THEOLOGY AS A DISCIPLINE

I. What is Theology? (possible working definitions).

1. “Theology” derives from *theos* (“God”) and *logos* (“reason,” “word,” “study”). Therefore, when we use the word “theology,” we are merely saying something like “the study of God.”

2. (Lewis and Demarest, 23) “*Systematic theology* is the topical and logical study of God’s revealed nature and purposes.”

3. (Garrett, 10) “The ordered exposition of Christian doctrines . . .”

4. (Grudem, 21) “Systematic theology is any study that answers the questions, ‘What does the whole bible teach us today?’ about any given topic.”

5. (Erickson, 23) “That discipline which strives to give a coherent statement of the doctrines of the Christian faith, based primarily on the Scriptures, placed in the context of culture in general, worded in a contemporary idiom, and related to issues of life.”

6. (Moody) “A Christian theology is an effort to think coherently about the basic beliefs that create a community of faith around the person of Jesus Christ.”

7. (Patterson) “Theology is the investigation of all possible truth about God and His purposes in creation in order to discern all of creation’s appropriate response to God.”

8. (McGrath, 141) “Theology is …discourse about God …”

II. Why is Theology Important? (Theology’s Purpose)

1. Because everyone is a theologian. Ultimately, the question is whether one is a good theologian or a bad one. Every Sunday School teachers is a theologian. Examples:
   - Interpreting a Biblical passage – *Biblical Theology*
   - Comparing two Bible verses – *Systematic Theology*
   - Examining how Baptists have traditionally understood a passage – *Historical Theology*

   Even the statement, “I don’t need theology – just the Bible,” is a theological position.

2. Because Theology is the area where one utilizes many of the skills acquired in other disciplines.
   - Proper exegetical skills: Understanding the grammar and context
   - Proper interpretive skills: Hermeneutics
   - Proper contextual skills: NT and OT Backgrounds
3. **Because Theology is the area where the Bible is applied to many of the difficult issues of our day.** Examples:
   - Abortion and Euthanasia – *imago Dei* (i.e., the image of God); the Biblical definition of life/death; and the concept of “person,”
   - The Role of Men and Women – the doctrine of the Trinity; the nature and effects of the Fall; the nature of the Incarnation
   - Homosexuality – the doctrine of original sin.
   - The Role of the Christian in Politics and Culture – eschatology, the relationship of the Church and the World, and the nature of sanctification.

4. **Because Theology is the infrastructure to one’s methodology in ministry.** Examples:
   - What one believes concerning the Lordship Salvation controversy will affect how one does evangelism i.e., can one accept Christ as Savior and not as Lord?
   - What one believes concerning the order of salvation will affect how one gives an invitation.
   - What one believes concerning the condition of lost man will affect one’s openness to seeker services.
   - What one believes concerning the gender debate will affect one’s position on church polity.
   - What one believes concerning providence will affect how one prays during sickness or suffering.

   How great is the influence of belief upon behavior? Consider the words of the economist John Maynard Keynes, “The ideas of economists and political philosophers, both when they are right and when they are wrong, are more powerful than is commonly understood. Indeed the world is ruled by little else. Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influences, are usually the slaves of some economist. Madmen in authority, who hear voices in the air, are distilling their frenzy from some academic scribbler of a few years back.”

5. **Because the purpose of theology is to know the Triune God, His special revelation to man, His will and ways, in order to more effectively live holy lives in His service and to lead others to do the same.**
III. The Divisions of Theology:

1. **Philosophical Theology:** The basic assumptions involved in theology – the existence of God, the nature of reality, and the epistemological possibility of knowing God (i.e., the discipline of what we can know, how we can know, etc.).

2. **Biblical Theology:** Focuses on the theological content of a particular genre (e.g., the Psalms) or corpus – Old Testament theology, Johannine or Pauline theology, for example.

3. **Historical Theology:** The historical development of doctrine and controversies that have shaped the questions we ask and the answers we get.

4. **Systematic Theology:** The most comprehensive type of theology. A systematic formulation of the whole of the Biblical witness in a way that responds to contemporary issues and gives a basis for Christian life and ministry. Usually broken down into the following areas:

5. **Glossary of Terms:**
   - **Prolegomena** – a preliminary discussion; a broad overview; a word spoken before we started;
   - **The Doctrine of Revelation** - that God communicates and how he does so.
   - **The Doctrine of God** (Theology Proper)
   - **The Doctrine of Angels** - Angelology
   - **The Doctrine of Humanity** (Anthropology)
   - **The Doctrine of Sin** (Hamartiology)
   - **The Doctrine of Christ** (Christology). Generally, His person and work are studied separately.
   - **The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit** (Pneumatology)
   - **The Doctrine of Salvation** (Soteriology) – “soter” is the greek word for Savior, “logos” is the word for study. Hence, soteriology is the study of how Christ saves.
   - **The Doctrine of the Church** (Ecclesiology)-ekklesia is the greek word for “called out ones.” Logos is the word for “study.” Therefore, ecclesiology is the study of the church i.e., the called out ones.
   - **The Doctrine of Last Things** (Eschatology)-“eschatos” is the greek word for “last;” logos is the word for study. Hence, Eschatology is the study of last things. This is not to be reduced to various positions on the millennium.

IV. The Possibility of Theology: (This question is dealt with much more extensively in Apologetics)

“For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe.” (1 Cor. 1:21 NKJ)

“But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.” (1 Cor. 2:14 NKJ)
1. The Accusation of Meaninglessness:
   - The Problem of Accessibility: In *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), Immanuel Kant argued that it is not possible to have theoretical knowledge of objects that transcend sense experience. We never know the objects that transcend sense experience. We never know the objects of knowledge as they really are in themselves (the *noumena*). We only know them as they appear to us (the *phenomena*). There can be no real knowledge of or cognitive basis for religion as traditionally understood. Practical reason (i.e. ethics) requires God, but as an object of faith, not proven by reason. Since, Kant, modern thought has denied the possibility of objective metaphysical knowledge. But Kant’s statement is metaphysical, and thus self-contradictory.

2. The Evangelical Response:
   - The Reasonableness of Theology: We justify our theology by demonstrating internal consistency and coherence, and showing its ability to explain the observable data. Furthermore, we assert that all attempts to explain reality begin with presuppositions. Our presuppositions are a least a credible as any others, and thus unbelievers should not be allowed to hid behind intellectual objections. However, at the same time, we recognize that no one can be argued into having faith.
   - The Approach of Theology: Theology is possible within the context of “faith seeking understanding,” based upon the reality of divine revelation and the superintending ministry of the Holy Spirit. Looking at the components of this claim:
     - “Faith:” “If anyone wants to do His will, he shall know concerning the doctrine, whether it is from God or whether I speak on My own authority.” (John 7:17 NKJ)
     - “Reason:” “By faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that the things which are seen were not made of things which are visible. (Heb. 11:3 NKJ) “Pistei nooumen: - - rational reflection; to perceive or understand; to think carefully about; to conceive.
       - Reason above faith: rationalism
       - Faith without reason: fideism
       - Reason the servant of faith: *fides quarens intellectum* – “Faith seeking understand”
     - Divine Revelation:” “The LORD has made known His salvation; his righteousness He has revealed in the sight of the nations.” (Ps. 98:2 NKJ)
       “God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son: (Heb. 1:1-2 NKJ)
     - “Superintendence of the Holy Spirit:” “Now we have from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God. (1 Cor. 2:12 NKJ)
There are two approaches to theology or biblical studies: *objective* or *confessional*. The objective approach is to pursue theology apart from any creedal or confessional presuppositions. The approach seems to be rationalistic and holds the individual to be the final authority. History indicates that this eventually leads to chaos, nihilism, and despair. *We will proceed along confessional lines* —

V. **A few things to remember:** We are not merely looking at the “material” of theology, we are also learning the “methods and manner” in which theology is discussed, debated, and determined.

- The idea of a *theological continuum*. This is the idea that all beliefs don’t necessarily have to be held with the same tenacity and conviction. For example, I don’t hold my eschatological conviction as tightly as I hold my belief in the deity of Christ. If I were threatened with death over the doctrine of my belief in the deity of Christ, then I would die for this. If I were cornered on my position about “last things,” then I would be open for discussion and, perhaps, modification.

- Continuing with this idea of a theological continuum, we also need to remember that for many issues, unless you are that rare one who has it all figured out, there are appropriate times to **suspend judgment**. For instance, I believe that Scripture explicitly teaches the doctrine of “creation ex-nihilo.” That is, God created the heavens and earth from nothing (no previous existing matter). However, on a personal note, that conviction has not yet settle for me the issue of “young earth versus old earth.” I have many friend/scholars are all conservative Christ-honoring men and women who differ on this issue. Unless one has made a thorough study of both sides and has a modicum of expertise on this issue, then I would recommend “suspending judgment” until such time that you have an “informed and studied opinion/conviction.”

- The *importance of logic* in theological discussions. It is important to remember that we can all hold views on a variety of subjects, but if we are to become compelling, cogent, consistent and coherent, we must make sure that our views don’t conflict with another view that we have lodged in our thinking processes. We all hold, at some level, inconsistent views, even if we are unaware of it. This is a lifelong pursuit to “…take every thought captive into obedience of Christ” (1 Cor. 10: 5). Example: Can God create a rock so big that he cannot move it?