

AUTHORITY IN THEOLOGY

1. Review.

- a. Theology is “the ancient and ongoing discipline within the Christian faith that seeks, by the illumination of the Holy Spirit, to understand, organise, and articulate truth about the Triune God and his works of creation and redemption in light of his special revelation in Scripture, his personal revelation in Christ, and his general revelation in creation.”¹
- b. The three varieties of theology are *biblical* theology, *systematic* theology, and *historical* theology. All three are useful and necessary.
- c. Foundational presuppositions are:
 - (1) There is a God, and he can communicate to us (Ge 1:1, 28).
 - (2) God has communicated to us in the Bible. The Bible is trustworthy (2 Ti 3:16; Jn 17:17).
- d. Personal presuppositions are:
 - (1) Faith (Heb 4:2).
 - (2) Thinking (Mt 22:37).
 - (3) Illumination of the Holy Spirit (Jn 16:13; 1 Co 2:6-14).
 - (a) **1 Co 2:6-14** 6 Yet among the mature [believers] we do impart wisdom [Christian theology], although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away. 7 But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom [special revelation] of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. 8 None of the rulers of this age understood this [special revelation], for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. 9 But, as it is written, What no eye has seen, nor ear heard [beyond human experience], nor the heart of man imagined [beyond human reason or imagination], what God has prepared for those who love him— 10 these things God has [specially] revealed to us [apostles] through the [Holy] Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. ...12 Now we [believers] have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might [spiritually] understand the things freely given us by God. 13 And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those [believers] who are [in fellowship with God and therefore] spiritual. 14 The natural person [unbeliever] does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.
 - (4) Worship (Ro 11:33-36).

2. Epistemology.

- a. Epistemology is the study of how man knows truth and how truth can be verified. It asks questions like: “How do we know?” “Says who?” “Where does that idea come from?”
- b. The five tools of knowledge are:
 - a. Faith: firm belief in the assertion of another who one finds trustworthy.

¹ Definition slightly modified from one given by Dr. Michael Svigel, Dallas Theological Seminary.

- b. Tradition: inherited, established, or customary pattern of thought, action, or behavior.
- c. Reason: comprehending, inferring, or thinking in orderly, rational ways according to the rules of logic.
- d. Experience: direct observation of or participation in events as a basis of knowledge.
- e. Intuition: Knowledge or conviction gained by immediate apprehension or cognition without rational thought and inference.
- f. Exercise.
 - a. “We are sitting in church today.”
 - b. “God is here right now.”
 - c. “A man ought to open the car door for his wife.”
 - d. “Non-white people *ought* to be treated equally before the law, just as white people are.”
 - e. “To murder someone just for the fun of it is wrong.”
 - f. “God will condemn the wicked to the lake of fire for all eternity.”
 - g. “A loving God would never cast people in hell for all eternity.”

3. Authority in Christian Theology.

- a. Remember the definition of theology above.
- b. Evangelical views.
 - (1) Biblicism.
 - (a) Faith in Scripture (interpreted literally, grammatically, and historically), reason, tradition, experience, intuition.
 - (b) In questions of Christian faith and practice, Scripture is totally sufficient. No other source need be consulted.
 - 1) “All Protestants agree in teaching that ‘the word of God, as contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, is the only infallible rule of faith and practice.’”²
 - 2) In the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England, it is said: “Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation.” Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997), 151.
 - 3) The Westminster Confession teaches: “Under the name of Holy Scripture, or the Word of God written, are now contained all the books of the Old and New Testament, which are these: etc.... All which are given by inspiration of God, to be the rule of faith and life. The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man’s salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture; unto which nothing at any time is to be added whether by new revelations of the Spirit or traditions of men.² All things in Scripture are not alike plain in

² Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997), 151.

themselves, nor alike clear unto all; yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed, for salvation, are so clearly propounded and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them.” Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997), 151–152.

- 4) From these statements it appears that Protestants hold, (1.) That the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the Word of God, written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and are therefore infallible, and of divine authority in all things pertaining to faith and practice, and consequently free from all error whether of doctrine, fact, or precept. (2.) That they contain all the extant supernatural revelations of God designed to be a rule of faith and practice to his Church. (3.) That they are sufficiently perspicuous to be understood by the people, in the use of ordinary means and by the aid of the Holy Spirit, in all things necessary to faith or practice, without the need of any infallible interpreter. Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997), 152.
 - (c) When a truth claim of Scripture conflicts with a truth claim from any other source, Scripture trumps. Scripture, understood objectively, is the ultimate source of truth.
 - (d) Often biblical truth claims will not conflict with truth claims from other sources.
- (2) Wesleyan quadrilateral.
 - (a) Scripture, tradition, experience, reason.
- (3) Creedalism.
 - (a) Scripture, tradition, reason, experience.
 - 1) Apostles’ Creed.
 - 2) Nicene Creed.
 - 3) Athanasian Creed.
 - 4) Augsburg Confession.
 - 5) Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England.
 - 6) Westminster Confession.
 - (b) “This then is the order of the rule of our faith (*Regula Fidei*), and the foundation of the building, and the stability of our conversation: God, the Father, not made, not material, invisible; one God, the creator of all things: this is the first point of our faith. The second point is: The Word of God, Son of God, Christ Jesus our Lord, who was manifested to the prophets according to the form of their prophesying and according to the method of the dispensation of the Father: through whom all things were made; who also at the end of the times, to complete and gather up all things, was made man among men, visible and tangible, in order to abolish death and show forth life and produce a community of union between God and man. And the third point is: The Holy Spirit, through whom the prophets prophesied, and the fathers learned the things of God, and the righteous were led forth into the way of

righteousness; and who in the end of the times was poured out in a new way upon mankind in all the earth, renewing man unto God.”³

- (c) “On account of the number and variety of errors, there is a need for someone to lay down a rule for the interpretation of the prophets and the apostles in such a way that is directed by the rule of the catholic [universal] church. Now in the catholic [universal] church itself the greatest care is taken that we hold *that which has been believed everywhere, always, and by all people*. This is what is truly and properly catholic [universal]. This is clear from the force of the word and reason, which understands everything universally. We shall follow ‘universality’ in this way, if we acknowledge this one faith to be true, which the entire church confesses throughout the world. We affirm ‘antiquity’ if we in no way depart from those understandings which it is clear that the greater saints and our fathers proclaimed. And we follow ‘consensus’ if in this antiquity we follow all (or certainly nearly all) the definitions of the bishops and masters.”⁴
- (d) “My critique of culture and religion is based on a culturally transcendent norm—divine revelation—mirrored primarily in the witness of the prophets and apostles in Scripture and secondarily in the witness of the fathers and doctors of the holy catholic church.”⁵
- (e) “In practice, some traditions or denominations give their creeds coordinate authority with the Bible. Creeds can provide helpful statements of truth, but creeds can never be the authoritative judge of truth. Credal statements must always be considered fallible, in need of possible revision, and subservient to biblical authority.”⁶

(4) Pentecostalism.

- (a) Scripture, experience, reason, tradition.

(5) Paleo-orthodoxy.

(6) Anything, though with Scripture supreme.

- (a) “Broadly speaking, the sources of theology include any means (whether natural, rational, moral, textual, liturgical, spiritual, or divinely revealed) by which the divine goodness is conveyed to humanity.”⁷
- (b) Consider Dr. Michael Svigel’s “Six Fields of Dialogue—Exegesis, Theology, History, Science, Philosophy, and Experience.”
- (c) The subject matter dictates what sources (faith, tradition, reason, experience, intuition) are to be consulted, and what weight they should receive. This takes judgment.
- (d) On any subject about which Scripture speaks and is rightly understood, it cannot be contradicted. Truth claims always have to submit to the test of Scripture.

³ Irenaeus, *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*, 6.

⁴ Vincent of Lerins, *Commonitorium*, 2.6.

⁵ Donald Bloesch, *God the Almighty*, 261.

⁶ Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, 22.

⁷ Thomas Oden.

- c. Other views.
- (1) Roman Catholicism.
 - (a) Tradition (the church's interpretation of the Bible, church traditions, certain pronouncements by councils and popes), Scripture, reason, and experience.
 - (2) Liberalism.
 - (a) Reason, experience, Scripture, tradition.
 - (b) "In all forms of liberalism, human nature in one aspect or another is the source of religious truth. The Bible, then, is viewed as the product of human reasoning containing man's thoughts about God, himself, and this world. It records the historical development of man's religious experiences and beliefs, and is not, as conservatives believe, the record of a message from a transcendent God who broke into the course of history."⁸
 - (3) Neo-orthodoxy.
 - (a) Experience (experiential encounter with Christ through a fallible Bible), Scripture, tradition, reason.
 - (b) "The basis of authority in neo-orthodoxy, at least as expressed by Karl Barth (1886–1968), is the Word. However, the Word is mainly Christ. The Bible witnesses to the Word, and does so fallibly, and Christian proclamation is a word about the Word. The sovereign God took the initiative in revealing Himself, centering primarily in the revelation in Christ. The years of Christ's life exhibited the epitome of revelation, and His death was the climax of revelation. The Bible witnesses to the revelation of God, even though it is interpreted by all the canons of liberalism. The Bible, then, has no absolute authority, but only instrumental authority, since it serves as the fallible instrument by which we encounter Christ the Word. And it is that encounter of faith at the point of 'crisis' in which God communicates Himself. That is absolute truth. Though neo-orthodoxy seeks objectivity in God's sovereign initiative, it practices subjectivism in the experiences of faith's encounters. Even though the Bible is involved in those experiences, it is not allowed to be the ultimate judge of those experiences. Neo-orthodoxy lacks an external, objective standard of authority."⁹
 - (4) Culturalism.
 - (a) Scripture, experience, reason, tradition, culture.
 - (b) "The proper tools—the sources of and norms for our theological construction—consist of the biblical message, the theological heritage of the church and the thought-forms of contemporary culture."¹⁰
 - (c) "I think it unwise simply to attack or discard the signal contributions of either the mystical or rationalist traditions of the faith or to dismiss altogether what moderns and postmoderns are saying about God, life, and the world. Their insights need to be integrated in a comprehensive vision of evangelical

⁸ Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, 21.

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¹⁰ Stanley J. Grenz and Roger E. Olson, *Who Needs Theology? An Invitation to the Study of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996), 92.

catholicity, which holds the Bible above both sacred tradition and the cultural ethos.”¹¹

- d. We are to attribute theological statements their appropriate degree of authority:¹²
 - (1) Direct statements of Scripture.
 - (2) Direct implications of Scripture.
 - (3) Probable implications of Scripture.
 - (4) Inductive conclusions from Scripture.
 - (5) Conclusions inferred from general revelation.
 - (6) Outright speculation.
- e. The results of our theological method are to be:¹³
 - (1) Scripturally faithful.
 - (2) Christological consistent.
 - (3) Historically authentic.
 - (4) Philosophically and scientifically sensitive.
 - (5) Experientially viable.

4. Central Motif.

- a. As theologians, we must decide on a central motif, a theme which, for us, is the most significant and helpful isn approaching theology as a whole. This is the perspective form which they data of theology are viewed. It should be truly comprehensive.
- b. Historical examples are:
 - (1) Martin Luther: salvation by grace through faith.
 - (2) John Calvin: the sovereignty of God.
 - (3) Karl Barth: the living Word of God, Jesus Christ.
 - (a) **1 Co 3:10-13** 10 According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I [Paul] laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it. 11 For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Messiah.
 - (4) Gustaf Aulen: the love of God.
 - (5) Millard Erickson: the magnificence of God.
 - (6) Lewis S. Chafer: the grace of God.
 - (7) Charles Ryrie: the glory of God.
 - (8) John Stott: the cross of Christ.
 - (a) **1 Co 1:23-24** 23 ...But we preach Messiah crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, 24 but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Messiah the power of God and the wisdom of God.
 - (b) **1 Co 15:1-7** 1 Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, 2 and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. 3 For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, 4 that he was

¹¹ Donald Bloesch.

¹² Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 83-84.

¹³ Dr. Michael Svigel, Dallas Theological Seminary.

buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, 5 and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.

(9) The biblical story how God reconciled man to himself by grace through the Lord Jesus Messiah for everlasting life.

(a) Jn 3.16; Eph 2:8-10