

The Simple Version

There is no sound understanding of the Bible without processing upon sound principles of learning and of knowledge, which themselves are found in Scripture. Such processing is the *science* we know as *theology*. Sinful men make knowledge absolute. Godly men understand our limitations and prescribe godly means of gaining sure knowledge. The same kind of godly thinking produced the *scientific method* for the realm of natural science.

God gave the Bible to men for understanding Him and His ways by faith. Faith requires action, which in the case of Biblical understanding, is learning what God intended in the Scriptures. The Bible is raw material which must be worked by our minds, with the help of the Holy Spirit to gain its understanding the way God intended. Biblical theology is learning about God, His ways, and what He requires all on His terms.

We must learn from the Scriptures, live, produce fruit, be corrected, and grow, “till we all come to the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:13).

The Problem

The problem is that thinking God’s revealed thoughts after Him is not easy. First of all, our sinful dispositions get in the way. The original sin made man’s thoughts equal to or greater than God’s thoughts. We *all* tend to make the Bible fit our own comfortable view of life. “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom.3:23 NKJV, see 1 John 1:10-2:1). There is no pure Biblical thinking among men.

While a virtuous goal, America’s historic Biblical Fundamentalism can oversimplify the complexity of God’s Word and can hinder Christians from the depth of understanding that God requires. Sometimes simplistic interpretation is just wrong.

To cite an absurd example, if your hand sins (*scandalizes* in Greek), cut it off (Matthew 5:30). This is a Biblical statement! According to one well-known pastor, at least one young man acted on this. Does Christ want us to mutilate ourselves? Does our hand cause us to sin? Does cutting off the hand that does the act help us not to sin? Or is there a deeper and more proper understanding of Christ’s message?

Once at a ministry mixer sponsored by our local Christian radio station, two young ladies came by my display on applied Biblical faith. They claimed that theology was bad, as men cannot be trusted. Nonetheless, they trusted themselves and were merely Biblical. In their independent Biblical thinking, they declared that Jesus is not God! I asked them, “Who raised Christ from the dead?” They said the Father God. I asked them, how then did Jesus say, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up” (John 2:19). The young ladies’ jaws dropped, they turned, and almost ran to get away! They couldn’t face the implication that if Christ raised Himself from the dead, He must be God.

The early church fathers, with some of their wacky ideas about Christ thought they were Biblical, until theology worked out a better way. Jesus was a ghost. Jesus was merely a man. No! Jesus is fully God and fully man, without intermixing of the two natures. The Holy Trinity is now a universally accepted Biblical doctrine because the church worked it over theologically for decades, even centuries! It then appropriately became an essential and sound Biblical truth for the faith of Christ. No theology, no Holy Trinity. No theology, no sound Biblical thinking.

Furthermore, all human life and service of God requires faith. None of us can gain absolute knowledge, for then we would no longer be dependent upon God. Knowledge puffs up, but love edifies (1 Corinthians 8:1).

Again, simplistic treatment of the Bible places unreasonable limits on what the Scriptures requires of us. To exercise the Great Commission, Christians must put all resources and activities of life into operation. The civil sphere is not off limits, for unless God wishes the wicked to rule (which He decidedly does not), then Christians must participate in civil matters (Proverbs 29:2; Romans 13). Put simply, Christians ought to take all activities of life self-consciously to the captivity of Christ, so that everything we do, from table manners to public, civil manners; from government of the home to civil justice; we ought to do all we do to the glory of God (2 Corinthians 10:4-5; 1 Corinthians 10:31).

Lastly, yes, God gives individual insight and comfort through His Word. This is good and I have benefitted from such condescending love by my Savior. Yes, God gave the Scriptures to all of His people of all estates, not merely to an elite, ruling clergy. Yet, sometimes I have seen personal preference declared as Biblical thinking, saying the Holy Spirit gave it directly. Such personal epiphany is supposedly superior to sound theology worked over for hundreds of years, tested, and bearing good fruit. Which is the more reliable way for the most sound understanding of the Scriptures?

Theology is the Answer

Theology derives from the ancient Greek from two terms—*God* and *discourse*. Essentially, theology is the *science of God*. Christians desire sound *Biblical* theology. Noah Webster in his 1828 *American Dictionary of the English Language* says that *theology* is:

Divinity; the science of God and divine things; or the science which teaches the existence, character and attributes of God, his laws and government, the doctrines we are to believe, and the duties we are to practice.

Theology is a science. A science is the art of learning of a particular subject or discipline. We should all be scientists—that is learners—of God. We should all be theologians, which is to say *disciples* of Christ.

Fallen men must rely on God's mental gifts to men of abstraction, imagination, and knowledge—exercised by faith—for understanding Him. He gives us the Scriptures and commands us to heed them. "To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because there is no light in them" (Isaiah 8:20). Proper learning from the Bible is *Biblical theology*.

Without the science of a subject, it is impossible to practice its art. The art of Christianity is how we ought to live before Christ! We must live and produce fruit. To reach hardened hearts, John the Baptist cried out severely, "And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire" (Matthew 3:10).

The Word is the Seed (Luke 8:11) and it must go into good soil—the well prepared heart of man. Then that seed—with all the fullness of its future expression in germ form—must grow in a real person's real life. The Seed becomes a full-fledged plant that will produce fruit—some 30, some 60, some a hundredfold (Matthew 13:8). In human terms, this means living by faith in the way God requires and letting God bring the increase.

Wisdom calls aloud outside; she raises her voice in the open squares. She cries out in the chief concourses, at the openings of the gates in the city she speaks her words: "How

long, you *simple ones*, will you love *simplicity*? For scorners delight in their scorning, and fools hate knowledge. Turn at my reproof; Surely I will pour out my spirit on you; I will make my words known to you (Proverbs 1:20-23, emphasis added).

The Seed of the Word must be interpreted and applied! Surely, there is no private interpretation of God's Word (1 Peter 1:20). Therefore, God's truth is absolute. However, due to our human limitations—such as sinfulness and difficulties of communication—we do not make our own views of truth absolute. For example, we must study the whole counsel of the Word of God to come to understanding of murder and its penalty (see Nordskog Publishing's book *Death Penalty on Trial* for a sound treatment of murder and capital punishment). This principle is true for all learning from God. Such is the place of sound, Biblical theology.

Is our understanding perfect? Of course not! But sound, historical theology has demonstrated that we can count on it with our very lives. We have the assurance of Christ. John, in his first Epistle writes repeatedly that we may *know*, that is, be assured.

How arrogant we are when we think that we can reach our potential in Christ and make our appropriate contribution to His kingdom without constant study, application, exercise, and correction! Do we expect God to bring great accomplishment in human endeavors without the investment of learning by faith? Of course, not! To embrace theology is merely to embrace the notion that we ought to make complete Biblical learning our way of life!

I am told we should avoid use of the term *theology* because of present prejudice against it. Should we contribute to ignorance and prejudice, or should we proclaim the truth? Truly, there is no sound Biblical thinking apart from sound Biblical theology—thoroughly studied, debated, applied, tested and then studied again!

While we're at it, we should say that godly men have accomplished much sound theology in history. We call their work doctrines. The historic doctrines of God and Christ are completely accepted by all Biblical Christians. We almost take the Holy Trinity for granted today. Two thoughts are important here. One, is that it is the duty to learn and confirm to his own heart the historic theological doctrines of the faith, so that we know what we believe. All things ought to be confirmed in the Scriptures unto conviction. Two, sound theology is not finished. We do not possess exhaustive knowledge. Therefore, there is much left to learn. I believe one of the most neglected areas of theology is what I call *relational government*—how Christians are to get along with each other. We need to know how to love our neighbor in many particulars. The theology of relational government should lead to good, practical skills. Here is a hint, Calvinist James Madison, learning from the great John Witherspoon, president of the College of New Jersey (Princeton), applied Biblical thinking regarding individual liberty, covenants, local self-government, limitations of authority, federalism (multiple authorities and peer relationships and multiple citizenship) and the reciprocal nature of authority and representation. If these things sound like a foreign language, I respectfully suggest their study! Once, such was common knowledge in America, and needed if we will ever fully be the people God (via our founding fathers) intended.

I am told that we should avoid the term *theology*, because only accomplished professional theologians study theology. It also is all beyond the understanding of ordinary Christians. High theology doesn't deal with reality anyway! No, none of this is true. Christ calls us all to be His *disciples*. Therefore, He

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calls us to be scholars and theologians. Scholarship and theology are not matters of accomplishment, but of *willingness* to continue to learn, correct and grow in Christ.

Christians ought not to be timid about making personal contributions to Biblical theology. Yes, we must be humble, and realize that whatever our ideas, those ideas ought to be and will be tested in the community of the saints. Christians ought to be ready again to enjoy a lively debate in the context of loving acceptance of one another. Iron sharpens iron! Who knows when God might use the humble or babe to make a contribution to sound theology!

For over 20 years, I annually taught a course in applied Biblical thinking. Often my students were of the humblest previous accomplishment or native gifting. Sometimes they were downright damaged from a poor education. Though demanding, my course brought sound Biblical theology to terms understood by the average Bible-believing Christian. These students learned, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” (Philippians 4:13). With a sound theology that declares this life meaningful and purposeful in all human activities, these humble folks learned that each one had a set of gifts (1 Corinthians 12; Romans 12) and works to walk in prepared by Christ beforehand (Ephesians 2:10). This teaching set them free to learn of God in new ways they never thought possible. And it made them capable of things they never imagined they could do.

Pastor friends discouraged me from sharing these ideas with their congregations. They said, “Ron, this is great stuff, but my congregation is just too damaged and hurt. They would be blown away by this teaching.” My experience tells me exactly the opposite. In Ephesians 4:11-13, Paul the Apostles declares in the most pointed words God’s assignment to church leaders:

And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.

Theology is not merely for the highly accomplished scholar. But all God’s children should be scholars. We should all be learners—theologians of God’s Word!

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