

Theology Is Important: Why Careful Bible Study Matters

We tend to form a first impression about someone in less than 27 seconds, but how accurate is that impression? According to Lemony Snicket, first impressions are often entirely wrong. That has certainly been my experience. For example, when I was in high school, I moved to a new school. In one of my classes I sat next to a girl named Kristy, who eventually became one of my best friends. I later found out that when we first met, she thought I was stuck up because, even though I sat beside her, I never talked to her. I wasn't really stuck up. I was just painfully shy. It turns out that her first impression of me was wrong.

It's common to form an opinion about someone based on a short interaction, or even based solely on what we've heard about that person, only to find out later that the person is not at all who we thought they were. Unfortunately, we tend to do that with God, as well. After reading a little about Him in the Bible or hearing about Him in a sermon or Bible study, we create an image in our minds of who God is. I wonder, though, if our impressions of God are entirely wrong. If we really took the time to get to know God, would we find out that He's not at all who we think He is?

It seems like most people want to avoid theology. We like checklists, with dos and don'ts. "Just give me ten steps to being the perfect Christian, and I'm good. I don't need all that theology stuff." That's the way most people seem to think.

But that's extremely unfortunate, because that's a very unbiblical way of thinking. Theology is actually very important, and we can't just skip over it to get to the dos and don'ts of Christianity. But why? Why is theology so important? First, let's define theology, then we'll look at several reasons that theology is important.

The word *theology* literally means "the study of God." It's studying who God is and what He has done. Because we believe in a trinitarian God, theology includes the study of Jesus and the Holy Spirit. Also, because the Bible is God's revelation of Himself, theology by extension includes the study of the entire Bible. So, theology basically is just Bible study.

So, now that we've defined theology, let's talk about a few reasons that theology is so important:

First, theology is important because you are already a theologian, so it's your duty as a Christian to make sure your theology is sound.

If you read the Bible at all, if you listen to a sermon or participate in a Bible study, if you listen to Christian music or read Christian books, you are engaging in theology. Everyone has a theology of who they God is, even those who say they don't believe in Him. We all have some understanding about the Bible. According to R.C. Sproul, everyone's a theologian. He writes, "It is not a question of whether we are going to engage in theology; it is a question of whether our theology is sound or unsound."

We read in 1 Corinthians 10:31, "Whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God" (NIV). That includes reading and studying the Bible. If we are to study the Bible in a way that glorifies God, then we must seek to truly understand it the way that God intends. To glorify God, we must be sure that our theology is sound. When we skip over the theology and focus on the commands of Scripture, then we're actually making the Bible all about us, instead of all about God, which is not sound theology. That also takes away from God's glory.

We're also commanded in 2 Timothy 2:15 to rightly handle the truth so that we won't be ashamed before God. We are responsible to read the Bible carefully so that we can understand the truth. Without careful study of theology, we can easily misinterpret verses, or take them out of context so that they will say what we want them to say. I saw a t-shirt once that said, "I can do all things through a verse taken out of context." We can make the Bible say whatever we want in order to justify our behavior. However, that is not pleasing to God.

Also, when we rightly handle the truth, we can then recognize the lies when hear them. We are bombarded with the lies of the world, and even lies from other religions or so-called "Christian" groups. We have to know the truth of God's Word so that we will not be led astray by this false teaching. We must develop a sound theology through careful study of God's Word.

Second, theology is important because theology is the foundation of holiness.

Theology actually forms the foundation for why we obey God's commands. If our focus is on just obeying a bunch of rules, then Christianity becomes oppressive. We start thinking that we must obey in order to gain or keep God's favor. However, when we focus on what God has done for us through Christ, then Christianity becomes more about a relationship instead of a bunch of rules. Our obedience is then motivated out of love and gratitude.

We see this pattern throughout Scripture, especially in the writing of Paul. Many of his letters start with several chapters of theology, where he discusses the person and work of Christ. Only after laying a theological foundation does he move on to talk about how we should live. Basically, he's saying, "Because of what Christ has done for you, this is how you should live."

I honestly think that most Christians would say that they want to become more holy, but we often base our holiness on how well we obey the rules. We do not become holy by obeying God's commands, though. We become holy by becoming more like Christ. As we become more like Him, then obedience follows and becomes easier. Our focus then, must be on Christ, learning who He is so that we can become like Him. If we don't even know who Jesus is, then we can never become like Him, and never become holy.

Third, theology is important because you live out what you believe.

What you believe definitely impacts how you live. For example, if you believe that a chair is sturdy, you will sit on it. However, if the chair doesn't look sturdy and you don't believe that it will hold you, you don't sit on it.

In that case, whether you are right or wrong in your belief doesn't matter, because not much depends on whether you sit on that chair or not. Whether you are right or wrong in your belief about God, however, is extremely important because your belief about God definitely impacts your life.

For instance, if you believe that God is a loving, grandfather-like figure, just waiting to dole out blessings on everyone, you won't bother to obey His commands. After all, you may as well do whatever you want, because God will forgive you anyway. But if you believe that God is a harsh dictator, just waiting to strike down anyone who sins, you will seek to obey every command out of fear in order to keep God happy. You will also

experience extreme guilt when you fail. The truth is that God is somewhere between those two extremes, and theology helps us to know what He is really like.

Fourth, theology keeps God as the focus of our Bible study.

When we have a problem, we go to the Bible to find answers. We want to be better parents, or have a better marriage, or stop some sinful habit, so we look for a Bible verse to help. Now, the Bible certainly does offer answers to many of life's problems, but it's not primarily an instruction manual. The Bible is actually God's revelation of Himself. In the Bible, God tells us exactly who He is and what He's done for us through the work of Christ. Our problems are not the main focus of Scripture. We are not the main focus of Scripture. Jesus is the main focus. Instead of reading the Bible like it's the advice column or an instruction manual, we must read it to learn what it teaches us about God.

Fifth, theology is important because it keeps you from committing idolatry.

Idolatry is worshiping anyone or anything other than the one true God of the Bible. Humans were created to worship, but we tend to worship the wrong things. That's why people have been worshipping false gods since the beginning of time. They know they ought to worship something, so they pick something, such as the sun or moon or nature, or even made-up deities. Some people even form their own image of God in their minds, thinking they are worshipping the God of the Bible, but the god they have created is nothing like the true God. That's also idolatry.

So, instead of reading the Bible like it's the advice column or an instruction manual, we must read it to learn what it teaches us about God. The Bible is God's revelation of Himself to mankind. Without it, we would not know who God is or how we can have a relationship with Him. He is the main character of the Bible, primarily in the person of Jesus Christ. We must study the Bible carefully, diving deep into theology so that we can get to know God better.