

The Study of God

Led by Sunni Williams

I. What is theology?

Simply put, theology is the study of God.

There are different types of theology. We will take two into account: systematic theology and Biblical theology.

- 1) SYSTEMATIC theology involves Christian doctrines. Christian doctrines are the set of beliefs held and taught by the Church. Obviously, we want any doctrines to be rooted in and supported by Scripture.
- 2) BIBLICAL theology. You may be asking, “Shouldn’t all theology be biblical?” Yes! Absolutely. Again, we want what we believe to be rooted in and supported by Scripture. But what I mean when I say Biblical theology is the whole story of the Bible. The Bible is not just a book of stand-alone stories and letters strung together. From Genesis to Revelation, the Bible tells one story. It begins with creation, moves into the fall, then builds up to the rescue, and after the rescue is restoration. The Bible is about the Holy God, sinful man, man’s need for a Savior, a rescuer, to save us from our sin and separation from God, and God’s plan of rescue, which was fulfilled in Jesus, so that we can be redeemed and restored to a right relationship with our Holy God. Everything in the Bible speaks to this story. Biblical theology.

II. Why is theology important?

Ligonier Ministries, which was started by RC Sproul, and Lifeway Research partnered together “to take the theological temperature of the United States” every two years. It just so happens that they recently released the 2022 State of Theology survey, which was very timely for me in preparing for this. They had 35 statements, and they would give a scale for the respondents to indicate whether they agree or disagree with the statement. The two categories of respondents are US Adults, which were surveyed from the general population, and US Evangelicals. For this, LifeWay research defined Evangelicals “as people who strongly agreed with the following four statements:

1. The Bible is the highest authority for what I believe.
2. It is very important for me personally to encourage non-Christians to trust Jesus Christ as their Savior.
3. Jesus Christ’s death on the cross is the only sacrifice that could remove the penalty of my sin.
4. Only those who trust in Jesus Christ alone as their Savior receive God’s free gift of eternal salvation.”

I won’t go over all that they cover, but I do want to highlight a couple:

Statement #4 reads “God learns and adapts to different circumstances.”

The US Adult finding was that 51% agree with this statement while 32% disagree. But they don’t leave it at the “US Adult” category.

The US Evangelical finding is that 48% agree while 43% disagree. That means there isn't that large of a difference on that view between those in the general population and those who are evangelicals. As the study indicates, "Nearly half of both groups believe that God changes by learning and adapting." Why is this troubling? Scripture teaches that God doesn't change. Malachi 3:6; Hebrews 13:8; Numbers 23:19; James 1:17

Here's another one...

Statement #27 reads "Gender identity is a matter of choice."

In 2020, 22% of US evangelicals agreed. Any guesses what the percentage of those who agree is in 2022? 37%. I'm not too surprised by this increase given our culture and what has been happening in this realm of gender identity issues and conversations.

These statistics show a sad truth. They indicate that Scripture is not informing all evangelicals in all areas. Instead, culture is informing views.

Do these statistics surprise you? Have I convinced you that we need to have good theology? That we need to know what we believe and why we believe it?

III. Now for the practical: How can we be "everyday theologians?"

First, let's consider **text vs framework**. This part is going to touch back on why we need theology, but it also helps in understanding how theology is applicable to our everyday lives. The text part of this is the Bible. What does God, through the Scriptures, say about _____. The framework part comes from our experiences or culture.

What we believe informs how we live and act. Our experiences shape what we believe. It's not just culture informing our views but our own experiences. Due to this, we need to talk about how our views and our experiences can inform our understanding of the Bible. Insert a flashing danger sign when we let our experiences inform Scripture. Here's an example:

More than likely, not everyone reading this had the greatest earthly father. Maybe he was absent, neglectful, too permissive, too strict, or even abusive. Maybe you have even found yourself questioning what you could do or could have done better for your earthly father to love you more. Maybe you've questioned why you aren't or weren't good enough for him. Growing up with one of those types of fathers can and most likely will shape your view on God as Father. Maybe you find yourself praying to Him but feeling as though He never answers. He's absent. Uncaring. Maybe if you read Scripture and pray and do all the things at church and check off all the "Good Christian" boxes and prove yourself "good enough," maybe he'll answer your prayer. Maybe you find that all that He requires of you to follow Him and to walk in His ways is too hard. Too strict. Maybe you think you're not cut out for this Christian life.

Did you catch what the possible answers or responses to those views of God were? Maybe if I do more (works-based). Maybe I'm not cut out for this. I can't do it. These responses are self-centered. This is the temptation for any wrong view we could have of God. We don't know God as we could and should, so we revert to what we can and can't do. Instead of looking to ourselves, we should look to Him. But if we are drawing from our own framework instead of from the text, instead of from Scripture, the very Word of God and how he reveals Himself to us, then we are going to stay stuck with our eyes on ourselves and with a wrong view of God.

So, what does it mean to be God the Father? How do we find that answer? We're going to turn to the text. We're going to look up verses and passages that speak of God as Father. Like **Matthew 6:26**: "Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barn, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?" God cares. He knows us. We are valuable to Him. **Luke 6:36**: "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful." God is merciful. **Psalm 46:1**: "God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble." In **Psalm 68:5** we read that God is the "Father of the fatherless." We're going to read passages, like "The Prodigal Son" in **Luke 15**. In that, we see a father who forgives and wholeheartedly welcomes his wayward son back. These verses and the passage listed are not an exhaustive look at God as Father, but hopefully, you see where I am going. What does this tell us about God the Father. He is merciful. We are valuable to him. He cares for us. He is ever-present—not absent. He is our refuge and strength. He forgives. God, despite our sinfulness, made a way back to him through Jesus. Through Christ, we receive God's grace and forgiveness. So, now, we are building the basis of our theology about God the Father. We are getting to know Him from the text, His Word. We are correcting our view of a "Good Father." We are realizing that earthly fathers, no matter how bad or how good, will never be the Good Father God is to us. Why? Because man is sinful and flawed. God is Holy.

Let's move on. In thinking about how to be an "everyday theologian," you may say, "If theology is the study of God and the Bible is the Word of God, then when I read my Bible, I'm doing theology." My answer would be yes and no. Let's consider different ways we may study or read the Bible.

In her book, *Women of the Word* (pgs 39-44), Jen Wilkin describes different Bible study approaches. I'm going to briefly list and describe them:

1. *The Xanax Approach*: "...treats the Bible as if it exists to make us feel better." Her examples: "Feel anxious? Philippians 4:6 says be anxious for nothing. Feel ugly? Psalm 139 says you are fearfully and wonderfully made." She writes, "The Xanax Approach makes the Bible about me. I ask the Bible how it can serve me rather than how I can serve the God it proclaims."

2. *The Pinball Approach*: “I read whatever Scripture I happen to turn to.” “The Bible was not meant to be read this way. The Pinball Approach gives no thought to cultural, historical, or textual context, authorship, or original intent of the passage in question. It does nothing to help us gain understanding of the text beyond our immediate context.”
3. *The Magic 8 Ball Approach*: In this approach, you have a question you need answered. Should I take this job? Should I marry this person? You open your Bible, point to a verse, and see what it says and try to surmise if that means yes or no. “The Magic 8 Ball Approach misconstrues the ministry of the Holy Spirit through the Word, demanding that the Bible tells us *what to do* rather than *who to be*.”
4. *The Personal Shopper Approach (aka the Topical Bible Study)*: “I want to know about being a godly woman or how to deal with self-esteem issues, but I don’t know where to find verses about that, so I let {insert famous Bible teacher here} do the legwork for me.” Now, if you love your topical studies, don’t get upset with me. I am not saying you shouldn’t do them. However, I do agree with Jen when she says, “Topical studies serve a purpose: they help us integrate broad concepts into our understanding of Scripture. But they are not foundational. If they are all we ever do, we will miss out on the richness of learning a book of the Bible from start to finish. A well-rounded approach to Bible study addresses a topic as it arises in Scripture, rather than attaching Scripture to a topic.”
5. *The Telephone Game Approach*: We all know how the telephone game works. A message starts with one person, is whispered to another, continues to be passed down, and by the time it reaches the last person, the message has changed. “A similar process can happen when we read books about the Bible instead of reading the Bible itself. Why? Because authors build on the writings of others. This isn’t wrong. It’s logical.” However, “[w]e’re called to love the Lord our God with all of *our* mind, not John Piper’s mind. While what he and others have to say about the Bible can be extremely helpful, it is no substitute for Bible study on our own.”
6. *The Jack Sprat Approach*: Jen describes this as “picky eating.” “I read the New Testament, but other than Psalms and Proverbs, I avoid the Old Testament....” I stick with what I’m comfortable. “A well-rounded approach to Bible study challenges us to learn the full counsel of God’s Word. It helps us to build a collective understanding of how the Bible as a whole speaks of God.”

Is your Bible study approach one of these? If we’re honest, we all have probably used all these approaches at some point. Maybe, hopefully, the Magic 8 Ball approach is the exception. How can we avoid getting stuck in these types of approaches. Again, I’m not saying they are all bad, but how can we study well?

First, let's learn how to ask good questions. If you attend the Bible study on Wednesday nights, a lot of this is going to sound familiar to you, but if the wheel isn't broke, don't fix it.

How to ask good questions. Hint: Don't start with "How does this apply to me or what did I get out of this?"

Do start by asking questions about the book. Who wrote it? To whom was he writing? When was it written? Why was it written? What genre is it? Or in what style was it written?

Genre: It's French and means "kind or sort." So, what kind of literature is it? Law? Narrative or Historical? Wisdom? Poetry? Prophecy? Gospel? Parables? Epistles?

We're going to read different genres differently. We're going to recognize that poetry and prophecy are full of metaphors and aren't always going to be taken literally. We're going to know that the Law, on the other hand, is more literal. Keeping differences between genres in mind can help you as you read.

When we are reading a passage or a chapter of Scripture, we can ask systematic theology type questions like: What does this tell me about God? What attributes of God are found in this passage? What does this tell me about Jesus/the Holy Spirit? In light of what I have learned, how should I respond?

For Biblical theology: How does this fit into the whole story of God's redeeming plan? How does this passage point to Christ?

Other type questions: What words or themes are repeated? What do I not understand? Am I inserting my framework into my understanding or drawing from the text first?

Learn how to find good secondary sources (Bible is the primary source.). Just because the book says it is about God or Christianity does not make it a good, biblically sound book.

- Study Bibles (I use the ESV Study Bible. The Gospel Transformation Study Bible is one Corey recommends.)
- Commentaries (such as the *Christ-Centered Exposition* series)
- Authors: Stay away from those who just make you feel good, teaches a prosperity gospel, or takes too many liberties with Scripture (inserts his/her own framework), among others. Find authors who support what they say with Scripture without taking it out of context.

Let's practice some of this by walking through a passage together.

Open your Bibles to Genesis 22 and let's answer these questions as we read.

- Who wrote Genesis?
- To whom was he writing?
- When was it written?
- Why was it written?
- What genre is it?
- What words/themes are repeated?
- What does this tell us about God?
- What does “fear God” mean?
- What does this tell us about Jesus?
- How does this fit into God’s Story?
- How did this point to Christ?
- What does this tell us about man?
- What questions do I have about the passage?
- If we are coming to this passage after studying the chapters before it, then we will remember that God made a covenant with Abram. He promised Abram that through the son (Isaac) God will give him, Abram’s offspring would be as numerous as the stars (Genesis 15:4-6). How could that be if God allowed Abraham to kill Isaac? God was testing Abraham to see if he would put Isaac before God. If Isaac would be Abraham’s idol or if Abraham still feared God.

When we ask good questions, we start uncovering and recognizing details and truths that we may have missed otherwise.

Is having good theology enough? Not if it doesn’t transform your heart.

Conclusion

It is my hope each of you will be a little more, if not a lot more, confident about your ability to do theology. Consider the text first, consider where or how you may be inserting your own views or starting with your own framework, ask good questions, find and use good resources. Study God and His Story, and it will transform your life.

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