



# The Nature and Method of Theology

## DEFINING THEOLOGY

**Developing a definition.** This volume is founded upon, and is intended to examine and to elaborate, what Paul calls “the whole counsel of God.”<sup>1</sup> We have already looked at the context of Paul’s statement in the book of Acts concerning the whole counsel. The next step is to define theology in a general fashion.

A simple, yet accurate definition of theology would be “knowledge concerning God.”<sup>2</sup> That definition affirms many truths. It acknowledges that there is a God and that God can be known. It also recognizes that human beings are able to know things, even things about God. However, is it legitimate to make these assumptions concerning both God and humanity?

If theology is defined as “knowledge concerning God,” we are assuming that God exists and that he has revealed himself to humanity. Therefore, a more precise definition of theology would be something like “the study of God to the extent that he has revealed himself to humanity.” From this foundational definition, we can begin to develop the study of theology.

**The Bible and creation: a subject-object problem.** The last phrase in the definition, “to the extent that he has revealed himself to humanity,”

1. See Acts 20:27.

2. Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology* (1948; typeset, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 4.

presents a problem. That problem is what philosophers call "the subject-object problem."

We know that God has revealed himself to humanity in his creation and in his Word. When one turns to the creation account found in the first three chapters of the book of Genesis, one immediately notices that theology is quite different from any other area of human investigation or research. Theology is different because God has not only revealed himself to humanity, but actually created humanity.

To understand the first part of the definition, "the study of God," we have to understand what it is for a person to "study" something. Usually, to study something means to break the object down into component parts, to analyze them separately, and then to put them back together and understand them as a whole.

Such study implies that there are different parts to human knowledge. Starting at the very beginning, for any human learning to occur, there must be a "thinking subject" (a human investigator) and an object of investigation. For example, Adam and Eve (human thinking subjects), while in the Garden, could have investigated a tree. They could have examined the tree from every angle, taken off pieces of the bark and tasted them, and collected leaves from different trees for comparative studies. Adam could have pushed on the tree to see if it would fall over, and could have compared the strength of this particular tree with others.

Today, the method of human examination of a tree (an object) would be similar. One difference, however, would be that we have more advanced investigative tools. Today, photographs could be taken of the tree. Perhaps the tree could be sawed down to count and study its growth rings. So that we would not miss any part of the analysis, the tree could be microscopically probed, and it could be dug up to investigate its root structure.

Obviously, the study of God is not like the study of a tree! Theology as a discipline is unique. The normal subject-object relationship in a human investigation is not present, for God is not like a tree. God, as the Creator, cannot be tasted or pushed or examined. People and all things in the created world are distinct from God. This distinction appears to be absolute. In theology, unlike other human sciences, the

relationship between the subject (humanity) and the object (God) can even be reversed!

Furthermore, in theology the supposed object of investigation (God) is far from being passive like the tree. God is in fact the first one who is active on the field, by the work of creation itself. Man (the subject) was created and defined by God (the object)! To make the situation more complicated, the book of Genesis tells us that the subject (humanity) could have no knowledge of the object (God), were it not for the fact that the object (God) has graciously granted us access to knowledge of himself.<sup>3</sup> Thus, theology is different in many ways from other areas of human study.

**Human sin: a philosophical limiting concept.** The human study of God becomes more complex with the introduction of a limiting concept, namely, sin. The fact of human sin is introduced in the Genesis creation narrative. The presence of sin in the world forces a further refinement of our definition of theology. Sin produced a new subject-object relationship. The human subjects (Adam and Eve), because of their rebellion against God, no longer trusted him (the object). That is why they hid from him immediately after their sin. Also, because of sin, the object of investigation (God) is in a different relationship with the subjects.

In the New Testament, Paul comments on this situation in Romans 1:18. After the Fall, he explains, human beings retain some knowledge of God. However, because of their sin, people now need a supernatural revelation or a new self-disclosure from God about himself. This supernatural revelation is required for humans (the subject) to understand any absolutely true and adequate information about divine things (the object). Yet even more is required.

**The subject changed through regeneration.** Besides the new revelation, there is need for a new relationship. The object (God) is “angry” with the subject, and the subject distrusts this Great Object. To create a new relationship, God has to be the active party. He

3. Geerhardus Vos, “The Idea of Biblical Theology as a Science and as a Theological Discipline,” in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, ed. Richard B. Gaffin Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980), 4–5.

alone has the ability to change the estrangement. That change comes through conversion.

When human regeneration comes by the gracious act of God, a new type of individual or "knowing subject" is created.<sup>4</sup> Now, through examination of the deposit of truth found in Scripture, the regenerated mind (subject) can obtain vast degrees of previously unknown knowledge concerning God (object). This does not mean that there has been a transformation in God's divine acts, words, or being; rather, the subject (humanity) has been changed.

**A better preliminary definition of theology.** An understanding of the subject-object problem facilitates the formulation of a better definition. Theology may be more precisely defined as "the appropriation by the regenerated mind of that supernatural/natural information by which God has made himself the object of human knowledge." This definition also needs to be understood in its various parts. The regenerated human mind needs to understand God's supernatural communication. This information is found in God's holy Word.

## KNOWING GOD THROUGH THE BIBLE

**The formation of the Scriptures.** The development of theology necessitates interaction with Scripture. Theology, therefore, presupposes exegesis, which is the examination or interpretation of the Bible. However, preliminary to understanding exegesis or exegetical theology is the study of the formation of the Scriptures.

The field of study dealing with the formation of the Scriptures is generally termed canonic. Canonic is concerned with the Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek texts of the Bible, the dates of those texts, and the human authors of them.<sup>5</sup> It also deals with the development and communication of the actual written revelation itself.

4. Eph. 2:10, "For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works."

5. For more information on canonic, see Merrill F. Unger, *Introductory Guide to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1956). See also R. Laird Harris, *Inspiration and Canonicity of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1957). Particularly good is Richard B. Gaffin Jr., "The New Testament as Canon," in *Inerrancy and Hermeneutics*, ed. Harvie M. Conn (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988). See also Roger Nicole, "The Canon of the New Testament,"

By the term *canon* or *canonical writing* is meant a divinely inspired book. All books of Scripture are inspired by God, and are therefore “canonical.”<sup>6</sup> The Bible, as a whole book and in all of its parts, is divine and therefore canonical.

However, since Adam’s fall, humanity has distrusted God. People have been so corrupted by their own sin and rebellion that they are unable to recognize the divinity of the Bible. It is evident that humanity cannot recognize such divinity on its own; therefore, God must tell his readers that his book has proceeded from him. God himself has identified these canonical books for humanity.

**The divinity of the Scriptures.** While God himself may have so identified the Bible, that does not mean that it is easy for humans, who distrust him, to know that God has identified these books as divine. While the issues are multifaceted (more complex analysis follows in the second part of this volume), nevertheless men and women can know that the Bible is God’s word. Primary evidence for the divinity of any book of the Bible is provided by the inward testimony of the Holy Spirit concerning it. This inward testimony is a conviction that is planted in the mind and heart of a believer by the Holy Spirit. The conviction is that these written words are “alive” with God’s power.<sup>7</sup>

There are also secondary evidences that corroborate the inward testimony of the Holy Spirit concerning the Bible. Those secondary evidences include the beautiful character of the contents, the harmony of all the various parts, the incomparable excellencies of the Bible

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*Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 40 (1997): 199–206. Nicole reminds his readers that “the authority of the Hebrew canon was clearly established by the practice of Jesus and the apostles” (p. 200).

6. Edward J. Young, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 31: “By the term ‘canonical writings’ is meant those writings which constitute the inspired rule of faith and life. Canonical books, in other words, are those books which are regarded as divinely inspired. The criterion of a book’s canonicity, therefore, is its inspiration. If a book has been inspired of God, it is canonical, whether accepted by men as such or not. It is God and not man who determines whether a book is to belong to the Canon. Therefore, if a certain writing has indeed been the product of divine inspiration, it belongs in the Canon from the moment of its composition.”

7. *Ibid.*, 32: “The believer possesses a conviction that the Scriptures are God’s word, and that this conviction is a conviction which has been implanted in the mind by the Third Person of the Trinity. This conviction has been the possession of God’s people ever since the first portion of Scripture was committed to writing. There can be no doubt that the true Israel immediately recognized God’s revelation.”

itself, and the positive testimony of so many devout men and women over the ages.<sup>8</sup> Granting that God has communicated supernatural information (the Bible) concerning himself to us, it would be helpful next to analyze the best methods to study that golden depository.

**Biblical exegesis and hermeneutics.** The examination of Scripture is usually called exegesis, and exegesis and exegetical theology are based upon insights from canonic. From canonic, the Bible student knows when a particular book of the Bible was written, the place where it was written, the human author of the material, and the first audience. Based on that historical work, he uses the "historical-grammatical" method of analyzing the biblical text. That is, he investigates the grammar of the original text, translates it into his own language, and studies its meaning within its literary-cultural context.<sup>9</sup>

When exegesis is combined with the Bible interpreter's own worldview, his presuppositions concerning the whole body of Scripture, this process develops into what is termed hermeneutics.<sup>10</sup> A proper hermeneutic will always acknowledge God as the revealer of himself and as the ultimate author of the Scriptures. Thus, the tools that the regenerated person will use to understand God's self-revelation are exegesis and hermeneutics. Using those tools, we see that the Bible speaks of its own supernatural characteristics. It would be helpful now to investigate those characteristics.

## THE CHARACTERISTICS OF SCRIPTURAL REVELATION

The doctrine of Scripture will be developed more completely later from actual analysis of biblical texts. Nevertheless, there are basic questions that should be addressed in a general introduction to the Scriptures and

8. *Ibid.*, 33.

9. For further literature on exegesis, see Willem VanGemeren, *The Progress of Redemption* (Grand Rapids: Academic Books, 1988), 27–37.

10. For more information on hermeneutics, see J. I. Packer, "Biblical Authority, Hermeneutics and Inerrancy," in *Jerusalem and Athens*, ed. E. R. Geehan (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1971), 141–53. See also George W. Knight III, "The Scriptures Were Written for Our Instruction," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 39 (1996): 3–13. Richard L. Pratt Jr., in *He Gave Us Stories* (Brentwood, TN: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, 1990), defines *hermeneutics* as simply "the study of all that goes into interpreting the Bible" (p. 1).

theology. Nonbelievers are not certain that the Bible is God's word. They are not certain that God, even if he existed, would be able or willing to communicate a divine word to humanity. If the Bible is the word of God, they ask, is all of it God's word, even those parts that appear to them to be contradictory?<sup>11</sup> An answer to this question must be given by anyone who hopes to present the whole counsel of God. The answer begins with recognizing a difference between the Bible and all other literature.

**The Bible is not just a human book.** In my freshman year at a liberal "Christian" college, our professor confronted the class. It was his job, he thought, to help his immature students to think about the Bible as "literature." Of course, there is nothing wrong with analyzing the Bible as literature. That is what we do when we consider a book's "genre," for example. However, the professor was convinced that the Bible was merely a piece of literature, just like any other piece of literature. To use his words, it was no different from Karl Marx's *Das Kapital*.<sup>12</sup>

At this point, the learned professor went too far. Those who view the Bible as only a human book are surely incorrect.<sup>13</sup> The Bible is indeed a human book, but it is also the very word of the God of truth.<sup>14</sup>

11. Years ago, William Henry Green stated the question this way, and the same questions need to be answered by each generation: "The burning question of the age is not, what does the Bible teach? It is one yet more radical and fundamental: what is the Bible? In what sense is it the word of God? Is it a revelation from him, and divinely authoritative; or is it to be left to the interpreter to say what in it is from God and worthy of our faith, and what is the fallible human element that may be rejected? This question is approached from all sides, and the most diverse and conflicting answers have been given" (*Moses and the Prophets* [New York: Carter, 1883]).

12. Already in the eighteenth century, J. A. Ernesti claimed that "the Scriptures are to be investigated by the same rules as other books" (cited by Pratt, *He Gave Us Stories*, 8).

13. Young, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, 26–27: "[Such a view] regards the Bible as a book of only human origin, whereas, as a matter of fact, the Bible is basically a book of divine origin." "There are those who apparently think that it is possible to approach the Bible with a neutral attitude. Their position seems to be, let us study Scripture as we would any other book. Let us subject it to the same tests as we do other writings. If it proves to be the word of God, well and good, but, if not, let us accept the fact. Essentially, this position is no different from the first two. The so-called neutral attitude towards the Bible is really not neutral at all, for it begins by rejecting the lofty claims of divinity which the Bible makes and it assumes that the human mind of itself can act as a judge of divine revelation."

14. Young, in *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, 27, eloquently states: "The viewpoint adopted in this present work is that the Old Testament is the very Word of the God of truth. It is also the work of men. . . . In His inscrutable wisdom God chose and prepared for the task of writing those human agents whom He desired to speak His will. Then in mysterious fashion His

**Revelation is historically progressive.** Scriptural revelation is grounded in history and is structured in a historically progressive fashion.<sup>15</sup> Later biblical books follow from, and are grounded upon, the earlier books. The regenerated person must know that the truths of Scripture come to him or her in the form of historically growing truth. The Bible is God's truth, and each Old Testament book has both a historical past and a future. In that sense, none of the Old Testament books has a "static" truth.

Therefore, since the Bible is not just a human book, but is supernatural information given in a historically progressive fashion, it would be helpful to see some of the Bible's claims concerning itself.

**Scripture's claims concerning itself.** God's Word makes certain claims within itself concerning itself. It claims that all human beings need a divine word from God for salvation. It is, from the human angle, necessary. Scripture also claims to be an authoritative word from God.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, from our vantage point, the Bible is both necessary and authoritative. That being so, one might assume that all people who read this word from God would treat it as a great treasure.

However, we know that because of sin, non-Christians do not and will not accept the claims that the Bible makes concerning itself. The normal human response to God's gift, sadly, is to reject it. The unregenerate do not acknowledge their desperate need for the Word of God and reject its claim to authority.<sup>17</sup>

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Spirit wrought upon them, so that what they wrote, although in a very true sense their own, was nevertheless precisely what the Spirit of God desired. The Bible, therefore, in one sense may be regarded as a human book. Basically, however, it is divine, and God Himself is its Author."

15. Edmund P. Clowney, *Preaching and Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), 15, 17: "This revelation was not given at one time, nor in the form of a theological dictionary. It was given progressively, for the process of revelation accompanies the process of redemption. . . . The most fruitful understanding of biblical theology is that which recognizes both the historical and progressive character of revelation and the unity of the divine counsel which it declares."

16. Cornelius Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1969), 15: "As self explanatory, God naturally speaks with absolute authority. It is Christ as God who speaks in the Bible. Therefore, the Bible does not appeal to human reason as ultimate in order to justify what it says. It comes to the human being with absolute authority."

17. *Ibid.*, 57: "From the non-Christian point of view, the idea of biblical authority is impossible."



The reasons for this negative response to God's own claims are diverse. Two of the reactions are sometimes called the irrationalist and the rationalist responses. The irrationalist person responds to God's claims armed with an assumption that "pure chance" guides all of reality. There can be no God in control of the universe. On the other hand, the rationalist responds with an assumption that reality is governed not by a personal God, but by impersonal laws—laws that he fully understands (and thus in some sense controls) in his mind.<sup>18</sup> However, not all humans reject God's gracious revelation. The reasons why the regenerate embrace this information are also found in Scripture. This involves the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit, but there is more that moves the believer.

**The redemptive process.** There is a connection between God's revelation in Scripture and other divine acts in history. This unified system of revelation and historical act could be called "the redemptive process." To understand the redemptive process, we must first appreciate that biblical revelation is not an isolated act of God, having no connection with all the other divine acts in history. We must not separate scriptural revelation from this comprehensive historical background of the total redemptive work of God. If we make that separation, then we fail to appreciate Scripture's historic and progressive character. The stages of this redemptive process need to be better understood.

**The stages of the process.** God's redemptive process has at least two stages: an "objective" stage and a "subjective" stage. A supernatural element is present in both.

The objective stage of redemption consists of the biblical events themselves. In other words, it is an objective fact that Israel was liberated from bondage at a certain time and place. Any event mentioned in Scripture is part of the objective stage of God's revelation. This stage of God's revelation is not subjective and individual in its nature; rather, it objectively addresses all of humanity. However, God applies these objective events (facts) to individuals. With that application, they become subjective.

18. *Ibid.*, 56.

The objective fact that Israel was liberated from slavery in Egypt, for example, or that Christ was raised from the dead, becomes something different from the objective fact that at one time John F. Kennedy, president of the United States, was assassinated. Each of the three events is a historical fact. However, the events recorded in the Bible are of the most profound and important character. No other facts of history are applicable to all of humanity, in all cultures, for all time. When the facts of the Bible (and especially the fact of Christ's resurrection) grip the heart of an individual, the objective fact of special revelation gains a subjective meaning. Thus, the objective and subjective stages of God's special revelation are clearly seen within the process of his work in human history.<sup>19</sup>

Among the thousands of biblical facts, some must be singled out as special. Some carry with them a heightened meaning. There is no disputing the fact that the redemptive work of God carries with it a heightened interest from the human perspective.

**Redemptive acts.** God has accomplished wonderful redemptive acts that reveal important principles of truth. Some of the greatest supernatural deeds were Israel's liberation from bondage in Egypt and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. These events themselves form a part of God's special revelation. These miraculous "interferences" by God in history are themselves revelatory, and often furnish the joints and ligaments by which the whole framework of sacred history is held together and its structure is determined.

Truly redemptive acts, since they are recorded in a book, have a verbal aspect and never consist only of acts by themselves. Redemptive acts never take place apart from God's verbal communication of truth. God's word (the text) and God's act (the event) always accompany each other and are never contradictory.<sup>20</sup>

A similar situation may be found in the Christian sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper. Both of these sacraments are mean-

19. Vos, "The Idea of Biblical Theology," 8.

20. The words that describe the event take hermeneutical priority over the event itself. Also, the words of the Bible do not "become" the word of God by the event of God speaking to the heart concerning that word. That latter view would be termed "Barthian," and will be described in more detail in volume 3.