

Introduction to
CHRISTIAN
Theology

Justo L. González and
Zaida Maldonado Pérez

An Introduction to Christian Theology

By Justo L. González, Zaida Maldonado Pérez

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CHAPTER 1

I. WHAT IS THEOLOGY?

The most common approach to this question is to examine the roots of the word *theology*. Thus, we are told that *theology* comes from two Greek roots: *theos*, which means "God," and *logos*, which means "study, reason, or treatise." In conclusion, theology is the discipline that studies God. That is what many introductory books say, and to a certain point it is true.

However, the truth is that when we declare that theology is "the discipline that studies God," we have not said much. Each intellectual discipline defines its own method on the basis of the object it studies. Physics is based on the observation of the manner in which physical bodies behave, and astronomy on the observation of the movement of the heavenly bodies. Mathematics is an abstract discipline, which does not really base its findings on any observation, but only on abstract arithmetic quantities, geometric forms, and so forth. History cannot look directly at the events that it discusses, and therefore studies documents, archaeological remains, and other pointers to those events. In short, each discipline must develop its own method, and that method must somehow relate to the theme or subject of its study.

Looking now at theology, we soon realize that it is not enough to say that theology is "the discipline that studies God." It is also necessary to take into account who this God is whom theology studies, and how this God is known. This will be discussed in the next chapter, but for the present one can say at least that God is known through divine revelation—a statement

that in itself is of the utmost importance for theology.

Furthermore, the methods each discipline follows are closely related to its purpose. Some disciplines have both a purely intellectual or cognitive purpose and a practical one. Meteorology, for example, studies the atmospheric phenomena in order not only to understand them better, but also in order to foretell them and thus help us be better prepared for storms, droughts, and so on. History, which at first sight might appear to be the unbiased study of past events, in truth also seeks to understand and interpret the present, and to point toward the future. Even astronomy, which studies distant bodies, also seeks to help us understand the tides, radiation, and solar storms and their impact on radio transmission. Likewise, when we ask, What is theology? we are also asking about its use, about its purpose.

For all these reasons, in the rest of this chapter we will begin by asking what is the purpose of theology, in order then to move to other subjects that will help us understand what theology is and how it is done.

1. THE FUNCTION OF THEOLOGY

Throughout history, those who have devoted themselves to theology have understood their task in various ways.

(a) Theology as an explanation of reality

It was thus that the word *theology* was first employed, even centuries before the birth of Jesus. The ancient Greeks gave the title "theologians" to the poets and other authors who explained the origins of things through myths about the gods. In the Christian church, theology also sometimes has been understood as an explanation of reality, and this has often brought dire consequences. For example, when Galileo first

suggested that the sun did not revolve around the earth, as was believed in his time, ecclesiastical authorities condemned him, because his explanation of reality did not coincide with that of the "theologians." Although it is true that the Christian faith, and therefore also theology, offers us an understanding of reality, this is not so much an explanation of how things work, or how they originated, as it is a view of their place in God's purposes. As we shall see later on, not to distinguish between these two approaches to reality is to create confusion between theology and the physical sciences. When that happens, we run the risk of holding the Christian faith hostage to the vicissitudes and the evolving views and discoveries of those sciences.

The case of Galileo serves as a warning about the dangers in this view of theology. If theology is the explanation of the functioning of reality, every other intellectual discipline has to submit to it. That is why medieval theologians often claimed that their discipline was the "queen of the sciences." Some theologians held that the earth was the physical center of the universe because Joshua 10:13 says that both the sun and the moon stood still. Therefore, no astronomer had the right to claim the contrary, and this led to the condemnation of Galileo. Today we agree that Galileo was right. Therefore, one must beware of any theology or biblical interpretation that seeks to explain how things are, how they work, and so forth. Theology certainly does affirm that all that exists has been created by God, and that everything has a place in God's plan. But how these things function is a matter of concern for other disciplines, and not for theology.

Perhaps the point at which this understanding of theology and its danger are most clearly seen today is the manner in which some read the narratives in Genesis as scientific explanations of the origin of things and animals. Such a reading of Genesis, which sees in it the literal history of the origin of things, clashes not only with today's scientific theories—which after all are no more than theories—but with Genesis itself. In Genesis 1, we are told that God first created the animals and finally the human beings, both male and female, while in Genesis 2 the order is quite different: God creates first the man, then the animals, and finally the woman. Were we to read the narratives of Genesis as scientific

descriptions, we would face the need to declare that Genesis contradicts itself.

This is not to say that theology has nothing to do with the sciences. On the contrary, theology must take into account all human knowledge, and it must also be ready to speak of how various scientific procedures and options must be judged in the light of the gospel. Thus, biology itself cannot determine whether the cloning of humans ought to be done or not, but in this regard requires the guidance of ethics—including theological ethics.

(b) Theology as the systematization of Christian doctrine

From a very early date in the history of Christianity, the need was apparent to systematize the teachings of the Christian faith, or at least its main tenets. Already by the middle of the second century there was a "rule of faith," which was a short summary of those essential tenets, emphasizing those which were denied by some individual or group.

Toward the end of that century and early in the third, the great systematizer of Christian doctrine was Origen, whose work *On First Principles* deals with all the central themes of Christianity, from the doctrine of God and creation to eschatology. Ever since, hundreds of "systematic theologies" have been written, whose purpose is precisely to present Christian doctrine as an ordered and coherent whole.

This function of theology is important, although it too has its dangers. As a systematization of Christian doctrine, it can serve as a point of reference from which to weigh and judge any doctrine or idea that may be suggested. It was thus that the ancient church used the "rule of faith." If somebody suggested that a certain thing had been created not by God but by the Enemy, it was easy to respond rather quickly that the rule of

faith affirms that God is "maker of heaven and earth" or "creator of all things, visible and invisible." The same was true if someone denied eternal life, or the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ.

This function of theology is also valid for us today. If, in the course of a Bible study in a church, someone suggests an interpretation of a text that contradicts the message of the rest of the Bible, and we have studied theology, that theological knowledge will help us recognize and correct the error in what is being proposed, and help us seek a possible different interpretation of the text.

This view and use of theology also involves its perils. The most serious is the possibility that we may be so intent in systematizing and classifying everything that we give the resultant theological system an authority that is far beyond its due.

This was the great danger of much systematic theology in the nineteenth century, and it was against this excessive systematization that Danish Lutheran theologian Søren Kierkegaard insisted that the human being, simply because it exists, because it is placed within time and space, can never systematize all reality. He says, "Does this mean that there is no such system? Certainly not. All of reality is a system for God; but never for us." (Author's translation)

Another example of such thorough and excessive systematization may be seen in the matter in which Calvinist theologian Jerome Zanchi, late in the sixteenth century, tried to prove the doctrine of predestination. He claims that since God is both omnipotent and omniscient—that is, can do all things and knows all things—God knows and determines what is to take place, which leaves no room for human freedom. What Zanchi has done with such an argument is to make us believe that God has to fit within our own narrow understanding of omniscience and omnipotence. But the truth is that, if God is truly omnipotent, God does not have to fit the arguments of Zanchi or any other theologian. If God is truly omniscient, God will know how to allow for human freedom, even though Zanchi's "system" ultimately leaves no room for it.

Another danger in such an excessive system of theology is that the message and work of God may appear to be reduced to three or four points in such a system. This is what happens, for example, when people reduce the message of the Bible to a "plan of salvation" consisting of three, four, or a dozen points, and give the impression that knowing such points is sufficient, so the rest of the Bible is no longer really necessary.

(c) Theology as the defense of the faith, and as a bridge for nonbelievers

From a very early date the church felt the need to defend the faith against those who criticized it, as well as to prepare the way for nonbelievers to approach the gospel in a manner that made sense to them. Thus, when the Christian church began teaching in the midst of the Roman Empire and its Greco-Roman culture, there were some who mocked Christians because they had no visible god. To respond to such criticism, some Christian intellectual leaders began seeking bridges or points of contact between their faith and the surrounding culture. This they found in what some of the most distinguished philosophers of antiquity—especially Plato—had said about the Supreme Being. According to these philosophers, above all visible beings there must be a first Being, infinite and immutable, from which all other beings derive their existence. Joining that ancient philosophical assertion with Christian doctrine, those early Christian theologians—people such as Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen—claimed that the same Being whom the Christians called "God" or "Father" was the one whom the ancient philosophers called the "Supreme Being," "Highest Beauty," "Supreme Goodness," or "Prime Mover." Thus they showed its critics that Christian belief was not as senseless as was claimed, and that Christians, far from being "atheists," worshiped a Being far beyond all the pretended pagan gods.

This is usually called the "apologetic function" of theology. In this context, "apology" means "defense." Therefore, the first Christian writers who wrote this sort of theological writing are called "apologists." For the same

reason, theology that seeks to serve this function is usually called "apologetic theology" or simply "apologetics."

There is no doubt that this function of theology is important and valuable. Had it not been for those early apologists of the second century, and for those who continued their work thereafter, Christianity would not have been able to dialogue with the surrounding culture. Already in the book of Acts, we see first Peter, then Stephen, and finally Paul, who are all Jews, defending the Christian faith before other Jews who do not accept it. Today, since there are so many arguments and prejudices against Christian faith, it is necessary to refute them, if not necessarily in order to prove that Christianity is true, at least in order to remove the false obstacles that are placed in the path to faith. In its apologetic function, theology may help us refute the argument of those atheists who claim that it is unreasonable to believe in God.

Apologetic theology also has its dangers. We shall see some of those when we deal with the "proofs" for the existence of God in the next chapter. At any rate, part of the danger is that every apologetic argument is like a bridge that may carry traffic in both directions: it can serve not only to convince nonbelievers of the acceptability of Christianity, but also to convince believers that their faith corresponds to much in the general culture, and to do this in ways that may affect the content of their belief.

A clear example of this appears already in the arguments of the apologists of the second century, to whom we have already referred, and the manner in which their thought has influenced the Christian doctrine of God. When those apologists faced Greco-Roman culture, they felt the need to defend their belief in a single and invisible God over against a culture that believed in many gods and saw them in the statues placed in the temples and elsewhere. In order to respond to such a situation, the apologists had recourse to the teachings of Plato regarding the Supreme Being, and then they claimed that that Being was the God of Christianity. Obviously, the great asset in that argument was in that it claimed for the proclamation of the Christian faith the support of one of the most respected and admired thinkers of antiquity. The great liability was the possibility that Christians

might come to the conclusion—which they did—that the manner in which Plato spoke of the Supreme Being was better or more precise than the manner in which the Bible speaks of God. In consequence, much of Christian theology began to think of God as an impersonal, impassible being, removed from human reality, and therefore very different from the God of Israel and of Jesus Christ, who intervenes and partakes in human history, who suffers with the suffering, and responds to prayers.

(d) Theology as a critique of the life and proclamation of the church

Another way of understanding the function of theology is to see it as a critique of the life and proclamation of the church in the light of the gospel. The church is commanded to proclaim the gospel and to live it. It is a task that we undertake even while acknowledging our incompetence and insufficiency for it. As sinful human beings, our words are always very far from being the Word of God. As a human institution, the church also carries the mark of human sin and fallibility. It is only by God's grace—God's self-giving love—that our words may convey a word from God. It is only by God's grace that our actions can point toward God's purpose. It is only by God's grace that the proclamation of the church can become proclamation of the Word of God, and the organizations and acts of the church may point to God's reign.

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