

Why Study Theology?

by Shane Rosenthal

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American culture is arguably heading more and more in an entertainment oriented and anti-intellectual direction, and this approach is not without its effects on American Christianity. Too often Christians are put-off by theology and the deep reflection of the Bible's rich doctrines, yet these are the things that make up the most exciting and rewarding parts of the Christian life.

In his struggle against religious liberalism in the 1920's, J. Gresham Machen summarized the liberal approach to Christianity: "Theology, or the knowledge of God, it is said, is the death of religion; we should not seek to know God, but should merely feel his presence." With this approach, the Princeton apologist could not bring himself to agree; "it ought to be observed that if religion consists merely in feeling the presence of God, it is devoid of any moral quality whatsoever. . . . Certainly it does make the greatest possible difference what we think about God; the knowledge of God is the very basis of religion." In other words, if feeling and experience is the essence of religion, then perhaps one could justify murder, theft, or even dabbling with the occult, simply because "it feels right." The founder of Christianity, however, had a different approach: "You are really my disciples if you hold to my teaching" (Jn 8:31).

There is undeniably a doctrinal core to the Christian faith. We confess not merely the fact of Christ's death, but that his death was an atonement for sin. True faith, therefore, rests on the foundation of certain doctrinal claims: "I believe that Jesus died for my sins," etc. However, today it is common once again to hear Christians say for example: "I don't get into that theology stuff. I let my pastor handle all that because he went to seminary." Unfortunately, this is not true faith. True Christian faith rests in the finished work of Christ, whereas the person who makes this kind of statement is actually trusting in his or her pastor's faith. If you trust in your pastor's faith, what happens if your pastor runs off with the church secretary? If you leave theology to the so-called experts, how will you know if your church begins to teach false doctrine? (Eph 4:14). How will you share your faith with others? (1 Pet 3:15). What will keep you from joining a cult or a non-Christian religion? By acquiring an understanding of what you believe and why you believe it, you will be able deal with questions such as these.

The command to love God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength is a serious charge, and it suggests that our whole bodies are to be involved in the worship of God; yes, even our minds. Unfortunately contemporary American culture does not encourage us to use our minds. Often in the church this masquerades as spiritual superiority. "Why split hairs over theological subtleties, isn't the real important thing that we love and serve Jesus?" Whenever I hear questions like these, I usually respond with a few questions of my own: "Who is Jesus? Is He just a nice guy, a great teacher, or is He God in human flesh? What was significant about His death? Did it merely show

us how much He loved us or did He satisfy God's wrath toward us? What does it mean to serve Him? Do we serve Him by taking drugs and having mystical experiences, by throwing young virgins into volcanoes, or by attempting to love our neighbors as ourselves?" You see, if theology is really irrelevant, it would make no difference whatsoever who Christ is or even how we are saved. As novelist Dorothy Sayers argued in her book *Creed or Chaos*, "It is the dogma that is the drama!" Christ is worth honoring and serving because of who he is and what he has accomplished, and that is what theology is all about!

Another phrase I hear often these days is this: "Well, my idea of God is. . . ." The problem is that your idea of God just might be idolatry if it is not based squarely upon the Word of God. Theology defines the boundaries of our thoughts concerning God; it takes into consideration all of the Scriptural data on a given subject, such as the attributes of God, the work of Christ, or the ramifications of sin. Theology attempts to give an account of how God has revealed Himself to His people in history. This is why theology is ultimately the most practical thing a Christian can be involved with, for what could be more practical than to know who God is, what He is like, what the basic message of the Bible is, etc. Ignoring God's own self revelation, and focusing on what Christ can do for us now (either in terms of experiences, or changed lives, etc.) is to lose the essence of Christianity which is centered on the historic gospel of Christ's death and resurrection. Again from Machen, "If the saving work of Christ were confined to what He does now for every Christian, there would be no such thing as a Christian gospel--an account of an event which put a new face on life. What we should have left would be simply mysticism, and mysticism is quite different from Christianity."

One of Paul's many prayers to the young and developing churches throughout the ancient world was that Christians would grow in wisdom and understanding of who God is: "I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better" (Eph. 1:17). While Christians today do express interest in knowing God, they usually do so apart from any deep reflection about God. Yet Paul here clearly teaches that growth in wisdom, knowledge, and depth of insight about God will help us to know Him better. What's more, this was not just passing advice; this was something Paul often and earnestly prayed for. But, you might say, Paul also says that "knowledge puffs up" (1Cor 8:1). Yes, it is true, there is a danger of conceit when sinners acquire virtue, and thus when compared with love, which is what Paul is doing in 1 Cor 14, it is a lesser virtue. However, Paul is not thereby suggesting that we pursue or remain in ignorance, but continually urges us to "let the the Word of Christ dwell in [us] richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom... (Col. 3:16).

Similarly, the Apostle Peter wrote, "His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him..." It is our knowledge of God, Peter is saying, that is the primary fuel for godliness. To avoid theology therefore, is to be "ungodly." It was this very apostle who was asked by Jesus himself, "Who do you say that I am?" (Matt. 16:15). Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven" (Matt. 16:16-17). Here Peter's view of Christ (theologically speaking--his "Christology") wins God's approval. But later on as Jesus was explaining that he must "go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed,"

Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!" Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men" (Matt. 16:21-23). Here, Peter had an ungodly theology. In fact, it was so ungodly that it was as if Satan himself were talking to Jesus. But what was so bad about what Peter said? Well, briefly stated, he was focused on "the things of men" rather than Christ's mission of the cross. This is one of the biggest problems in the church today. In many pulpits across this country, you will hear passionate and exciting things, even very religious things. But many of them are ultimately focused on the things of men rather than on the centrality of the cross. If Peter could get sidetracked, so can your pastor, and so can you.

This is the heart of the matter for us today. Because we think that theology is irrelevant, we have been "conformed" to the world's way of thinking rather than being "transformed by the renewing of our minds" (Rom 12:2). Only if we resist the emphasis on personal experience, self indulgence, and the anti-intellectualism of our day, and begin to mine the rich resources of our Christian faith and heritage, then will we "no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming" (Eph. 4:14).

Relevant Bible Passages For Further Study:

Job 38:1 Then the LORD answered Job out of the storm. He said: 2 "Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge?"

Prov. 2:1 My son, if you accept my words and store up my commands within you, 2 turning your ear to wisdom and applying your heart to understanding, 3 and if you call out for insight and cry aloud for understanding, 4 and if you look for it as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure, 5 then you will understand the fear of the LORD and find the knowledge of God. 6 For the LORD gives wisdom, and from his mouth come knowledge and understanding.

Isa. 56:10 Israel's watchmen are blind, they all lack knowledge; they are all mute dogs, they cannot bark; they lie around and dream, they love to sleep.

Jer. 4:22 "My people are fools; they do not know me. They are senseless children; they have no understanding. They are skilled in doing evil; they know not how to do good."

Hosea 4:6 my people are destroyed from lack of knowledge. "Because you have rejected knowledge, I also reject you as my priests; because you have ignored the law of your God, I also will ignore your children. v14 -- a people without understanding will come to ruin!

Mal. 2:7 "For the lips of a priest ought to preserve knowledge, and from his mouth men should seek instruction --because he is the messenger of the LORD Almighty.

John 6:56 Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him. 57 Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me. 58 This is the bread that came down from heaven. Your forefathers ate manna and died, but he who feeds on this bread will live forever." 59 He

said this while teaching in the synagogue in Capernaum. 60 On hearing it, many of his disciples said, "This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?" 61 Aware that his disciples were grumbling about this, Jesus said to them, "Does this offend you? 62 What if you see the Son of Man ascend to where he was before! 63 The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life. 64 Yet there are some of you who do not believe." For Jesus had known from the beginning which of them did not believe and who would betray him. 65 He went on to say, "This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless the Father has enabled him." 66 From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him. 67 "You do not want to leave too, do you?" Jesus asked the Twelve. 68 Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. 69 We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God." Machen: ...The evil consists in the existence of the errors which cause the divisions and not at all in the recognition of those errors when once they exist.

John 8:31 To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. 32 Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

Acts 6:9 Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called) --Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia. These men began to argue with Stephen, 10 but they could not stand up against his wisdom or the Spirit by whom he spoke. (John 4:23-24)

Rom. 1:18 The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, 19 since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. 20 For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities --his eternal power and divine nature-- have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse. 21 For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. 22 Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools 23 and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles. 24 Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. 25 They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator --who is forever praised. Amen. 26 Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. 27 In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion. 28 Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done.

Rom. 10:2 For I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge. 3 Since they did not know the righteousness that comes from God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness.

Rom. 12:2 Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is - his good, pleasing and perfect will.

Rom. 16:18 For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people.

1Cor. 1:10 I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought.

1Cor. 14:20 Brothers, stop thinking like children. In regard to evil be infants, but in your thinking be adults.

2Cor. 4:6 For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.

2Cor. 10:5 We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.

Eph. 4:11 It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. 14 Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. 15 Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ.

Phil. 3:8 What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ --the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith. 10 I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death...

Phil. 4:8 Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable --if anything is excellent or praiseworthy --think about such things.

Col. 1:6 All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and understood God's grace in all its truth.

Col. 1:28 We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ.

Col. 2:2 My purpose is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the

mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

Col. 3:16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.

Col. 4:6 Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.

2Ths. 2:13 But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers loved by the Lord, because from the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth.

1Tim. 3:15 if I am delayed, you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God's household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth.

1Tim. 4:6 If you point these things out to the brothers, you will be a good minister of Christ Jesus, brought up in the truths of the faith and of the good teaching that you have followed. 7 Have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives' tales; rather, train yourself to be godly.

1Tim. 4:16 Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.

1Tim. 6:20 Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to your care. Turn away from godless chatter and the opposing ideas of what is falsely called knowledge...

2Tim. 2:15 Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.

2Tim. 2:23 Don't have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments, because you know they produce quarrels. 24 And the Lord's servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. 25 Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth...

2Tim. 4:2 Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage --with great patience and careful instruction. 3 For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. 4 They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. 5 But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry.

1Pet. 3:15 But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect...

2Pet. 3:15 Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him. 16 He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction. 17 Therefore, dear friends, since you already know this, be on your guard so that you may not be carried away by the error of lawless men and fall from your secure position. 18 But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever! Amen.

1John 5:20 We know also that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true. And we are in him who is true --even in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life. See also, Titus chapter 1.

For Further Reading On This Topic See:

[Christianity & Liberalism](#), by J. Gresham Machen

[History and Faith](#), by J. Gresham Machen