Understanding Our Task: Defining and Locating "Theology"

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I didn't study theology in college. As a matter of fact, I was warned against it— not by the agnostics and unbelievers in my life, as you might expect. I was warned against studying theology by members of my church. They had not studied it themselves, but they observed others who had. They found among these unfortunate others what they could only interpret as a weakening, if not outright loss, of faith. The winsome young person who had been so eager and responsible in youth group went to study Bible and theology and returned with a mass of qualifications, fine distinctions, and overbearing dogmatic meticulousness.

None of my friends studied theology, either. Many of them had secular upbringings and had only vague impressions of what the word meant, let alone what a field dedicated to the subject would entail.

Perhaps you come from similar backgrounds. Perhaps even now you are wondering what this course will mean for your faith. Or perhaps you have enrolled with only hazy awareness of what theology is all about, and you are hesitant about just how much you will commit to it.

In this first lecture, we will consider the meaning, scope, and procedure of theological studies, at least in a preliminary way. What theology entails will of course become clearer as we actually do it, as the class progresses over subsequent lectures. But it would be a mistake to launch into the discipline without taking popular ambiguity toward the field seriously and thematically discussing a few basic definitions.

To come at these, I'd like to share three common responses I've gotten over the years from folks who hear that I teach theology. Imagine sitting in a barbershop and overhearing these brief exchanges. These are actual conversations I've had in the barber's chair.

Common Response #1:

"Cool. I'm really spiritual. I was raised Christian, but I just think we're all connected to something and we just all need to get along."

> "What is it that you do?" I'm politely asked.
>
> "I'm a professor of theology."
>
> "Cool; I'm really spiritual. I was raised Christian, but I just think, you know, we're all connected to something and so, you know, we just all need to get along."

I have to confess that I have never answered this first response to my vocation in a perfectly satisfactory way. I affirm what I can—that I, too, believe in a spiritual God and that His will does involve the peaceful coexistence of His creatures. But I generally feel crippled by having to choose among a series of unproductive replies: from expressing my belief that Jesus Christ is not merely a kind of invisible connective tissue uniting humanity in good will; to explaining that academic theology is not the equivalent of quasi-religious self-help; to sharing that despite the broader world's ignorance about it, theology refers to a definite field of inquiry and employs logic and prizes systematic precision. Because none of these answers yields anything but awkward silence, I tend just to smile and nod, and try to bear witness in other ways.

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In any case, what I have always found interesting about this sort of reply is the *immediacy* with which people share their ideas about human life and its relationship to Deity. For many, the word *theology* invokes free association with an incredibly broad spectrum of loosely religious ideas and behaviors and, perhaps more than anyone, I as a theologian should appreciate certain common denominators in all of these opinions and practices. In contrast to this, we must become clear that Christian theology is constituted externally by a definite object. It is not an indefinite propagation of subjective intuitions about divinity, transcendence, the numinous, and so forth. In fact, part of the duty of Christian theology is to raise critical questions about our existential intuitions.

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First definition: Etymological

This brings us to our initial definition. Etymologically, "theology" is a composite term made of two Greek roots, *theos* and *logos*. *Theos*, cognate to Latin *deus*, means "god/God." *Logos* means "word." In the strictest sense, then, *theology* refers to a "word of or about God." The verbal form of *logos (logizomai)* helps to flesh this out a bit. It means to "reckon, calculate, or give account." In this regard, we recognize that the term "theology" is structurally akin to many words denoting various fields of study: *anthropology*, the account of anthropos or humanity; biology, the account of *bios*

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Theology is reckoning with, studying, or giving account of God.
- Think from God to humanity

or life; and psychology, the account of *psyche*, which we might translate "soul" or "mind." Theology is reckoning with, studying, or giving account of God.

A critical claim emerges already in this etymological treatment, which deserves special comment. Theology studies *God*, not humankind, morality, or again, some intuitive sense of personal transcendence. The discipline is animated by this object, and also constrained by Him. It finds no other basis for its speech than God, and also no other boundary and goal.

In many respects, Christian theology is nothing more than a lifelong training exercise in learning to think from God to humanity, not the other way around. That basic trajectory "from above to below" is given in the basic confession that Jesus Christ is Lord. If that confession is to mean anything, if Christ is actually to be Lord in our moment-by-moment living, then he must precede our every thought and word, indeed our every instinct and being. He must be the exclusive ground of our being, speaking, and thinking. It is not that the theologian can never speak "from below to above," but rather, that anything we think and say of God on the basis of human living must be tested against what God says to us in and through Christ's lordship.

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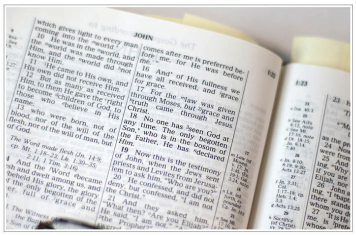

We recall, by way of illustration, John 1:18. "No one has ever seen God," the verse says, "but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known." Without apologizing for it or defending the claim, the evangelist simply declares a fundamental human incapacity for God. We cannot perceive Him. Lacking this ability, we are completely reliant upon God for our every knowledge of Him. John does not allow us to circumvent our incapacity by conjuring up some extrasensory ability for the supernatural. He does not solve the problem that "no one has ever seen God" by saying "except a few people who possess strange radars or mystical powers to sense the divine." He does not appeal to some esoteric wisdom by which we can dispense with our inability before we ever really acknowledge it.

No, the evangelist confronts us with an unqualified declaration that no human ever has seen God. But that is good news, because it makes God the single condition by which God is known. God alone speaks of God. "God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known." That last phrase, "has made him known," is a translation of the Greek word, exegeomai. The root of this word is often translated, "to bring out meaning," to

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exegete. John is saying that in view of humanity's unqualified inability to perceive Him, God brings forth His own meaning and significance. He reveals and makes known His own reality in Christ Jesus. Jesus is God's own Word, His own logos spoken in space-time to humankind.

What is theology? The simplest answer is "Jesus Christ." He is the Word (*logos*) of God (*theos*), God's own reckoning or account of Himself. More exactly, theology is ongoing reiteration of Christ as the meaning and significance of God in words, idioms, and communicative practices appropriate to each new space and time, repeating in fresh and constructive ways God's own Word in our words here and now. Harbor no illusions: we do not become Christ in speaking of him, nor do we summon him like a genie. But theology does reflect Christ's exegesis of the Father; it looks to this both for its form and content, as it has no other perception of God. Our etymological definition of theology, then, is simply this: *Theology refers to the study of God (theos) according to the claims and expectations established in His living Word (logos), Jesus Christ.*

That brings us to our second instructive conversation.

"What is it that you do?" I'm asked again.

"I'm a professor of theology?"

"So you teach religion?"

With this second response, we are moving closer to a defined program of study than with the previous notion that theology trades in speculative, spiritual intuitions. The study of religion takes place within universities across the world, especially in the western hemisphere, and adjudicates the specific subject matter of individual faith traditions. But are we to equate theological studies with religious studies?

We cannot rehearse the full development of the study of religion within the western university. In brief, the discipline as it is undertaken today was forged in the furnace of the Enlightenment and it exhibits that era's conviction concerning the sufficiency of reason to assess the sense and value of religious beliefs. One studies religion more or less as one would survey an era of history or examine a laboratory animal: by detached, disciplined application of the methods of inquiry appropriate to a discrete science.

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Enlightenment
- *Sufficiency of reason*
- *Detached application of methods of inquiry*
- *Psychology's view*
- *Sociology's view*
- *History of religion's school*

So, for instance, psychology considers the origin of religion from within the framework of the mind. What cognitive processes best provide a rationale for these particular doctrinal claims? What emotional needs are satisfied by the performance of these specific rituals? The psychologist of religion not only poses such questions, but also seeks to answer them according to the accepted practices of her field. She conducts personal interviews and records accounts of conversion and faith, reads diary accounts of religious experiences, and perhaps examines the biochemical processes and brainwave patterns exhibited in the course of these experiences. The sociologist does the same kind of thing. What social function is expressed in this religion's claims and expectations? What role does it perform in society, that is, which ideas and actions does it reward, and which does it vilify? What relational behaviors are reflected in these religious practices? Within the conventions of her field, she sets the answers to these questions relative to those learned from other societies and their religions and thus studies religion comparatively.

Once more, this comparative approach to the study of religion—what the Germans famously call Religionsgeschichte or "history of religions" school—emerged in the modern era and continues to exercise great influence. It is a worthy manner of inquiry. One obvious benefit, which Enlightenment thinkers extolled stridently, is that its inherent detachment enables the inquirer to investigate religion without the passions that often invite conflict. Given the historical predilection of religious people to react even violently against perceived criticisms of their beliefs, the scientific study of religion provides a welcome, "reasonable" alternative means of considering divergent belief systems. Moreover, it has often been remarked that religion is unique to human being. Being religious is "what makes man a man." Insofar as it is apropos to construe humanity as homo religiosus, we learn more of ourselves by examining our religious psychology, sociology, anthropology, history, and philosophy.

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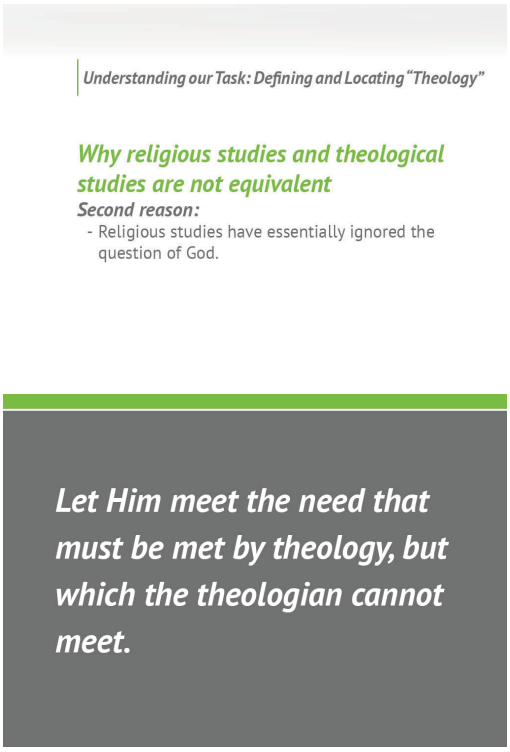
Why religious studies and theological studies are not equivalent

First reason:
- The theologian is trained in the customs of a given faith tradition.

Yet religious studies are not equivalent to theological studies; and, for at least two reasons, which reflect the latter's distinction from the former, theology remains a necessary field in its own right. The first has to do with training. As we began to see a few moments ago, and will discuss again directly, the theologian is trained in the customs of a given faith tradition—in its authoritative documents and defining teachings, doctrines, or "dogmas." She is generally not trained in psychology, sociology, anthropology, and so forth, at least not in an advanced way. It is better, therefore, to leave



the anthropology of religion to the anthropologists. A faculty of theologians teaching the truths of their traditions from within, not from without, is worthwhile. A faculty of religious scholars behaving as psychologists is questionable.

Secondly, and more importantly, it should be clear from our brief treatment of religious studies that this approach has essentially punted on the question of God. It is concerned with humankind, once more, with the processes of our mind, our social arrangements, our characteristics as a species, our history. As a rule, it is not concerned with our gods except as they reveal something about us. What the gods are or might be in themselves is beyond the purview of the science of religion.

It is just here that theology is warranted as a differentiated field of study; it is in order to pursue the question of God that religion survives and religious people seek theologians. Unlike our peers in other sciences, we theologians ought to have clear, decisive words to speak of *God*. Of course, the theologian cannot speak of God; we are humans too and have the same incapacity that John declares. Our task, then, is to recognize that we ought to speak of God but cannot, and exactly in this impossible contradiction let God speak for Himself. Let Him meet the need that must be met by theology, but which the theologian cannot meet. Let me unpack this a bit.

We have noted that theology is constituted externally by an object that cannot be identified with humanity and that cannot be examined as a cypher for humanity. Theology is discourse about God, not man; and as the Swiss theologian Karl Barth famously remarked, one does not speak of God by speaking loudly of man! But how can we speak of God? We are bound by time. We have no rational ability to think of eternity, so how can we know anything about God's manner of existence? If we are to avoid making eternity just a grand version of time and God just a grand projection of ourselves, then we must let eternity come to time, God come to us. We must speak after, and only after, God speaks. We must allow our thinking to be conditioned from first to last by God's revelation. By His Spirit, God must make our words to be true of Him; He must make our statements of and about His being in Christ to accurately reflect who He is.

We must constantly recognize that we have no capacity for God—no ability to think and speak of Him—even though we ought to do so if we are not simply to reduplicate in a poor way what is

being done by our colleagues in other sciences. In precisely this constant recognition, we confess that God must speak today in Christ as He did 2,000 years ago for His truth to be known.

If this is so, then theological knowledge is never detached. It is never the outcome of sterile application of given methods. It is rather an exercise in attachment, concern, and commitment to its object, because we find our true selves in this object. We discover anew that, and in what way, human existence is bound by God's [existence]. We discover anew that, and in what way, we are not capable of God, but He is capable of us; and out of this capability makes us to stand before Him as recipients of His address. Theology, in short, is an exercise in *faith*. It is forged in the moment-by-moment recognition that we are entirely reliant upon God for our knowledge of Him and of ourselves, and it affirms that Christ Jesus is God's self-revelation. It perceives in Him the answer to our questions, and their proper formulation. That brings us to our second definition of theology.

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Theology, in short, is an exercise in faith.

Unlike religious studies, theological studies is a process of "faith seeking understanding." We will call this an historical definition, because it is the longest- standing and most venerated construal of the discipline to be found in the Christian tradition. It dates at least to the fifth-century giant Augustine of Hippo. This particular verbiage, *fides quaerens intellectum* in Latin, comes from the 11th-century Archbishop of Canterbury, St. Anselm.

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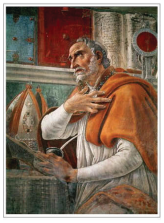
Augustine of Hippo



Faith is not just a vague feeling but an awareness or understanding defined by specific teachings and practices.

Faith and knowledge are not opposed in theology, but integrated. One only knows God as a person of faith, and one only has faith in God as a person who knows Him. Knowledge is not just a collection of empty facts, but an active disposition toward a concrete relationship with God. In turn, faith is not just a vague feeling but an awareness, an understanding defined by specific teachings and practices. It is, again, the perceptual framework within which we perceive Jesus Christ as Lord. Faith has content to it— namely, the shape and substance of humanity's covenant relationship with God given in Christ—the understanding of which builds and develops over time.

I hope this helps those who come to the study of theology concerned, as my former fellow parishioners were, about its impact on the life of faith. Good theology enhances faith. It stretches and tests it, yes, but like a good athletic trainer, it is something that God uses to build faith (and it is only God who builds faith) in and through this stretching and testing. That is

how I have found theology. Perhaps I will one day get to explain to my worried brothers and sisters that their concerns, while not without justification, have not been realized. It's just the opposite: As I have grown in my knowledge of God, my faith in Him has grown too.

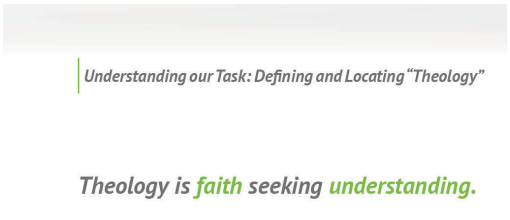
Affirming our historical definition that theology is faith seeking understanding, we are positioned to consider a final barbershop conversation:

"What is it that you do?" I'm asked a third time.

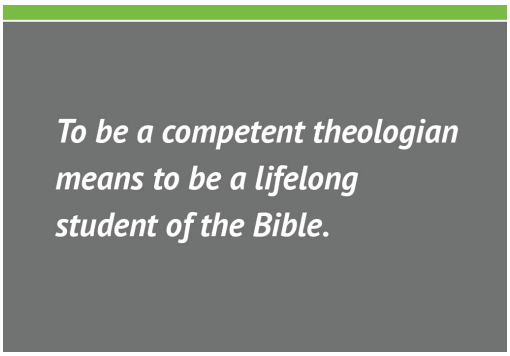
"I'm a professor of theology?"

"So you teach pastors?"

This final response comes closest of the three to the nature and location of theological study. As faith seeking understanding, theology takes a distinct, confessional orientation. It is done by members of a faith community, for members of a faith community. In this regard, it is indeed a course of study for leaders of the community, for pastors.



But theology is not only for pastors. The community of Christian faith is gathered around the Word of God. The Word animates and holds together a differentiated people in the world. It does so first with the prophets and apostles—its primary witnesses. It does so secondly with the community founded upon these witnesses. Because theology thinks and speaks from within this community about its God, it is for the edification of all people gathered by God's Word. Theology examines the community's life of faith, above all its preaching and teaching, but also its fellowship, service, discipleship, and evangelism, by referring these things constantly to the scriptural witness to the Word as a member of the community founded upon that witness.



Theology thinks and speaks from Scripture outward as it situates the life of Christian faith again and again within the history of salvation recorded in the Old and New Testaments. Make no mistake: to be a competent theologian means to be a lifelong student of the Bible. No one should take up theological studies who does not have a taste for reading, investigating, and analytically pondering the Bible. We exegete that text as the authoritative record of God's dealings with humankind, the meaning and

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***Third definition:** Descriptive*

Theology is not a vocation reserved for a special class of religious elites.

significance brought forth by God himself in Christ Jesus for our every knowledge of who He is and who we are as His people. Theology is not speculation into who God might be. It is confession of who He is, normed after the witness to His works in Scripture and the statements of faith distilled from Scripture by the community. It always begins again, reconsidering in diverse human contexts what Scripture meant and what it means, how the church's defining faith statements derive from Scripture so understood, and how they apply here and now.

We can thus offer a third, descriptive definition of theology: Theology is constructive reiteration of God's self-speech or revelation in Jesus Christ, undertaken as an examination of the community's past and present testimony to Christ in the light of the texts recognized by that community to be the authoritative witnesses to God's revelation, the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments.

Once again, each of these definitions should become clearer as we actually practice them. For now, it is enough to perceive that they are interrelated. The theologian only speaks of God in Christ—our etymological definition—as one who is actually confronted by Christ, as one for whom Christ is all-determinative reality, as a person of faith seeking to understand this encounter in the fullest way possible—our historical definition. And one only knows Christ as *Christ*, as the exegesis of the Father, if one knows Him in the prophetic and apostolic testimony to Him. As our third definition indicates, one only encounters God in Christ according to the framework (the particular teachings and events that make up Christ's life, ministry, death, and resurrection) provided by the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. As a theologian, our task is always to be knowing Him in these terms—setting the church's ongoing claims to God relative to the Bible's testimony.

A final observation must be made in view of these interrelated definitions. Nothing in them excludes the layperson. You are concerned too! Theology is not a vocation reserved for a special class of religious elites, or mystics, or overactive intellectuals. It is simply response to God's ever-prior address to us, all of us. It is our little, infirm, imperfect answer to His revelation in Christ Jesus. But it is an answer that God makes possible in His revelation, and thus something that we must give in our own way. The question is not whether you will do theology. God speaks. We must respond.

What kind of theology will you do?

The question is what kind of theology will you do? Untrained, ad hoc, self-referential, experientialist theology? Or systematically precise, historically informed, and, above all, biblically grounded, exegetical theology? This course introduces and invites you to participate in the latter.