

LESSON 1:

Rediscovering Redeeming Love

What Is Theology?

Getting Started

The word *theology* is derived from the root word *theo*, which means *God*. Your theology is what you believe about God. Doctrines are the individual beliefs about God that make up your theology. Your theology concerning God may or may not be correct.

The great theologian A.W. Tozer said: “What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us. For this reason, the gravest question before the Church is always God Himself, and the most portentous fact about any man is not what he at a given time may say or do, but what he in his deep heart conceives God to be like. We tend by a secret law of the soul to move toward our mental image of God.”

Whether you realize it or not, you are framing your life around your personal truths—or what you believe to be true. If your beliefs about God are inaccurate then you, in a sense, are worshipping an idol or a false god. There are no shortcuts to gaining an accurate picture of God—it comes through delving wholeheartedly into His Word and discovering what He has to say about Himself. Insight about God can also come from carefully studying what other Spirit-filled people have learned about God and through the study of God’s creation, including the study of man. We will examine all of these ways to develop an accurate theology in this lesson.

Tozer goes on to say: “Were we able to extract from any man a complete answer to the question, ‘What comes into your mind when you think about God?’ We might predict with certainty the spiritual future of that man...That our idea of God correspond as nearly as possible to the true being of God is of immense importance to us...A right conception of God is basic not only to systemic theology but to practical living as well. The essence of idolatry is the entrainment of thoughts about God that are unworthy of Him...”

When people do not thoroughly understand doctrine they go on to live anemic Christian lives void of power. The Apostle Paul reminded his student Timothy to teach sound doctrine. He warned in

I Timothy 4:15-16:

“Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress. Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.”

The writer of Hebrews admonished those who remain immature and unable to share God’s Word accurately.

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—A.W. Tozer

“We have much to say about this, but it is hard to explain because you are slow to learn. In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God’s word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.” (Hebrews 5:11-14)

No Christian can avoid theology. Every Christian has a theology. The issue, then, is not, do we want to have a theology? That’s a given. The real issue is do we have a sound theology? Do we embrace true or false doctrine?

—R.C. Sproul,
*Essential Truths
of the Christian Faith*

It takes time and discipline to become familiar with the basics truths of God’s Word. James Montgomery Boice said: “Luke, the historian, says that during his missionary journeys the Apostle Paul spent two years in Ephesus teaching ‘the word of the Lord’ to all who lived in Asia (Acts 19:10). A marginal note in one ancient manuscript suggests that he did this for five hours each day. Counting six days to each week and fifty-two weeks to each year, that makes 3120 hours of apostolic instruction, considerably more than most Bachelor or Master of Theology degree programs.”

This should give us some idea how important Paul thought it was for everyone to develop an accurate view of Bible doctrine. How much time have you given to your own understanding of God?

In this lesson, you will discover how to get started in putting together your own personal theology, or your belief system, about God.

The three thoughts for this week are:

Discovering God in Scripture

Discovering God in History

Discovering God in Nature

Discovering God in Scripture

One of the first steps in building a personal theology is to carefully examine the Word of God.

Christianity is the only religion in which the *God* defines Himself. In all other religions, men explain the god. Knowledge about God found in Scripture is called *special revelation*, because it cannot be gained by everyone—only those who read Scripture.

The word *Bible* actually means *book* or *books*. It was written over a span of 1600 years, and contains 66 books divided into two sections—39 books in the Old Testament, which was written in Hebrew, and 27 books in the New Testament, which was written in Greek. It had 40 different authors, who lived in different times and places, and under vastly different circumstances and customs. Although the authors of the Bible (comprised of fishermen and shepherds with little or no formal education to highly educated kings and scholars), there is a golden thread that runs throughout Scripture as if it were written by one person, about one person.

The Word of God well understood and religiously obeyed is the shortest route to spiritual perfection. And we must not select a few favorite passages to the exclusion of others. Nothing less than a whole Bible can make a whole Christian.

—A.W. Tozer

1. (a) What does II Timothy 3:16 say about the author of the Bible?

All Scripture originates in the very heart of God and then is *revealed* to man through the Holy Spirit. This is why the reformers called the Bible *verbum Dei* or *Word of God*, and *vox Dei* or the *voice of God*. The Bible is a product of divine self-disclosure.

2. (a) What did Paul tell Timothy about studying the Bible? (I Timothy 4:15-16)

- (b) From what sources do you believe most of your ideas about God were formed?

- (c) On the scale of 1-10 below, 0 being completely *inaccurate* and 10 being completely *accurate*, mark the spot you believe best describes how accurate your theology is.



3. (a) What does Hebrews 5:11-14 say about Christians who do not learn Scripture?

4. (a) If your *theology* describes your belief system about God, what have you learned in Scripture recently that gave you a broader understanding of God?

(b) Has there ever been a time that you had an idea about God that was false and studying Scripture gave you a better understanding of Him? Please explain.

- The first step in building a theology should be the study of God's Word.
- The knowledge about God we learn through Scripture is called *special revelation*.
- In the Bible God Himself explains who He is.
- We cannot expect to have a sound theology or a mature Christian walk without a good grasp of God's Word.

Truth for Today: *Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.*

2 Peter 1:20-21

Discovering God in History

Another step in building your theology is to take a look at church history. Through studying the conclusions reached about God by Spirit-filled people who came before us, we can gain a broader understanding of who God is.

Theological history is studied by people desiring two very different outcomes.

- Some study to gain *human* understanding and to learn *human* opinion.
- Others study to learn truths about *God* discovered from those who came before them.

The second outcome is what we desire in this study. There are four charts included in this course to help you study church history more effectively: *Summary of Church History* (covers major events in church history from the time of Christ until today), *Pre-Reformation Time Line* (zeroes in on church history just prior to the Reformation, 1215-1515), *The Reformation Time Line* (pinpoints the Reformation years, 1516-1563), *Post-Reformation Time Line* (covers the results of the Reformation, 1564-1689). On these charts, you will discover men and women who had a major influence on Christian theology and church councils that met to decide doctrines that were disputed. It is important to understand the process that brought us to the belief systems we have today.

Every generation studies the Bible under the influence of the culture of the day. It can only be helpful to study it through the eyes of Spirit-filled people who lived under different influences. This can add to our perspective.

Even within the pages of Scripture, we see godly men who disagreed about interpretations because they were coming from different exposures. The disagreements began early, A disagreement between Paul (the leader of the Gentile church) and James (the leader of the Jewish church in Jerusalem), which is described in Acts 15, is one example. The men met in Jerusalem to work out their differences. This Jerusalem Council set the precedence for other council meetings that followed at Nicea (325 A.D.), Constantinople (A.D. 381), Ephesus (A.D. 431), and many others throughout church history. Studying the issues and outcomes of these councils can help us in developing our theology. (Locate these four councils on the *Summary of Church History* chart.)

1. (a) Read Acts 15:1-21. What was the disagreement between Paul and the Jerusalem church?

- (b) How was the disagreement resolved? (Also see *Summary of Church History* chart.)

...the past not only shapes the present; it can also show us the future. We can see much more and further ahead by standing on the shoulders of those who have gone before us."

—Charles Colson,
The Faith

The very same Holy Spirit who led these men to write, longs to lead us today so we can understand. Without the Holy Spirit, the Bible is like an ocean which cannot be sounded, heavens which cannot be surveyed, mines which cannot be explored, and mysteries beyond unraveling. We must—we must—yield to the leadership of the Holy Spirit.

—George Sweeting

2. (a) When studying *reformed* theology, many study such great minds as Augustine (400s), Thomas Aquinas (1200s), Martin Luther (1500s), John Calvin (1500s), Karl Barth (1900s), and others.

Find these men on the *Summary of Church History* chart. Describe what just one of them did to advance the belief system of Reformed theology.

3. (a) Who are some of the theologians you have studied in an effort to gain a clearer understanding of God and develop your own personal theology? Name just one significant way in which a theologian has enhanced your understanding of God?

- A second way of building a personal theology is to study church history.
- Only Spirit-filled theologians should be allowed to shape our personal theology.
- Historical theology is studied to learn what others learned about God in their generation.

Truth for Today: *Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. Hebrews 7:7-8*

Discovering God in Nature

A third way to build your personal theology is to study God’s creation for clues about God’s character. This is known as *natural theology* or information gained about God through nature. Just as we saw with historical theology, natural theology can be approached one of two ways.

- Those who view natural theology as a theology derived from *human* speculation unaided by reflecting on nature.
- Those who approach natural theology to discover what *God* reveals to them through nature.

Remember revelation is something that God does. It is His act of self-disclosure. In revelation, God is always the initiator. The Bible clearly teaches that, in addition to God revealing Himself in Scripture, He also reveals Himself in nature.

1. (a) Read Romans 1:18-21. What do these verses tell us about what can be understood about God through nature?

- (b) What are some things that God has revealed to you as you have reflected on His creation?

Theologians describe two types of revelation from God:

General Revelation—General revelation provides us with the knowledge that God exists and is available to everyone or a *general* audience. Natural revelation is *general* revelation because everyone is exposed to God’s creation.

Special Revelation—Special revelation is called special because it provides *special* information about God that cannot be found in nature. The truths about God found in Scripture are considered *special* revelation because they define specifics about the character of God and His activity that cannot be gleaned simply from observing God’s creation. Special revelation also has a *special* audience confined to only those who have been able to read or listen to a Bible. A sound theology should be built on both knowledge of nature and the Bible.

2. What evidence do you see in today’s culture that people reject natural revelation?

3. Review the *Introduction* to this study. Why do you believe that it is absolutely necessary that your idea about God be as accurate as possible?

People reject the natural knowledge they have of God. This rejection, however, does not annihilate either the revelation or the knowledge itself. The sin of mankind is in refusing to acknowledge the knowledge they have. They act against the truth that God reveals and they clearly receive.

—R.C. Sproul,
*What Is Reformed
Theology?*

