

Why We Need Theology, Part 1

Selected Scriptures

We're going to be kicking off this study, giving you some reasons why we're going to pursue a course of instruction in the doctrines of Scripture and in the theology of Scripture. And I want to start out by giving you a bit of a justification tonight of why we're going to study theology. Several reasons why we study theology. I'm going to start with the outside, kind of what's out there, and then move in closer to the heart.

So I've got three points, three reasons why we're going to pursue a study of theology. Number one, sound theology provides protection in the faith. When I say, *the faith*, notice the definite article there, I'm not referring to the subjective notion of believing, you know, our exercising of faith, our trusting in Christ, relying on God, that's obviously vital. But I am actually referring here to the objective notion, referring to, *the faith*, the definite article.

So it's what Jude was appealing for, that we contend for, the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.

According to the Apostle Paul, this is the equipping work that I, as a pastor, we as elders, have been chosen by God and commissioned by Christ to do according to Ephesians 4:12-13. We are to "equip the saints for the work of ministry, for the building up of the body of Christ," and then verse 13, "Until we all attain to the unity of," again definite article, "the faith."

So Paul is referring there, in context, to the objective body of doctrine that has been given to us by God through the apostles and the prophets. When the Spirit regenerated us, the truth into which we were brought by his regenerating work, by his uniting us to Christ, we are united and in a body of doctrine, a body of belief.

Ephesians 4:4-6, there is a body of truth that Paul describes there that we're being instructed out of. "One body and one Spirit," he refers to. He talks about the "one hope that longs to your call." "One Lord, one faith, one baptism, the one God and Father of all who's overall and through all and in all." In those verses Paul just laid out for us a structure of systematic theology. One body is ecclesiology. One spirit, pneumatology. One hope referring to the hope that we have in Christ, that's eschatology. One Lord, Christology. One faith,

there it is again, the faith. Biblical theology, systematic theology. One baptism, that's our soteriology. That's our participation in the church. And then one God and Father, that's theology proper.

The deeper we go into that body of doctrine that we've been brought into and we study, the faith, we are going deep into what you, truly unites us at the core. And we're raising those issues to the surface. We're bringing those issues to the surface to bring doctrinal clarity and harmony in the church. The deeper we go into the study of, the faith, "once for all delivered to the saints," the safer we are in the face of all social and cultural and political and, by the way, we know that principalities and powers are at work behind all those social, cultural, political forces, right? So we don't "wrestle against flesh and blood." So this spiritual pressure that keeps coming at us externally to lead us or tempt us to compromise and abandon the truth; sound theology is protection in the faith.

Two of the most impression prophets of the last century were George Orwell and Aldous Huxley. In his 1931 book, *Brave New World*, Aldous Huxley delivered a, a vision of a utopian society, a perfect world guaranteed by eugenics. We're seeing that played out now. Sexual immorality in this novel, *Brave New*

World, was not only tolerated, but it was encouraged and promoted and celebrated. All sense of guilt and guilty feelings distracted by copious amounts of entertainment. And if that didn't work, it was dulled by a medication they called, Soma.

One of the characters in the book is a, a guy who's called a World Controller. His name is Mustapha Mond. And he, in the book, made a theological point. He supposed that there, quote, "quite probably is a God," but he, quote, "manifests himself in different ways to different men." He's advocating a spirituality there, but it's absent any organized structure or religion. Mustapha Mond goes on to explain that in premodern times, God manifested himself as the being that's described in these books and he's pointing to books like the Bible.

But now, quote, "he manifests himself as an absence, as though he weren't there at all. Call it the fault of civilization," Mustapha says, "God isn't compatible with machinery and scientific medicine and universal happiness. You must make your choice. We have chosen machinery, medicine, and happiness." Here we are now nearly a hundred years later, and we're seeing how prophetic those words were.

We understand the world has been moving in that direction for quite some time and we're actually right in the thick of

exactly what he described in his book. We understand how the world is moving in that direction. What we're disappointed to see is that the church has been moving there, too. Many in the evangelical church has been moving there, too. Theologian David Wells says, "Evangelicalism has basically followed the world in this, committed a whole myriad of intellectual sins and has been assimilated into a set of very compelling lies and heart level worldliness, sins of worldliness."

In his 1994 book called, *God in the Wasteland*, David Wells writes this about Evangelical theology. Quote, "It is one of the defining marks of our time that God is now weightless. I do not mean by this that he is ethereal, but rather that he has become unimportant. He rests upon the world so inconsequentially as not to be noticeable. He has lost his saliency for human life. Those who assure the pollsters of their belief in God's existence may nonetheless consider him less interesting than television. His commands less authoritative than their appetites for affluence and influence. His judgment no more awe-inspiring than the evening news and his truth less compelling than the advertisers' sweet fog of flattery and lies. That is weightlessness. It's a condition we've assigned him after having nudged him out to the periphery of our secularized life." End quote.

When he keeps saying, we, we, we, he's referring to us evangelicals. He's referring to us who have grown up in churches. And I can certainly concur, based on my experience, I can concur that is indeed what has happened even in my experience and in my soul. Into the spiritual void that's been created by several revolutions of the so-called Age of Enlightenment, revolutions in industry, technology, transportation, telecommunications, medicine, information technologies, now the political sphere, the political realm is vying for primacy to govern the whole of human life, the whole of man.

And that's what's taking shape today. George Orwell predicted that in the late 1940s. If any of you have read his book, his 1949 novel, *1984*, it described this intrusive and universal rule of a government called INGSOC. INGSOC is a not-so-subtle abbreviation that refers to English Socialism. So INGSOC, English Socialism. The governments of INGSOC, the governing authority and the power in 1984, it was divided between four ministries. Three of them were the Ministry of Peace, which concerned itself with war. The Ministry of Love, which maintained law and order. So think boot upside the head, that's ministry of love. And then the Ministry of Plenty, which was responsible for economic affairs. That's the promise of



English Socialism. That's the promise of American Socialism, as well. The Ministry of Plenty.

The fundamental conditioning ministry, though, the means of control, that came through the Ministry of Truth. And the Ministry of Truth concerned itself with news, entertainment, education, and the fine arts. The Ministry of Truth controlled what people said. They called it, Newspeak, the official language of the party, which was always subject to change, which was the vehicle for conveying the party's message. Particular words, particular phrases, things that were prohibited and outlawed and things that were okay to say, the right way to say it.

The Ministry of Truth promoted something called, doublethink, among the people such that they could hold two opposing ideas in the mind at once. So this idea of holding and tolerating within the mind contradictions, things that didn't make sense, things that they could see but then had to reinterpret through doublespeak in their head and say, I didn't just see that. I interpret it this way. So doublespeak is evident in the party's three slogans: War is Peace, Freedom is Slavery, Ignorance is Strength.

Ministry of Truth also controlled the narrative of the past, what we call history, in textbooks, newspapers. The main character in the book, Winston, that's his job at, at INGSOC, is to go into the Ministry of Truth and go and excise things that don't fit the narrative anymore and put in a different word. It's just like Wikipedia. It doesn't take a whole lot of imagination to see the parallels to developments in our own time. The past is mutable, it's pliable, it's flexible, it's a useful tool for shaping the present.

For example, think about this: To promote these high ideals of diversity and inclusivity, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, and Rules Committee Chairman James McGovern, they introduced a new code of conduct for the House floor to eliminate gender terms. So we're talking about, you can't use words like father, mother, brother, sister, son, daughter. Gone. They say that those changes on the House floor would, quote, "honor all gender identities by changing pronouns and familial relationships in the House rules to be gender neutral." End quote.

That is Newspeak. Today's classroom instruction, and this is even prior to Covid, but especially now in this, what they call this online classroom. All the move has been away from books, printed books, actually put together by a publisher and

cost involved, to move us away from that to online resources like Wikipedia articles and all the rest. Printed books, obviously, they contain errors as well, but they're less malleable, less subject to change, less mutable, more easily verified, more easily held accountable.

Again, the one who controls the narrative controls the past and reshapes thinking and reshapes thinking in the present and sets new prejudices by retelling history according to a modern critical theory agenda; that's what we're seeing in society and culture, in politics and in media all around us. And the same thing has happened in our evangelical churches. For many decades now, and it's directly related to our abandonment of the study of theology. In 1996, there was a document called *The Cambridge Declaration*. It makes this statement, quote, "The loss of God's centrality in the life of today's church is common and lamentable. It is this loss that allows us to transform worship into entertainment, Gospel preaching into marketing, believing into technique, being good into feeling good about ourselves, and faithfulness into being successful."

I just want to stop real quick in that quote, mid-quote, and just say that the loss of God centrality in the church and in our worship has led to all that change. What is the problem?

We don't know our God. We don't what he would approve of and what he would disapprove of. We're disconnected and cut off from our history because we think that the present is all that matters. And so many of us are terrible, terrible theologians, terrible church historians, terrible historians all around. We're more into what's on today's news than we are about what's going on 500 years ago and learning from our evangelical forebearers.

Continuing the quote. "As a result, God, Christ, and the Bible have come to mean too little to us and rest too inconsequentially upon us. God does not exist to satisfy human ambitions, cravings, the appetite for consumption or our own private spiritual interests. We must focus on God in our worship rather than the satisfaction of our personal needs. God is sovereign in worship. We are not." End quote.

If we will return to the centrality of God, the one who's sovereign over our lives, over our minds, over our time, over our worship, over our families, then listen, we will find safety in the study of theology. We will be safe in him. Studying theology obviously provides more than just protection from compromise, more than just protection from drifting into worldliness, but it will, at the very least, provide some

guardrails of safety for us, for our families, and for our church. And we need this safety as we head into the future.

Martin Luther, in his day he knew what it meant to put his life on the line for the sake of theology. He wrote these lines in his famous hymn, you know this, "A mighty fortress is our God." He says, "A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing; our helper he, amid the flood of mortal ills prevailing. For still our ancient foe doth seek to work us woe; his craft and power are great, and armed with cruel hate. On earth is not his equal."

Those lines come from Psalm 46. Psalm 46 in the first few verses start out this way. "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble at its swelling."

That had to comfort Martin Luther as he faced the diet of worms and the prospect of being burned at the stake as a heretic. We can't know God as our refuge and our strength if we don't study him. And so, we need to learn to worship him in depth and in wisdom. And so that brings us to a second point here. Sound theology provides protection in the faith. That's

the first point. Sound theology, number two, provides instruction in the faith. Sound theology provides instruction in the faith.

One of the fallacies that I grew up hearing in evangelicalism, is this notion that there is no creed but the Bible. Anybody heard that? That is the Bible's all I need. Just don't trouble my mind with all these creeds, confession and all this extrabiblical stuff. I just need the Bible. You may have heard that before yourself. I'm not sure if the origins of that kind of phrase are noble or not, but the sentiment has been used to promote suspicion in studying doctrine. That's not a good sentiment. That's not a good impulse. It promotes suspicion in developing the skill and the wisdom of systematizing the doctrines of the Bible into a coherent theology.

The problem with that mentality is that everyone is a theologian, whether they know it or not. Everyone has developed a sense of the Bible's doctrines. Everyone has to some degree or another, systematized these doctrines of the Bible. Some to the better, and many to the worse. Because we're created in the image of God, we can't help but do this. Our minds are wired by God to try to harmonize all the things that we know and think and understand. Being created in his image, we're going to try

to systematize and harmonize and put it all together into a coherent way of thinking.

Most people are not cognizant or thoughtful about that reality, which means they are susceptible to importing all kinds of error into their thinking, just swallowing all kinds of stuff from different books that they read or different articles that they download, different things they listen to on the Internet, and they import it into their thinking. And they don't know, years down the road, Why do I do what I do? It's very hard after time to forget what you've studied and you don't realize you could trace it back to that really bad seed of bad stuff that was put in your head. The error can start with shallow interpretations of specific Bible passages. It could be aided and imbedded, even deepened by what's taken in from other sources.

We've talked in various venues about something referred to as the theological pyramid. Sometimes we call it the exegetical pyramid. It's just a way, just think of a triangle, it's just a way to illustrate how everything that we consume comes with its own attendant theology and doctrine and exegetical conclusions and assumptions and all the rest. Everything from popular Christian books to scholarly books, to sermons, blog articles,

podcasts, YouTube lectures, whether we're conscience of this or we're totally unaware, all that we take into our minds and into our hearts promotes a particular view of theology.

It's based on certain doctrinal conclusions. And those doctrinal conclusions are built on prior and deeper exegetical decisions. So how do we know what's right? At the most foundational level, we rely on a scholarly discipline called textual criticism. Textual criticism studies what we call the canonicity of the text. That is, what is the standard? Or do we have a reliable Bible in our hands to start with. And once we have a reliable text, we can build from there. It's good for us to know that our English translations are fantastic.

I'm not talking about the dynamic equivalence approach to translation more of a thought-by-thought paraphrase. I'm talking about a literal approach to the text. So with a reliable text in hand, we can set about with confidence to interpret passages of Scripture. So when we talk about interpretation, we're talking about exegesis. Exegesis is the interpretation of the text of Scripture. We stay, in exegesis, we stay within the boundaries of what has been set by faithful protestant hermeneutics; the grammatical historical method. And that applies to the rules of grammar, with consideration to the facts of history. Those are

boundaries around the text and around our thinking, a discipline we maintain as we come to the text in order to help us get to the meaning of the text, the plain sense of the text to make good observations.

So good exegesis is based on good and valid observations of the text, interpreting the meaning of the text, and coming to that understanding. When we then gather together what the Bible teaches about particular topics, so, all the key passages about Jesus Christ, we put all those together and we call that Christology. If we bring together all the key passages about the Holy Spirit, the *pneumas*, that is Pneumatology. When we take all those doctrines and we group the teaching of all those passages together, that's what we refer to as the Doctrines of the Bible.

Doctrine is just a big fancy word for teaching. So we're talking about teaching. When we take all those doctrines of the Bible, the Christology, the Ecclesiology, the Eschatology, all these 'ologies, we take all these doctrines of the Bible. We harmonize all those doctrines into a coherent, noncontradictory view of the Bible's overall teaching, that is what we call Systematic Theology. It's very important because it gives us an overall framework about thinking of the whole counsel of God.

So from the text itself as the bottom of that pyramid, the base, from the text itself to the interpretation of the text, to the doctrinal teaching of the Bible, to the systematizing of all the Bible's doctrines. So we're talking about a foundation up through this big super structure of the Bible, out of that at the very top, at the pinnacle comes all that we do by way of application in the church. The preaching you listen to comes out of that top layer. The books that you read comes out of the top layer. Your approach to apologetics and evangelism comes out of the top. Your parenting, your discipleship, your counseling, church polity or governance, philosophy of ministry, what we do in the church and why we do it, all of that comes out of this top layer of the pyramid.

A vast majority of what Christians consume at that high, is at that highest level. It stands to reason we all not textual critics, exegetes, doctrinal students, systematic theologians. So what are we? We're consumers. That makes sense. Most of us have full time jobs. We don't have time to get into all this pyramid. That's why we rely on pastors and teachers and elders and all that in the church. That's what we rely on them to do.

But the vast majority of what we consume as Christians is at that highest level. And that rests, you just need to realize,

that rests on a super structure and a base that is very rarely examined. That is not a cause for you to go into apoplectic fits of anxiety and fear. You don't need to worry that you don't have all of this underneath because Christ has given you his Spirit. He's given you the Spirit who is the Spirit of truth, the Spirit of illumination, the Spirit who gives light and understanding.

That doesn't mean you're not going to defy the Holy Spirit within you and go make your own mistakes anyway, because you will. As John MacArthur said very eloquently, he's says it all the time. "If I could lose my salvation, I would." And you can say that, apply that to a lot of things. If I could misinterpret the text, I would. If I could misunderstand theology, I would and I do and I will. But Christ has given us his Spirit. And that is, that is a powerful, powerful gift that we have his abiding Spirit who teaches us and trains us and illuminates the truth. John assures his disciples in 1 John 2:27. He said, "The anointing that you have received from him abides in you and you have no need that anyone should teach you." Christ has given his Holy Spirit to all believers, and he will guide and direct us into all truth. He'll keep us safe.