

Method: The Word of God as Source and Norm of Theology**Aaron Smith, Ph.D.**

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ST410 | Lesson 02

Introduction to Theology

Method: The Word of God as Source and Norm of Theology

Theology, as defined in Lecture One, is human speech of God deriving from the Word of God. "Deriving from," means not only that theology finds its content in the Word, but also its method. The Word supplies not only what we know of God, but also how we know it. Lecture Two demonstrates that, determined by God's Word, theology is confessional, responsive, dialectical, and exegetical.

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*Theological Method is
defined by confession,
response, dialectic, and
exegesis.*

Our previous lecture located the task of theology within the movement of God's address to humankind. God speaks in Christ Jesus. We respond also in Him, which is to say in the faith that seeks to understand Him better and in the language and power of His witnesses.

In this, we notice that theology's commission entails a particular method. "Method" refers to the practice, technique, or system by which theology draws its conclusions. How we go about making and defending theological claims, our procedure and standard, is given in theology's unique source. God's speaking both grounds and guides theological discourse in that it initiates and sustains the process of faith seeking understanding. God's Word brings about faith specifically as a modality that strives to know its source, to grow in its knowledge of Christ Jesus as testified to by the prophets and apostles.

Lecture Two extends the conclusions drawn last time concerning the nature of theology, showing how these conclusions involve the field in a particular orientation to its subject matter. It demonstrates, specifically, that theological method is defined by confession, response, dialectic, and exegesis.

Before demonstrating this, however, I have found it necessary to explain why we must devote a lecture to method in the first place. From within orthodox and especially evangelical Christianity, I have encountered a tendency to skip the whole notion of procedure and launch into "I believe" statements. "I believe that God is pure mystery," for example. Or, "I believe that God lives in my heart." Such statements turn out to be true in their own way when viewed from the lens of God's Word.

And I always appreciate the democratic spirit from which these kinds of claims are made: they reflect a firm grasp of the reality that thinking and speaking of God is not the duty only of special

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Second Reason:

- Use of method keeps us from confusing the work of theology with the work of various important social, political, and moral agendas.

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clerics, but can and should be done within the frames of reference differently available to all of God's children.

Nevertheless, there are two reasons why we cannot simply skip the step of identifying how we will make and test our statements of faith. The first reason, which we will discuss further in our fourth lecture when we cover the merits and demerits of so-called "natural theology," is that the revelation of God in Christ Jesus entails judgment. It does not straightforwardly affirm our ideas and their verbal formulations even in a state of grace. This is a hard truth. Our statements of faith in Christ Jesus are imperfectly structured. (Imagine what that means for our claims made in unbelief!) Scripture informs us that even in a state of faith we perceive God's truth only darkly and remain in need of God's Spirit to make our fallen and shortsighted claims to be true. We cannot, having tasted God's goodness, simply assume it as validation of our right and ability to speak whatever belief is meaningful to us. We must rather always answer to a standard external to us and allow it to correct us, including views forged in a moment of great emotion or moving insight. Neither feeling nor insight is the final criterion of God's truth, but both remain within the fallen operations of sinful humanity.

The second reason for the need to be conscious of method is that it keeps us from confusing the work of theology—to speak of God—with the work of various, important social, political, and moral agendas. The church has often struggled with this issue. It has here and there conflated the truth of God with the realization of particular cultural goods. In associating God's life and work with Christendom, with socialism, with capitalism, with religious liberty, or with the family unity, its theology has been coerced into anthropology, to extolling human institutions instead of expressing God's life and presence in the midst of all creaturely circumstances. This is not to say that God does not care about human institutions, or that He does not set forth ideals for us to pursue socially, politically, and morally. But God has a way of working in the full range of human situations, and theology must follow where He leads. It may be that the next generation of theologians will be charged less with defending the family unity and more with expressing how God is still God where His ideal for the family is not realized; how His mercy still flows abundantly and how His grace is still sufficient in a society of broken families.

In the secular university, we encounter suspicion about theology as an academic discipline, and so the matter of method must be

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Theology as an *academic discipline*

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addressed from this perspective too. Academic suspicion toward theology has to do with assumptions about the nature of faith and its role in relation to knowledge. In scholarly inquiry, the presumption of disinterest in one's subject matter is almost ubiquitously presumed to be the necessary criterion of objectivity. Contemporary university education has little intellectual space for personal investment in the things that we study, particularly when our object of inquiry is religion. Faith is not a valid starting point for attaining knowledge; it is quite the opposite: faith is the subjective imposition of distracting, artificial standards and values onto theories, processes, and articles of examination. One cannot understand the truth of religion by being religious. Only the nonreligious examiner, or at least the examiner who has set aside her faith, can rightly investigate and understand that faith. A measure of sober appreciation for modern suspicion about the role of faith in knowing is appropriate. There is historical warrant for being mistrustful about where faith leads academic inquiry. Western mistrust hailes especially from the era of Enlightenment, when science fought its way free from what did indeed prove to be the false imposition of standards and values onto truth by the church. Reason had to detach itself from belief in order to come to a better understanding of the cosmos, for instance. It had to realize that, in spite of what the centrality of humankind in the perspective of Christian faith led us to think, the earth is not the literal center of the world.

The triumph of reason has not been so damaging to faith as both its antagonists on one side and activists on the other have often announced. The God of Copernicus and Galileo's heliocentric world is perhaps a grander God than the deity standing at the top of the medieval pyramid of being or inhabiting Dante's Empyrean, which wreathes his geocentric cosmos. In many respects, faith has been sharpened by the unfaith of scientific discovery.

Modern academic mistrust of faith is intellectually nearsighted, however, by perpetuating the simple dichotomy between the objectivity of knowledge and the subjectivity of belief. There is a third option, the objectivity of faith. Theology studies an entity that constitutes itself as determinative source and norm in an event that constructs the conditions of its perception, the cognitive and volitional parameters of its study in and with its self-giving. It is not the artifice of an imagination pre-reflectively guided by primal instincts, pressures, and needs. It is rather a living voice, a dynamic address, which as such retains its self-determining objectivity even as it is only discovered in the

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First: *theology is an act of confession*

corresponding faith (active, obedient pursuit) that it generates. God stands before us, but as God. As an object yes, but an object entirely under its own control. God becomes objective to us by His own moment by moment act. We become subjects who know him, that is people of faith in the same act. That returns us to our description of theological method. In the first place, theology is an act of confession. It is, again, the declaration of what God has done and is doing in coming to humankind. Theology is guided not by a mere subjective desire for what God should do, but by factual encounter with God's active involvement in space-time. Thus, once more, theology is entirely invested in its object. As confession, theology is not invested in personal intuitions called "beliefs," but in the living activity of God with us and among us. Theological beliefs are formed after the fact of this activity, not prior to it. Any beliefs held prior to encounter with God's act must be corrected in the light of it.

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Theology is *not* a linear affair.

As to its operative procedure, then, theology is not a linear affair. It does not build an account of deity brick-by-brick as if its job was to assemble a figure out of available raw material. It speaks only what it hears, and it tests its speaking against what it has heard. There is no reason to be coy or embarrassed about this. Since none of us has crossed the boundary of eternity and returned to tell of it, we have no basis or authority on which to speak of God except for what He tells us. And what norm could we employ to decide if God was right about who and what He says that He is, except for one He gives?

"Let God be true, and every man a liar. As it is written: 'So that you may be proved right when you speak and prevail when you judge' " (Rom. 3:4; citing Ps. 51:4).

Theology is neither the steady accumulation of human wisdom nor the impulsive gushing of religious consciousness, but the modest, calm yet joyful acknowledgement of God's wisdom and understanding shaped after the flesh and language according to which He expresses Himself to us.

In the second place, risking another repetition of this central theme, theology takes place in media res. It is a discipline on the way, arising moment-by-moment in and as answer. It is characterized by reiterative affirmation. What other position could it occupy in relation to God's speech? It does not ascribe truth, love, faith, and hope to God, but acknowledges these characteristics as properly

Romans 3:4

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God Defines:

- Truth by His disclosure
- Love by His self-sacrifice
- Faith by His covenant loyalty
- Hope by Christ's resurrection

His and properly defined by His living. God defines truth by His disclosure, love by His self-sacrifice, faith by His covenant loyalty, hope by Christ's resurrection; and we reply by extolling these realities as the basis and goal of all existence. Theology strives neither more nor less than to restate who and what God shows Himself to be in conventions appropriate to each new time and place.

Taken together, confession and response remind us that theology thinks and speaks from God outward. His thoughts and speech are more basic than our own. He is not the outcome of our thinking and speaking; we do not arrive at "god" by induction, deduction, testing of hypotheses, or like methods. On the contrary, God is. If we cannot say this, then we have no means to say we are. And God speaks. If we cannot say this, then we have no means to say that we speak. His being is the ground of all being, and His revelation is the source and norm of all truth. And how do we describe that revelation and its shaping influence on theology?

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Third, theology is dialectical:

- opposing statements held in tension

In the third place, theology is dialectical. "Dialectic" refers to opposing statements held in tension. We say that God's revelation is dialectical in that it is comprised simultaneously of His no and yes to humankind. No, humanity is not pure and righteous, but sinful. No, we have no innate capacity for the divine. No, our towers of reason and language will not reach from earth to heaven, but will be damned and scuttled. No, our rebellion against God will not be victorious, but will be overcome by His grace, truth, and love. Yes, God will forgive our sin and make us righteous. Yes, God's capacity for us overcomes our incapacity for Him. Yes, God makes a stairway of His own reason and language from heaven to earth:

"You shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man" (John 1:51).

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Yes, God refuses our predilection to death and gives us life. Theology confesses and responds to this no and yes of God, reiterating it in further thought and speech. It stands on a knife's edge, neither fixing on the no nor the yes. It is not fussy carping about the darkness of our times. It is not high-minded condemnation of all those who refuse to accept its teachings. Cults are born of folks who know nothing but to stand against the world in anger and disappointment. Christian theology is not so afraid or so reviling of the world, for its God addresses Himself to

Christian theology is not so accepting of the world as to call its darkness, "light."

Theology is a difficult, indeed impossible, discipline.

chaos and darkness from all eternity and shines His light. Yet at the same time, theology is not uncritical endorsement of every principality and power in the world. It is not blanket approval of the sophistries, which fallen minds generate and jealously guard to preserve their sense of right and purpose.

Hell is populated with exceptions made in every man's favor. Christian theology is not so accepting of the world as to call its darkness "light."

Theology is a difficult, indeed impossible discipline. It is called to restate God's judgment and forgiveness, His wrath against sin and His love for His creature, but as an enterprise that must first hear this message. The theologian is not divinized and made to stand above everyone else who must now hear his message. Rather, he stands as the first to hear it himself. Theology, therefore, must always be a modest discipline, conducted in full humility and full recognition of its great need for God lest it become merely a screeching harangue or a sedating opiate.

In the fourth place, theology is exegetical. If the discipline is to remain humble, not just in attitude but also in operation, not just in posture but also in method, then it must derive again and again from the Word spoken to it. It must take upon itself the biorhythmic humility of looking outside itself, indeed of emptying itself in a manner parallel to its Lord that it might be filled exclusively by Him.

Theology is a secondary form of what the Latin theologians called the *ministerium verbi divini*, the ministry of the Word of God. Its glory is in the glory of the Word. It seeks no other end than to make the revelation of God known in ever-greater scope and detail. It therefore proceeds by drawing out and expressing the meaning and significance of God's Word as the meaning and significance of all things, the exclusive ground of all being and its singular destiny.

Dialectic, confession, response, and exegesis—this is the quadratic core of theological method. This core is given in the Word of God from which theology comes and against which it is tested. The content of our thought and shape, the catalyst of our speech and substance, the limitless source of our work and unbroken rule—all of this is God's Word as a living, objective modality.

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Quadratic core of theological method:

- Dialectic
- Confession
- Response
- Exegesis

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The Next Step:

- Identify, define, and describe the Word of God.

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The method of thinking and speaking of God according to a material principle does more to make God in our image than the other way around.

Our obvious next step is to identify, define, and describe the common source and standard of theology, the Word of God. We will take that step in our next lecture. I would be remiss, however, not to conclude this lecture with a few comments about such a Christocentric method in an increasingly secular age.

The modern era has put tremendous pressure on theologians to work from a standpoint of disinterest in their subject matter. Part of this pressure, as noted, comes from post-Enlightenment assumptions about objectivity and untainted inquiry. But it also comes from evangelistic concerns. Theologians have wanted to speak in a way that is relevant and attractive to an increasingly unbelieving world. This is a laudable goal. However, I am increasingly convinced that pursuit of this agenda has done little for modern theology except to render it evermore irrelevant.

Scope does not allow me to go into all of the reasons for drawing this conclusion here. Suffice it to say that as the discipline has looked outside of its object for its method, two deleterious alternatives have emerged. One, it has found itself defining God, humankind, the origin, nature, and destiny of all things according to this or that material principle. This has been a predominant feature of Liberal Protestantism. A material principle is a given construct that acts like a lens through which other ideas become cognate. For instance, Friederich Schleiermacher, who lived from 1768 to 1834, understood God to as the All, the One, the Whole. Working from within the given construct, he taught that genuine humanity is found in the experience of absolute dependence upon the All. Creation is the panentheistic instantiation of the All in dependent creatureliness. And salvation is the culmination of dependency in forfeiting oneself entirely to the All.

Such a romantic construal might prove attractive to the unbelieving mind for a season, although even then one wonders just what sort of commitment it demands from the unbelieving mind to repent and convert. But in any case, it takes only a little reflection to see that the method of thinking and speaking of God according to a material principle does more to make God in our image than the other way around. In time, as such construals accrue, the unbelieving mind looks at the cumulative enterprise of theology as an attempt to keep God alive by reinventing Him after the defining concerns of individual eras.

The second deleterious alternative to the method we have described here, also emerging out of the desire to speak relevantly

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Way of Apologetics:
- Reasoned defense of the faith

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**Reasoned arguments for and against
God can rarely be proven.**

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Let God be God

and attractively about God to an increasingly secular world, is the way of apologetics. This has been the preferred modus operandi for conservative Christianity. Apologetics refers to reasoned defense of the faith. Here too the challenge is that we quickly find ourselves not speaking about God, but about a series of penultimate propositions, historical events, orthographic, philological, and text-critical details. Space might be carved out for the idea of God through such discourse, but the human mind left to fill in this space is a factory of idols.

More insidiously, apologetic arguments tend not to defeat the claims of atheism. That should be obvious, since reasoned arguments for and against God can rarely be proven. About the best that they can do is to make faith to be a credible alternative to atheism. But this outcome has not proven to be altogether positive. God is not an intellectual alternative. Making Him into an alternative, however credible, already makes Him Not-God, because it turns His power to command obedience into the power of our arguments to command an audience. It reverses the order of being, rendering Him the outcome of our search and not the condition. Such a state of things could only occur in a delusional world where human thought takes itself for granted as primary and renders all external objects as secondary and susceptible to it, including God, such that He too becomes a choice to be made or not made according to the preponderance of evidence.

In view of both scenarios, it is best that we let God be God and get back to the work of theology. My sense is that our thought and speech will suddenly be as relevant and attractive as God's own if they are merely a confession of His revelation, taking place in response to His revelation, dialectically shaped after His revelation, and exegetically derived from His revelation.