

Who needs theology?

Is theology 'useful' or is it just a 'classroom thing'?



A KBCTC supplement to Senior Leader magazine – helping Senior Leaders think theologically

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“To think theologically, or not to think theologically, really isn't the question!” Whether or not Shakespeare would have appreciated the misquote, an important point is immediately obvious: like it or not, we are all theologians of sorts.

Even those who do not know God demonstrate an innate

understanding of the kind of god they could believe in: the kind who doesn't allow suffering; the kind who answers prayers; the kind who's

there when we're in trouble. Christians even more so, cannot help but being theologians!

So what then is the question? Put simply it is this: if we are all theologians of sorts, what is the purpose of what we might call *good theology*, and what might *good theology* look like?

Good theology

This article will argue that the purpose of good theology is “to equip the saints for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4.12-13)”

It follows therefore that the way in which we do or theology must be apostolic, prophetic, pastoral, educational and evangelistic in nature. Before exploring these characteristics, these few verses identify some important principles:

1. The purpose of all our theologising must be to equip others.

2. The appropriate outcome of such equipping must be *works of service*: theology must lead to action.

3. The task of theology is clearly ongoing in nature: whilst anyone, anywhere remains anything less than fully mature, there is work to be done!

4. Attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ is not simply an intellectual task but “requires divine illumination of one's heart and divine transformation of character” (J I Packer).

Theology must equip people and lead to action. Theology is an ongoing task, of the whole community, with the divine help of God.

5. The saints corporately build the body, thus the theology is a function of the entire community not some pre-elected elite and must be of the utmost concern for every believer.

The educational nature of theology

To teach in a truly Christian manner is to teach a Christian way of *thinking and living*. To teach biblical theology is to teach biblical wisdom; the kind of wisdom that begins with the fear of the Lord. To have wisdom is to possess and exercise the skills required to live well; to have insight to recognise the way things are; and the wisdom to live in the light of that. This kind of teaching includes preaching and teaching, but also much much more.

Furthermore, wisdom in the New Testament sense is to imitate Christ, to walk the road of suffering, embracing the cross in selfless love and humility. To teach theology then is to



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The historical development of theology

The word "theology" is derived from two Greek words; *theos* meaning God and *logos* meaning word, teaching or study.

Originally used by the early Greeks to refer to the sayings and writings of their poets about gods or divine matters, the word *theologia* was appropriated by the Christian apologists around 200AD to mean Christian teaching about the Christian God.

For many centuries theology remained thoroughly practical and intimately linked with Christian teaching. Sadly in Mediaeval times and definitely by the Enlightenment, many would consider theology to have lost its way:

"A great deal of what is called theology today is specialist speculation and does not bear at all on the Christian's personal experience" J I Packer

Hence the importance of ensuring that what we do every day is theology "in the best sense", and a "matter of conscientious concern to every Christian who aims at a life that honours God".

embrace the biblical *Way of Wisdom* and to invite others to walk with us on that way.

The pastoral nature of theology

The pastoral nature of theology reminds us as much as any other that our theologising must be practical, serving to build up the body in times of suffering as well as rejoicing. Pastoral tasks include those of:

1. Building community – recognising and reflecting that the God about whom we speak is community: more *one* precisely because he is *three*.

2. Story-making – helping people understand God's big story, and learning to find our place in it. Who I am can only be affirmed on the basis of who God has shown himself to be in relation to us as a people.

3. Pain-sharing – we see in the book of Lamentations the vital function theology must perform of directing despair and pain not away from God, but towards him. Theologically, we must take feelings seriously and then help to shape them into a response before God.

The prophetic nature of theology

Throughout history the result of theological endeavour has been a prophetic message both to the church and the world: the Reformation resulted not only in the transformation of the church, but also the whole of Western European society.

This should not be surprising. If God's fundamental concern is to redeem the whole of creation, and this concern is reflected throughout Scripture, a thoroughly redemptive and prophetic message will emerge as we study the scriptures.

In the same way that Jeremiah, Hosea, Amos and others were prophetic in their own generations, we must learn to read carefully the cultural milieu of our time, and both speak and act prophetically in it.

Similarly, we must not be afraid to act in a manner that speaks prophetically to the church. Just as the Desert Fathers acted prophetically towards the corruption and extravagance that had crept into the church in their day, so the nature of the theological task necessitates that we embrace spiritual deserts and alienation as we embody a prophetic message to our own church.

The apostolic nature of theology

The apostolic role is much less developed theologically than many others we have looked at, nevertheless we may recognise two related facets: firstly apostles are *sent ones*, those who go out and share the good news of Jesus. Secondly, in the context of this *going* they establish churches. Thus we see the appropriate relationship between missiology and ecclesiology: our *going* shapes our *churching* i.e. firstly we are sent into the world to be Christ's ambassadors, and secondly we ask what kind of church Christ would have us build in this context.

The evangelistic nature of theology

Theology is to do with God, and God himself is on a mission. Hence theology is fundamentally missional in nature. Two important concepts arise out of this understanding:

1. Evangelism is a theological task and extends

beyond simply seeing souls saved. Until the 17th Century the word 'mission' was only ever used with reference to the triune God (*missio dei* – that is, God's own mission), thus we must ask ourselves difficult questions in order to ensure we really are participating in the fullness of God's mission to the world!

2. Apologetics² has been a key part of our Christian witness in the world, but must extend beyond simply bringing an individual to a place of serious consideration to a "conviction that comes from the apprehension of spiritual beauty and the glory of divine things". To bear witness to the glory of Christ we must learn to engage not only verbally, but also relationally and visually in order to capture the imagination of our culture.

Conclusion

As we have seen, the precise nature of theology has changed over time, and no doubt will continue to do so as we seek to equip the saints at different times and in different places. Nevertheless, if we are to see the church built up in the way Christ desires, we must ensure our theology remains educational, pastoral, prophetic, apostolic and evangelistic in nature.

How do you respond?

'Theology must lead to action' – so what action are you going to take?

1. How do you respond to the issues raised in this paper? As you read it did God get grab your attention about something?
2. What difference should this perspective make to your leadership, your church, your life?
3. Why not get your leadership team to read the paper and then review together how your church needs to respond?

² A reasoned defence of the faith