

Christian Ministry Unit 1

Introduction to Theology

Week 1 – Theology Proper

Introduction

“Theology” refers to the general study of the (biblical) God. This broad study is normally broken down into sub-sections (EXAMPLES). “Theology Proper” refers to the specific study of God’s person and attributes.

Why do we need an accurate view of God?

Whether we realize it or not, our understanding of God impacts every major area of our lives. Read Ps. 16. Notice three reasons why David prizes accurate knowledge about God:

- Because understanding and appreciating what God is like helps us to worship him with awe and joy (Ps. 16:9,11).

Read Ps. 146:1-7. The Psalmist reminds himself to keep praising God throughout his life. Why? The alternative is to trust in humans who cannot save us or meet our deepest needs—which always disappoints. But praising and trusting God brings blessing—because God is the sovereign Creator, because he is faithful to keep his promises, and because he cares about the downtrodden and the brokenhearted.

Moses asks God to see his glory (Ex. 33:18)—his magnificence. In Ex. 34:6-8*, God answers Moses’ prayer by verbally describing his glory—namely, that he is both righteous/just and compassionate/merciful. In response, Moses (moved by this revelation) bows in worship.

God's JUSTICE defines the dilemma between humans and God, and his MERCY is the way he resolves this dilemma. Over the next two weeks we'll explore how through Jesus' death on the cross, God found a way to maintain his justice and yet still extend mercy.

- Because there are many harmful distortions of God (Ps. 16:4). Humans are always creating idols (1 John 5:21). An idol is a god of our own making that we depend on to meet our basic needs (EXAMPLES). Instead of worshipping the true God who is there, we distort the truth about God and remake him according to our own desires to serve our own purposes. This helps us maintain our autonomy from God. But since we were created by God to worship him, all idolatry results in the corruption of our lives (Rom. 1:18-32). Therefore, we need to remind ourselves of who the true God is in order to grow spiritually. We also have the responsibility to communicate accurately who God is to our culture. David is doing this for his readers in Ps. 16, and we do this in various ways as we communicate to friends, family members, fellow-Christians, etc.
- Because God’s character is the only true foundation of our lives, Who provides stability in the midst of life’s changes and sorrows (Ps. 16:1,8). This is why the psalmists frequently refer to God as their Rock or Fortress or Refuge (cf. Ps. 46:1,2).

How do we learn about God?

How can we find accurate information about who God is and what he is like? There are only two options:

- **SPECULATION:** Humans starting from themselves and coming up with their own idea of who God is or the nature of ultimate reality. Because of our fallen condition, this always results in some kind of idolatrous distortion of God (see above).

EXAMPLE: “I like to think of God as so loving that he would never judge anyone.”

- **REVELATION:** God communicating about himself to humans. God has revealed himself to us in two ways:

GENERAL REVELATION: What God has revealed about himself to all people.

SPECIAL REVELATION: What God has revealed about himself and his purpose to individuals and which is available to us through the Bible.

General Revelation	Special Revelation
available to all people	available to some individuals
revealed through creation or from within	revealed in scripture
less detailed	more detailed

- **What can be known from general revelation?** Several biblical passages, including Romans 1 and 2, tell us that certain facts about God may be learned from observing his creation.

Rom. 1:19, 20 says that from creation, we know that God is:

- Personal - This is inferred from “what has been made” (intelligence) and from within (How can our own personality come from divine impersonality?).
- Powerful - This is inferred from the immensity of creation. God must be bigger and more powerful than creation because he brought it into being and sustains it.
- Eternal – Since God predates creation, he must be the uncaused Cause for there to be a creation.

Rom.2:14,15 says that we can infer from our consciences that God must be morally righteous.

Note: *General revelation contradicts many of the central tenets of other religions.* For example, pantheists believe that God is impersonal—yet we can discern from creation and our own makeup that God is personal. Many religions teach that we can earn God’s acceptance by performing good works, but our conscience bears witness that we sin and break God’s moral standard. Because of this, *the honest seeker without access to the Bible will not be a devout animist, pantheist, etc.* Paul says they know enough about the true God from general revelation to be justly judged for idolatry (“they are without excuse” – Rom. 1:20).

Note: Christians disagree whether general revelation is sufficient for a saving knowledge of God. Our tentative view is that a non-Christian who responds in faith to the revelation they have received can be saved. (For more on this see the handout titled “Is it necessary to hear the gospel to be saved?” by Gary DeLashmutt.) But general revelation does not disclose God’s plan for salvation. We can infer from general revelation that God is moral and that we are guilty before him, but we can’t know *if* He has a plan of forgiveness, or *what* that plan is if He has one. This knowledge comes only from special revelation. Also, believers in general revelation alone (like Old Testament believers) do not have access the Holy Spirit, because he is Jesus’ gift to those who believe in Him (Jn. 7:39).

The unity & diversity of God

The Bible reveals that God is a Community of three Persons. These Persons are distinct from one another (diversity), yet share the same essential attributes, purpose and love for one another (unity). Christians refer to this “tri-unity” as the Trinity.

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- Many biblical passages teach the unity and diversity of God:

UNITY: Deut. 6:4; Isa. 45:5

DIVERSITY:

Old Testament:

Gen. 1:26,27**; 2:24 – God speaks as One (singular verbs)—yet refers to himself as “Us.” Human marriage is an image of God’s unity and plurality (“the two shall become one flesh”).

Isa. 48:12-16 - The speaker is God because he is eternal (“first and last” - Isaiah 41:4), the Creator (vs. 13 - Isaiah 42:5). Yet he also says YHWH sent him (vs 16b). Therefore, there are at least two Persons who are called YHWH. (This passage does *not* prove the Spirit is God, but it does assert that there are at least two Persons who are both YHWH.)

New Testament:

Matt. 28:19 - This passage indicates that God is one Being (“name” is singular) who exists as three Persons (“Father, Son and Holy Spirit”).

Many other New Testament passages (e.g. those that assert the deity of Jesus and the Holy Spirit) provide scriptural material for the Trinity. We will cover those passages in Christology and Pneumatology.

- Why is the Trinity important? While the doctrine of the Trinity is difficult to comprehend or explain, the alternative (no Trinity) presents more serious problems.

The Trinity resolves the tension between God’s love and his self-existence. How can God be loving and personal without having relationships? And yet how could God be self-existent if he needed someone to love. This is unresolved in Judaism and Islam. But the Bible teaches that there was always love between the Persons of the Godhead (Jn. 17:5,24).

The Trinity provides the ultimate basis for valuing personal love relationships. What is the basis for the high value that humans place on personal love relationships? Atheism must see this as a biological accident, not intrinsic to our humanity. Pantheism has no basis for this because God is ultimately impersonal oneness. But the Bible teaches that personal love relationships are a reflection of the very nature of God and ultimate reality. God is a community of love relationships, and because we are made in God's image we value them.

The Trinity provides the ultimate basis for unity and diversity in human community.

Healthy community requires both a respect for the value of individual differences in temperament, talent, gifting, etc.—but also requires the loving collaboration of individuals toward a common purpose. The church is the Body of Christ, which mirrors the Trinity in this regard.

The attributes of God

“Attributes” means “characteristics.” When we say, “George has a good sense of humor, but he is unreliable,” we are describing some of George’s attributes. Through the Bible, God reveals many of his attributes so that we may know how to relate to him. God’s attributes do not negate each other; they are interrelated (e.g. God exercises his power in a way that's consistent with his love and justice). Some attributes are UNIQUE to God; others are shared in COMMON with humans – especially before the Fall (e.g. love, veracity).

INSTRUCTORS: Cover each attribute, *focusing especially on how the gospel affects our reaction to God’s attributes.*

- **Loving (Common)**

Definition: God always views humanity with compassion and acts for its best interest.¹

Scriptural Evidence: (1 Jn. 4:8,16; Isaiah 30:18-21;49:14-16)

Applications:

The reason God loves us lies wholly within God and is not because of anything within us. God love of us has nothing to do with our value or worth (1 Jn. 4:10). It is God’s nature to love and to redeem lost sinners (Rom. 5:6-8).

As God’s children, His discipline is always an expression of His love, and never retributive. Therefore, His discipline is always for our good (Heb. 12:4-11), and we need never fear Him as a retributive Judge or a harsh Task-master (Rom. 8:15).

Because God is loving, His will is always good, well-pleasing and perfect (Rom. 12:2). We need not pit God’s will against our good or other people’s good. When we disobey God's will, we say, "I don't trust that you love me."

- **Righteous (Common)**

Definition: God is the essence of moral goodness.

¹ God’s love does not erase his other attributes—such as his righteousness and justice. Because God is loving, he satisfies the demands of his righteousness through Jesus’ death on the cross—so that he can remain just, yet justify sinful people who believe in Jesus (Rom. 3:26).

Scriptural Evidence: (Mark 10:18; Job 34:10; Hab. 1:13)

Applications:

Because God is absolutely righteous, our sins (even one of them!) render us utterly incapable of earning God's acceptance. But because Jesus clothed himself with our sin, God clothes us with Jesus' righteousness (2 Cor. 5:21).

As we continue to entrust ourselves to Jesus, God's Spirit will gradually change our characters to reflect his righteousness (Rom. 14:17; 2 Cor. 3:18). This righteousness always involves loving others like God loves us (1 Thess. 3:12,13).

- **Just (common)**

Definition: God does what his righteousness demands (reward, punishment, deliverance). His justice operates retributively only towards sinful beings apart from Christ, and he rewards Christ and those who are in him.

Scriptural Evidence: (Rom. 2:1-5; Gen. 18:25; Ps. 19:9)

Applications:

We should never ask God: "Give me what I deserve!" Our sins cause us to forfeit God's justice operating toward us in a positive way. But through Jesus, God justifies us—He satisfies His justice against our sins so that He now approves of us as He approves of Jesus (Rom. 3:25,26).

Because God has satisfied his justice against our sins by pouring our his wrath on Jesus, God acts justly when he forgives us when we sin (1 Jn. 1:9-2:2). To judge our sins when he has already judged his Son for them would be unjust!

To avenge another in interpersonal relationships is to usurp God's role as Judge (Rom. 12:14,17,19). Because God has dealt with us by grace, we should forgive all who sin against us (Eph. 4:32). It is therefore improper to seek justice within interpersonal relationships.²

- **Omniscient (Unique)**

Definition: God knows all things actual or possible.

Scriptural Evidence: Ps. 147:5; Isa. 40:28

Applications:

We cannot hide our sins from God. Yet because of God's grace, we do not need to be afraid of his exposure. We can draw near to him confident of his mercy (Heb. 4:12-16).

If we ask God, He can show us our "hurtful ways" as we need to see them (Ps. 139:23,24).

- **Omnipresent (Unique)**

² Legal/civil justice is valid, but it is always partial and imperfect, and left to the civil authorities to execute (Rom. 13:4).

Definition: God transcends all limits of space and time.

Scriptural Evidence: Ps. 139:7-10

Applications:

God is not confined to a "sanctuary." Through Jesus and his full payment for our sins, we can draw near to God anywhere at any time (Jn. 4:21-24; Heb. 10:19-22).

Jesus is present and involved in every aspect of our lives. Therefore, we can and should represent him in whatever we do and say (Col. 3:17).

- **Omnipotent (Unique)**

Definition: God can do whatever he wants to do as long as it is consistent with his character.³

Scriptural Evidence: (Gen. 18:14; Jer. 32:17) The name "Almighty God" (*El Shaddai*) also implies omnipotence.

Applications:

Even though we are sinful, God is powerful enough to transform us if we entrust ourselves to Jesus (Rom. 8:2,11).

Even though we are weak, God's power through Jesus is able to advance His redemptive purpose through us (2 Cor. 3:6; 12:10; Phil. 4:13).

Even though Satan is far more powerful than we are, God is far more powerful than Satan—and God is in us (1 Jn. 4:4).

- **Sovereign (Unique)**

Definition: God owns, rules, and sustains the creation. No one and nothing can thwart him from ultimately accomplishing his purposes.

Scriptural Evidence: (Gen. 14:19; Acts 17:24-28; Ps. 24:1ff)

Applications:

God rightfully owns our lives—both because he created us and because he has redeemed us through Jesus (1 Cor. 6:19,20).

God can work through his enemies' opposition to accomplish his will (e.g., the Cross). Because we are now God's children, he is able to work through all things to advance his purpose (Gen. 50:20; Rom. 8:28).

God's purpose will prevail—he will re-establish his loving rule through Jesus (Eph. 1:9,10). We are on the winning side!

- **Immutable (Unique)**

Definition: God doesn't change with regard to his attributes or promises.⁴

³ God cannot do things that are logically impossible (e.g. make a square circle), violate his own character (e.g. act cruelly, fail to do what he has promised, etc.), or undo the past (though he may release us from its consequences and even the memory of it).

Scriptural Evidence: (Heb. 13:8; James 1:17; 1 Sam. 15:29)

Applications:

God's promises are always true no matter how we feel. For example, if you are experiencing alienation your relationship with God, it is not because God has rejected you (Rom. 8:1).

Unlike people, who are undependable in spite of their best intentions, God's character is utterly dependable (Psalms: "God is my Rock;" Heb. 13:5,6,8).

- **Veracity (Common)**

Definition: God is completely truthful and faithful.

Scriptural Evidence: (Heb. 6:18; Num. 23:19; Titus 1:2; 2 Tim 2:13)

Applications:

God's Word always tells the truth (Jn. 17:17).

God's faithfulness is more foundational than our faithfulness to God (2 Tim. 2:13).

- **Self-Existent (unique)**

Definition: God is totally independent—the only non-contingent being in the universe. See the divine name YHWH—"I am that I am."

Scriptural Evidence: (Ex. 3:14; Jn. 8:58; Isa. 40:28; Acts 17:25)

Applications:

The essence of sin is to assert your independence from God (Gen. 3:6; Isa. 14:14).
The essence of humility is to personally entrust yourself to God's mercy through Jesus.

God does not need us to accomplish his will. Rather, through his grace he gives us the privilege of collaborating with him in advancing his will (1 Cor. 3:9,10).

Our prayers cannot manipulate God to do our will. But through prayer, we can collaborate with God to advance his will.

- **Infinite (Unique)**

Definition: God's attributes are free from all limitations.

Scriptural Evidence: (Ps. 90:2)

Applications:

By virtue of his deity, Jesus was able to endure God's infinite wrath against our sin in a finite amount of time (Heb. 10:10,14).

Heaven will never be boring because we can never exhaust the depths of God's kindness (Eph 2:7) or his wisdom (Rom 11:33).

⁴ God does changes in his emotional reactions. He also introduces changes in his redemptive program.

Memory Verses

Ex. 34:6-8** - God's character is awesome and worthy of worship. God is both just and merciful in his dealings with humans.

Gen. 1:26,27** - God exists as more than one Person.

Assignment