

Building Your Theology

Lesson 1

What Is Theology?

Lesson Guide



thirdmill

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HOW TO USE THIS LESSON GUIDE

This lesson guide is designed for use in conjunction with the associated video. If you do not have access to the video, the lesson guide will also work with the audio and/or manuscript versions of the lesson. Additionally, the video and lesson guide are intended to be used in a learning community, but they also can be used for individual study if necessary.

- **Before you watch the lesson**

- **Prepare** — Complete any recommended readings.
- **Schedule viewing** — The Notes section of the lesson guide has been divided into segments that correspond to the video. Using the time codes found in parentheses beside each major division, determine where to begin and end your viewing session. IIM lessons are densely packed with information, so you may also want to schedule breaks. Breaks should be scheduled at major divisions.

- **While you are watching the lesson**

- **Take notes** — The Notes section of the lesson guide contains a basic outline of the lesson, including the time codes for the beginning of each segment and key notes to guide you through the information. Many of the main ideas are already summarized, but make sure to supplement these with your own notes. You should also add supporting details that will help you to remember, describe, and defend the main ideas.
- **Record comments and questions** — As you watch the video, you may have comments and/or questions on what you are learning. Use the margins to record your comments and questions so that you can share these with the group following the viewing session.
- **Pause/replay portions of the lesson** — You may find it helpful to pause or replay the video at certain points in order to write additional notes, review difficult concepts, or discuss points of interest.

- **After you watch the lesson**

- **Complete Review Questions** — Review Questions are based on the basic content of the lesson. You should answer Review Questions in the space provided. These questions should be completed individually rather than in a group.
- **Answer/discuss Application Questions** — Application Questions are questions relating the content of the lesson to Christian living, theology, and ministry. Application questions are appropriate for written assignments or as topics for group discussions. For written assignments, it is recommended that answers not exceed one page in length.

Notes

I. Introduction (0:20)

II. Definition (1:46)

A. Typical Definitions (3:04)

There's a sense in which all human beings are involved with theology every day of their lives (Romans 1).

The formal task of theology is performed by people who make a concerted and well-informed effort to pursue theology as a discipline of study.

1. Thomas Aquinas (4:28)

Roman Catholic theologian (ca. 1225-1274).

Theology is “[a unified] science [in which] all things are treated under the aspect of God either because they are God himself or because they refer to God” (*Summa Theologica* 1.1.7).

Aquinas used the term “science,” meaning an intellectual or scholarly pursuit.

According to Aquinas, the discipline of theology focuses on two main subjects:

- God himself – “theology proper”
- other subjects that refer to God – “general theology”

2. **Charles Hodge (9:45)**

Protestant theologian (1797-1878).

Theology is “the science of the facts of divine revelation so far as those facts concern the nature of God and our relation to him” (*Systematic Theology*, chapter 2, section 1).

Hodge viewed theology mainly as an academic discipline (i.e., “science”).

“The Bible contains the truth which the theologian has to collect, authenticate, arrange, and exhibit in their internal relation to each other” (*Systematic Theology*, chapter 1, section 1).

Hodge tended to leave application in the hands of ministers and pastors and the work of formal theology to academics and scholars.

Two main topics in theology according to Hodge:

- nature of God
- our relation to God

3. **William Ames (14:10)**

Influential Puritan (1576 to 1633).

Theology should focus on “the doctrine or teaching of living to God” (*The Marrow of Theology*).

Ames de-emphasized the close association of theology with other academic disciplines suggested by Aquinas and Hodge.

In Ames view, the most significant dimension of theology is a focus on the full range of the believer’s life before God.

4. John Frame (16:01)

Contemporary theologian (1939-).

Theology is “the application of the Word of God by persons to all areas of life” (*The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, chapter 3).

Theology is application — applying the Scriptures to life is the centerpiece of all Christian theological work.

B. Tendency (18:36)

There are two distinct emphases or tendencies in the field of formal theology.

1. Academic Orientation (18:50)

Aquinas and Hodge represent an academic orientation in theology, reflecting the majority of Christian theologians’ views.

The word “theology” derives from two Greek words:

- *theos* (θεός): God
- *logos* (λόγος): doctrine or study

Therefore, theology is “the doctrine or study of God.”

In an academic orientation, application is often a secondary enterprise; therefore, formal theology can be performed with very little concern for ordinary living.

2. Life Orientation (21:05)

Ames and Frame represent the minority view in which applying theology to the practicalities of life is the essence of theological reflection in the Christian faith.

Increasingly, Christian theologians have argued that formal theology is not just academic, but rather, it is deeply and essentially concerned with living for Christ.

C. Evaluations (23:57)

1. Academic Orientation (24:46)

Strengths:

- Academic approaches to theology emphasize our rational abilities.
 - Solomon was considered wise because he exercised his ability to think through matters (1 Kings 4:29-31).
 - Biblical wisdom literature repeatedly calls faithful believers to develop and use their reasoning abilities.
 - Peter acknowledged the importance of intellectual sophistication (2 Peter 3:15-16).

Dangers:

- Theologians often skillfully gather, analyze and collate facts about God, but fail to give the same attention to living in service to God.

- We commonly consider people to be “good theologians” because they know a lot about theology, but they are not always good people.

2. Life Orientation (32:37)

Strengths:

- A life orientation in theology enables us to fulfill important biblical values.
 - Good theology will lead to proper living and not just proper learning (James 1:22).
 - If our theological concepts don’t yield the fruit of love, they amount to nothing (1 Corinthians 8:1; 13:2).
 - Scripture constantly calls faithful followers of Christ to orient their theological reflections toward living for God.

Dangers:

- Life orientations toward theology pose the risk of “anti-intellectualism.”
 - Christians who prioritize living for Christ often reject the value of theological analysis.
 - Paul insisted that Timothy must work diligently to handle the word of truth rightly (2 Timothy 2:15).

We must acknowledge the strengths and dangers of both views as well as our need for both academic theology and theology for life.

III. Goal (38:00)

A. Primary Goals (39:10)

- To teach or develop doctrines that focus on intellectual matters.
- To develop doctrines that focus on the broader issues of Christian living.

1. Orthodoxy (40:18)

Orthodoxy — right or straight thinking

The goal of orthodoxy is to reach right or true doctrines.

Theologians are right to make orthodoxy a primary goal of their theological work.

Jesus was deeply concerned with true doctrine (John 17:17).

2. Orthopraxis (43:47)

Orthopraxis — right behavior or practice.

It's not enough simply to *think* correctly about theological concepts; we must also put these concepts into practice.

Challenges to maintaining the goal of orthopraxis:

- Many Christians grow weary of insisting on right and wrong ways to behave in a culture that claims there are no moral absolutes.
- Religious people, even sincere Christians, often use their theology to justify all kinds of terrible sins.

Theology should never be concerned merely with conceptual correctness, but also with teaching and doing the right kinds of actions (James 2:19).

3. **Orthopathos (50:41)**

Orthopathos — right or correct feelings or emotions

Living for God involves making sure that our deepest sentiments are used in his service.

Obstacles to maintaining the goal of orthopathos:

- Academic theologians are often inept at expressing or exploring emotions.
- Many evangelicals believe that feelings are amoral, or morally neutral.

The apostle Paul often exhibited pathos within his theological writings (Romans 11:33-36).

B. Interdependence (57:51)

The goals of orthodoxy, orthopraxis and orthopathos are so intertwined that we can't be strong in one area without being strong in the other two.

1. Orthodoxy (58:12)

Some measure of orthodoxy is necessary for orthopraxis and orthopathos to occur.

Our beliefs influence our behaviors and emotions:

- What we come to believe confirms our behaviors and emotions.
- Orthodox theological concepts challenge us to change our behaviors and feelings.

2. Orthopraxis (1:01:40)

Our behaviors affect our beliefs and our emotions:

- Orthopraxis often confirms or challenges what we believe to be true.
- Our actions influence the emotional dimensions of our theology — orthopraxis impacts orthopathos.

3. Orthopathos (1:05:14)

Our right emotions and attitudes influence what we believe and do:

The Psalmists' emotions moved their thinking and actions:

- The psalmist's sorrow pressed him to ask perplexing theological questions (Psalm 13:1-3).
- The psalmists' emotions influenced their actions (Psalm 6:6, 30:11).

The three goals of orthodoxy, orthopraxis and orthopathos do not operate apart from each other but are highly interdependent.

C. Priorities (1:11:17)

Mistakenly, many evangelicals insist that we should *always* give first place to orthodoxy, second place to orthopraxis and third place to orthopathos.

Thoughts, actions and emotions in theology interconnect with each other like the vital systems of the human body.

Our pursuits of orthodoxy, orthopraxis and orthopathos form webs of multiple reciprocities and influence each other in countless ways.

Much harm can come to us as individuals, and to others around us, if we don't learn how to shift our priorities:

- Constantly prioritizing orthodoxy leads to intellectualism.
- Constantly prioritizing orthopraxis leads to legalism.
- Constantly prioritizing orthopathos leads to emotionalism.

Learning how to balance these goals can help us avoid these extremes.

We need to focus on those goals that we tend to ignore in order to build a theology that leads to God's glory and to our unending enjoyment of him.

IV. Topics (1:20:50)

A. Options (1:21:21)

There are many options for anyone who ventures into the formal study of theology.

Topics covered by theology:

- Practical topics:
 - missions
 - evangelism
 - apologetics (defending the faith)
 - worship
 - mercy ministries
 - counseling
 - homiletics (preaching)
- Theoretical or abstract topics:
 - soteriology (the doctrine of salvation)
 - ecclesiology (the doctrine of the church)
 - anthropology (the doctrine of humanity)
 - pneumatology (the doctrine of the Holy Spirit)
 - Christology (the doctrine of Christ)
 - theology proper (the doctrine of God)
 - eschatology (the doctrine of end times)
 - biblical theology (theology of redemptive history recorded in the Bible)
 - systematic theology (the logical arrangement of biblical teaching)
 - historical theology (tracing the development of doctrines in the history of the church)
 - hermeneutics (interpretation)

Traditional academic theology tends to focus on these topics from the vantage point of orthodoxy, or the right way of *thinking* about them.

A more adequate approach to the topics of theology requires deepening our concern in all *three* directions.

B. Selections (1:24:42)

We have to choose the topics and emphases that we will pursue as we build our theology.

There's general agreement today on the kinds of topics that need to be covered when educating leaders in the church.

Typical divisions of seminary curriculum:

- Biblical division – focuses on the content of Scripture and responsible interpretation of the Bible.
 - Old Testament
 - New Testament
- Doctrinal and historical division
 - church history – how God has developed theology in the church in different ways at different times
 - systematic theology – the ways the church has organized the teaching of the Bible into logical or systematic arrangements

- Practical division
 - spiritual development
 - practical ministry skills (e.g., preaching and evangelism)

V. Conclusion (1:30:22)

Review Questions

1. Briefly state the four definitions of “theology” provided by Aquinas, Hodge, Ames and Frame.
2. Describe the two tendencies or perspectives most people have when approaching the study of theology.

3. Contrast the relative strengths and weaknesses of an academic orientation and a life orientation.
4. Describe the three primary goals of theology.

5. In what ways are the three primary goals of theology interdependent?

6. How should a person prioritize the three goals of theology?

7. Describe the options available to systematic theologians in terms of topics and goals.
8. What selections are represented in a typical seminary curriculum, and why are these selections valuable?

Application Questions

1. How would you explain the term “theology” to someone who was unfamiliar with the concept?
2. Which approach to theology do you think is more valuable, an academic orientation or a life orientation? Why?
3. Explain how you might successfully approach theology with a life orientation.
4. What does it mean to say that our beliefs and our actions and our feelings form “webs of multiple reciprocities”? Why is this concept important to understand as you begin the study of theology?
5. We noted that “because the deck of life is always shifting, balance can be nothing more than momentary synchronicity.” What does this mean, and what implications does it have for the study of theology?
6. How can we avoid the trap of intellectualism as we study theology?
7. What is the most significant insight you have learned from this lesson? Why?

Glossary

Ames, William – (1576-1633) Influential Puritan theologian and author of *The Marrow of Theology*

anthropology – Theological term for the study or doctrine of humanity

apologetics – Field of study concerned with the systematic defense of Christianity

Aquinas, Thomas – (ca. 1225-1274) Italian theologian and Dominican friar who wrote *Summa Theologica*

biblical theology – Theological reflection drawn from the historical analysis of acts of God reported in Scripture

Christology – The study and doctrine of the person and work of Jesus Christ

doctrine – A synthesis and explanation of biblical teachings on a theological topic

ecclesiology – The study or doctrine of the church

emotionalism – A disproportionate and often excessive focus on the emotions

ergates – Greek term (transliteration) meaning “a worker” or “a laborer”

eschatology – The study or doctrine of the last days

Frame, John – (1939-) Contemporary theologian and professor; author of *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, and several other titles

hermeneutics – The study of interpreting the meaning and significance of Scripture

historical theology – A theological discipline that traces the development of theological doctrines in the history of the church

Hodge, Charles – (1797-1878) Well-known theologian from Princeton Theological Seminary who wrote numerous commentaries, articles and books, including his three-volume *Systematic Theology*

homiletics – The art or craft of preaching

intellectualism – A disproportionate focus on the intellect without regard to emotional or behavioral considerations

legalism – A disproportionate focus on or adherence to keeping the moral law without regard to faith or the gospel of Christ

logos – Greek term (transliteration) meaning “word” or “study”; title assigned to Christ (John 1:1)

orthodoxy – Right or straight thinking

orthopathos – Right or correct feelings or emotions

orthopraxis – Right behavior or practice

pneumatology – The doctrine of the Holy Spirit

practical theology – Theology that is applied to the daily lives of believers

soteriology – The doctrine of salvation

Summa Theologica – The most famous work of Thomas Aquinas; written from approx. 1265-1274 as an instructional manual for beginning students of theology

systematic theology – A theological discipline that seeks to give a rational and orderly presentation of the doctrinal truths of Christianity

theology – Any matter that refers directly to God or that describes subjects in relation to God

theology proper – The doctrine or study of God; any theological matter that refers directly to God

theos – Greek word (transliteration) for “God”

webs of multiple reciprocities – Manifold logical connections among various beliefs or systems