

# CHAPTER 1

## THEOLOGICAL TERMINOLOGY

The Greek word “theology” simply means discourse about God. Theology is “God-talk”; it deals with God for man and God with man, and hence with the divine-human relatedness. Theology is also related to the world. God cares for the living as well as the non-living, both man and matter. So in the broad sense, theology deals with God’s creative work and providence in the total cosmos.

### **A. Branches of Theology**

Theology is subdivided into many branches: biblical theology, historical theology, systematic theology, apologetic theology and moral theology.

1. Biblical theology refers to the concepts of God, man, sin and salvation in the Old and New Testaments. However, the books of the Bible do not have the same theology, so some (especially Protestant liberals) wonder if it is possible to have a truly biblical theology. Others assert that the scriptures have a certain unity because they represent a basic Hebraic world-view different from that of the Greeks, Indians and Chinese. A

third group tries to find one main theme in the entire Bible. In our day W. Eichrodt<sup>1</sup> maintained that from Genesis to Revelation there is one central concept—the covenant. A fourth group (Karl Barth and the Neo-orthodox theologians) believes that the scriptures represent the norm of revelation, hence we should limit theology to what is taught in the Bible. A fifth group (John Macquarrie, Anglicans, and liberal Catholics) contends that biblical theology is only one part, the first part, of historical theology, which includes the whole spectrum of Christian thought; therefore the Bible is not the only authority.

2. Historical theology begins with post-New Testament history, studying past Christian thinkers and their systems. Once we learn what the Christian message was for Origen and Augustine, Aquinas and Calvin, we can better understand what it is for our time. Sometimes—rather naively—Protestants think they can ignore everything between the Bible and their own day. But no one who wants an adequate theology can bypass 2000 years of Christian thinking. Hence, the history of Christian thought is a valuable resource for the modern Christian.

3. Next we must mention systematic theology. Both biblical and historical theology are primarily focused on the past. By contrast, systematic theology is mainly interested in the present: What is the word of God for us today? Systematic theology treats all the essentials of our faith in a rational and orderly manner. We try to make every doctrine fit with the others in a coherent pattern.

4. Apologetic theology is designed to answer critics. The apologist starts where the critic is and tries to lead him to an appreciative understanding of Christianity. Paul Tillich is often called an apologetic theologian because he says the world asks the questions to which faith must give satisfying answers. We should listen to the world and ask what its questions and its problems are—and then find answers and solutions within the Christian faith.

5. Ethics goes hand in hand with belief, even though Christian ethics is ordinarily taught in a separate course rather than as a part of theology. Catholics call Christian ethics moral theology and Protestants call it practical theology or applied theology. Ethics today is a highly specialized academic discipline covering numerous topics. For example, besides philosophical ethics there are personal ethics, family ethics, marriage ethics, Church ethics, social ethics, business ethics, medical ethics, national ethics and international law ethics. Each would require a full book to itself and requires a specialist in the field. In this complex and complicated world, it is impossible to set up a code of ethics which applies to all situations.

## **B. Sources of Theology**

What are the sources of theology?

1. Tradition refers to an ongoing historical process, preserved in the Bible and past theological literature. Tradition contains the experiences of the Church as a whole. Tradition means what we have learned from our past as a Christian community.

Until recently Protestants have disagreed with Catholics and the Eastern Orthodox about the value of tradition. Protestants put scripture above tradition; Catholics and Orthodox put tradition and scripture on the same level as equally authoritative sources for theology. In fact, sometimes they seem to put tradition above the Bible, as when Catholics create dogmas like the infallibility of the pope, the immaculate conception of the Virgin Mary and her physical assumption into heaven. None of these ideas is mentioned in the New Testament, yet they have been made essentials of Catholic faith.

Because of discussions within the ecumenical movement, mainline Protestants now recognize that they accept tradition as well as scripture as sources for theology as the Catholics do.

There is a tension between the given Christian tradition and our contemporary experiences. What is given to us is the Bible and past interpretations of the Christian message. The writers of the Bible and the classical theologians lived before the Age of Reason. We live on this side of the Enlightenment. Thus, we cannot return to a pre-scientific world-view. We see our world differently; we live in a world in process. We are future-oriented. It is useless for us to try to preserve ancient forms which have lost all meaning. Yet Christians have received scripture and tradition from the past. Consequently, it is necessary to look at Christian tradition both appreciatively and critically. Nevertheless, the Bible and Christian writings in the past 2000 years are sources of theology.

2. Experience is also a source for theology. What we think about God, man and salvation is determined to some extent by our total experience as individuals and churches. However, experience should not be interpreted too narrowly. Our non-religious as well as our religious experiences affect our theology.

3. Reason is a source for theology. Men can be satisfied with nothing less than a reasonable faith. Every theologian uses reason to make his religious ideas clear. Theology implies a critical analysis of doctrine. No person will believe a doctrine which he knows is untrue, even though many of our religious ideas cannot be proved by reason alone. Our faith has to make sense.

4. One's own culture—one's social, political and economic situation—contributes to his theology. Theology is always written in a cultural context; and thus theology needs to be constantly rewritten. That is also why indigenous theology (Asian theology, African theology or Latin American theology, for instance) is apt to be different from the Europe-centered theologies of the past.

5. Revelation is the most important source for theology. When one is inspired or receives new insights a reinterpretation of theology takes place. This topic will be treated later.

### C. Doctrine and Dogma

Doctrine means simply the formulated teachings of one's church about God, man, sin, immortality, etc. By contrast, dogma refers to a doctrine that we are told to accept by our religious authorities. Dogmas are normative and authoritative doctrines. On this matter there are great differences between Protestants and other Christians. For example, in Catholic circles, at least prior to Vatican II, dogma meant the decisions of all ecumenical councils from Nicaea in 325 A.D. on—plus all the "*ex cathedra*"<sup>2</sup> utterances of every pope. For Protestants, dogma is a more hazy affair. Some would say that the only Protestant dogma is that Jesus is the Christ.

In Europe, even now systematic theology is usually called dogmatics. In English, however, the term 'dogmatic' has connotations of being narrow-minded, authoritarian, dictatorial, and arrogant, so theologians writing in the English language tend to avoid the term.

### D. Faith, Reason and Revelation

A major question for theologians is the relationship between faith and reason. Each theologian must decide how much authority should be given to human reason and how much to revelation. There have been two traditional theological methods.

Archbishop Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109) accepted the primacy of faith. He described his method as "faith seeking understanding" and said, "I believe in order to understand." Anselm accepted all the creedal doctrines of the Christian faith and then defended them by reason, holding that since God is truth, every doctrine can be proved on the basis of reason alone. He even believed that one could logically prove the existence of God, and thus he invented the ontological argument for

God's existence, which will be described in detail in Chapter 4.

A second method was created by Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274). In his time there were two rival groups. One group (the rationalists) argued that man must follow reason alone, even if this required criticizing or abandoning ancient Christian dogmas. Their opponents (the fideists) denied that reason has any authority in matters of faith. One should simply accept the traditional dogmas because they were revealed from God and taught by the infallible Church.

Aquinas rejected both of these extreme positions. He insisted that faith and reason both have a proper place so long as they do not overstep their bounds. Reason and revelation are not contradictory but supplement one another. Reason serves man at one level, the natural; while revelation comes from a higher level, the supernatural. Revelation then completes and perfects human nature (the natural).

During the Enlightenment, the primacy of faith was replaced by the primacy of reason. Major thinkers criticized Christian dogmas and ecclesiastical practices in the name of historicity and scientific objectivity. They rejected as irrational and impossible such ancient doctrines as Jesus' virgin birth, his physical resurrection and bodily return.

Since the 18th century Age of Reason, most theologians have tried to defend the intrinsic reasonableness of Christianity, and careful historical study has solved some biblical problems. Modern theologians have given up trying to defend many unbelievable dogmas. And God has given new insights through progressive revelation which clarify the real core of the Christian faith and its application to our time. Thus there is no need for any basic conflict between reason and revelation.

## E. Salvation-History

Theology is tied to the stories and history of God's dealing with the people of Israel, with Jesus of Nazareth and with the Christian Church. God acts creatively and redemptively, and this implies that God is intimately involved in our existence.

The term *Heilsgeschichte* means "salvation-history." Christian history is not simply a meaningless succession of events; history is the self-disclosure of God in certain mighty acts. History has a beginning and an end. It is linear rather than cyclical. It originates with an act of God and will come to fulfillment with a divine consummation.<sup>3</sup>

Salvation-history begins with the creation of the universe. The Bible contains several important confessions of faith in God's creative activity in nature; for example, the creation stories in Genesis, in the Book of Job (38-40:5), Psalms (19:1-6, 24:1-2, 29) and parts of Isaiah (40:12-31). In these passages the Hebrews testify to the God who creates, maintains and preserves the whole universe.

According to salvation-history, God created man and woman in His image. Adam is both the first man and a symbol of everyman. Eve is both the original woman and the mother of all the living. Thus man's dignity comes from his creation in the divine likeness.

But men and women are also sinners in need of salvation. The story of the Fall introduces the perplexing problems of freedom and sin. Genesis relates several stories of human sinfulness: Cain and Abel, the building of the tower of Babel, Noah and the flood; all these illustrate divine judgment upon sin.

Salvation-history continues with accounts of God's successive covenants with mankind. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob founded Israel upon the basis of God's election and covenant. God binds Himself to Abraham and his descendants so that they can create a chosen people who will be a blessing to all nations.

After the stories of the Hebrew patriarchs, salvation-history deals with the epic of Moses, the exodus from Egypt, the giving of the Torah (Law) at Mt. Sinai, and the dream of living in the promised land.

Yet the history of Israel is a record of God's troubles with a stiff-necked people. Repeatedly they sin, break the covenant, and rebel against God. Therefore, the righteous God has to punish Israel and divide the nation. Later came the conquest of Israel by the Assyrians and the conquest of Judah by the Babylonians. During this tragic period of political chaos and military disaster the great prophets appeared. Jeremiah proclaimed his vision of a new covenant not written upon stone but engraved upon the human heart.

In exile there survived a remnant, the true Israel, who learned to live without a temple. This period was followed by a return to Palestine. Judaism then produced its wisdom literature and an apocalyptic interpretation of history. The Old Testament concludes with the hope that God will at last intervene decisively in the affairs of men to inaugurate the messianic age.

For Christian salvation-history, all this serves to prepare for the coming of Jesus. Jesus gives men the new covenant. But even more important are Jesus' death on the cross and his resurrection. When Jesus was crucified, he was alone. Everybody else had deserted God; he alone remained loyal to the covenant relationship with God. However, because of the resurrection, the twelve disciples renewed their faith and became apostles for the new covenant. It was an unrestricted covenant for all people, regardless of race, sex or economic status. Christians preached a gospel for the whole world. Even though Jesus' mission, death and resurrection fulfilled God's promise they did not consummate God's purpose for man. Thus, the last book of the Bible ends with the vision of a new heaven and new earth yet to come.

## F. Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics means the science and art of interpretation of ancient writings, especially the Bible. The word literally refers to the Greek god Hermes who served as the messenger from heaven to earth. Now it means an explanation of the scriptures.

Since the Bible is not self-explanatory, it is necessary to figure out what it means. Both Jews and Christians from early times believed that the scriptures had a spiritual as well as a literal sense.

Two modes of allegorical exegesis prevailed among the ancient Jews: the Palestinian and the Hellenistic. Palestinian allegorization began at least as early as the prophet Hosea, who took Jacob's struggle with the angel to refer to Israel's later troubles (12:4). Hellenistic Jews faced a different problem; they had to prove that the scriptures did not contradict Greek philosophy. Since they believed that Greek philosophy was true, they had to show how to reconcile the scriptures and philosophy; and if possible, prove that Moses discovered all truth earlier than Plato. Therefore, Alexandrian Jews used allegorical exegesis to defend the continuing validity of their biblical heritage. Philo of Alexandria spiritualized the scriptures, and developed allegorical exegesis into an elaborate system.<sup>4</sup>

Some letters ascribed to St. Paul—Galatians (3:16, 4:24), 1 Corinthians (9:9-12) and Hebrews interpret Old Testament texts allegorically. Clement of Alexandria states that all scripture speaks in a mysterious language of symbols which has to be decoded.

Origen, like Philo, systematized biblical interpretation. All biblical texts have three meanings: a literal sense, a moral sense and a mystical-allegorical sense. Thus for him the Bible was full of metaphors pointing to the doctrine, faith and practices of the later Church.<sup>5</sup>

Allegorical interpretation flourished in both Eastern Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism. Among the Western church fathers it was used by Hilary, Ambrose, the early Augustine, Jerome, Aquinas and St. Bernard of Clairvaux. Bernard's mystical exegesis of the Song of Solomon as love between Christ and the individual soul exerted enormous influence in Catholic circles. However, from almost the beginning there were occasional strong protests against allegorization. Tertullian and Irenaeus opposed it and the later Augustine and sometimes Jerome insisted on sticking to the literal text. Luther and Calvin were also hostile to so-called spiritual explanations of the Bible—and their preference for the obvious or historical type of exegesis is the majority view today.<sup>6</sup>

During the 19th century Europeans became interested in the scientific study of history. A critical historical consciousness appeared; research methods used to study ancient Greek and Roman texts were gradually applied to the Bible. Historical criticism enables us to see the biblical writers in terms of their own times. However, historical critics tend to ignore the meaning of the sacred text for us today, viewing the Bible simply as the record of the dead past.

Neo-orthodoxy reasserted the authority of scripture. Karl Barth treated it as living revelation, the Word of God for our time; Rudolph Bultmann emphasized the need for demythologizing the pre-scientific world-view of the Bible and translating it into contemporary language.

The Bible is living revelation for every generation. However, this does not mean that every word is God's revelation. The Bible contains history, hymns, proverbs, civil laws, rituals, poetry and simple edifying messages. Many parts are garbed in an outmoded world-view which cannot be taken literally. Yet God's eternal truth and divine promises are contained in scripture, often expressed in metaphorical or allegorical language. So historical/critical study as well as spiritual insight

and revelatory guidance are needed to discern the real meaning of the Bible.

## NOTES TO CHAPTER 1

- 1 Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, Vol. I (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1961), Chs. 1, 2.
- 2 "Ex cathedra": decisions made by a pope in his official position as the infallible guardian of faith and morals.
- 3 G. Ernest Wright, *God Who Acts* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1952), especially Ch. 3; and Bernhard W. Anderson, *Understanding the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1966), Ch. 1.
- 4 "Allegorical Interpretation," *The Jewish Encyclopedia* (New York: Krav Publishing House, Inc., n.d.), Vol. I, pp. 403-411.
- 5 Origen, *De Principiis*. Book IV, Ch. I, Sections 11-13.
- 6 "History of the Interpretation of the Bible," *The Interpreter's Bible* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1952), Vol. I, pp. 106-141.