

CHAPTER 1



THE SCIENCE OF THEOLOGY

The word “theology” means literally a discourse concerning God, but in analogy with other words, as geology, chronology, and biology, it means the science which treats of God

It naturally concerns itself with such questions as these: Is there a God? Can he be known? What is his nature and character? What are the relations he sustains to the universe, particularly to intelligent beings possessed of spiritual natures and, above all, as most important to us, to men? In what ways has he made himself known [to men]? And especially, in what aspect does he reveal himself to them as sinners? This is theology proper.

In connection with this last relation it treats, particularly, of man as a creature of God placed under the government of his moral law. It inquires into his original condition of innocence and happiness, the manner in which he fell there from, and his present state of sinfulness and condemnation and inability for self-rescue. This is anthropology.

It is thus led, also, to discuss the nature of the salvation which God has provided, as seen in the person and character of Jesus Christ, through whom it has come, and in the works of active and passive obedience, by which he has wrought out reconciliation to God. This is soteriology.

In like manner, also, does it consider the nature and work of the Holy Spirit, through whom man is led to accept the provisions of God’s grace and to attain through penitence and faith unto a salvation in Christ, which consists in freedom not from condemnation only but also from the dominion and defilement of sin, and in attainment of the holiness and happiness of children of the Heavenly Father. This is pneumatology.

It follows man also beyond the death of the body and makes known the future state of both the righteous and the wicked, as we before as after the resurrection of the body, together with the final judgment of both these classes, and the heaven and hell which shall be their respective abodes forever. This is eschatology.

Finally, it teaches the great end which God is accomplishing through all his works, in the manifestation to all his creatures of his own glory, as seen in its twofold aspect of mercy and justice in his dealings with this fallen race of man. This is teleology.

The term "theology" is applied not only to the science itself but to any treatise on that science. This is true not only of a discourse upon the one true God but even of one upon the many false gods of the heathen. It is also true, though the treatise be not a scientific discussion but simply an imaginative narrative or poem. Thus, "Orpheus and Homer were called theologians among the Greek, because their poems treated of the nature of the gods" (Charles Hodge, *Sys. Theol.* Vol. 1, p. 19). Even the poems of Ossian, though probably written in England within the past century, is a book of theology. Mythology is not less theology because it treats of false gods and in works of the imagination.

The term "theology" is, however, especially applicable to learned and scientific works upon God, or the gods. Of these, many are to be found connected with Heathenism. Such are the Vedas, the most ancient of the sacred books of the Hindoos. Such is the Zendavesta of the ancient Persians. The Edda, which sets forth the Scandinavian mythology, consists of poetic songs and also of dialogues on the origin of the gods, on the creation of the world, and other like topics. (See Gardner's *Faiths of the World*, Vol. 1, p. 795.)

The most valuable discussions among the heathen, however, are to be found in the works of the Greek philosophers, the greater part of which, when not directly upon the nature of the gods, involve questions as to the origin of the world and the presence therein of a divine controlling Spirit, as well as upon the nature of the soul, and its duties, and its immortality. Of their works many have come down to us in fragments only, while a large portion of what they taught is found only in the records and reports made by others. But there are also many complete works which profess to have been written by the authors of these speculations. Confessedly, the most important of these Greek writings are Xenophon's *Memorabilia of Socrates* and the works of Plato and Aristotle. But from the beginning of Grecian philosophy in Thales and Pythagoras to its culmination in Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle was not quite two hundred years, while its whole history covers a period of six centuries and a half before, and five centuries after, the coming of Christ. No human mind can estimate

the value of these contributions nor the influence they have exerted even over those possessed of the Christian Revelation.

The Latin writers also produced several works of a theological character, pre-eminent among which is that of Cicero, "Concerning the nature of the Gods."

Theology is also frequently used for the set of opinions exhibited by a writer, or class of writers, in any one or more productions. Thus, we have the theology of Calvin, or of Arminius, or of Baxter, that of the Reformation, Princeton theology, and New England theology. Men also speak of the theology of the Old or of the New Testament, the theology of the Psalms, of the various evangelists (especially of John), and Petrine and Pauline theology.

Theology is defined as a science. It is eminently worthy of that name. It lacks nothing that constitutes a science. It is concerned in the investigation of facts. It inquires into their existence, their relations to each other, their systematic arrangement, the laws which govern them, and the great principles which are the basis of this existence, and these relations.

As in other sciences, there is much that is absolutely known, much beyond this that is little questioned, much that is still matter of speculation, and much as to which there is decided difference of opinion. New facts are constantly developing in this science, as in others, which enable us to verify the facts and principles heretofore accepted, when true, and to modify them when erroneous. New theories present themselves for the better explanation of facts already known, and are tested by these, and by others subsequently discovered, and are received or rejected according to their ascertained correctness. The knowledge of the past is built upon for progression towards the future.

The discovery of the facts is conducted, as in all other sciences, by study of what the field affords. Geology examines the earth and derives its facts from the structure of that earth. Astronomy investigates the stars. Theology, likewise, studies the sources of its knowledge. Each science seeks to arrive at the truth. The votaries of each are certain that it is to be found in their fields, either partially or completely. The perfect attainment of all facts prepares for the exactness of scientific knowledge. The absence of any must make the knowledge incomplete. The proper generalization of all is essential in this, as in all other kinds of science. A full knowledge of all the facts,

and a perfect generalization of them, will constitute theology an exact science.

Theology is also as sensitive to the absence of facts as is any other science. The astronomer finds that his calculations, based upon correct theories, are not exactly verified, and at once suspects the presence of some disturbing body as the cause of this variation. So, also, in theology. The omission of a single fact, however small, must affect the whole universe of doctrine. The common mind does not perceive this, and hence is not prepared to value the discovery of the new fact. But the theologian finds in the new and more exact adjustment, thus made possible, the proof of the truth of his whole system, and therefore prizes it, even sometimes beyond what he ought.

Regarded as a science, theology may be classified in various forms:

- According to the method of revelation, into natural and supernatural theology. Natural theology embraces what man may attain by the study of God in nature. This extends not only to what is beheld of him in the heavens and the earth, but also in the intellectual and spiritual nature of man himself. Supernatural theology is that derived from such special information as God has given by what we commonly call revelation.
- According to the purpose which it contemplates, into systematic theology, also called didactic or dogmatic; polemic or controversial theology; and practical or experimental theology.
- According to the main religious idea associated with it, as pantheistic theology, deistic theology, rationalistic theology, etc.
- According to the name of its founder, or the race in which it originated, or flourishes, as Christian theology, Judaistic theology, Mohammedan theology, etc.
- According to the sources from which it is derived, into Biblical theology, Christian dogmatic theology, and ecclesiastical dogmatics.

Biblical theology consists in the facts of the Bible, harmonized by scriptural comparison, generalized by scriptural theories, crystalized into scriptural doctrines, and so systematized as to show the system of truth taught to the full extent that it is a system and no farther. As

in botany, one gathers all the plants of the world and arranges them without attempting to introduce new plants, even to fill up manifest gaps, so Biblical theology, duly presented, shows scriptural truth in all the perfection and in all the imperfection with which God has given it.

True Biblical theology should recognize the inspired source whence come its teachings. But as now technically used, Biblical theology refers to the statement and development of doctrine by the various Biblical writers, or in other words to the development of Jewish religious thought without assuming or denying the inspiration of the Bible.

Christian dogmatics is not confined, as is Biblical, to the facts and theories and statements of doctrine expressly and formally set forth in the Scriptures. It comprises, in addition, such philosophical explanations as seem necessary to make a complete and harmonious system. These additions are not necessarily non-scriptural, for they are often the embodiment of the very essence of Bible truth, though not of its formal utterances. They may be as much a part of Scripture as the theory of gravitation is of the revelation of nature. They should never be so far unscriptural as not to be either probable inferences from the Word of God or natural explanations of its statements. The more perfectly they accord with that word, and the greater the proportion of its facts which they explain, the more clearly do they establish their own truth, and the more forcibly do they demand universal acceptance. Failure to explain all difficulties or to harmonize all facts does not deprive them of confidence, but only teaches the need of further investigation. Direct opposition, however, to any one scriptural truth is enough to prove the existence of error in any Christian dogmatic statement.

Ecclesiastical dogmatics consists of authoritative statements of doctrine put forth by some body of Christians claiming to be a church of Christ. These are to be found in creeds, symbols, decrees, apologies, and resolutions. They may also appear in the form of authoritative discussions of the creed or system of doctrine of any church.

It thus appears that a perfect system of theology will combine all of these classes. It must be based upon Biblical dogmatics which shall have so collected and systematized all the teachings of a full