

Lecture Outline 1: The Nature of Theology

Beginning of Lecture 1a.

I. Introduction

- A. Does theology really matter?
1. Many students who are going into the ministry wonder if they are wasting their time and money to study theology.
 2. The evangelical church is weak because it is not serious about theology.
 3. What do we mean by theology?
 - a. Theology deals with the great truths and mysteries of life such as the meaning of life, death, suffering, and the greatness of God.
 - b. Therefore, theology will challenge us to reach further than we have reached before.
 4. The audience of the theologian
 - a. The theologian's prime audience is God. It is before him and from his presence that the theologian speaks.
 - b. The task of theology is to take the truth of God's word and apply it to one's own context.
 - c. The theologian's secondary audience is the church, not the academy.
 - 1) Theology is formulating the knowledge and the truth of God for the people of God.
 - 2) It is formulating knowledge and truth for the church's nurture, service, understanding, and character.
 - 3) The purpose is to enable Christians to navigate their way through life in a way that is pleasing to God.
 - d. Theologians have sometimes forgotten that the church is the secondary audience.
 - 1) They then tend to assume that the academy is the prime audience.
 - 2) Theology becomes a conversation between specialists who use language that is esoteric, technical, and exclusive.
 - 3) The academy is rarely interested in the church or in a biblical understanding of God.
 - e. It is important not to drive a wedge between the church and the academy.
 - 1) Mark Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994)
 - (a) Noll argues that evangelicals don't feel compelled to think deeply about life from a specifically biblical point of view.
 - (b) There is no compelling Christian voice in society to help people to

- understand the tragedy and chaos around them.
- 2) The root of the problem is that we have forgotten who our audience is.
 - (a) Our audience is primarily God. We do our theology for him and before him and from him and to him.
 - (b) We, therefore, need to be able to speak with the kind of clarity and profundity that matches the kind of truth that he has given us in the scriptures. Then we will really serve the church.
5. The loss of theology among evangelicals
- a. “The Third Coming of George Barna” by Tim Stafford, *Christianity Today*, August 5, 2002, 46(9):32
 - 1) Barna is in despair about the evangelical world.
 - 2) He believes that the evangelical church has five years left to turn around, or it will simply disappear.
 - 3) Barna bases his belief on his polls, which show that there is little difference between those who claim to be Christians and those who claim to be non-Christians in how they look at life, how they live morally, and what they want from life.
 - 4) Barna’s solution is to apply a business or consumer model to the church.
 - b. Dr. Wells believes that evangelicals have lost their “theological soul.”
 - 1) Forty percent of evangelicals think that all religions lead to God.
 - 2) The real problem, however, is that the theological truths don’t have weight for us. They don’t reach deeply into who we are as people and shape who we are.
6. Student questions
- a. How is it that we do our theology before God and for him?
 - 1) We do it before him in the sense that we are recognizing from whom we have received biblical truth.
 - 2) Since God is the one who has given it to us, that has implications for how we should handle it and what we should do about it.
 - 3) The Bible contains not only historical documents, but it is also divine revelation.
 - 4) So we need to do our theological work with reverence and the appropriate humility. This means that we come to the biblical text recognizing that we are fallen and biased.
 - 5) We do theology for God in the sense that we have been given a mandate to take the biblical truth that he has given us and bring it into a different context in our world.
 - b. If theology contains the deepest answers to the deepest questions that we face,

why are so many people uninterested in it?

- 1) This is a difficult question to answer.
- 2) At the root the answer is probably that we all have to be trained in godliness. It doesn't come naturally or easily to us.
- 3) The world that surrounds us is full of values and beliefs that are hostile to the interests of biblical godliness.
- 4) It is as difficult to do theology as it is to live a moral life.

II. Definition of Theology

A. Historical sketch

1. The word theology comes from the Greek θεός (*theos*, “God”) and λόγος (*logos*, “word”).
 - a. In a narrow sense, theology is knowledge about God (sometimes called “theology proper” or “the doctrine of God”).
 - b. In a broader sense, theology is knowledge about everything that God has revealed and how this impacts all of life.
2. Patristic Period (The early church fathers)
 - a. The patristic period covers the first five centuries of the church's life.
 - b. The fathers gave a great deal of attention to differentiating the biblical God from pagan deities.
 - 1) Thus, the word theology was quite constricted in its meaning.
 - 2) The New Testament was born in the context of great religious diversity.
 - e. The fathers also gave a lot of attention to apologetics, that is, to educating people in the Christian faith.
 - 1) They expected people to come into a church service and not know what was going on.
 - 2) Christianity was very different from the rest of the culture.
 - 3) They spent a lot of time in catechesis or teaching.
3. The Middle Ages
 - a. Christianity became culturally dominant.
 - b. Recommended Reading: *Medieval People* by Eileen Power (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1963)
 - One sketch in this book shows how pagan rituals had become Christianized.
 - c. As Christianity became dominant the culture became Christianized, but in a very real sense paganism was still present.
 - d. In this period, the understanding of what theology entailed broadened.
4. The Reformation
 - a. The Protestant Reformation scraped away much of the residue of the Middle Ages.
 - b. Calvin said, “If the contest were to be decided by patristic authority, the tide,

- to put it very modestly, would turn to our side.”
- c. By this Calvin meant that you could look at the Reformation from two angles.
 - 1) On the one hand, it was a recovery of the authority of the biblical word of God and a displacement of the authority of the church.
 - The church was displaced from its role of being able to control what scripture can say.
 - 2) From another angle, you could see the Protestant Reformation as a contest between patristic and medieval Christianity, between what was more faithful in the beginning and what became less faithful over time.
 - d. This brought about the idea that the word of God must be made completely authoritative in the life of the church. This idea drove a whole new generation of theologians.
5. Reformation theology made two assumptions.
- a. Theology is about the God of the Bible.
 - b. What we have in scripture is given to us by God, under the Spirit’s inspiration, and is therefore authoritative.
- B. Feminist critique questioned the assumption that theology is about the God of the Bible.
1. There are some contemporary feminists who urged theologians to talk about “sheology” instead of theology, that is to talk about “goddess” rather than God.
 2. “Since God is male, the male is God.” (Mary Daly)
 - a. The belief that God is male is part of a hierarchy that has led to the oppression of women.
 - b. In a traditional understanding of theology, God the Father rules the world. Male clergy rule the church, and males rule females.
 - c. Feminists want to inject a feminine element into theology in order to get some parity in this world.
 - 1) God/ess (Rosemary Reuther)
 - 2) God-she
 - 3) Others have gone further and argued that God not only has a feminine element, but that the female element is actually independent of God. They will often speak of this female element as “Sophia” which means wisdom (from the examples of personified wisdom such as in Proverbs 8 and 9).
 - d. Example of a worship service directed to Sophia
 - 1) The first hymn celebrated the fact that Sophia ordains what God will do: “Sophia is the teacher we esteem and the subject of life’s theme. Lover, counselor, comforter; life is gladness lived with her.”

- 2) This was most scandalously epitomized in a conference sponsored by the National Council of Churches in 1993 called “Re-imagining the Divine.”
3. If theology is a systematic reflection upon Sophia, a divine female element that is independent of the God of the Bible, you are going to end up with a very different body of understanding from what you would have if you were submissive to the God of the Bible.

End of Lecture 1a.

Beginning of Lecture 1b.

- C. Enlightenment skepticism questioned the assumption that scripture has been given by God, through the Holy Spirit, and is therefore authoritative.
 1. Since the dawning of the Enlightenment in the 18th Century, there has been a great deal of skepticism about the possibility of miracles, including that of the inspiration of scripture.
 2. There has been a compensating or parallel assumption in Enlightenment thinking that unaided human reason can unlock the meaning and mysteries of life.
 3. One can make a compelling argument that the Enlightenment was really a Christian heresy in the sense that it offered people what the Christian faith offered, but it did so on a purely naturalistic and humanistic basis.
 - a. Where Christians had revelation, the Enlightenment offered unaided human reason.
 - b. Where Christians had salvation and judgment, the Enlightenment changed salvation into “having” and being damned into “not having.”
 - c. The Christian message as a whole was not rejected, but human beings decided that they could produce what it offered in themselves.
 4. If you begin with the assumption that God does not intersect with life or produce miracles, then what possible reason would you have for thinking that scripture could be inspired or reliable or that there is a unitary message that goes through it? In fact, you would assume the reverse on all of those points.
 5. In culture today, there is a growing skepticism about the Enlightenment assumptions.
 - Perhaps natural reason isn’t antiseptic, unaffected by class or gender or social context.
 6. The Enlightenment brought about a broadly expansive understanding of what religion is.
 - Many universities have religion departments that have taken over the Enlightenment assumption that all the meaning and mystery of life is lodged in human experience.

D. Summary

1. James Denney: theology properly begins with God but nevertheless includes a worldview within that understanding of who God is.
2. Theology gives us a way of thinking about everything.

III. The Doing of Theology

A. The objective

1. Theology is about discovering what God has said in his word and communicating it to the church living in a particular context and culture.
2. The two poles
 - a. Scripture (revelation)
 - b. Culture (the church in a particular place)
 - 1) Theology is not speaking abstractly, but it is speaking to people who are connected to their culture.
 - 2) If human nature is fallen and corrupt, then the human nature which by extension is given collective expression in the world around us is also fallen.
3. *Christ and Culture* by H. Richard Niebuhr (New York: Harper, 1951)
 - a. Niebuhr presents five historical models of relating Christian faith to culture.
 - b. Distinguishes between nature and culture
 - 1) Nature is what we have by creation (example: a river).
 - 2) Culture is the artificial environment that we have built upon nature (example: a bridge).
 - c. However, our complex, highly organized society does things to us that Niebuhr probably wasn't thinking about. This includes urbanization, methods of production and consumption, communication, mobility, and the breakdown of the family.
 - d. If you cannot do theology well, then you are not going to be engaging people with the truth of God at the very point where they need to be engaged.
4. How would you distinguish between culture and the New Testament concept of worldliness?
 - a. We cannot equate culture one-for-one with worldliness.
 - b. The culture contains within it elements that can and should be affirmed, as well as elements that ought to be denied.
 - c. What we are engaged with is the relationship between things that do not change and things that are constantly changing.
 - 1) God, in his character and moral purposes and plans, does not change.
 - 2) The completion and significance of the atonement do not change.

- 3) Human nature does not change.
- 4) The nature of sin does not change.
- 5) What does change? Our minds, people, the world, beliefs, etc.
- d. What should happen when the truth about what is unchanging comes to intersect with that which is always susceptible to change? Contextualization
 - 1) This is an idea that has fallen into considerable disfavor.
 - (a) In practice, contextualization came to mean rewriting the Christian faith in terms of the ideologies or political agendas of a specific culture, so that the Christian faith meant different things in different contexts.
 - (b) In less serious ways, the Christian faith has also been “contextualized” and made synonymous with fads and fashions.
 - 2) Is the context defining what the word of God will be allowed to teach, or is the word of God defining what is normative for the context?
 - (a) Rudolph Bultmann argued for a deterministic view of culture.
 - (1) A people’s worldview is given to them in and with their context or culture, and they cannot change it at will.
 - (2) This is an example of the context limiting and defining what the word will be allowed to teach.
 - (b) Student question: Since the Bible was given in particular contexts, how do we separate what is purely cultural from what is transcultural?
 - (1) This is the question of the expanding world of learning: we have to think about the truth of scripture with the knowledge of a much larger context than anybody who has ever preceded us.
 - (2) Contextualization is very difficult, and it would be very disheartening if we did not have truth that is enduring and unchanging in the midst of all the complexities of culture.

B. The practice

1. Confession
 - What does scripture say about the doctrine of God, about the atonement, about the church, about sanctification, etc.?
2. Reflection
 - We need to reflect on biblical truth and on the way biblical truth has traveled through time in the life of the church.
3. Cultivation
 - a. Cultivation is thinking about truth and working it into our lives.
 - b. This includes engagement with the world and culture.
4. Putting it into practice
 - a. We should begin with confession. This is the Protestant understanding of *sola*

scriptura: scripture alone is authoritative.

- c. We should move from confession through reflection and cultivation and back to confession to ask ourselves if we have understood rightly and if we have understood fully all the consequences of our confession.
 - c. Liberal Protestantism began with cultivation and moved through reflection to confession.
 - This was based on the assumption of the immanence of God (Schleiermacher). That is to say that God is to be found by, with, and under all human personality.
5. Elaboration on confession
- a. This is foundational to our task.
 - b. We should begin with the truth of God as revealed in scripture and with that knowledge that marks us out as belonging to God in Christ.
 - c. With a Bible in our hands, what would we say to people who asked us what we believed?
 - d. This entails hard work partly because scripture itself is complex and partly because we have to come to an understanding of ourselves as those who sometimes stand in the way of understanding what scripture says.
 - e. Beginning with Jesus and continued by the apostles, there emerges a body of teaching which comes to define those who believe it just as a password might define which side a soldier is on in the ancient world.
 - 1) “Stand firm and hold *the traditions* which you were taught by us” (2 Thess. 2:15).
 - 2) This apostolic understanding of what is entailed by Christian believing becomes the deposit that is to be carried in the life of a church from that moment to this.
 - 3) Heresy can be defined as all of those ways in which this set of teachings is denied, diluted, perverted, or misconstrued.
 - (a) Heresy is subsequent to orthodoxy.
 - (b) What is orthodox is what scripture defines.
 - (c) What is heretical is what is denied in scripture.

End of Lecture 1b.