

PAUL'S THEOLOGY

Lesson 1

Overview and Approach

“Theology” has always struck me as a powerful and impressive word. Even before I understood the meaning behind the word, I was under its spell as a word of significance and serious thought. As I aged and my studies progressed, the word took on more shape and meaning. Yet all that time, its effect and power never diminished, but grew, as I learned to appreciate its reflection of some of humanity’s best thoughts of and understandings about God, his creations, past, present, and future.

The word “theology” comes from two Greek roots: *theos* (θεος) meaning “God” and *logos* (λογος) meaning, “word” or “reason.” In common parlance, one could follow the British theologian James D. G. Dunn and define theology as “talk about God.”¹

The wordsmiths have seen fit to break theology down into a number of other “ologies.” We can study “Christology” as the talking or reasoning about Christ, “soteriology” (from the Greek *soter* meaning *to save*) as the study of salvation, ecclesiology (from the Greek *ekklesia* meaning *the church*) as the reasoning over the church, and so on.

Scholars also write and teach on various aspects of theology such as *biblical theology* and *scholastic theology*. Biblical theology is the byproduct of careful bible study (what scholars call “exegesis,” for it takes a biblical text and draws out the meaning of the text). If we carefully study a text to understand it, say Romans 1:16-17,² we are doing “exegesis.” After exegesis, if we combine, compare, and contrast Paul’s writing on the gospel in Romans 1:16-17 with Paul’s writing on the gospel in 1 Corinthians 15:1ff³ or other passages, we begin the work of “biblical theology.” We are studying various passages of scripture together to more fully understand the meaning and usage of words and ideas.

¹ James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Eerdmans 1998) at 6.

² “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith, as it is written, ‘The righteous shall live by faith.’”

³ “Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved...”

Biblical-Literacy.com

“Scholastic theology” is the next step. Scholastic theology involves taking the results of careful study, the results of “biblical theology,” and putting it into a form and structure that makes it easier to understand and explain.

One must fairly pause at some point and ask whether these words do a service to the cause or merely make it sound much more formidable and difficult to appreciate and master. I was studying an ethics course in law school when a professor instructed us that when we went into legal practice to choose “legalese” as often as possible, writing our documents in formal legal language that few common people would truly understand. The professor’s reasoning was that as lawyers, we would be charging a hefty sum for our work, and the less people understood what we did, the more likely they would see its value and willingly pay! (Yes, one may fairly ask how this was a class in ethics!)

Is that the value of such high dollar words? In fairness, probably not! The words convey nuances and become shorthand points of reference that help scholars communicate their ideas to each other. So, what shall we do as laymen? Easy! We shall explain and then use those words as we open up the scholastic doors to Paul’s theology! But, we will not use the words to impress or sound weighty in our lessons. We shall use them only as they are useful and become more commonplace within our studies. For our goal is not to sound like theologians. Our goal is to understand what Paul had to say about God (Paul’s “theology”) and in this manner grow in our understanding and relationship with God and his people. Inherent in this study, we will have a chance to learn important and noteworthy insights from other scholars and their studies, and we will use and understand their language – always with an eye toward making sense of it for the lay theologian!

AN EXAMPLE

With that in mind, let us return to our words “biblical theology” and “scholastic theology,” considering whether we are wasting our time or finding fruit that may feed and aid us in our Christian walk! Next week, we will begin our study of Paul’s theology with the subject of “God.” Our goal will be to understand what Paul thought of God and how we can best understand it today. Who or what was God to Paul? We know he used the term “God” nearly 1,000 times in his writings. In what circumstances? What did he attribute to God? What is God like to Paul?

“Biblical theology” means we will need to carefully study the various passages where Paul writes of “God” with an eye toward better grasping the relations and significances of the passages as we compare them. In a preview of next week, let us consider the following 5 passages from Galatians and 1 Thessalonians:

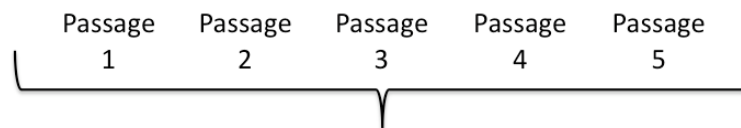
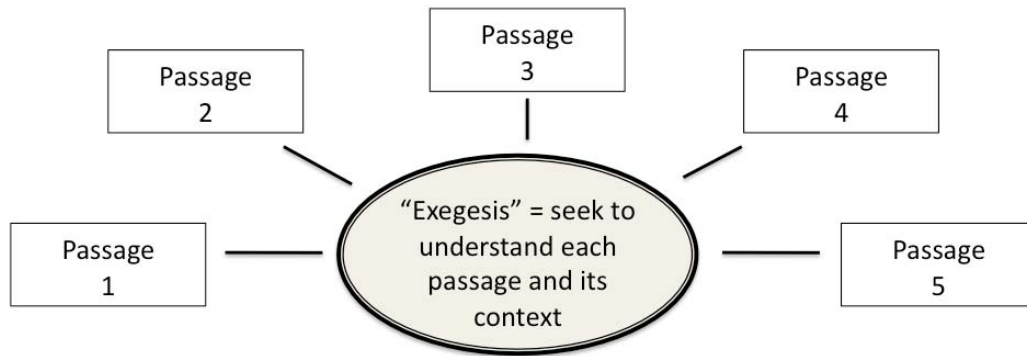
1. “And from those who seemed to be influential (what they were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality) – those, I say, who seemed influential added nothing to me” (Gal. 2:6).
2. “Now an intermediary implies more than one, but God is one” (Gal. 3:20).
3. “Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap” (Gal. 6:7).
4. “And we thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers” (1 Thes. 2:13).
5. “But though we had already suffered and been shamefully treated at Philippi, as you know, we had boldness in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in the midst of such conflict” (1 Th. 2:2).

The first step to biblical theology is seeking to understand each passage on its own merit and in its own context. This is exegesis. Because this first step is so important, we have spent a good part of this year looking at Paul’s writings individually in context. This was an effort to perform a limited amount of exegesis prior to beginning our theology lessons.

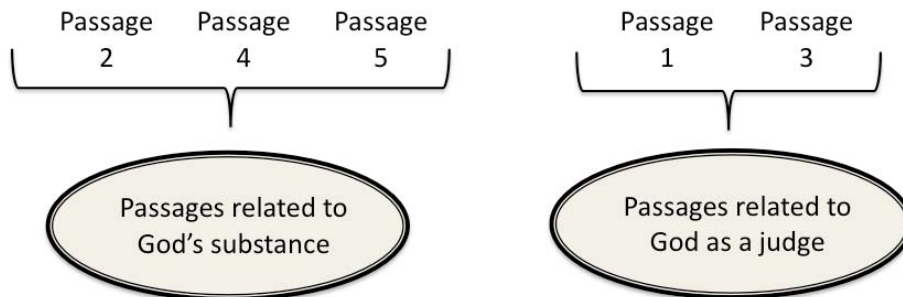
In our next task, we begin the theological work as we compare the passages together to see the common thread of Paul’s referencing God in each. This is *biblical theology*. When we look at the above five passages in this light, we might sort them in a coherent order to understand that: God is one (Scripture #2) before whom Paul boldly declares God’s gospel (Scripture #5). Paul thanks God, for the peoples’ reception of God’s word as God’s word rather than the word of man (Scripture #4). Paul also writes of God showing no partiality (Scripture #1) and not being mocked or deceived (Scripture #3). This is Biblical theology digesting Paul’s writings on God.

The next step is scholastic theology. Here, we try to break apart, sort, and classify Paul’s thoughts in ways that help us digest and understand them. We might take passages 2, 4, and 5 above and classify them as writings that show Paul’s consideration of the *substance* of God. In this sense, we see that God is a unity; he is “one” (2). We see that God is personal to Paul as he writes of “boldness in *our* God” (5). God speaks. Paul compares the word of God to the word of man (4). We can also classify passages 1 and 3 as Paul depicting God as a judge. God shows no partiality (1). God dispenses to man his just due; man reaps what he sows (3).

Were we to chart this process we might see it as follows:



"Biblical Theology" accumulates the passages together and compares them for fuller meaning and understanding



"Scholastic Theology" sorts the passages and puts them into various structures to better analyze and understand them

Some might be asking by now, "Why on earth does this matter? Can't we simply read scripture and be satisfied with that?" To this we answer, "Yes and no!" Yes, we can read scripture and understand that Jesus Christ died for our sins. The answer to mankind's fall that God has provided through the death of Christ is

simple and straightforward. One need not delve into deep theological musings to ferret out what God has done for mankind and mankind's response to this gift.

But, should we end our study there? What of the requirements of God for his children? Can we truly love God and not desire to know him more fully? Can we be happy with Christian milk, with the basics of faith, and ignore the meat that calls us to maturity?

Shall we not be challenged by the words in Hebrews 5:12-14?

For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.

We believe that the writer of Hebrews correctly assesses that as we grow in our knowledge of God's word, we grow in our ability to discern good and evil as we mature before our God and maker. We believe this study will unlock riches that help us conquer the bad habits of the old man, will propel our roots of faith deep into soil that enable us to weather the storms of life, and will set us into a place of understanding that brings forth fruit in the lives of those with whom we connect.

Let us be even more direct. Consider the doctrine of the Trinity – God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. If we were to examine Paul's writings for a verse where he sets out the Trinity as a doctrine, then we are going to be stumped, for he does not give us such a discourse. We can understand the Trinity from Paul, however, by the exercise of good theology! We first accumulate his writings on God ("biblical theology") and we then sort, compare, contrast, and reason through those passages in good "scholastic theology" to glean Paul's teachings and beliefs on what the church historically calls "the Trinity." It is only through good theology that we can derive the orthodox doctrine of God as One in three persons.⁴

⁴ The astute Bible student might point out the passages in the Bible that reference the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as texts that establish the doctrine of the Trinity. But while those verses give us insight, they do not set out a developed doctrine of the Trinity. As Karl Barth expounded, "The Bible lacks the express declaration that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are of *equal essence* and therefore in an equal sense *God himself*. And the other express declaration is also lacking, that God is God thus and only thus, *i.e.*, as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit." (Emphasis added) (Karl Barth, *CD*, I, 1, 437). We can read, for example, in 2 Corinthians 13:14, "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all." But that does not give us the orthodoxy of the Trinity. The same is similarly true for Matt. 28:19 ("Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit"). We are not saying that the doctrine is the

Considerations like the Trinity illustrate how theologians throughout the ages have sometimes used language, some of which we now consider normative or orthodox, that is not found in scripture. That does not make the language wrong; indeed, the language is many times useful. It does serve as a reminder, however, that that the language is not required for faithfulness to God!

WHERE WE ARE GOING FROM HERE

If we understand “theology” as talking about God, then we study Pauline theology with an eye to understanding what Paul had to say about God! We will breakdown these lessons into the various subjects that scholars commonly use in trying to understand the breadth of the subject, including those matters set forth in the original syllabus for this class and reproduced for convenience below:

- Paul on God
- Paul on Jesus (“Christology”)
- Paul on the Holy Spirit
- Paul on the Trinity
- Paul on Scripture
- Paul on the Law
- Paul on salvation (“Soteriology”)
 - Justification (Including Paul’s terms for the “gospel”)
 - Conversion
 - Adoption
 - Use of legal language
 - The elect/election and free will
- Paul on sanctification
- Paul on guidance
- Paul on morality/ethics
- Paul on spiritual anatomy (spirit, soul, body, mind, “old man,” “new nature,” “flesh,” etc.; “anthropology”)
- Paul on spiritual warfare (including angels and the spirit world)
- Paul on prayer
- Paul on persecution
- Paul on suffering and perseverance
- Paul on the Church (“ecclesiology”)
- Paul on worship
- Paul on the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper
- Paul on interpersonal relations

result of parsing words or that it is man-made. We are saying that through careful study, one can learn more of this truth of God by examining multiple passages analytically.

- Paul on charismatic gifts
- Paul on Dispensationalism
- Paul on Judaism / Gentiles
- Paul on women
- Paul on the end times (“eschatology”)

These subjects are not always suited to one class per subject. Certainly, many of these subjects could fairly command months of study in great depth. Our goal, however, in keeping with the spirit of this class, is to bring a level of literacy on these subjects, roughly equated with a seminary overview class in these matters. That should provide not only a fair grasp to aid in life and our intellectual and spiritual growth, but also a good foundation for further study in the Bible and associated writings.

WARNINGS

There are a lot of books available on our subject – *a whole lot!* There are books written for the scholars and books written for the laymen. There are famous books on Pauline Theology, and there are obscure books that few have heard of or read. It would not be hard to put together a list of several hundred books on Paul that are useful in some way, shape, form, or fashion. In our class, however, we are not using any book in particular for lesson preparation. Our lessons will be hybrids of our own creation, using and referencing a number of scholarly books, but even more so directly digesting and applying what Paul himself said and wrote. It is, after all, Paul’s talk about God we are studying!

As we come to the subject, though, we do well to note why we choose this route, why we write these lessons anew weekly, especially in light of the wealth of written material out there. We do so for a number of reasons. First, we bring to this material our own beliefs about the authority of scripture and what Paul actually wrote and said. Consider, for example, Dunn’s book referenced earlier. Dunn has a very useful and scholarly work on Pauline theology. But, Dunn arrives at his conclusions and ideas considering the books of Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, and Philemon as written by Paul. He does not consider Ephesians, Colossians, or the Timothy letters as authentically Paul’s. This class, however, while appreciating the scholarship that leads some to conclude non-Pauline authorship of those books, still considers those epistles Paul’s own. Similarly, we regard the statements attributed to Paul in Acts as truly statements of Paul.⁵

⁵ This is a fruitful area for discussion given the right opportunity. The scholars that dispute Paul’s original authorship of certain epistles have a number of reasons supporting their position. There are also a number of substantive reasons to accept Paul’s authorship, beyond mere tradition. Consider, for example, Ferdinand Prat, *The Theology of Saint Paul* (Burns and Oates Ltd 1964).

Another reason we write our own materials is to position our study in increments that fit our class schedule. We can also tailor the lessons to emphasize the particular issues that are more relevant to our place in time and history.

We have been careful to lay groundwork for this study by examining Paul's life and letters already. We must avoid the trap some fall into of studying Paul's writings on certain theological issues out of context. Some take the passages out of context of their fuller letters. Some also lose the context of how and why the letters and passages were written to start with. Paul rarely wrote letters without some frame of reference. We remember, for example, that the Corinthians were writing Paul asking questions and pronouncing their ideas. Paul answered their questions. He also agreed with some of them while he took issue with others.⁶ We do not do his writings, or Holy Scripture, justice if we do not keep these contexts in mind as we study Paul's theology.

While offering our warnings on this class, we do well to also remember that God's thoughts and ways are higher than ours. Some of our questions will always, at least in this life, remain unanswered. Theology as we are discussing it always faces the danger of bending and twisting scripture to make it "fit" rather than being content with a less than complete system of understanding. We will frequently make this point, hopefully, as we consider some very deep and thoughtful areas of scripture and faith.

A final note before we begin our theology lesson: One might fairly ask what order we are using to cover our broad subject. The answer is akin to asking how one might build a house. One makes plans, and then begins with the foundation, adding the framing, drying in the home and then going to the finer details of the inside. We will begin with the foundations of faith: God, Jesus, and scripture. Taking these foundations, we will frame out our theology by examining the Old Testament law and the salvation recorded and pronounced in our New Testaments. We will then dry in our building and begin the more detailed and focused work on Paul's theology of the changes to the believer both on an individual basis and as a collective (the church).

The trial lawyer in me that spends a lifetime examining issues and cross examining experts has not arrived at my conclusions without debating each of the scholars, pro and con, in my head! In other words, our presuppositions of Paul and scripture come from deliberative analysis, not mere adherence to a safe tradition.

⁶ We are not saying that is *all* Paul did in his letters. He certainly wrote the Corinthians, for example, for many reasons beyond simply answering their questions.

Next week, we start our study with Paul's theology of God. If you are interested in homework, then we suggest taking one or more of Paul's writings and read through making notes of each passage where Paul writes of God. Try to understand the passage (exegesis) then look at the passages together and think through them trying to more fully understand them (biblical theology). Finally, begin thinking of how you might sort and classify what the passages teach about God.

POINTS FOR HOME

1. "Brothers, do not be children in your thinking. Be infants in evil, but in your thinking be mature" (1 Cor. 14:20).

We do not live a life that is satisfied with kindergarten or a first grade education. We want to brush into a burning flame the desire to know more of our God, to better understand his work within us and his will for us. Let us commit to stretch and grow before him!

2. "How can a young man keep his way pure? By guarding it according to your word" (Ps. 119:9).

This class is not an academic exercise. We are not about learning fancy words or special terms. We are not seeking to understand the theological writings of scholars who make a living writing about esoteric matters that make no difference in the lives of man. We are about applying ourselves to God's word in ways that change us. We are seeking his wisdom to be more of what he has called us to be. Maturity brings fruit to the believer and it is toward this fruit we are reaching.

3. "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15).

When Paul writes of "rightly handling the word," must we not realize that there is a way to mishandle the word? We need to recognize that good scholarship, careful study, and prayerful appreciation of scripture is extremely important. It is not something we do to fill our brains up. It is a matter of our stewardship before God. We take up the challenge asking ourselves, what have we spent our time studying in our lives? Do we know as much of God as we do the field of our profession or daily life? Have we applied our self to understanding God? Have we applied our self to understand our hobby? Whether we answer those questions yes or no, we

now commit ourselves to a course of good study in God's word, meditating on it, and watching it change us.