

How to study Theology without damaging your Faith!

What is Theology?

Greek: 'theos' (God) + 'logos' (word)

Theology is the 'word about God' or 'the study of God'.

"Christianity is not, and never has been, about finding the right combination of words! It is about encountering the living and loving God" – Alister E. McGrath

Theology is an attempt to describe God and his ways, especially by studying what God reveals about himself through the Bible. But all descriptions of God using words are limited at best, merely signposts pointing to something much greater. God cannot be contained in human language – even the language of the Bible. Only Jesus, the incarnate Word – the true Logos – expresses God fully. Christ is true 'theology' – the Word about God in human form! It is only in an ongoing ever-closer relationship with Christ that we start to understand God's ways. The character of Christ shows us what God is like. If we study 'theology' outside of relationship with God, then we find ourselves with a warped caricature of God, not the real thing.

Who is it for?

Not just academics and church leaders! Actually everyone 'does' theology all the time. Whenever we say, 'The Bible teaches...' or make a statement like, 'God is in control,' we are expressing our theology. What we believe and speak out has great influence in our own and others' lives – so it matters what we believe about God. We are made in God's image, so in understanding God we understand who we are too!



What are the dangers?

Intellectualism

If we reduce theology to the accumulation of knowledge, the ability to understand and make clever arguments, instead of a joyful exploration of a truly relational God in whom we live, then we can quickly become

proud and obsessed with being 'right' all the time. We can obsess about minor details and miss the big picture, making knowledge *about God* our goal instead of *knowing and expressing God* better. We can become competitive instead of constructive, harsh instead of loving, dogmatic and inflexible instead of accepting people with other views.

Confusion



Most Christians are brought up in a particular theological environment or school of thought, either that of their parents or the church where they spent their formative years as a believer. Many are unaware, at least at first, that there are other ways of thinking 'out there' in the

wider Christian world, some of which may differ from the early teaching they received and accepted.

It can be confusing as we become aware of the different strands of thought that exist in the church today. Many of us like things to be kept simple and clear. We don't want too many options. Some Christians conclude that to study theology is pointless – who is right after all? Unsure of what to believe, they retreat from theology and conclude it is not for them. It can even result in an anti-intellectualism that sees study as counterproductive and detrimental to life in God.

Doubt

At some point, we all become aware that good, Bible-believing Christians whom God is evidently blessing believe some things which appear to contradict our own upbringing in the faith. Are they right or wrong? Should they be stopped or corrected? Or, if we are wrong about those things, what else can we trust from our past church experience? Were our Bible teachers trustworthy? Is anybody really 'in the know'?

This can unsettle some people. Particularly if they are prone to intellectualism, they can start to doubt even basic truths and begin to rely solely on their own reasoning, not even being able to trust the Bible. Before long they stop relating to God, no longer trusting that God is guiding them, or is even there at all. The result can be spiritual shipwreck.

Later in this session, we will look at ways to approach faith and theology that avoid these extremes and help us stay healthy in our pursuit of God, but first let's start to think about some areas of theology currently being debated in the Christian world...

Discussion time...

Read through the following examples of where Christian thinking has been changing or has been challenged in recent times:

- *When Jesus died, was he really being punished by God the Father to satisfy wrath, or should we understand the cross in another way? Many Christians are seeing things differently now.*
- *Does 'hell' mean conscious torment for ever? Increasing numbers of believers are totally against this view.*
- *Does God sovereignly decide everything that happens in advance, or is he more flexible somehow? There are a variety of answers here, depending on who you ask.*
- *Does the Bible contain any errors? Many say 'No', but many evangelical Christians are happy to say 'Yes', but still trust the Bible as God's written Word.*
- *Did creation happen in six literal days, or over a much longer time? Did God use evolution, as described by science, to bring about the world we live in? Bible-believing Christians are not uniform in their stance here.*

Questions to discuss:

1. When you read the statements above, how do you feel? Intrigued / sad / excited / indignant / unsettled / dismissive?
2. Which statement, if any, is most controversial to you, and why?
3. What do you hope to get out of this theology course?

Part 2: A new basis for faith?

What does your faith rest on?

For many people, their belief system is like the tower of bricks in a familiar family game¹. The bricks are individual beliefs they hold, each interlocking with others, with their trust in God resting on top of the whole thing. Often, the bottom bricks are to do with the Bible being God's Word, and other doctrines are built on top of that. Their trust in Jesus depends on the whole structure remaining intact.



The problem with this is that when someone comes along with a different view or understanding of a particular belief, one of the bricks is pushed out of place. If enough bricks are moved, the whole tower starts to topple, and the person's faith comes crashing down around them!

For example: take Adam. One of the beliefs being questioned today is, was Adam a historical person or just a 'cipher' – an example the Bible uses to represent the human race? Some evangelical Christians now take the second view. Others argue that the Apostle Paul's teaching about Jesus as the 'last Adam' and his ability to redeem us relies on Adam being historical. Either they both were genuine historical people, or they weren't. For people who see things like this, the poking of the 'Adam brick' starts to shift the 'Jesus brick' too, and the tower becomes dangerously unstable, threatening to bring their faith in God down with it! I personally don't believe the 'either/or' argument is that strong – but you get the idea. Shifting of foundational blocks, like our ideas about what the Bible is, can start to destabilise the tower and threaten us.

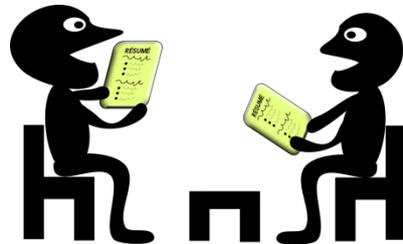
Thankfully, there are alternative things to rest our faith on. Firstly, our personal, living relationship with Jesus, Why should minor issues and tricky bits of Scripture affect that? Why not decide that they won't? Secondly, let's remember that Jesus is at the centre of our faith, not the Bible. The Bible is not the "fourth member of the Trinity"! It is extremely valuable and precious, but it is not God. Rather than trusting in Jesus because we believe the Bible, let's believe the Bible is the Word of God because we trust in Jesus. Why can we do this? Here are a few reasons:

1. There are many writings outside the Bible that talk about Jesus as a real historical person, and the impact he and his followers had.

¹ I am indebted to David Matthew for this example, which appears in his book 'A Poke in the Faith, Challenges to evangelical faith and how to survive them', from which I will often be drawing in this and future 'tLS' sessions.

2. We can look back on our own personal experiences of God in our lives. Personal experience is valued in the Bible, not frowned upon. No sceptic can deny our personal encounters with God.
3. Two thousand years of Christian history have shown the transforming power of Christ in countless lives and in communities that have benefited from the influence of his followers. A religion founded on a lie could not produce the immense blessing that continues to ripple outwards in society wherever Christ is received.
4. Believing in Jesus and a loving creator God who gives humanity freedom, but intervenes in grace due to our misuse of it, is the best way for us to understand the world we live in – better than any alternative philosophies that prove hollow and empty.

If we keep these things in mind, it does not matter if someone pokes a particular belief in our Christian world-view. Our relationship with God is not balanced precariously on top of a wobbly tower of interlocking beliefs. Whilst it may still be uncomfortable at times to have to question things we have accepted for years, it need not throw us into confusion or doubt. This should allow us to study theology safely and debate healthily with others of differing views!



Final thoughts

God's blessing on us or our church family does not depend on us having good theology in every detail! God does not wait until we have all our theology correct before he relates to us, blesses us, works with us for his Kingdom, even doing miracles in our midst. If so, he would be waiting for a long time before doing anything for anyone!

God's blessing on a person or group, and even miracles, are not proof of correct theology – they just show an openness to God and a desire for him. Miracles do not prove our theology is right, they just demonstrate that the kingdom of God is real and here! God shows up to reveal himself, not to rubber stamp our beliefs or motives. This was true even in New Testament times. Paul wasn't worried when people responded to the gospel when it was preached by those with bad motives...

"...some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill... But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice." – Apostle Paul, Php 1:15-18

Before next time – ask God to help you base your faith and relationship with him on more than a certain set of beliefs being 'true'. Enjoy him!