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Chapter 1

CONCEPTS AND DEFINITIONS

Prolegomena, the title of this section, simply means prefatory or preliminary remarks. It furnishes the author with the opportunity to let his readers know something of the general plan he has in mind, both its extent and limitations, as well as some of the presuppositions of his thinking and the procedures he plans to use. Prolegomena serve to orient the readers to what the author has in mind for the book.

I. THE CONCEPT OF THEOLOGY

That a book is a work on theology says something at once about extent, focus, and limitations. The word “theology,” from *theos* meaning God and *logos* meaning rational expression, means the rational interpretation of religious faith. Christian theology thus means the rational interpretation of the Christian faith.

At least three elements are included in that general concept of theology.

(1) Theology is intelligible. It can be comprehended by the human mind in an orderly, rational manner.

(2) Theology requires explanation. This, in turn, involves exegesis and systematization.

(3) The Christian faith finds its source in the Bible, so Christian theology will be a Bible-based study. Theology, then, is the discovery, systematizing, and presentation of the truths about God.

II. THE VARIETIES OF THEOLOGY

Theologies can be cataloged in various ways.

(1) By era: i.e., patristic theology, medieval theology, reformation theology, modern theology.

(2) By viewpoint: i.e., Arminian theology, Calvinistic theology, Catholic theology, Barthian theology, liberation theology, etc.

(3) By focus: i.e., historical theology, biblical theology, systematic theology, apologetic theology, exegetical theology, etc. Some of these distinctions are very important to anyone who studies theology.

A. Historical Theology

Historical theology focuses on what those who studied the Bible thought about its teachings either individually or collectively as in the pronouncements of church councils. It shows how the church has formulated both truth and error and serves to guide the theologian in his own understanding and statement of doctrine. A student can be more efficient in coming to his own understanding of truth by knowing the contributions and mistakes of church history. When it seems appropriate I shall include some history of doctrine in this book.

B. Biblical Theology

Though the term biblical theology has been used in various ways, it serves to label a specific focus on the study of theology. In a non-technical sense it can refer to a pietistic theology (in contrast to a philosophical one), or to a Bible-based theology (in contrast to one that interacts with contemporary thinkers), or to exegetical theology (in contrast to speculative theology). Some contemporary biblical theologies from a liberal perspective fall under this latter category, exegetical, though the exegesis does not faithfully represent the biblical teaching. Often too their works consist of a running commentary through the Bible held together by some large category like kingdom or covenant or God (if Old Testament biblical theology), or categories like the teachings of Jesus, Paul, and primitive Christianity (if New Testament biblical theology).

Technically, biblical theology has a much sharper focus than that. It deals systematically with the historically conditioned progress of the self-revelation of God in the Bible. Four characteristics emerge from this definition.

(1) The results of the study of biblical theology must be presented in a systematic form. In this it is like other areas of biblical and theological studies. The system or scheme in which biblical theology is presented will not necessarily employ the same categories systematic theology uses. It does not have to use them, nor does it have to avoid them.

(2) Biblical theology pays attention to the soil of history in which God's revelation came. It investigates the lives of the writers of the Bible, the circumstances that compelled them to write, and the historic situation of the recipients of their writings.

(3) Biblical theology studies revelation in the progressive sequence in which it was given. It recognizes that revelation was not completed

in a single act on God's part but unfolded in a series of successive stages using a variety of people. The Bible is a record of the progress of revelation, and biblical theology focuses on that. By contrast, systematic theology views revelation as a completed whole.

(4) Biblical theology finds its source material in the Bible. Actually orthodox systematic theologies do too. This is not to say that biblical or systematic theologies could not or do not draw material from other sources, but the theology or doctrine itself does not come from anywhere but the Bible.

C. Systematic Theology

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

Systematic theology may include historical backgrounds, apologetics and defense, and exegetical work, but it focuses on the total structure of biblical doctrine.

To summarize: Theology is the discovery, systematizing, and presentation of the truths about God. Historical theology accomplishes this by focusing on what others throughout history have said about these truths. Biblical theology does this by surveying the progressive revelation of God's truth. Systematic theology presents the total structure.

Chapter 2

SOME PRESUPPOSITIONS

I. THE BASIC ONE

Consciously or unconsciously everyone operates on the basis of some presuppositions. The atheist who says there is no God has to believe that basic presupposition. And believing it, he then views the world, mankind, and the future in entirely different ways than the theist. The agnostic not only affirms we cannot know God, but he must believe that as basic to his entire outlook on the world and life. If we can know about the true God then his whole system is smashed. The theist believes there is a God. He mounts confirmatory evidence to support that belief, but basically he believes.

The trinitarian believes God is Triunity. That is a belief gleaned from the Bible. Therefore, he also believes the Bible to be true.

This stands as the watershed presupposition. If the Bible is not true, then trinitarianism is untrue and Jesus Christ is not who He claimed to be. We learn nothing about the Trinity or Christ from nature or from the human mind. And we cannot be certain that what we learn from the Bible about the Triune God is accurate unless we believe that our source itself is accurate. Thus the belief in the truthfulness of the Bible is the basic presupposition. This will be fully discussed under inspiration and inerrancy.

II. THE INTERPRETIVE ONES

If our source material is so crucial, then we must be concerned how we approach and use it. Accurate theology rests on sound exegesis. Exegetical studies must be made before theological systematization, just as bricks have to be made before a building can be built.

A. The Necessity of Normal, Plain Interpretation

Though a more thorough discussion of hermeneutics will appear in section III, we need to state here the importance of normal interpretation as the basis for proper exegesis. In giving us the revelation of

Himself, God desired to communicate, not obscure, the truth. So we approach the interpretation of the Bible presupposing the use of normal canons of interpretation. Remember that when symbols, parables, types, etc. are used they depend on an underlying literal sense for their very existence, and their interpretation must always be controlled by the concept that God communicates in a normal, plain, or literal manner. Ignoring this will result in the same kind of confused exegesis that characterized the patristic and medieval interpreters.

B. The Priority of the New Testament

All Scripture is inspired and profitable, but the New Testament has greater priority as the source of doctrine. Old Testament revelation was preparatory and partial, but New Testament revelation is climactic and complete. The doctrine of the Trinity, for instance, while allowed for in the Old Testament, was not revealed until the New Testament. Or, think how much difference exists between what is taught in the Old and New Testaments concerning atonement, justification, and resurrection. To say this is not to minimize what is taught in the Old Testament or to imply that it is any less inspired, but it is to say that in the progressive unfolding of God's revelation the Old Testament occupies a prior place chronologically and thus a preparatory and incomplete place theologically. Old Testament theology has its place, but it is incomplete without the contribution of New Testament truth.

C. The Legitimacy of Proof Texts

Liberals and Barthians have often criticized conservatives for using proof texts to substantiate their conclusions. Why do they complain? Simply because citing proof texts will lead to conservative, not liberal, conclusions. They charge it with being an illegitimate, unscholarly methodology, but it is no more illegitimate than footnotes are in a scholarly work!

To be sure, proof texts must be used properly, just as footnotes must be. They must actually be used to mean what they say; they must not be used out of context; they must not be used in part when the whole might change the meaning; and Old Testament proof texts particularly must not be forced to include truth that was only revealed later in the New Testament.

III. THE SYSTEMATIZING ONES

A. The Necessity of a System

The difference between exegesis and theology is the system used. Exegesis analyzes; theology correlates those analyses. Exegesis relates the meanings of texts; theology interrelates those meanings. The exegete strives to present the meaning of truth; the theologian, the system of truth. Theology's goal, whether biblical or systematic theology, is the systematization of the teachings under consideration.

B. The Limitations of a Theological System

In a word, the limitations of a theological system must coincide with the limitations of biblical revelation. In an effort to present a complete system, theologians are often tempted to fill in the gaps in the biblical evidence with logic or implications that may not be warranted.

Logic and implications do have their appropriate place. God's revelation is orderly and rational, so logic has a proper place in the scientific investigation of that revelation. When words are put together in sentences, those sentences take on implications that the theologian must try to understand.

However, when logic is used to create truth, as it were, then the theologian will be guilty of pushing his system beyond the limitations of biblical truth. Sometimes this is motivated by the desire to answer questions that the Scripture does not answer. In such cases (and there are a number of crucial ones in the Bible) the best answer is silence, not clever logic, or almost invisible implications, or wishful sentimentality. Examples of particularly tempting areas include sovereignty and responsibility, the extent of the Atonement, and the salvation of infants who die.

IV. THE PERSONAL ONES

One should also be able to presuppose certain matters about the student of theology.

A. He Must Believe

Of course unbelievers can write and study theology, but a believer has a dimension and perspective on the truth of God that no unbeliever can have. The deep things of God are taught by the Spirit, whom an unbeliever does not have (1 Cor. 2:10–16).

Believers need to have faith also, for some areas of God's revelation will not be fully understood by our finite minds.

B. He Must Think

Ultimately the believer must try to think theologically. This involves thinking exegetically (to understand the precise meaning), thinking systematically (in order to correlate facts thoroughly), thinking critically (to evaluate the priority of the related evidence), and thinking synthetically (to combine and present the teaching as a whole).

Theology and exegesis should always interact. Exegesis does not provide all the answers; when there can legitimately be more than one exegetical option, theology will decide which to prefer. Some passages, for example, could seem to teach eternal security or not; one's theological system will make the decision. On the other hand, no theological system should be so hardened that it is not open to change or refinement from the insights of exegesis.

C. He Must Depend

Intellect alone does not make a theologian. If we believe in the reality of the teaching ministry of the Holy Spirit, then certainly this must be a factor in studying theology (John 16:12–15). The content of the Spirit's curriculum encompasses all the truth, focusing especially on the revelation of Christ Himself which is, of course, found in the Scriptures. To experience this will require a conscious attitude of dependence on the Spirit, which will be reflected in humility of mind and a diligent study of what the Spirit has taught others throughout history. Inductive Bible study is a beneficial way to study, but to do it *only* is to ignore the results of the work of others, and to do it *always* can be an inefficient repetition of what others have already done.

D. He Must Worship

Studying theology is no mere academic exercise, though it is that. It is an experience that changes, convicts, broadens, challenges, and ultimately leads to a deep reverence for God. Worship means to recognize the worth of the object worshiped. How can any mortal put his mind to the study of God and fail to increase his recognition of His worth?

Chapter 3

THE QUESTION OF AUTHORITY

Authority constitutes the foundational principle in the study of theology. Presumably all who operate within the broadest concept of “Christian” theology would acknowledge the authority of God as the supreme norm for truth. However, how the authority of God is conceived and expressed varies considerably within the “Christian” spectrum.

I. AUTHORITY IN LIBERALISM

Subjectivism stands as the hallmark of liberalism, though the focus of that subjectivism may vary with different people. So one person could say, “The Word of God includes ‘any act of God by which communication occurs between God and man.’”¹ That communication comes through human reason, feelings, or conscience.

A. Reason

Reason has always occupied a dominant place in liberal thought. Of course it is within the sphere of reason that concepts are formed that are the basis of communication from one person to another. Reason is a necessary channel for giving and receiving truth, and the evangelical recognizes that. But liberalism has certainly made human reason the judge of truth and often the creator of truth. Reason becomes autonomous, governed by no higher or outside authority, but also severely limited by its finitude and fallibility.

B. Feelings

As a reaction against rationalism, Schleiermacher (1768–1834) developed his theology of feeling. He emphasized the analysis of religious experience and based religion on feeling or awareness. In effect, theology became anthropology and psychology. Because of this, Karl Barth considered Schleiermacher to be the epitome of religious liberalism.

C. Conscience

This form of liberalism emphasizes conscience as the basis of au-

thority. Our knowledge is unreliable and limited, so the basic moral instincts of the human soul become the basis for authority. Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) was the leader in this form of thought. Once again, theology had become anthropology.

In all forms of liberalism, human nature in one aspect or another is the source of religious truth. The Bible, then, is viewed as the product of human reasoning containing man's thoughts about God, himself, and this world. It records the historical development of man's religious experiences and beliefs, and is not, as conservatives believe, the record of a message from a transcendent God who broke into the course of history.

II. AUTHORITY IN NEO-ORTHODOXY

Neo-orthodoxy has sometimes been classed with liberalism and sometimes with conservatism. The reason for this confusion is that, on the one hand, it broke with liberalism by insisting that God, not man, must initiate revelation (and thus seemed to be conservative); while, on the other hand, it continued to teach liberal views concerning the Bible (and thus seemed to be liberal).

The basis of authority in neo-orthodoxy, at least as expressed by Karl Barth (1886–1968), is the Word. However, the Word is mainly Christ. The Bible witnesses to the Word, and does so fallibly, and Christian proclamation is a word about the Word.

The sovereign God took the initiative in revealing Himself, centering primarily in the revelation in Christ. The years of Christ's life exhibited the epitome of revelation, and His death was the climax of revelation. The Bible witnesses to the revelation of God, even though it is interpreted by all the canons of liberalism. The Bible, then, has no absolute authority, but only instrumental authority, since it serves as the fallible instrument by which we encounter Christ the Word. And it is that encounter of faith at the point of "crisis" in which God communicates Himself. That is absolute truth.

Though neo-orthodoxy seeks objectivity in God's sovereign initiative, it practices subjectivism in the experiences of faith's encounters. Even though the Bible is involved in those experiences, it is not allowed to be the ultimate judge of those experiences. Neo-orthodoxy lacks an external, objective standard of authority.

III. AUTHORITY IN CONSERVATISM

In conservatism the basis of authority is external to man and objective.

A. Conservative Catholicism

In Roman Catholicism authority ultimately rests in the church itself. To be sure, the Bible is believed, but it must be interpreted by the church. Furthermore, the traditions of the church are, along with the Bible, a source of divine revelation. Ecumenical councils and popes have from time to time made pronouncements that are considered infallible and therefore binding on church members.

The Eastern Church is similar as far as finding its authority in tradition, the church itself, and the Bible. Even though evangelicals reject tradition as authoritative, it should be recognized that Catholicism's authority is not found in man, as liberalism teaches.

B. Conservative Protestantism

“Conservative” eliminates liberalism’s humanistic and subjective bases of authority, and “protestantism” removes the church as a base of authority. So one would agree that “orthodoxy is that branch of Christendom which limits the ground of religious authority to the Bible.”² The Scriptures contain the objective revelation of God and are therefore the basis of authority for the conservative Protestant.

To be sure, understanding God’s revelation in the Bible involves using the rational processes of a redeemed mind, a commitment of faith in matters not revealed or not understood, a dependence on the teaching ministry of the Holy Spirit, a conscience clear before God, and some insight into the lessons of history.

Sometimes in practice, though not in theory, conservatives can and do deny that the Bible is their sole basis of authority.

(1) In practice, some traditions or denominations give their creeds coordinate authority with the Bible. Creeds can provide helpful statements of truth, but creeds can never be the authoritative judge of truth. Creedal statements must always be considered fallible, in need of possible revision, and subservient to biblical authority.

(2) In practice, some groups give tradition and accepted practice coordinate authority with the Bible. A church has a divine mandate to set authoritative guidelines for its members (Heb. 13:7, 17), but these too are fallible, in need of periodic revision, and always subservient to biblical authority.

(3) In practice, some conservatives make religious experience authoritative. Healthy experience is the fruit of allegiance to biblical authority, but all experiences must be guided, governed, and guarded by

the Bible. To make experience normative and authoritative is to commit the same error as liberalism by replacing an objective criterion with subjective existentialism.

Observe the point of this chart: when objective authority is supplemented, compromised, or abandoned, theism will be weakened or even relinquished.

ORTHODOXY	NEO-ORTHODOXY	LIBERALISM	BELIEVES IN:
x			objective
x	x		transcendent
x	x	x	theism

NOTES

1. L. Harold DeWolf, *The Case for Theology in Liberal Perspective* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1959), 17.
2. Edward John Carnell, *The Case for Orthodox Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969), 13.