

Foundations of Good Theology

How to Approach Doctrine on a Solid Basis

By Micah Hackett
www.InsidetheBible.ca

Every good theological position – every well-formulated doctrine – begins on a solid foundation. Imagine a scientist proposing a new theory without any knowledge of scientific formulas. Imagine a single trying to give marriage counseling. Imagine a grammarian writing a dictionary without training in linguistics. What is wrong with these pictures? In each of them, there is an inadequate foundation. Theology is a field of study which requires solid foundations. Just as a single has no right to offer marriage advice, so it is mere presumption for a higher critic to call himself a true “theologian.” A true theologian approaches his field God's way – morally, spiritually, and intellectually – and that demands he accept certain foundational claims before he ever examines the specifics.

Basic Assumptions

Concerning God. The foundation of all theology is obviously God Himself. Man's first basic assumption must be that God exists. In theology we approach God: “But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him.” The study of Bible doctrine is a lifelong commitment: the theologian must be absolutely convinced he is studying the God Who exists. But the theologian must also assume that God is knowable, that God is personal, and that God is involved in his creation. Faith is destroyed and theology is nullified without these things. God is as good as non-existent if He is unknowable and distant.

Concerning Scripture. As to Scripture, there are four necessary assumptions. While these will be more thoroughly studied and defended in their place, they must also be our starting point. If one of these falls, our whole system of theology and doctrine will fall apart and descend into chaos. The assumptions are these:

1. *Scripture is God-Breathed (Inspired).* If the Bible is any less than the very heart and mind of God revealed, it would not be worth a lifetime commitment. It would simply be a document, then. But Scripture is of God: we must respond to it.
2. *Scripture is Infallible.* If the Bible is able to fail in any way, if it has any error, it cannot be from God. But if it does indeed have absolute purity and integrity as a unified volume (and it does), we must trust it.
3. *Scripture is Authoritative.* If Scripture is not our absolute authority, we will find more freedom in how theology is done. But if we tremble at God's Word, theology will be more than a mere academic study; it will be a concern of the heart in seeking to know the absolute truth. Scripture is authority: we must obey it.
4. *Scripture is Sufficient.* In other words, it is our “sole infallible rule of faith and practice.” If we understand this, we will hold tradition, books, churches, and systems of much less

authority than the text of Scripture itself. Once an extra-Biblical factor rules over us, there cannot be an absolute standard any longer. Scripture is sufficient: it must be enough for us.

Concerning Truth. Truth is basically that which corresponds with reality and fact. It expresses what *is*. The moment we sacrifice basic logic and fact-based thinking is the moment we destroy our potential in our studies. In theology, we need to assume at least three things about truth.

1. *Truth Exists and Is By Nature Exclusive.* There is only one faith to uphold, that is, Scripture's unified body of teaching that corresponds with the reality of God Himself. With God, His Word is final. When He establishes something, there is not an equally legitimate claim that can rival His will. We should know that truth in general is absolute, objective, and singular; but especially when handling the Word of an unchanging God must we believe this.
2. *Truth is Central in the Mind of God.* We are to worship in truth (Jn. 4). We are to buy the truth and sell it not (Prov. 23). We are to love in the truth (2 Jn. 1). We are to meditate on truth and have it constantly in our minds (Phil. 4). Truth holds in place all the other Christian armour (Eph. 6). Truth is a primary purpose of an assembly's existence (1 Tim. 3). One cannot escape this vital component in his life: it is everywhere! Therefore, it will affect every aspect of the Christian's experience. We cannot risk bad theology.
3. *Truth is Clear.* Theology is primarily about explaining clear Biblical doctrines, illuminated to us by the Holy Spirit. It is not about speculating on unfounded theories. On the positive side, when discussing clear doctrines, there is no reason why a firm stance cannot be taken: God's Word was meant to be understood!

What We Assume About Personal Understanding

Thus far we have laid the most basic of foundations for good doctrine. Now we need some assumptions that aid us in our personal understanding of Scripture. How is it that a finite man can even touch the brink of knowing the infinite God?

The first solution to the question is this: *God has made man to receive divine truth.* Man is made in God's image, meaning he has a God-reflective personality and a God-given compatibility with Himself. Animals have neither of these traits. Of course, in Adam and the fall man is cut off from relationship with God. While he still has the image of God embedded in his very makeup, he lacks one thing under sin: responsiveness to God. Romans 3 says, "There is none that seeks after God." Obviously, then, there is one more step required. This step is salvation, at which point man partakes in the divine nature – not in God's essence, but rather that which is natural to Him, in terms of morality and life. When, upon exercise of faith, one is born of God, God puts His "principle of divine life" (K.S. Wuest) within. This not only enables response to God, but fellowship with Him in searching out His truth. God gives Himself to us that we might know Him. Thus by both first birth and by new birth, God has equipped us for unique comprehension of Him.

And it must be God who equips, because *God is the sole Giver of divine knowledge.* Proverbs 2:6 says, "For the LORD gives wisdom: out of his mouth comes knowledge and

understanding." Every level of mental capacity – from knowledge to wisdom to understanding – comes from God Himself. This means at least two things: (1) to know something more of God than we do presently is purely by grace on God's part. Presumption and arrogance have no place in the Christian's mind. (2) to pursue the knowledge of God demands we be in line with Himself. The unregenerate man has no part in constant illumination. And, even as believers, grieving the Spirit will make us less receptive of divine truth. We must never take for granted the grace God gives in illuminating our minds.

On our part, then, we must *put ceaseless effort into knowing God*. Just before Proverbs 2:6, Solomon writes, "For if you cry for discernment... and search for her as hidden treasures, then will you discern the fear of the LORD, and discover the knowledge of God. For the LORD gives wisdom..." (NASB). Of such value is the knowledge of God that it cannot be entrusted to those who will not cherish it. To know God through His Word will require the entirety of our beings. In our spirit, theology will lead us to a closer communion with God. In our soul, the entire inner man will transform. In our heart, affection will be intensified. In our mind, we will think deeply and discern intelligently what God is saying to us. With our strength, we will be passionate in seeking God's knowledge. In our body, that knowledge will be practiced in daily living. Consecration is the only means to good theology. That leads us to verse 7, "[God] lays up sound wisdom for the righteous..." In other words, yes, intelligence is essential when considering the things of God, but integrity is primarily what God looks for when He is about to impart knowledge. So then, let us yield ourselves to God in both heart and mind: by His grace He may deem us fit to receive His "sound wisdom." What a wonderful privilege!

What We Assume About How God Reveals Himself

God is a God of self-revelation; without this reality, nothing of God could be known. God unveils Himself by two main categories of revelation: General Revelation and Special Revelation. Under General Revelation there are two main spheres of disclosure: nature and the human heart. Under Special Revelation, there is an unveiling of God's attributes and purposes through Christ as the living Word and Scripture as the written Word. Theology is about understanding God through His revelation; we must understand something of His revelation to establish a foundation for theology.

General Revelation. In general revelation, God universally discloses basic insights into the nature of His Being, such as His morality, His power, His intelligence, His divine characteristics, His existence, and His eternity. This has both an external aspect and an internal aspect. Neither are sufficient to save, but both accomplish two things at least: (1) they reveal the existence and essential nature of God (2) they expose humanity in light of God's essential nature.

General revelation is primarily seen in nature/creation and to a small extent in history. "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament shows His handiwork." (Psalm 19:1). Through nature, there is "that which may be known of God" made manifest by Him; this condemns the world, as it turns its back on even basic revelation.

There is also the internal aspect, which deals with what is within man, specifically his conscience, his God-consciousness, and his personal experiences.

1. The conscience, first of all, reveals God as Lawgiver and embeds in man the

consciousness of a standard higher than himself. H.C. Theissen called it, "something in our nature that is yet above that nature" (*Theissen*, 10). In creation, man's creatureliness is manifested in light of God's power. In conscience, man's wickedness is revealed in light of God's righteousness.

2. Secondly, man's intrinsic responsiveness to God, whether positive or negative, also reveals something of God's existence and centrality. Whether in pagan religion, true religion, or atheistic religion, deity is the object of man's response or rebellion. Nevertheless, "In the wisdom of God, the world by [its] wisdom knew not God" (1 Cor. 1) and "There is none that seeks after God." (Rom. 3).
3. Thirdly, man's personal experience can be a form of God's disclosure of Himself. This is not to advocate mysticism or communication from God to man apart from Scripture; rather, it coincide with the concept in Romans 2 that "that the goodness of God leads you to repentance." In other words, the interaction of God with man will always reflect His character, since He does not act apart from His character. However, this form of disclosure is limited, since it must be informed by Scripture to make sense.

Special Revelation. Special revelation has a few contrasts to general revelation. General revelation can only condemn, but not save; special revelation can do both. General revelation is unrestricted in its scope; special revelation must be delivered first of all and then illumined for those who are exposed to it. General revelation deals with temporal realities, such as the physical creation and the tendencies of man; special revelation deals with unchanging, eternal realities. General revelation tends to communicate the Being of God, while special revelation is necessary to reveal the heart of God.

Special revelation has two main aspects to it: The living Word and The written Word. The living Word is none other than Christ Himself. He is God manifested in the flesh. He is God's supreme, utmost, and complete revelation of Himself by Whom we know God personally. In 1 John 5:20, there is a wonderful explanation of this concept. "And we know that the Son of God has come [Incarnate revelation], and has given us an understanding [He opens blind eyes unto the knowledge of God], that we may know him that is true [He makes truth a relational reality], and we are in him that is true, even in his Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God, and eternal life. [Christ, the sufficient God-Revealer and Life-Giver]." Hebrews 1 also explains the reality of incarnate revelation when it says, "God... has spoken unto us in Son... who [is] the radiance of His glory and the exact expression of His substance/being." Or as Colossians says, "In Him dwells the fulness of the Godhead bodily." Being fully God and simultaneously fully man, Christ is not only the perfect Mediator between God and man, but the perfect revelation from God to man. Apart from Him there could never be any personal knowledge of God or salvation for man.

Though Christ is the fullest revelation of God (since Scripture does not contain every detail of God and His works within it, cf. John 21:25), Scripture is our most immediate revelation of God (since it is the testimony of Christ while we do not yet see Him as He is, cf. 1 John 1:1-4; 3:1-3; and 5:9-11). It is dangerous for the believer to overly divide the living Word from the written Word, for God has given us the record of His Son in Scripture. To lose the

record, we lose our understanding of the Son. The idea that we must “stop worshiping Scripture and start worshiping Christ” is an unhelpful one, since Scripture is the basis of worship, though not its object. To get our eyes on Christ is to get our eyes on the Scriptures and to act on what we find therein. In fact, to fully understand any other form of revelation, we need Scripture, which informs us concerning and gives testimony to any other type of revelation. Scripture is the only true theology textbook; it must be inseparably part of the Christian's being.

Understanding these foundational assumptions will prove necessary to the study of doctrine. In light of the God we are studying, there is no room for sloppy theology. Unless we assume something of God's nature and how He reveals Himself, unless we presuppose the nature of truth, and unless we approach doctrine humbly, our theology will never take meaningful shape; nor will it have any coherence. We must begin right, or we will never end right.