

## **TTS Foundations 2023/24 - [S1] "We Believe..."**

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## [1] What Is Theology? – Its Reputation and Content

Let's begin with that first question – 'What is theology?'

Before we even begin to answer it, we need to take a step back.

### [1A] On the State of Theology in the Modern Church

- **It's very hard to gauge this with perfect accuracy – we're mostly dealing in terms of trends. For example...**
  - ON THE ONE HAND:
    - For now, we see that sermon is still a regular feature.
    - Churches regularly speak of 'closed hand' issues.
    - There's a latent sense that we need to believe XYZ.
  - BUT ON THE OTHER:
    - A noticeable move away from confessions of faith.
    - Trend towards replacing statements of faith with vision values. (Re: business, Bill Hybels, *et al.*)
- **There is some concrete data we can put our hands on.**
  - For example, when we look at bestselling Christian books:
    - **Some classics** – e.g. Bunyan / Foster's *Celebration of Discipline*, etc. **But mostly** – e.g. Johnny Gumbel / Max Lucado / Pete Grieg, etc.
    - **KEY POINT:** not saying these are all bad, but rather your average Xian isn't reading theological books.
  - Also – recent surveys have acted like canaries in coal mine.
    - Ligonier 2018 *State of UK Theology* – 63% agree that God accepts worship of all religions / 71% believe Jesus "is the first + greatest being created by God".
    - **KEY POINT:** the average Christian is no longer theologically astute.

### [1B] On the A-Doctrinalism of Modern Churches

- **The real challenge for modern Evangelicals – we are more often *a-doctrinal*.<sup>1</sup>**
  - I.e. there is no theological culture of either kind.
    - Lip service is paid to the *idea* of theology – e.g. 'denying the Trinity', or 'grace alone'.
  - BUT MOSTLY – theology proper is totally absent.
    - Again, no theological culture. No habit of reflection or discussion. Theological toil is seen as unnecessary.
    - Just as likely to see the hard work of theological study as 'navel-gazing' – whilst reaping benefits of previous generations who did the hard work for us.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This predilection is nothing new. In his survey of ancient heresies, John of Damascus [c675-749AD] warns of the so-called '*Gnosimachi*' (literally: 'enemies of knowledge') – those who would eschew theological study in favour of the supposedly pure, moral life [*On Heresies*, 88].

<sup>2</sup> John of Damascus also wrote the following about the privilege and responsibility of theological hard work: "With our whole soul and our whole understanding let us approach. ... And let us not be satisfied with arriving speedily at the gate, but rather let us knock hard, so that the door of the bridal chamber may be opened to us and we may behold the beauties within" [*Philosophical Chapters*, I]

**[1C] Examining the Absence of Theology – How Has This Happened?**

- **[A] Academic theology has become divorced from the concerns of the local Church.**
  - It didn't always used to be this way.
    - The University was an institution built for the Church – emerging from cathedral and monastic schools.
      - "I shall think my work has appeared at an opportune time as soon as I perceive that it has borne some richer fruit for the Church of God than heretofore. This is my only prayer" [Calvin – Pref. *Inst.*]
  - The story of how the divorce happened is a long one.
    - Roots in 1400s, growing to full maturity in 20<sup>th</sup> Cent.<sup>3</sup>
- **[B] The modern Church has made theology redundant.**
  - I.e. theology used to serve a vital function in the Body.
    - Establishing / Defining / Equipping.
  - Theology no longer *needs* to play this role for Evangelicals.
    - Re: praise band vs. pulpit / altar – the centre of gravity has shifted, now an emphasis on dynamic experience.

**Regardless of the background, the net result is the same.**

- For some, theology is regarded as...
  - **Irrelevant:** for those in ivory towers.
  - **Not For Me:** for the intellectual type.
  - **Pharisaical:** for laying down the law.
  - **Divisive:** for splitting churches + causing rifts.
- In other words:
  - **Theology is seen as one big, self-indulgent distraction.**
    - Hence terms like 'doctrinaire' + 'indoctrination'.

**Without a doubt, theologians can be part of the problem here.**

- Helmut Thielicke – *A Little Exercise for Young Theologians* [1962]
  - Prof. of Systematic Theology, Uni. Of Hamburg.
    - Theological students at a Church bible study.
      - "Although my fate and my life were at stake, those others came at me with their routine. I found in them no trace of life or truths learned by experience. I smelled only corpses of lifeless ideas... I was looking for a Christian in whom I could detect a flame. I found only burnt-out slag" [Thielicke – *A Little Exercise*, p.14]

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<sup>3</sup> Although we don't have the space here to tell this story at length, a quick summary will suffice. Renaissance thinkers of the 1400s looked suspiciously at the kind of theology done in the medieval period. Called 'scholastic theology', it dominated the medieval academy, and the Reformers of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century were equally suspicious of it. In the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, some academic theologians (such as Friedrich Schleiermacher [1768-1834]) sought to make the old ways respectable to a new generation, liberalising theology to appeal to Enlightenment thinkers. This in turn provoked a response: in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, 'fundamentalists' rejected the liberal theology of the Enlightenment, looking askance at the kind of unbelieving thought that had come to dominate academia. By the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, it was normal for academic theologians to question traditional Christian beliefs – and those in the Church who held to such beliefs distrusted the academy even more.

**BUT LOOK:** 1 Tim 4:16 / Prov 23:23

Theology has been done badly – that is indisputable.

AND YET – we’re commanded to “*pay close attention*” to our doctrine.

AND YET – we’re told to “*buy wisdom, instruction, and understanding*”.

AND YET – God says that that he “*was pleased, for the sake of his righteousness, to magnify his teaching and make it glorious*” [Isa 42:21]

**There’s a blessing here which we simply can’t afford to miss.  
So, let’s start at the beginning...**

### [1D] Defining ‘Theology’ – Its History and Content

- **How have people understood theology in the past?**
  - For the **Greeks**, the word ‘theology’ was very specific.
    - It referred to a kind of speech a poet would make in a play – announcing the words or actions of a deity.<sup>4</sup>
  - For the **Romans**, the word became more philosophical.<sup>5</sup>
    - E.g. Marcus Terentius Varro [116BC-27BC] – theology “an account of the gods” (*mythical* [poets], *natural* [philosophers], *civil* [popular use]).
    - E.g. Lucius Annaeus Seneca [4BC-65AD] – theology the “science of things human and divine”.
  - When the **Jews** started to interact with Greco-Roman culture, they adopted the term ‘theology’ for themselves.
    - E.g. Philo – Moses a *theologos*, i.e. he spoke of God.
- **So, what does theology actually mean, then?**
  - Thankfully, the term itself isn’t that complicated!
    - *Theos* (θεός): God. *Logia* (λογία): utterances / oracles. Derived from *Logos* (λόγος): word / discourse / speech.
    - **Hence ‘theologia’ – or theology.**

So we’re NOT referring to an academic degree.

We’re NOT referring to dusty tomes and oak-paneled libraries.

We’re NOT referring to a hobby of a specific kind of person.

#### SIMPLY PUT:

**Theology concerns itself with speech *about* God – with the speech *of* God – as well as our experiencing life *with* God.**

<sup>4</sup> E.g. Plato’s *Republic* [379a.5-6] – Homer and Hesiod were also called *theologoi*.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Augustine’s *City of God* VI.5 / Seneca’s *Letters* 89.

## [2] Why is Theology Important?

Let's now address our second question: 'Why is theology important?'

### [2A] Reason One: Because God Created Us.

- **LOOK:** Luke 10:25-28 (Re: Matt 22)
  - **The decision to prioritise theology is a confession:**
    - Of God's sovereignty, kingship, and rule over every all things – re: Abraham Kuyper, 'Not one inch of all creation over which Christ does not cry, 'MINE!'".
  - **The hard work of theological toil is also a reflection.**
    - Of our divine image – God has given us the gift of reason, a rational soul with which to contemplate divine things. With Christ we take of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. [[ More in S5! ]]
- **More than this, God would have us *love* him with our minds.**
  - We can't afford to miss this:
    - **LOOK:** 1 Cor 14:15 / 2 Cor 10:5 / 1 Thess 5:21 – this is our intellectual discipleship.
  - Vital to the healthy life of a worshipful, believing mind.
    - Indeed, this is how theology was treated for most of Church history – not as a mere abstraction or as an intellectual game.
    - (Augustine – true philosophy is 'love of God' / Aquinas – on sacred doctrine / Evagrius – 'he who prays truly is a theologian' / Ames – theology as '*scientia vivendi Deo*' (the knowledge of how to live for God) / Perkins – theology is the science of 'living blessedly before God forever'.)

### [2B] Reason Two: Because God Cares for Us.

- **LOOK:** Eph 4:11-16
  - God would have us pursue Godly truth + doctrine because he's our loving Father, and **he would protect his children.**
    - "*We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine*" [v.14]
- **The great delusion of the modern Evangelical Church:**
  - That theology is 'over there, and Church stuff is 'over here'.
    - IN TRUTH: **everything** we do is theological.
    - E.g. communion cups, use of technology, etc.
  - The net result of partitioning theology from Church life?
    - We just end up being bad theologians, and repeating mistakes – there is nothing new under the sun.
  - **KEY POINT:** we are ALL theologians + we ALL do theology.
    - The only choice is whether we do it *well*.

### [2C] Reason Three: Because God Is On A Mission.

- **LOOK:** 1 Pet 3:15
  - We can't tell about that which we don't know.

- We can't defend that which we haven't examined.
- **LOOK:** 1 Tim 4:16
  - The promise of pursuing the God of salvation.

**[2D]** Reason Four: *Because God is a Theologian*

- God is in the business of speaking about God.
  - He IS the 'θεός λέγων' – the speaking God.
  - He IS the reason with which we reason.
  - He IS the truth in which we know truth.
    - **READ:** Ps 36:9 – **God makes theology possible; we're just following his lead!**
- And how is God in the business of speaking about God?
  - **LOOK:** Heb 1:1-3 – in Christ, God is a theologian!
    - He is the very theology of God – a truth that distinguishes Christian theology from all other kinds, and one we'll slowly unpack as we go along.

### [3] How Do We Do Theology?

Let's now address our third question – 'How do we do theology?'  
If I was teaching a class, I would give an academic response.

#### [3A] The Shape of Academic Theology

- **The sources of theology.**
  - Revelation / tradition / experience / reason.<sup>6</sup>
- **The types of theology.**
  - *Disciplines:*
    - Biblical theology / Historical theology / Mystical theology / Contextual theology / Systematic theology.<sup>7</sup>
  - *Traditions:*
    - E.g. Protestant theology (Lutheran, Reformed, Anglican, etc.) / RC or EO theology, etc.

**BUT – we're not in a classroom, and this isn't a university.**

We're not here to write essays, to ponder on curiosities.

We're here to glorify God with our minds. Our intellectual discipleship.

**When we ask, 'How do we theology?', we're really asking, 'How do we do it well?' –**

"I hope you perceive what I aim at in all this, namely, that to see God in his creatures, and to love him, and converse with him, was the employment of man in his upright state; that this is so far from ceasing to be our duty, that it is the work of Christ to bring us, by faith, back to it; and therefore the most holy men are the most excellent students of God's works, and none but the holy can rightly study them or know them. 'His works are great, sought out of all them that have pleasure therein'; but not for themselves, but for him that made them. Your study of physics and other sciences is not worth a rush, if it be not God that you seek after in them. To see and admire, to reverence and adore, to love and delight in God, as exhibited in his works – this is the true and only philosophy; the contrary is mere foolery, and is so called again and again by God himself. This is the sanctification of your studies, when they are devoted to God, and he is the end, the object, and the life of them all" [Baxter – *Reformed Pastor*]

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<sup>6</sup> *Revelation*: both general (e.g. nature) and special (e.g. Scripture). [We'll look at this in more detail when we cover the doctrine of Scripture.] *Tradition*: this word can rightly be applied to unbiblical traditions, of the kind Jesus mentions in Mark 7:13, or it can refer to the 'handing on' of sound principles and helpful practices (from the Latin *tradere* ['to hand over']), of the kind Paul mentions in 2 Thess 2:15. *Experience*: e.g. our own walk with God and experiencing life with him. *Reason*: our God-given, critical faculties.

<sup>7</sup> *Biblical theology*: compassing how a particular idea or theme is developed throughout the canon of Scripture (e.g. the Exodus in the Psalms and NT). *Historical theology*: examining how a particular doctrine or idea has been received and understood throughout Church history. *Mystical theology*: the works of Christian mystics, e.g. Julian of Norwich and Meister Eckhart. Christian mysticism itself is a contentious thing; there can be truths gleaned within it (e.g. Calvin was influenced by Bernard of Clairvaux), but we must be discerning. *Contextual theology*: the kind of theology done from a 'perspective', e.g. 'feminist theology'. (In my opinion, some of the worst theology done in the modern academy is done under this banner.) *Systematic theology*: the 'jack of all trades' discipline, seeking to synthesise all the tools at our disposal to give an account of all that God has done.

**[3B] Theological Study and Love of God**

- **When you study Church history, you see this point made repeatedly.**
  - "As students of the divine scriptures... begin to approach the task of studying them in detail, they must ponder incessantly this phrase of the apostle Paul: 'knowledge puffs up, but love builds up'. ... Gentle and lowly in heart, peacefully subject to Christ, laden with a light burden, founded and rooted and built up in love, and incapable of being puffed up by knowledge, they should now proceed" [Augustine – *De Doctrina* II.148ff]
  - "[There] are some [...], enriched with great gifts, who, while they are ardent for the studies of contemplation only, shrink from serving to their neighbour's benefit by preaching; they love a secret place of quiet, they long for a retreat for speculation. ... [What] disposition of mind [causes one to] prefer his own privacy to the advantage of others, when the Only-Begotten of the supreme Father himself came forth from the bosom of his Father into the midst of us, that he might profit many?" [Gregory the Great – *Pastoral Rule* V]
  - "Doctrine is not an affair of the tongue, but of the life; is not apprehended by the intellect and memory merely, like other branches of learning; but is received only when it possesses the whole soul, and finds its seat and habitation in the inmost recesses of the heart. ... To doctrine in which our religion is contained we have given the first place, since by it our salvation commences; but it must be transfused into the breast, and pass into the conduct, and so transform us into itself, as not to prove unfruitful." [Calvin - *On the Christian Life* I.4]
    - The point is the same – there is no place for the theological type, their head stuffed with knowledge, but with a heart that stinks of pride + quarrel.
- **RECALL:** Luke 10:29 – "*wanting to justify himself...*"
  - **LOOK:** 2 Tim 2:14-26 – "*pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace*" (v22)
    - "*I have no greater joy than this, to hear that my children are walking in the truth*" [3 John 1:4]
    - "*A fool takes no pleasure in understanding, but only in expressing personal opinion*" [Prov 18:2]
  - The OT makes the same distinction between the scribes.
    - "*For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach the statutes and ordinances in Israel*" [Ezra 7:10] – a faithful servant.
    - "*How can you say, 'We are wise, for we have the law of the LORD', when actually the lying pen of the scribes has handled it falsely*" [Jer 8:8] – corrupt theologians.
- **John Bunyan [1628-88]** – captures this well in *Pilgrim's Progress*.
  - Part One, the character of Mr Talkative.

**This is why this group is called 'Theology That Sings'.**

We want to be theologians together. We want to love and serve the Lord. We want to learn to love God more. Hence the name – *Theology That Sings!*

- **LOOK:** 1 Cor 14:15 / Ps 119:172-73
  - "Any theology that does not lead to song is, at a fundamental level, a flawed theology" – J.I. Packer