Why Study Theology?

[If] you do not listen to Theology, that will not mean that you have no ideas about God. It will mean that you have a lot of wrong ones—bad, muddled, out-of-date ideas. —C. S. Lewis

Mention the words theology or doctrine in almost any gathering of Christian believers and you’ll get a variety of reactions, some quite negative. Some Christians glibly—almost proudly—confess ignorance of the subject. Few, it seems, want to be seen as “theologians.” Aren’t theologians, after all, pious but impractical people given to fussing over Bible trivia, engaging in doctrinal hair-splitting, and writing on obscure topics in pretentious tomes no one reads? While these specialists are wasting precious time on things that matter little—if at all, so the thinking goes—the rest of us are busy trying to live out our Christian faith in a sometimes hostile environment.

If you have harbored such thoughts, Bruce Milne’s claim that “every Christian is a theologian” may surprise or even dismay you. But think about it for a moment. Theology is the study or science of God. We all know something about God, yet we rarely think of what we know as “theology.”

By virtue of being born again we have all begun to know God and therefore have a certain understanding of his nature and actions. That is, we all have a theology of sorts, whether or not we have ever sat down and pieced it together. So, properly understood, theology is not for a few religious eggheads with a flair for abstract debate—it is everybody’s business. Once we have grasped this, our duty is to become the best theologians we can to the glory of God, as our understanding of God and his ways is clarified and deepened through studying the book he has given for that very purpose, the Bible. (See 2 Timothy 3:16.)

As children of God it only makes sense that we should strive to know all we can about our heavenly Father, his ways and his will for our lives. Taking a casual approach to our beliefs nearly guarantees frustration and misunderstanding in our relationship with God.

Given the choice between “theology” and “practical faith,” most Christians opt for the latter. But is it truly possible to grow in faith without growing in knowledge of God? How are we to know we are acting rightly, making wise choices, living in a manner pleasing to him, without some basis for such knowledge? Alister McGrath asserts that for anyone interested in doing the right thing, “it is necessary to have a set of values concerning human life. Those values are determined by beliefs, and those beliefs are stated as doctrines. Christian doctrine thus provides a fundamental framework for Christian living.”

Where McGrath sees a framework, Philip Yancey speaks of a foundation:

Jesus told a story of two men who built houses that, from the outside, looked alike. The true difference between them came to light when a storm hit. One house did not fall, even though rain poured down, streams rose, and winds beat against it, because its foundation rested on rock. The second house, foolishly built on sand, fell with a great crash. In theology as well as in construction, foundations matter.

A frequent complaint about theology is that it engenders argument more readily than spiritual progress. Wouldn’t it be better, Christians often reason, if we expended more
energy on loving each other and less on proving ourselves right and others wrong? Admittedly, doctrine is too often used as a weapon (often a blunt instrument!) to discredit the views of others. Promoting one’s own ‘righteousness’ at the expense of ‘righteousness’ is never to be commended. But to avoid the study of doctrine because some handle the subject badly is as foolish as haphazardly constructing a house with no foundation simply because someone else’s house is a monstrosity. The apostle Paul admonished that knowledge can make us arrogant (1 Corinthians 8:1), yet he chastised those who were sinning, having ‘no knowledge of God’ (15:34 NASB). We must find a balance between knowledge and love, between knowledge and faith.

The modern Christian tends to ignore or decry the importance of right doctrine. Tired of endless disputes, Christians today embrace the idea that what really matters is right relationships, not right doctrine. The idea that one is more important than the other is a faulty premise; both right relationships and right doctrine matter. At the same time:

Correct doctrine in itself is not enough; it is tragically possible to fail to work God’s truth out in practical obedience. That is one reason why doctrine often gets a bad press. If correct doctrine does not lead to holy, loving, mature lives, something has gone terribly wrong. But that is no reason for neglecting or discounting it. The greatest commandment, Jesus said, is to ‘love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind’ (Matthew 22:37). He did not give categorical options, as if we could love God with heart or soul or mind; the command requires all of the above. Loving him with our minds will naturally entail finding out as much as possible about him. Just as in any relationship, love compels us to know and understand what he is like, how he works in the world and in us, what he loves, what he desires, what offends him, what delights him. Doing so requires our full attention and our diligent study.

Prayer and humility are critical, helping us keep our relationship with God and others in perspective. We will never—in this life, at least—understand God fully; Isaiah reminds us that his ways are higher than ours (55:9). Nevertheless, prayerful study followed by obedient, humble living can lead us to understand him better today than we did yesterday. An attitude of prayer and humility will facilitate attentiveness to what the Spirit is telling us as we examine the Scriptures and hear God’s voice through his human servants. This attitude will also serve to keep us mindful that no person, school of thought, institution, church, or denomination has all the answers.

Neither does this book, its editors, or its many contributors have all the answers; even so, in the pages that follow, we offer you introductory thoughts to start you on your way to a more thorough understanding of biblical doc-trine. Have with you a Bible and a notepad while you read. As you study God’s attributes, or read about the atoning work of Jesus Christ, or contemplate the work of the Holy Spirit, you will begin to lay the groundwork—the theological foundation—for a life of faith that will please God and make a difference in your corner of the world.

Notes:
3. Ibid.

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