

# THE EQUIP INSTITUTE

Theme: Christian Belief

Topic: Introduction to Theology

Spring 2024

## Introduction

The Equip Institute exists to equip members of Taylors First Baptist Church to think rightly about God and His Word for the sake of living rightly before God in His world. The Institute is a two-year discipleship program that emphasizes four major themes: Christian Story, Christian Belief, Christian Formation, and Christian Witness. This spring, we will focus on the theme of Christian Belief. This session is an introduction to Christian theology.

## Defining Theology

Many theologians define theology as simply speaking about God. After all, the word *theology* combines two Greek words: *theos* (God) and *logos* (word). There is a sense in which theology is our words about God.

"[Theology is] 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." (Millard Erickson)

Nathan Finn's definition: *Theology is thinking rightly about God and His Word for the sake of living rightly before God in His world.* This definition weaves together the theoretical and the practical, the root and the fruit, the foundation and the structure. We don't want to simply learn true information about God. Rather, we want God to use theological truth to conform us more to the image of our Lord Jesus Christ.

## Types of Theology

There are at least six different types of theology, each of which provides us with a different and complementary picture of God and his ways:

1. Exegetical theology is the study of the Scriptures in their historical and grammatical context (microscopic view)

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2. Biblical theology is the study of the Scriptures in their canonical and redemptive-historical context (macroscopic view)
3. Historical theology is the study of how the church has reflected upon and attempted to articulate what is taught in the Scriptures (historical view)
4. Systematic theology attempts to explain what the whole Bible has to say about any given topic (integrative view)
5. Moral theology focuses upon the ethical implications of Christian theology for individuals and societies (the ethical view)
6. Practical theology is the intentional application of theology to the church's worship, witness, and ministry (pastoral view)

These six types of theology are like the facets of a diamond. Theology is more comprehensive and more useful to the Christian life when we combine all six of these approaches into our study of doctrine. *Theology shines most brightly when all the facets are polished.*

**Why Theology Matters**

In Ephesians 4:11–16, Paul discusses the purpose of the teaching ministry of the church:

- ⇒ To equip believers for the work of ministry (vs. 12a)
- ⇒ To build up the body of Christ (vs. 12b, 16)
- ⇒ To cultivate spiritual maturity (vs. 13–15)
- ⇒ To help believers avoid errors (vs. 14)
- ⇒ To promote unity among believers (vs. 13, 15–16)

This is a holistic vision that includes the head, the hands, and the heart. Theologians often refer to this holistic vision by talking about *orthodoxy* (right thinking), *orthopraxy* (right practice), and *orthocardia* (right heart).

We can't know God without knowing about Him. Intellectual knowledge surely isn't enough (James 2:19), but we can't have authentic relational knowledge without accurate intellectual knowledge. This is especially true in a culture that abounds with bad ideas about God, creation, humanity, sin, the future, etc. When rightly understood, theology provides language to describe biblical faith and godly action.

God has gifted the body of Christ with individuals who have advanced theological training who use those gifts to

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serve the church. Praise the Lord! But don't miss this: *every Christian is a theologian*. The real question is whether we're being *faithful* theologians or *unfaithful* theologians.

Key verse: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Romans 12:2, ESV).

Paul teaches us that God is working in our lives to correct worldly thinking and bring transformational renewal to our minds by redirecting our affections and our priorities *godward*. The result is that we live in a way that increasingly glorifies the Lord. Theology is intended to spur us on toward spiritual maturity. Sound doctrine is a means of grace in the life of the believer.

### Sources of Theology

Protestants (including Baptists) argue that Scripture alone is our ultimate authority for faith and practice. This includes theology. If a doctrine isn't biblical, then it isn't true. In this way, the Bible is our supreme authority for theology, the first and most important place we look to determine sound doctrine. As J. I. Packer argues, "the first mark of good theology is that it seeks to echo the divine Word as faithfully as it can."

A second source of theology is tradition. Unlike Roman Catholics, we don't argue that Scripture and tradition are equally authoritative sources of theology. Scripture is our supreme authority. However, tradition is an important secondary source of theology in that it helps us to understand the Scriptures. In this way, tradition is our servant authority for theology because it serves our interpretation and application of the Bible. Some of the most useful servant sources include historic creeds, denominational confessions of faith, catechisms, hymns, sermons, and the writings of theologians. However, *tradition is only a useful source to the degree it affirms, clarifies, and reinforces the Scriptures*.

### Theological Triage

Albert Mohler's "theological triage" argues that some doctrines are more central to the Christian faith while other doctrines, though still important, are less central. Theological triage divides doctrines into three categories.

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First-order (primary) doctrines are beliefs that are essential to authentic Christian faith. To deny, reject, or redefine these doctrines would result in something different than Christianity, even if it uses Christian lingo and affirms some Christian concepts. First-order doctrines include the Trinity, the inspiration of Scripture, the full deity and humanity of Jesus Christ, universal human sinfulness, the atonement, and salvation by grace through faith. To err with a first-order doctrine is to embrace heresy, which is damnably incorrect doctrine.

Second-order (secondary) doctrines are beliefs that are debated by Christians to such a degree that it's difficult for two believers who hold significantly differing views to be a part of the same church or group of churches. Secondary doctrines include biblical infallibility and inerrancy, baptism and the Lord's Supper, church leadership and polity (structure), miraculous spiritual gifts, eternal security, and the role of women in ordained ministry. Most denominations are formed due to strong convictions about secondary doctrines. To err with a second-order doctrine is to embrace heterodoxy, which is an incorrect doctrine that potentially hinders spiritual maturity but is honestly held by some sincere believers.

Third-order (tertiary) doctrines are beliefs that are widely debated by Christians but that don't normally preclude two believers from being a part of the same congregation or denomination. Tertiary doctrines include how best to understand predestination, the nature of the millennium, non-miraculous spiritual gifts, the details of original sin, and the age of the earth. Individual matters of conscience could also be put in this category. To err with a third-order doctrine is to simply be wrong about a doctrine that is genuinely important, but that ultimately has less impact on your spiritual health than first- and second-order doctrines.

**How Should We Study Theology?**

Wayne Grudem suggests six guidelines for studying theology:

1. We should study theology prayerfully
2. We should study theology with humility
3. We should study theology with reason
4. We should study theology with help from others
5. We should study theology comprehensively
6. We should study theology as an act of worship

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