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PROLEGOMENA

Prolegomena, from the Greek words pro (“before”) and legō (“word”), is a preliminary part of the study of systematic theology that answers questions such as “What is the nature of theology?” and “What are the objectives and purposes of theology?”

WHAT IS THEOLOGY?

Knowledge of God

Our wisdom, in so far as it ought to be deemed true and solid Wisdom, consists almost entirely of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves.¹

The knowledge of God must be the primary objective of life.

DEUTERONOMY 6:5

You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.

In Matthew 22:37–38 Jesus confirms that this is “the great and foremost commandment.” This is not a commandment to seek an emotional attachment

to Yahweh but it is a command to engage every facet of one's person—in intellect, emotions and will—in one's commitment to God. The term for *heart* (Hebrew *lēb*, *lēbāb*) is not limited to one's emotions but includes all aspects of one's inner life. “[It] denotes the seat of emotion (1 Sam. 2:1), desire (Ps. 37:4), thought (Gen. 6:5), and decision (1 Chr. 12:38).”² Here the “soul” (Hebrew *nepeš*) is the inner man from which the deepest feelings often spring (see Isa. 26:9; Ps. 42:5, 11; 63:1; 103:1–2, 22). The term *might* (Hebrew *meōd*) has the notion “abundant force,” so perhaps the idea there is that one will love God with “full intensity.” The command here is to love God with a focused and intent mind, with the deepest intensity of one's being, and with maximum effort.

To gain the true knowledge of God, a person must earnestly engage the intellect to know God, must have a heartfelt desire to love God, and must make a sincere commitment to God that leads to earnest effort to obey and serve God.

PSALM 42:2

My soul thirsts for God, for the living God;
When shall I come and appear before God?

PSALM 63:1

O God, You are my God; I shall seek You earnestly;
My soul thirsts for You, my flesh yearns for You,
In a dry and weary land where there is no water.

The psalmist's desire for a relationship with God is likened to a deep yearning for water, as when one finds himself in a desert and is extremely thirsty. The psalm title of Psalm 63 identifies the psalmist as David and adds the location as “in the wilderness of Judah.” This is significant, for this part of the land was often extremely dry and at certain times of the year access to sources of water was difficult if not impossible. Life in such a location required constant attention to satisfying the physical need for food and water. This is the degree of devotion that is necessary for anyone who desires the knowledge of God. The terms *soul* and *flesh* refer to the inner and outer man.

The psalmist is saying his desire for God involves his whole being. The effort to gain the true knowledge of God requires this same level of yearning and desire.

PSALM 73:25

Whom have I in heaven *but You*?
And besides You, I desire nothing on earth.

The terms *in heaven* and *on earth* are opposites that, when used together in the same context, indicate a totality. There is nothing in heaven or found on earth that the psalmist desires more than God Himself. The psalmist's desire for God is all-encompassing. The term *desire* (Hebrew *hāpēs*) often has the notion of delight. For the psalmist the greatest delight in heaven or on earth is the knowledge of God. The pursuit of the knowledge of God requires a singular focus that prioritizes the knowledge of the transcendent over the knowledge of the merely temporal.

WHY STUDY THEOLOGY?

To Know God

JEREMIAH 9:24

“But let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the LORD who exercises lovingkindness, justice and righteousness on earth; for I delight in these things,” declares the LORD.

The primary pursuit of theology must be the knowledge of God—or better, a personal relationship with God. The goal of theology is not accomplished by merely accumulating more facts and information about God. The goal of theology is personal knowledge of God Himself and a close living relationship with Him. The term *understands* (Hebrew *šākal, haskêl*) has the connotation of “practical insight” and the term *know* (Hebrew *yāda'*) has the connotation of “intimate knowledge.” The study of theology is meant to provide practical knowledge for one's life and for living in a personal

relationship with God. Specifically, one must know God's lovingkindness (Hebrew *hesed*)—His "loyal love" (i.e., His commitment to His covenant promises) and His justice and righteousness (i.e., His quality of fairness and His external demonstration of rectitude). God is just and right (in Himself) and all that He does is just and right.

JOHN 17:3

This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.

The scriptural notion of "eternal life" is not merely unending life. It is the opposite of "eternal death," which is eternal separation from God (see **Personal Eschatology**). Eternal life is a quality of life—a full, joyful, blessed life. It is a manner of living life—with the rich experience of a relationship with God that gives life meaning and value and purpose. It is the life humans were meant to live and will live in the eternal presence of God. Believers have this life now in their relationship with Jesus Christ (see John 3:36). To know God is the highest goal; indeed it is the very purpose of human life (see Jer. 9:24).

Question 1: What is the chief end of man?

Answer: Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.³

To Know Christ

JOHN 20:30–31

Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book;³¹ but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name.

This is the purpose statement or thesis of John's gospel. John is telling his readers that he wrote so as to convince them that Jesus of Nazareth was and is the Messiah and the Son of God. He wanted his readers to know not merely some of the stories and incidents of the life of Jesus, but to

understand what those accounts revealed (and what the signs and miracles He performed verified)—namely, that Jesus was God (see John 1:1–3; 8:58) and that He came to reveal God (see John 1:18; 14:7–9). John is telling his readers that his gospel enables them to know Jesus Christ and through Him to know God. In principle this thesis may be applied to the whole of the Bible; the purpose of the Bible is to reveal God, His nature, His will, His eternal purposes, and His salvation to enable us to know Him (see John 17:3).

To Know God's Thoughts

DEUTERONOMY 29:29

The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever, that we may observe all the words of this law.

The knowledge of God is utterly dependent on His self-revelation. There are truths about Him—His nature (e.g., the Trinity), His attributes, His eternal decrees—that we, as finite (and even fallen) creatures, could never discover by ourselves (see Job 11:7 and the exchange between Job and the LORD in Job chapters 38–42). There is information that only He knows such as the truth about creation (since only He was present at creation) and the events of the future (since He is the sovereign God “who works all things after the counsel of His will” [Eph. 1:11b]; see Isa. 46:10). On the other hand, we can be sure that what God has revealed is true (see John 17:17) and that we can know and understand His revelation well enough to believe it and obey it (see 1 John 5:20).

JOB 11:7

Can you discover the depths of God?
Can you discover the limits of the Almighty?

This is a rhetorical question that assumes the answer is negative. It is an admission that as mere men—finite creatures of God—on our own, we are not equipped (intellectually or morally) to ascertain fully the nature of the transcendent, infinite, eternal God.

ISAIAH 55:8–9

“For My thoughts are not your thoughts,
Nor are your ways My ways,” declares the LORD.
⁹ “For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
So are My ways higher than your ways
And My thoughts than your thoughts.”

The context of Isaiah 55 reveals that Yahweh offers the sinful and rebellious nation of Israel (see Isa. 1:4ff; 46:12; 48:4) spiritual nourishment and life (Isa. 55:1–3) through the ministry of the Messiah (descendant of “David,” Isa. 55:3; “leader and commander,” Isa. 55:4; “Holy One of Israel,” Isa. 55:5). The invitation to the nation to repent is urged (Isa. 55:6–7a) and the compassion of Yahweh is assured (Isa. 55:7b). But this mercy and grace is not something the nation had expected, nor is the work and compassion of the Messiah something human reason would have conceived of on its own. How could a righteous God offer such a sinful people not only the opportunity to repent (“forsake his way,” “return to the LORD (Yahweh),” Isa. 55:7) but also send them a merciful and compassionate Messiah? Two clauses, which begin with the word “for” (Hebrew *ki*), explain the dilemma. First, Yahweh asserts that His thoughts and ways (intentions and plans) are not to be judged by how human beings reason and calculate. His greater knowledge and His superior ways cannot be assessed from the limited knowledge and narrow perspective of mere men. Second, His divine perspective is greater—“as the heavens are higher than the earth” (Isa. 55:9)—than is the perspective of man. Simply put, Yahweh knows more and sees further than we do. His perspective is morally superior to that of fallen humans. Human beings should not question the wisdom of God’s mercy and grace but should embrace the Messiah in repentance and faith.

To Promote Sound Doctrine and Teaching, and to Refute False Teaching

2 TIMOTHY 4:2–3

Preach the word; be ready in season *and* out of season; reprove, rebuke,

exhort, with great patience and instruction. ³ For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but *wanting* to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires.

TITUS 1:9

Holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, so that he will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict.

Paul exhorted Timothy and Titus to preach and teach the word (understood as the Scriptures) in accord with “sound doctrine.” The term “sound doctrine” (Greek *hygiainousēs didaskalia*) is literally rendered “healthy teaching.” Healthy teaching is the objective of good theology and is the opposite of false teaching, which is based on man’s ideas rather than the revealed truth of God in His Word. “**Sound** translates *hugiainō*, from which we derive the English *hygienic*. It has the basic meaning of being healthy and wholesome, referring to that which protects and preserves life. In his preaching and teaching, it should be the pastor’s sole objective to enlighten his congregation in **doctrine** that protects and preserves their spiritual health.”⁴

To Test the Teaching of Others

1 JOHN 4:1

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.

It is an unfortunate reality that there are false teachers and there have always been many of them. This requires that every truth claim be tested by the only standard of truth available—namely, the Word of God (see John 17:17, “Your word is truth”). The task of theology is not primarily to integrate other supposed avenues or sources of truth but to investigate them, test them, and in light of the truth divinely revealed in the Scriptures, to expose them and, if necessary, to reject them. That requires a thorough understanding of the theology contained in the Scriptures.

To Live a Life Approved and Be Equipped

2 TIMOTHY 3:17

So that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.

The study of theology requires diligence (see Prov. 2:1–5 under **Solomon on How to Study Theology**) so as to be “approved to God” (2 Tim. 2:15). To be “approved” (Greek *dokimos*) means to be tested and found genuine (e.g., as in testing and approving coins and paper currency). The opposite of approved is “ashamed,” that is, embarrassingly exposed as unworthy, illegitimate, and false. The study of the Scriptures and theology is what qualifies and equips one to avoid this shameful exposure. The term “adequate” (Greek *artios*) indicates that one is capable and proficient. When one is proficient with the Word of God, then one is equipped, prepared, and supplied to live for, and to serve God.

To Be Filled with Wisdom and Knowledge

COLOSSIANS 1:9

For this reason also, since the day we heard of *it*, we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding.

THE OBJECTIVES OF THEOLOGY

PROVERBS 1:1–7

The proverbs of Solomon the son of David, king of Israel:

- ²To know wisdom and instruction,
- To discern the sayings of understanding,
- ³To receive instruction in wise behavior,
- Righteousness, justice and equity;
- ⁴To give prudence to the naive,
- To the youth knowledge and discretion,
- ⁵A wise man will hear and increase in learning,

And a man of understanding will acquire wise counsel,
⁶To understand a proverb and a figure,
 The words of the wise and their riddles.
⁷The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge;
 Fools despise wisdom and instruction.

Solomon begins the book of Proverbs by listing several outcomes or objectives to be achieved by the study of his proverbs. These can reasonably be understood as also the outcomes or objectives to be achieved by the study of theology. “Wisdom” is often understood as “having a skill” (see Ex. 36:1–2 where the words translated “skillful,” and “skill” are literally “wise of heart” and “wisdom.”) Here the idea is that a person who knows the proverbs (and theology) will have “skill in living.” A wise and knowledgeable person will be able to “discern,” that is, will be able “to distinguish, divide, separate” between the good and bad, useful and worthless, profitable and wasteful. The wise person will keep gaining knowledge and increase in his or her ability to use it. This one will grow in the facility of applying knowledge in order to resolve difficult questions. The wise person understands that wisdom (as a skill applied) and knowledge (as information employed) depends on the “fear of the LORD”—which is honor in one’s mind, reverence in one’s heart, and submissive obedience of one’s will.

Systematic theology correlates the data of biblical revelation as a whole in order to exhibit systematically the total picture of God’s self-revelation.⁵

THE KEY REQUIREMENTS OF DOING THEOLOGY

Faith

HEBREWS 11:3, 6

By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things which are visible. . . .

⁶And without faith it is impossible to please *Him*, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and *that* He is a rewarder of those who seek Him.

Doing theology requires “faith seeking understanding.” This phrase was used by both Augustine and Anselm to emphasize the necessity of belief in, devotion for, and commitment to God as a requisite to right thinking about God. It is particularly important to start with faith in God when considering the matter of creation because only God was present at creation, only God has the power to create (*ex nihilo*), and only God can reveal the truth about creation—as He has done in Genesis 1 and 2. Furthermore, faith is required to “please God.” In the context, it is clear that this refers to Enoch who “walked with God” (Gen. 5:24). Enoch’s life of walking in faith, trust, and obedience was what “pleased God.”

While many attempt to take up the task of theology in order to prove the existence of God (which would be philosophical, or theoretical theology), the biblical theologian must presuppose the existence of God. This is not a subjective “leap of faith” (i.e., “fideism”) but a presupposition based on the objective truth that God has revealed Himself in the inspired Word of God—the Scriptures. In that Word it is revealed that God exists (“He is”) and that He is involved in His creation.

“I am not trying to scale your heights, Lord; my understanding is in no way equal to that. But I do long to understand your truth in some way, your truth which my heart believes and loves. For I do not seek to understand in order to believe; I believe in order to understand. For I also believe that ‘Unless I believe, I shall not understand.’”⁶

Hard Work

2 TIMOTHY 2:15

Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth.

The meaning of the word *diligence* (Greek *spoudazō*) includes the nuances of “haste,” “eagerness,” and “persistence.” Paul is urging Timothy to “zealous

persistence” in his study of the “word of truth.” Study of the Bible and theology is not a task that one undertakes half-heartedly or with indifference. This is a task one takes up with the understanding that God Himself will judge one’s effort and accuracy, and that one may be “approved” (Greek *dokimos*) or “ashamed.” The task requires one to accurately handle the word of truth—the Scriptures or the gospel. “Handling accurately” (Greek *orthotomeō*) is literally “to cut straight.” As a bricklayer must do his work following a “straight line” as he lays his bricks and as a farmer must follow a “straight line” in plowing the furrows in a field, so the one who handles the Word of God must be careful and conscientious as he aligns his teaching with the truth of the Word of God.

Humility

PROVERBS 3:5–6

Trust in the LORD with all your heart
And do not lean on your own understanding.

⁶In all your ways acknowledge Him,
And He will make your paths straight.

PROVERBS 15:33

The fear of the LORD is the instruction for wisdom,
And before honor *comes* humility.

These well-known verses are applicable not just to one’s practical life of faith but to the practice of theology as well. It is imperative for theologians young and old to guard against the pride that allows one’s own thoughts (and desires) to dominate and regulate one’s theology.

SOLOMON ON HOW TO STUDY THEOLOGY

PROVERBS 2:1–5

My son, if you will receive my words
And treasure my commandments within you,

²Make your ear attentive to wisdom,
Incline your heart to understanding;