

3

Defining Theology

Charlie Brown sits in front of Lucy's "Psychiatric Help" booth as the "doctor" waxes eloquent: "Life, Charlie Brown, is like a deck chair."

"Like a what?" he exclaims.

Lucy explains: "Have you ever been on a cruise ship? Passengers open up these canvas deck chairs so they can sit in the sun." Pointing to her left, she continued, "Some people place their chairs facing the rear of the ship so they can see where they've been." Then gesturing in the opposite direction, she says, "Other people face their chairs forward. They want to see where they're going!"

The explanation completed, Lucy turns to the "patient" sitting on the stool and demands, "On the cruise ship of life, Charlie Brown, which way is your deck chair facing?"

The boy thinks for a moment and then replies, "I've never been able to get one unfolded."

Whenever people give serious reflection to the ultimate questions of

life, such as which way their deck chair is facing, they are engaging in theology. Viewed in this sense, everyone—Lucy, Charlie Brown, you, I, each of our friends and neighbors—is a theologian. Why is this the case? Why do the deepest questions of humankind lead to theology? Because in the end life's ultimate questions move beyond life. As we've noted already, these questions center around the question of God.

People find themselves in the realm of theology whenever they raise questions of ultimacy. Sometimes, however, their questions are more overtly and self-consciously theological. You have undoubtedly asked at one point or another: Is there really a God? What is God like? Or, Why does God allow evil? Each of these is a *theological* question. Theology explores general questions such as these.

Theology doesn't remain on the purely general level, however. Each person has at one time or another asked: Is God concerned about *me*? Does God love *me*? Or, How can *I* find God? These highly personal questions also lie in the domain of theology.

Theology seeks answers to general and personal questions about God, ultimate meaning, purpose and truth. But this way of defining theology is only partial, and because of its generality, it is wholly inadequate for describing the discipline (the science or formal study) of theology. Therefore, let us define it more precisely.

What Is Theology?

When confronted with a new term, it is often helpful to go first to the dictionary in order to understand it. Consider this simple, straightforward dictionary definition: Theology is "the study of God, his attributes, and his relationship with man and the universe."¹

A first reaction upon reading this may well be, "The dictionary makes theology sound so sterile. Can that be what theology is all about?" Despite its seeming sterility, the dictionary definition does encapsulate a central dimension of theology. As we explained in chapter one, the English word comes from two Greek terms, *theos* ("God")

and *logos* ("word," "teaching," "study"). Viewed from this perspective, theology means "the teaching concerning God" or "the study of God." This is surprisingly similar to the dictionary definition.

In the broad sense theology is the attempt to reach below the surface of life and gain a deeper understanding of God. Theology seeks to understand God's being, God's nature and God's relationship to the world. It answers questions such as: What is God like? How does God treat us? What does God do? And it poses queries like: Is *everything* God? Or is God distinct from the universe and its processes?

As the quest to gain an understanding of God, theology is an ancient and respected intellectual discipline. For centuries philosophers have groped after answers to questions about the existence and nature of whatever supreme being there may be. And religious teachers have always sought to understand, describe and explain God.

In this general sense, theology is not uniquely Christian. It is rather a nearly universal human endeavor, of which Christian theology is a specific embodiment. The unique thing about Christian theology is that Christians seek answers to the ultimate questions by looking to Jesus Christ because they are convinced that "Jesus is the answer." That is, Christians believe that Jesus has revealed truth and ultimacy to us because he is the revelation of the very heart of God. Since Christian theology explores the beliefs about God and the world that are uniquely Christian by looking to Jesus, we may say that *Christian theology is reflecting on and articulating the beliefs about God and the world that Christians share as followers of Jesus Christ.*

Theology seeks to discover answers to ultimate questions by exploring the uniquely Christian belief system. It looks at the Christian way of understanding life, the world and all reality. Christians who study and write about theology tend to divide their inquiry into several foundational beliefs or interrelated topics. These central theological foci include

- God (theology proper)
- humankind and the created universe (anthropology)

- Jesus and the salvation he brought (Christology)
- the Holy Spirit and the Spirit's work in us and in the world (pneumatology)
- the church as the fellowship of Christ's disciples (ecclesiology)
- the consummation or completion of God's program for creation (eschatology)

Good theology begins by exploring these topics as they are informed by faith in Jesus, who is the revelation of God.

Why Theology?

A central goal of theology is to understand and describe what we believe as Christians, what we hold to be true given our faith in Jesus Christ. Since the first century the church has affirmed the importance of theology to its mission. And Christians have defined theology according to the role it plays in the church's task. We engage in theological reflection because theology assists *us* in being Christ's disciples, and we can understand theology in accordance with the assistance it is designed to give.

What is theology's role in the life of discipleship? What does good theology do? We can capsize our answer in one sentence: Good theology assists Christians because it grounds their lives in biblically informed, Christian truth.

To understand this, consider a key aspect of the context of life today: This is a pluralistic world in which each person is continually bombarded with assertions as to what is ultimately true. A discordant chorus of voices arises, each claiming to inform people as to what they should believe and each inviting hearers to embrace the "truth" it proclaims.

Confused by the variegated claims to ultimacy that come their way, many people have embarked on a spiritual and intellectual odyssey. En route on this journey of discovery, they flit from one belief to another, depending on what happens to be the fad of the day. Perhaps yesterday it was transcendental meditation. Maybe today it's New Age

spirituality. And who knows what tomorrow may bring? But whatever it is, be assured, these “pilgrims” will be part of it.

The ill-fated, short-lived television series *Amazing Grace*, which aired in 1995, embodies this mood. Although borrowing its name from the grand old evangelical hymn, the program features a female cleric, Hanna Miller, who is neither Protestant nor Catholic. As viewers would expect, Hanna’s “call” to her nondescript ministry came in a nontraditional manner; it followed on the heels of a divorce, an addiction to prescription drugs and a near-death experience. Again as viewers would expect, the program downplays any specific religious ties Hanna may hold, replacing them with a focus on a generic spirituality.

Although a fictitious character—the product of some scriptwriter’s psyche—Hanna fits the profile of the lead actress, Patty Duke. Listen to Duke’s account of her own spiritual pilgrimage: “I was born into a Roman Catholic family. I have been a Christian Scientist. I have studied Buddhism. I studied to convert to Judaism. I think you can see a trend here. So it’s not all that odd to me that I should wind up playing a minister on television. I’m as lost as anybody else. And I’m as found as anybody else.”²

Amazing Grace reflects the ethos of today. To many people, the search for truth as embedded in the one true religion is passe. What is “in” is the quest for spirituality. And this quest, they claim, may lead through a variety of religious traditions, each of which offers *some* insight. Their advice? Just remember that no religion holds the final answer. Each religious expression is merely a way station along the path. So move with the times from one religious fad to the next!

The Christian’s desire to avoid being swept along by the ever-changing currents that blow across the landscape should lead to theology. In the context of competing visions, Christian theology seeks to articulate Christian truth. Theology instructs Christians as to what belongs to the distinctively Christian teaching about God and the world. As they come to see what marks true belief (orthodoxy), they are able

to detect and reject false teachings (heresy). By grounding us in *the* truth, theology contributes to our becoming mature, stable disciples of our Lord who are not “blown here and there by every wind of teaching” (Eph 4:14). Thus theology is vital to each Christian life.

Theology does, however, carry a certain “danger.” It requires that we scrutinize our beliefs in the light of biblically informed Christian truth. In so doing, theology exercises a critical function (which we will explore in chapter five). As you test your beliefs, you may discover that certain things you assumed were true do not square with sound teaching. Your theological study leads you to jettison these long-held but incorrect convictions. This aspect of theology actually should strengthen your faith, not destroy it.

Solid Christian beliefs, in contrast, will stand the test of critical reflection. As they “pass muster,” we will begin to hold them with even greater conviction. And other beliefs will be honed and clarified through theological study. As we come to understand such convictions with greater precision, our faith will be strengthened, for we will be able to affirm them with greater certainty.

As an example, consider the Christian teaching that God is triune—Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Perhaps to you this doctrine is little more than a mathematical puzzle: In some mysterious way God is one and three. You affirm this teaching, but not out of conviction borne by understanding; rather, because it is the “Christian” thing to do. In addition, perhaps your conception of the triune God focuses almost exclusively on God’s oneness, as is evident, for example, in your prayers, which are routinely addressed to “God.” Theological study should lead you to discover a greater richness in this traditional teaching. It should open your eyes to see that the one God is none other than Father, Son and Spirit—three distinct persons with distinct roles—united by mutual love.

When theology does its work, the doctrine of the Trinity—a teaching you once held tenuously—becomes a firm conviction. You now understand how the declaration “God is love” is inextricably bound

to the teaching that God is Father, Son and Spirit. You see how the Christian conception is intellectually sublime in a way unparalleled in the understanding offered in any other religion. Never again will you be afraid to face the “evangelists” who come to your door with another gospel. Never again will you fear that they will shake your faith in what the church has taught about the triune God throughout the centuries. You now glory in and glorify God in God’s own triunity.

This is how theology works. As Christians become more reflective and replace erroneous beliefs with correct convictions, and as they test and hone valid but imprecise and immature beliefs, they become even more steadfast in faith and more sure of what they believe. But the grounding work of good theology does not stop here.

Theology grounds Christian living. Because of the connection to the *what* and *why* of beliefs, many Christians view theology as a purely intellectual discipline. What is theology? For some, theology consists in dry debates about unimportant, unknowable or nonsensical points of doctrine. Theologians wonder about useless matters such as: Can God make a rock so heavy that he himself cannot lift it? Or, How many angels can stand on the head of a pin? They squabble with each other about potentially dangerous points of doctrine such as, Did God predestine the elect to salvation and the reprobate to condemnation before creating the world? To many Christians, such theological debate—and therefore theology and theologians in general—can only hinder their more important task, namely, sharing the gospel with the lost. Whether the damned “can’t” or “won’t” respond to the good news is in the end irrelevant, they declare. The sad fact is, the lost simply “don’t.”

This perception of theology is partially correct. Theologians do often appear to split hairs about seemingly inconsequential matters. While good theology does include academic debate, it never stops there. Good theologians discuss intellectual questions and concern themselves with academic debate because their chief concern is life. They want to know the truth not merely so that they might think

properly, but so that they might live properly. They engage in theology not merely to amass knowledge, but also to gain wisdom. Good theology, therefore, brings the theoretical, academic, intellectual aspect of Christian faith into Christian living. In so doing, theology becomes immensely practical—perhaps the most practical endeavor one ever engages in!

In case you are wondering how such a heady discipline can actually be immensely practical, notice that there are several connections that give theology this practical, life-related dimension. First, theology is practical because it is inextricably linked to the most practical aspect of Christian life—its beginning point, that marvelous transaction we call “conversion.”

To see this, let’s ask what for many believers is the central question of our faith: What does it mean to be a Christian? The answer: A Christian is a person who is “converted.” You and I claim to be Christians because we have encountered God in Christ in such a manner that our lives have been, are being, and will be radically changed. And this encounter places us in a new community, the people of God, the fellowship of Christ’s disciples.

This encounter occurs through the hearing and believing of the gospel. But what exactly is the gospel? Many Christians would likely agree that at the heart of the good news is the biblical story of God’s saving activity on behalf of sinful humankind. God has provided the way of salvation. And Christians all realize that to “call on the name of the Lord” (Rom 10:13), people must hear this salvation story.

Let’s push our questioning a step further: Is the story itself sufficient to lead someone to Christ? Isn’t something missing? Indeed! For people to believe the gospel, they must not only hear the story itself, they must also understand its meaning. Not only must people hear *that* Christ died and rose again—these brute facts of history do not yet bring us to the heart of the message—they must also be confronted with the *why* of his death and resurrection. They must understand that God acted in Christ for them.

The point is this: The biblical story always comes clothed in an interpretation that informs of the meaning of the events it narrates. This is how the gospel is found in the New Testament. The apostles and evangelists never merely retell the flat details of Jesus life, death and resurrection. They always tell the story in the context of its meaning: God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, to cite Paul's interpretation (2 Cor 5:19). In the same way, the gospel declaration always comes clothed in theology. And this theology is not something additional to the gospel. It is an essential part of the good news.

For this reason, good theology sharpens our understanding of the gospel. It helps us clarify the meaning of the story of God at work in Christ. Theology does this so that we might declare the good news in a manner that people today can understand. And in so doing, theology serves the conversion process. It assists others in hearing the gospel so that they might meet the God who in Christ offers salvation to all.

This doesn't exhaust theology's link to conversion, however. Once people have committed their lives to Christ, they naturally desire to gain a deeper understanding of the God who has acted to save them, the God who has brought them into fellowship with himself and with other believers. Theology serves this quest. Theology wrestles with how best to conceive of and speak about the God who is the author and object of Christians' faith. In this pursuit, Christian believers raise questions such as: Who are we? What is it about the human situation that requires Christ's saving work? Who is Jesus, and how is he related to God? How does Jesus' death save us? What is the role of the Holy Spirit in the work of the triune God? What is faith all about? What does it mean to be a part of a redeemed people? Where is God taking us? Once we are believers we naturally want to know these things. Consequently, faith—conversion—readily leads to theology.

Theology's purpose does not end at conversion, however. It has a second practical goal in view: providing direction for Christian living. To see this, it is important to follow another line of reflection, which begins by asking, "What is the Christian life?" That's easy. All Chris-

tians would likely define the Christian life in terms of "discipleship." They might say that the Christian life is the attempt to live as Jesus' follower.

But what does it mean to "follow Jesus"? Although definitions might diverge at this point, Christian believers would likely agree that following Jesus is somehow connected to living "Christianly," living constantly aware that we are "little Christs," as the name *Christian* suggests. Believers might also agree that being a Christian involves loyalty to Jesus. We are a people who seek to "live out" our confession of allegiance to Christ. This answer, however, requires one further, crucial statement. Whatever else it may entail, loyalty to Christ includes living in accordance with a set of beliefs—a worldview—shaped by the biblical story of Jesus.

When we say "beliefs" or "worldview," we again step into the domain of theology, for theology explores the Christian belief system, or worldview. It sets forth the uniquely Christian understanding of all reality as this understanding arises from the story about Jesus of Nazareth. But theology doesn't merely articulate this understanding in the form of a series of statements or propositions that we claim are true. It doesn't stop with the great theological assertions—"God is love" or "Christ is fully God and fully human," for example—although such statements are an important aspect of theology.

Good theology moves beyond stating truths; it explores the significance of our beliefs or faith assertions for all of life. Theology asks questions such as: What are the implications of the doctrine of the Trinity for the way we pray? Or, What does the affirmation of Jesus' full humanity have to do with how I conduct myself on Monday morning?

By exploring these matters, theology provides Christians with needed direction as they seek to live as Christ's disciples. Of course, Christians also pursue theology so that they might gain a greater understanding—even a more systematic understanding—of their faith. But this is not their ultimate purpose. Good theology always makes

a difference in how Christians live, and it motivates them as well. As they come to know more about God and his relationship to the world, disciples of Christ are drawn to love God more. As they come to love God more, they desire to serve him more. Good theology always moves from the head to the heart and finally to the hand.

To see how this works, consider again the teaching that God is triune. When exploring the doctrine of the Trinity, we discover that throughout eternity the Father loves the Son, and the Son reciprocates the love of the Father. But this is not mere intellectual theorizing. We learn as well that as the Son, Jesus reveals how people should respond to God. God is their loving Father who created them to give back this love to him. At this point the Holy Spirit steps in. When people are born again, the Spirit indwells them. And this indwelling Spirit draws believers into the glorious relationship the Father and the Son share, for the Spirit causes them to know God as their loving heavenly Father (Gal 4:6) just as Jesus did.

The implications of this realization are immense. The doctrine of the Trinity helps Christians understand how they are to come before God in prayer: They may pray to the Father in the name of the Son and by the prompting of the Spirit. Likewise the doctrine of the Trinity affords an entirely new perspective on who believers are and why they are here: They are children of the heavenly Father whose purpose is to live to the praise of their Maker and Redeemer. Knowing the dynamics of conversion in the light of the eternal relations of Father, Son and Spirit, causes believers' hearts to well up with a love that translates into willing service. Just think of the great privilege you have: The Spirit draws you into the glorious relationship the Son enjoys with the Father. Should you not love and serve a God who is so gracious?

"Who needs theology?" we ask. The answer is clear: All do. Theology seeks to clarify and articulate Christian doctrine, but its goal is wider. Christians engage in theological reflection so that their lives might be changed. Theological reflection ought to foster godly spirituality and obedient discipleship. Indeed, good theology will make

believers stronger, better informed, and consequently, more effective disciples. Therefore, we must add to our earlier definition of theology: Christian theology is reflecting on and articulating the beliefs about God and the world that Christians share as followers of Jesus Christ *for the sake of Christian living.*

Theology pleases God. We engage in theology because theological reflection grounds our lives in biblically informed Christian truth. It fosters maturity so that we might be stable believers in the shifting sands of our day and fosters wisdom so that we might live as disciples.

So far our discussion has focused on Christian believers. We have defined theology by looking at what theological reflection does *for us.* As a result, our definition has been anthropocentric, *human-centered.* Anthropocentric theology, however, is ultimately insufficient. We dare never engage in theology merely for what it can do for us, as helpful and important as that may be. By its very nature, theology must always lift people's eyes above themselves—even above themselves as Spirit-indwelt Christians—and focus on the triune God. Theology must be theocentric, *God-centered.* So also our definition of theology must in the end move beyond ourselves as humans and believers and find its resting place in God. What, then, would a theocentric definition of theology look like? We have already forged a link between theology and discipleship. We must now strengthen this link, for this is the clue to a theocentric theology.

Jesus himself invited his disciples to engage in theology. He reminded his disciples of the ancient commandment to love God with their *minds* (Mt 22:37; Mk 12:30; Lk 10:27). And Paul reiterated the Lord's admonition. He spoke about the importance of taking "captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ" (2 Cor 10:5). These biblical statements make clear that the life of discipleship is all-encompassing.

Most Christians would acknowledge that discipleship includes their wills, emotions, intuitions, attitudes and actions. As Christians we realize that we are to serve God in all these aspects of our being. Where

we sometimes stumble, however, is with the mind. Yet discipleship includes the life of the mind as well (Mt 22:37). Christ wants to be Lord of our minds (2 Cor 10:5).

A first impulse might be to connect Christ's lordship over the mind with the so-called thought life. Jesus wants his people to put away all evil, lustful or self-absorbed thoughts (see, for example, Mt 5:27-30), but this only scratches the surface. Individual thoughts are merely the symptoms of a deeper reality. Lying beneath them are the core convictions—the belief structure, the worldview—that govern not only thoughts but also entire lives. Discipleship means allowing Christ to be Lord of these. It entails sharing the core convictions displayed in the life of Jesus the Lord. Hence Christians sing, "May the mind of Christ, my Savior, live in me from day to day. . . ."

Theological reflection is a crucial aspect of disciplining the mind. As people seek answers to the great questions about the Christian belief system, they engage in the task of bringing their convictions into conformity with God's own truth.

How does this process lead to a theocentric theology? One answer seems obvious: Godly convictions lead to godly living, and godly living glorifies God. Thus, the final goal of theological reflection is that God might be glorified through believers' lives, through how they live and what they do.

Yet the response runs deeper. Good theology results in God being glorified even in believers' minds themselves. Theological reflection leads to thinking rightly about God as well as about oneself and about the world as a creation under God. This pleases God. In fact, even the quest to know truth, when it is motivated by the desire to obey the Lord in every aspect of life, pleases God.

Therefore, as Christ's obedient disciples—as those who would honor God with their minds—Christians can joyfully offer their theologizing and their theological discoveries to God as acts of worship. Good theology is one vehicle whereby believers can love God with their minds.

Theology doesn't only enhance personal glorifying of God, however. It functions in the Christian community in the same manner, coming to expression in every aspect of community life. Most significantly, theology shapes corporate worship. It is embodied in the music sung and played, in the words spoken, in the symbolic acts employed, and even in the structure of worship. Good theology leads to good worship, and good worship glorifies God.

Again we ask, "Who needs theology?" In a direct way, you and I do. And we do together. But in a special way, God does. God doesn't actually *need* theology in the strict sense, because the triune God is complete within the eternal divine life. But God chooses to need theology. God has decided to inhabit his people's praises (Ps 22:3), which means that the eternal, triune God condescends to "inhabit" good theology, for through this seemingly insignificant human endeavor, God is praised and glorified.

Given all of this understanding, we can now offer a more complete definition of good theology: Christian theology is reflecting on and articulating the God-centered life and beliefs that Christians share as followers of Jesus Christ, and it is done in order that God may be glorified in all Christians are and do. *Soli Deo gloria.*