

Who Needs Theology?

By Pastor Christopher Seah

There is a curious word that pops up every now and then in our Christian communities. It is the word, “theology.” It pops up in different ways. We hear of a “theology of something,” or “theologizing,” or “theological.” But what is theology? And why do we need to bother ourselves with it?

“Theology” is really a combination of two Greek words: *theos*, “God,” and *logos*, “word.” Essentially, “theology” is the study of God and his revelation (just as biology is the study of life and psychology the study of the mind). Sometimes, “theology” is used in a phrase. For instance: “a theology of work.” When we talk like that, what we mean is “a notion of work that is based on God’s Word.” (Saying “theology of work” is much simpler than saying, “a notion of work that is based on God’s Word”!) Sometimes, “theology” appears as a verb: “theologizing.” To theologize about something is to think about that thing with reference to God’s Word. And then sometimes “theology” is used as an adjective, as in, “theological.” “Theological” means “related to God’s Word.” Thus, we hear phrases like, “a theological argument,” “a theological school,” “a theological principle,” or “a theological truth.”

But the point of the above is not to get us tied up in grammar. It is to help us get more comfortable with the idea of theology. Why? *Because, like it or not, all of us are theologians.* We are all people who do theology, in some form or fashion.

How is this so? Allow me to explain. By making us in his image, God made us incurably theological creatures. We cannot help but think about God and his revelation. It is part of our humanity. We cannot help but do theology. Theology is as natural to us as eating, drinking, working, playing, and daydreaming. From young, we start to wonder: Who made the world? Who made the grass green and the sky blue? If that question is answered well, we would be led down a path of communion with God. If it is answered poorly, we could be led down the path of an atheistic life. But even if we do become atheists, we still remain in the image of God, and therefore, theological creatures. However, instead of worshiping God by his Name and Word, we end up transferring God’s qualities to earthly realities. Sometimes, people treat *things* as they would God. They use phrases like, “I worship the ground on which she walks.” Sometimes people put their hope in *processes*. Those who reject a personal God seem to have no problem ascribing God-like qualities to evolution: “Evolution will find a way.” And then sometimes, people impose God-like status on *institutions*. For many atheists and secularists, the state is the closest one can get to an all-powerful God. In their minds, it is the ultimate moral authority in the land—with the guns to enforce its “divine” will. So, as we had said earlier, we are all theological creatures. We cannot stop thinking about God. Even when we have self-consciously rejected God, we still cannot stop thinking in terms of him.

Given its importance, we can say that theology is one of the goals of the Christian life. The Lord Jesus came that we may have eternal life. But what is eternal life? John 17:3 explains: “And this is eternal life, *that they know you* the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.” This means that we were cleansed from sin, saved from hell, in order to know God and Christ. We were saved to be holy and righteous theologians.

So, who needs theology? *Everyone*—preschoolers, secondary school students, national servicemen, chefs, lawyers, lawmakers, homemakers, businessmen, teachers, doctors, philosophers, and construction workers. Therefore, each of us needs to mature in our theology. Each of us needs to grow in our understanding of God’s Word and our ability to apply it.

When we seek to grow in God’s Word, the place to begin is obviously God’s Word itself, *the Bible*. We receive the teaching of the Bible by listening to it taught on the Lord’s Day, and by our own personal study of it. When we receive God’s Word, our prayer should be that of Joshua’s as he stood before the commander of the Lord’s army: “What does my lord say to his servant?” (Josh 5:14)

However, as soon as we set ourselves to read the Bible, we must remember that many godly souls have read and interpreted it before us. God gave us the whole Church to help us understand the Bible. Therefore, it is important that we read the Bible with the help of the *confessions* of the Church. Confessions are documents that summarize the Bible’s most crucial teachings and set the boundaries of right teaching (orthodoxy). Confessions that we hold in very high esteem are the Apostles Creed, the Nicene Creed, the Three Forms of Unity (the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dort), and our church’s very own confession, the Westminster Confession and Catechisms.

Now, confessions are *not* the Bible. Nor are they intended to give the final word on every conceivable topic in Scripture. But we use them to guide our Bible reading, because God teaches us through the collective wisdom of the Church as expressed in the confessions. While each of us can have our personal theological views on particular issues in life, we need to make sure that our understanding of the major teachings of Scripture is agreeable to the Church. After all, the Bible is a book for all of God's children, not just a few individuals.

Lastly, we become better theologians by reading and listening to *good teachers of God's Word*. Our heavenly Father has granted his Church many gifted teachers. Here are some trusted names, past and present: Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Owen, Jonathan Edwards, Benjamin Warfield, Geerhardus Vos, John Gresham Machen, James M. Boice, R.C. Sproul, Sinclair Ferguson, Michael Horton, Philip Ryken, and Paul Tripp.

Theology is precious, life-long, sacred work. But it is work that deserves our deepest affections. Theology may not always be easy to understand. But that is because the Bible is a big book, and not a three-point sermon (much less a motivational DVD). As we seek to grow in our understanding of God's Word, we have the promise of our Father's help. John 16:13: "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth..." May the Lord guide you in your theological growth. May his Word always be at home in your hearts.