



What is Theology?

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Abstract

Theology is defined as wisdom about God. Implicit in this definition is the notion that Theology exists to establish, and continually improve, a relationship with God.

Generically speaking, Christian Theology is an extension of Theology that focuses on the work and being of Jesus Christ. Of note, the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ is what makes human relationships with God possible as humans alone are incapable of such work.

However, Christian Theology, as academically defined, has evolved over time to become both a superset and subset of Theology. As a superset, Christian Theology considers elements that are not specifically wisdom about the living triune God and as a subset, Christian Theology intentionally precludes the deeply personal and relativistic aspects of the God-human relationship that Theology exists for in the first place. At the same time, Theology requires the body of knowledge distilled from Christian Theology to properly constrain it from the realm of imagination. Given these distinct and critically important functional aspects, Theology and Christian Theology need to be recognized as separate and distinct disciplines.

Discussion

Theology is defined as wisdom about God. It includes information on who God is, how God acts, and, perhaps most importantly, how God relates with his human creations; particularly one's own self. More specifically stated, Theology is the mental model that each person has in their own mind about God. As such, Theology is both relativistic and deeply personal. The main point of human possession of wisdom about God is to establish, and continually improve, a relationship with God.

For historical perspective, theology has generally been considered to be the study of God. The term *theologia* (θεολογια), meaning "discourse on God"^[1], was first used by Plato in ~380 BC in *The Republic*. Later in 426 AD^[4], Augustine also defined *theologia* as "reasoning or discussion concerning the Deity" in *The City of God*^[1]. The above definition of Theology as wisdom is aligned with this convention, although the above definition does build upon it slightly as the motivation for having the wisdom (i.e. establishing and continually improving a relationship with God) is explicitly included.

Theology is somewhat similar to scientific disciplines as it has been described as "the science of things divine"^[1, citation of Richard Hooker]. Indeed, like scientific disciplines, there is a body of knowledge pertaining to the subject of study of God. However, unlike scientific disciplines, there are deeply personal aspects to Theology. More specifically, for each and every person, Theology is the study of God with an inherent, perhaps even purposeful, personal bias that is specifically relative to that person. The specific clinical disconnect that each practitioner of the various scientific disciplines needs to maintain regarding their branch(es) of study simply cannot be held for Theology and, thus, Theology is unique among scientific disciplines.

Every person's Theology can be, and should be, colored by the collective body of knowledge from theology as a whole, but the personal aspects of Theology make it relativistic for every person that has ever existed. No two human-human relationships are the same and, invariably, no two God-human relationships are the same.



Theology is often given to be an academic discipline that is reserved only for those specifically devoted to the study of God in a formal institution. However, the universal nature of Theology as well as the relativistic basis that each human brings to their relationship with God precludes this requirement. Indeed, it has been suggested that each and every person is a theologian^[3]. As will be discussed, academic theology (i.e. professional theology^[3]) can only maintain the theological body of knowledge that is a segment of overall Theology.

In some contexts, the definition of Theology has included the study of religion; the Christian religion in particular. However, religion consists of the human responses to God. Religions does include notions of what God expects his human creations to believe. This is aligned with Theology as defined in this work. However, religious practices themselves are human activities and are more properly categorized otherwise. As such, the term Theology is not meant to reference any human actions.

There are multiple approaches to Theology. The two most general types are Philosophical Theology and Observational Theology. These are the two types of theology expressed by Plato^[16] and Aristotle^[17], respectively, in function, although not by nomenclature. More specifically, Plato thought of God as an ideal outside of reality and God could only be learned of by thought. In contrast, Aristotle thought of God as at work in the world and God could only be learned of by observation.

Philosophical Theology and Observational Theology are, perhaps, dangerous as they lack any rigor to control the human imagination. In case it needs to be explicitly stated, God specifically declares that He is who He is (Exodus 3:14) and this state of being is most certainly independent from any human conception of him. Human perception can be used to discover God, but it cannot ever be used to define him.

As a peripheral note, Observation Theology, now more properly called Natural Theology^[5], is receiving increased attention in more recent years as a means of aligning Theology and nature, although it still has detractors (ex: the modern theologian Karl Barth^[6]).

Christian Theology^[7] might be envisioned to be an extension of Theology that focuses on the work and being of Jesus Christ. Of note, the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ is what makes human relationships with God possible as humans are incapable of such work. This concept is aligned with Theology as defined in this work. More specifically stated, Christian Theology might, perhaps, be defined as wisdom about God as revealed in and by Jesus Christ. This definition would sustain the deeply personal and relativistic aspects of Theology described above.

However, Christian Theology, at least as academically defined, has evolved over time to become both a subset and superset of Theology. As a subset, Christian Theology intentionally precludes the deeply personal and relativistic aspects of the God-human relationship that Theology exists for in the first place. At the same time, Christian Theology is a superset of Theology because it considers numerous topics outside of wisdom about God. Some of these are^[3,7,13]:

- God (Theology Proper) including
 - God, the Father (Paterology)
 - Jesus Christ (Christology)
 - Holy Spirit (Pneumatology)
- Creation (Cosmology)
- Sin (Hamartiology)
- Church (Ecclesiology)
- Last Things (Eschatology)



It should be noted that in the context of Christian Theology, the study of God, what this document calls Theology, is termed Theology Proper^[12]. The study of God, the Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit are indeed in keeping with this document's definition of Theology. However, the Church is separate institution that is distinct from God and the Last Things are events of the future. Lastly, Sin is specifically a human action. As important as these subjects are, they are outside of the "wisdom about God" that the term Theology is intended to encompass. These additions transform the concept of Christian Theology from merely extending Theology to include wisdom about God and Jesus Christ to an entirely new discipline altogether.

At its core, Christian Theology has evolved to become a system of coherent principals^[1]. In so doing, the focus on "wisdom about God" has become obscured and, most critically, the notion of the human-God relationship being relativist and deeply personal is omitted altogether.

Consider again that Theology is wisdom about God. This wisdom is limited by human understanding, but its stated intention is to be about the reality of God. Christian Theology, especially in its most advanced form of Systematic Theology^[10] (see below) is "an orderly, rational, and coherent account of the doctrines of the Christian faith"^[10]. Alternatively stated, it has transitioned from being about God to being about human beliefs and teachings. Repeating from above, the human response to God is beyond the intended scope of the term Theology. As such, it is concluded that Christian Theology needs to be separate and distinct from Theology; especially as academically defined.

For completeness, there are multiple forms of Christian Theology. Four of the most common recognized forms of Christian Theology are^[2]:

1. Biblical Theology
2. Historical Theology
3. Systematic Theology
4. Practical Theology

Biblical Theology^[8, 15 page 3] is specifically focused on concepts that can be essentially drawn explicitly from scripture, Historical Theology^[9] extends Biblical Theology by considering historical church interpretations of Biblical Theology as they have varied over time, and Systematic Theology^[10] extends both of these by considering a coherent entity (system) that all that scripture presents; both explicitly and implicitly. More specifically stated, Systematic Theology posits a system that the Bible represents whereas Biblical Theology holds that the Bible itself is the system.

Additionally, Systematic Theology is expanded to include numerous topics well beyond the short list above for Christian Theology. As an example of applied Systematic Theology, the salvation of Jesus Christ, explicitly and pervasively present in both scripture and church history, is fit together with angelology^[14], a topic with sparse supporting scripture. The notion of guardian angels is not explicitly present in scripture, but implicitly derived from it.

Practical Theology is unique in that it focuses on the functional aspects of religious practices. It attempts to connect "academic discipline" and the "life and practice of the church"^[11]. This is even farther removed from "wisdom about God".

The transition from Theology to the various forms of Christian Theology, by apparent intention, disconnects from the personal relationship with God including the deeply personal aspects of Theology noted above and depends more on the body of knowledge of Christian Theological that



has developed over the time since the incarnation of Jesus Christ. In the extreme, the personal aspects of Theology are extinguished and replaced with established doctrine. While the transition "should strengthen your faith, not destroy it"^[3, page 41], it is difficult to see any intention in any formal presentations of Christian Theology to preclude such.

As a simple example, scriptures command "Trust in the Lord" (Psalm 37:3). In the scripture based realms of Christian Theology, syntax is where 'trust' begins and ends. However, in the realm of Theology, God demonstrates 'trust' pervasively in scripture by God's care of his people (ex: Moses, Israelites, Jeremiah and Daniel), but this is not where 'trust' ends. The truest aspect of 'trust' is how each and every person perceives their relationship with God on their own. More specifically stated, by considering wisdom about God, it is possible to understand that the God of scripture is the God of each person. With this understanding, 'trust' becomes more than syntax; it becomes a personal experience. Every person of faith knows that they exist in the here and now because God has taken their hand and led them to it. Each person's God-human relationship, however it is intellectually recognized and processed, is most certainly relativistic and deeply personal. Theology includes consideration of this; Christian Theology precludes it. No discipline that precludes the personal aspects of the God-human relationship can be considered to supersede Theology as Jesus himself specifically stated that the Greatest Commandment is:

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment." (Matthew 22:37-38, NIV)

Christian Theology, however it is defined, does have a distinction that requires consideration. In Theology, God can be discovered, at least to some extent, by observation of the physical world (recall Observational Theology above). However, the person and work of Jesus Christ cannot be so discovered. Jesus Christ is only revealed directly by scripture and indirectly by human testimony throughout the ages. As such, there is a need in Christian Theology to include scripture and historical interpretations of it as core components of it. These two elements make up the body of knowledge of Christian Theology.

Moreover, as was noted above, a potential danger of classical approaches to theology such as Philosophical Theology and Observation Theology (Natural Theology) is that they may allow the theologian to drift into the realm of imagination. Because of its grounding in externals (scripture and historical interpretations), the body of knowledge accumulated by Christian Theology can provide anchor against such drift.

Again, Christian Theology is a subset of Theology in that it precludes the relativistic and deeply personal aspects of the human-God relation; the criticality of which is given by Jesus as the Greatest Commandment. Rather than forgoing Theology as classically defined to focus on Christian Theology, it is suggested that Christian Theology should only form the grounded boundaries of Theology. More pointedly stated, Christian Theology should only bound beliefs; it must not be allowed to limit the relationship with God.



Conclusions

Theology is defined as wisdom about God. Implicit in this definition is the notion that Theology exists to establish, and continually improve, a relationship with God, which is given by Jesus as the Greatest Commandment.

Christian Theology, as academically defined, has evolved over time to diminish focus on this critical relationship and adds focus to areas well outside the scope of "wisdom about God". As such, Christian Theology intentionally precludes the deeply personal and relativistic aspects of the God-human relationship that Theology exists for in the first place.

However, Christian Theology has developed a body of knowledge from scripture and historical interpretations of it. The external grounding of this body of knowledge is required to properly constrain classical Theology from the realm of human imagination.

Given these distinct and critically important functional aspects, Theology and Christian Theology need to be recognized and maintained as separate and distinct disciplines.

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"Freely you have received; freely give" (Matthew 10:8, NIV)