

Welcome to Theology – Fall 2020

Session 1 (Christian Doctrine, Chapters 1-4)

Small group discussion:

What is one burning question that you have always had about God or your faith?

What does it feel like to talk to your kids (or neighbor or family member) about theology or about your faith? Do you find it easy or difficult? Why?

Are you ever anxious that you don't have the right answers?

In your experience, what usually opens the door for a good discussion with your family/kids about theology?

Intro to theology: what does it mean to be a theologian and “do” theology?

Shirley Guthrie: “Sex, politics, and theology – these are the only things worth talking about. This old saying is an exaggeration, perhaps, but it is an attempt to express a deep truth. Sex forces the question, Who am I? Politics asks, How can we learn to live together? Theology, which means literally, “a word about God,” asks questions like these: What is your only comfort in life and in death? What is the chief end of human life? What are we by nature? In whom do you believe? To risk carrying the exaggeration even further, of the three topics mentioned, theology is the most important and most interesting because it *includes* the questions raised by sex and politics! No theology is interested only in God. *The study of theology is by definition the quest for the ultimate truth about God, about ourselves, and about the world we live in – what else is there to talk about?*”

And it is personal (*good theology can change your life*), more than just an intellectual game (like how many angels can dance on the head of a pin?) – and because it is personal there are some ground rules for “doing” theology:

- 1) Be Honest – an honest doubter is closer to the truth than a superficial or dishonest believer.
- 2) Recognize your own limitations – theology deals with a God whose thoughts are not our thoughts and whose ways are not our ways – sometimes it is more believing to say “I don't know” than to be smugly sure of something (good theologians are modest theologians . . .). And it is ok if people have different perspectives – you will learn more from an open and honest debate than from total agreement
- 3) Ask at any point what any of this has to do with your individual, everyday life (home, work, play, worship) – good theology speaks about what is true in the real world

And when we have finished this study, you will not have a nicely wrapped-up system of theology with every question answered – you will not have “arrived” in your understanding of the Christian faith, but hopefully you will feel a little further along the way

The most important criteria for Christian theology – this is our basis for theology (there has to be a basis other than what we feel is true, i.e. truthiness . . .):

1) Jesus Christ – if you want to know what God is like, look at Christ. If you want to know what it means to be human, look at Christ. If you want to know what God is doing in the world and in our individual lives, look at Christ. But that does not mean all questions are automatically answered. Christ is also a mystery that we try to understand.

2) The Bible means that we are not left alone to talk about God – keeps God from becoming a projection of ourselves (Ludwig Feuerbach – anthropomorphic projectionism). But . . . how are

we to discern in this ancient book what the living God is saying and doing in our quite different time and place? How are we distinguish within scripture what is the will of God in all times and places from what was God's specific will for particular people in a particular historical situation? There is always the danger that we will find *in* the Bible only what we take with us *to* it (i.e. German Christians found biblical justification for slaughtering Jews, American Christians found biblical justification for owning slaves . . .)

- **Scripture is interpreted in light of its own purpose** – when we read the Bible rightly we learn who God is and how we may live faithfully in the presence of God (not a textbook of scientific information, or a book about world history, or an answer book)

- **Scripture interprets itself** – when something is hard to understand, we can look at other passages to throw a different light on it – also means that we must listen to the total witness of scripture (not just the parts we like the best and want to hear) [seminary story: if you leave seminary without changing at all, your time has been wasted; if you read scripture and are not challenged or changed, your time has been wasted] Important to ask: “Is that all the Bible says, or have you picked only passages that support your own ideas and preferences? What other passages might give us a better and fuller understanding of the biblical message?”

- **“Jesus” principle** – scripture is interpreted in light of what Christ did and commanded (i.e. the way Jesus treated women, over and against passages that imply the inferiority of women)

- **The rule of faith** – *we interpret scripture rightly when we do not interpret it by ourselves*, as if we were the first or only people to ever ask what it means – by listening to other Christians, past and present, helps us avoid confusing biblical truth with our own limited perspective

- **The rule of love** – fundamental expression of God's will is to love God and neighbor and any interpretation is wrong which goes against this

- **Literary and historical context** – Confession of 1967 I.C.2:

“The Bible is to be interpreted in the light of its witness to God's work of reconciliation in Christ. The Scriptures, given under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, are nevertheless words of human beings, conditioned by the language, thought forms, and literary fashions of the places and times at which they were written. They reflect views of life, history, and the cosmos which were then current. The church, therefore, has an obligation to approach the Scriptures with literary and historical understanding. As God has spoken the divine word in diverse cultural situations, the church is confident that God will continue to speak through the Scriptures in a changing world and in every form of human culture.”

3) The Church

The Bible was written for and about a community of people (Israelites, Jesus and his followers, early church) – you cannot be a Christian theologian by yourself

Doctrines (a set of beliefs held and taught by a church): we don't believe in doctrines, but they help explain what we believe

First question of theology – how do we come to know God?

- 1) Creation, preservation and government of the universe, or by the “light of nature and the works of creation” (Westminster Confession, 1.1)
- 2) Because God has chosen to reveal Godself and people have written it down, God makes Godself known through God's Word

How can we find God: Doctrine of General Revelation

Refers to the self-disclosure of God that all people can perceive by contemplating evidences of God's presence in the world of nature, history, and human life in general. “Natural knowledge” - goes from us to God – we seek God

Where theology gets personal: *“Why am I here? Where did I come from? Where am I going? What is the meaning of my life? Is there a God? Is there someone at the end of my life? Is there someone in charge who can help me to understand who I am, why I am here, and how I can go about living as I should? Why are bad things happening in the world or to me?”*

The arguments for the existence of God (from our viewpoint i.e. the realm of general revelation):

- 1) **The world is not self-explanatory** – Where did the world come from? What holds it together? There must be a God who is the source of all things – there is an ultimate reality – we come from God and return to God
- 2) **The universe displays a purpose** – we sense that the world must have an origin and purpose – there is a sense of design in the order and harmony in the world (i.e. the world is not full of chaos)
- 3) **World history and personal experience point to God's existence** – forces of injustice have finally been defeated by forces of justice – in our own lives, sicknesses have been healed, needs met, problems solved
- 4) **Our conscience bears witness to the existence of God** – we have a sense of moral responsibility – a feeling of what is good and true
- 5) **Spiritual awareness of God** – we are spiritual beings in ways that we cannot always explain, we are intuitively aware of the creative presence of a Spirit in our lives
- 6) **The world seems to function in a rational way** – there is a strange agreement between the way our minds work and the structure of the world - there is a great Mind behind rational human beings and the rational world

Small group discussion:

Are any of these arguments more compelling to you personally? Less compelling? Any of these represent some aspect of your own thinking about God over the years?

However Christians may differ in their answers to the question how and whether we can find God, they agree that in the last analysis we know that God exists because God has found us, not because we have found God. And we know what God is like, not because we have figured out for ourselves what qualifications a “divine being” must fulfill in order to be truly divine, but because God has revealed God’s innermost self by speaking and acting in the world in a special way.

How does God find us: Doctrine of Special Revelation

The unique self-revelation of God through God’s *word and actions* in the history of Israel and in Jesus Christ, through the Bible who tells of the God who came to us, and through the church. Goes from God to us – God seeks and finds us. And to know God means to experience God, as a person not just as an idea.

The knowledge given with revelation is the knowledge of something new and unexpected – might even contradict what we think we know about truth, love and justice (What new understanding both of God and of ourselves is given in God’s self-revelation to us?)

- 1) **God comes to us and revealed to us above all in Jesus.** How do we meet this God personally? Jesus. John 14:9: “Whoever has seen me has seen the father.” The truth is a person, not an idea or concept
- 2) **God is revealed in the history of Israel and prophets**
- 3) **God is revealed in the Bible** – we believe that God speaks to us in this book (God comes to us in the words of human beings)
- 4) **God is revealed in and through the Christian community** (in the church’s acts and worship and sacraments, God really speaks and acts – but the church remains all-too-human)

“That sounds right theoretically, but it just does not agree with my experience. I can’t really think of God as a person except when I slip back into my childish view of an old man with a white beard up in the sky. There may be such a thing as a ‘personal relationship’ with God in which God speaks and people hear, God acts and people recognize God’s activity in their lives. But God never spoke personally to me, and I can never be sure whether God is doing anything in the events of my life. Maybe I’m just not a real Christian. Or maybe God’s self-revelation happened only long ago in biblical times. Or maybe God still speaks and acts in the lives of some people, but I have been left out.”

In truth, we only encounter God indirectly (in a mediated way) . . .

- 1) We are humans and not God – we cannot and should not expect to meet God in a direct, unambiguous way
- 2) If we want to have a personal relationship with God, experience God’s presence and work in our lives, we should expect it to happen in a disguised, indirect way – God comes to us in the world, and if we want to meet God, it must be in the world (not in some vain attempt to ascend to the heavens)
- 3) Could it be that God becomes real to us only in and through and with our personal relationships with other people – the people who wrote and collected the books of the Bible, the one person who is God-with-us, the people around us in the Christian community, the people we encounter in our daily lives? (1 John 4:12)

- 4) But, we must be careful not confuse God with the world. God speaks in the Bible, but these human writings and in themselves the word of God. God speaks through worship, witness, and work of the church, but none is the word and work of God. God works through social and political movements, but none can claim ownership of God. If we confuse God with any of these ways in which God comes to us, we make false gods. We also need to be aware about how we construct our understanding of God (What we think about God influences what we think about ourselves, and what we think about ourselves influences what we think about God)

What is important to teenagers (and to us): to have faith in God means to expect, find, accept and know God as God has chosen to be known by us, on our level – God isn't far away or unknowable (and to know God is to experience God personally, to have a relationship with God): To know God's judgement is not simply to believe that there is a divine judge; it is to have God's judgement happen to you. To know God's love is not just to believe in a theory of the love of God, it is to experience God's loving action.

The Word of God:

- 1) Jesus himself, the Word made flesh
- 2) Word of God – the Bible
- 3) Word of God – what is proclaimed in word and sacrament in worship

Do we believe in the Bible? Strictly speaking, no (if we take the Bible seriously). Our faith is not in the book but in the God we learn to know in it. The biblical writers are not themselves God's self-revelation; they are witnesses to it. They ask us to place our hope and confidence not in them but in the God to whose speaking and acting they point, the God made known above all in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Did revelation cease when the Bible was completed, or does it still go on in our time? God still speaks – above all in and through the church. It is only by listening to the story of the past revelation of God recorded in the Bible that we are able to recognize what God is saying and doing it and through the church in our time.

The Freedom of God: God is at work even in places where God is not known (i.e. we can recognize God's work in places where the Judeo-Christian tradition is predominant and places where it is not). We are limited but God is not (Should we not rejoice when we see, also among unbelievers or the followers of other religions, something of the beauty, truth, goodness, justice, and compassion of God at work? Why should we not see in them the confirmation of our faith that the world really does belong to the creative, helping, and liberating God of the Bible and Jesus Christ?)

General Revelation: Psalm 19, Acts 14:16-18, Acts 17:22-31, Romans 1:18-23, Romans 2:12-16

Special Revelation: John 1:1-14, John 14:9, 2 Timothy 3:16-17, Ephesians 1:16-23, Colossians 1:15-20

Small Group Discussion:

What new and unexpected things does God's self-revelation tell us about God?

In what sense are true Christians Bible-believing?

Is revelation still going on in our time (what form does it take)? Is what it tells us different from past revelation?