

Systematic Theology for the Local Church

#22—Theology Proper—Part I¹

The Knowability and Existence of God

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For studies in theology proper: If you have the book, you should begin reading Bruce Ware's *Their God Is Too Small*. I am providing a table entitled "Topics and Readings for Theology Proper." This includes Raymond's book and the two books of charts by Wayne House and associates readings with the topics of studies. You can read for the topics in upcoming studies. The topics of the next two studies will be The Names of God (reading line 2) and Introduction to Openness of God Theology. Helpful readings for today's study are found in line 3.

The knowability of God

God's existence

Theology proper is the study of the nature of God. When we come to this topic, we should have the reaction that God commanded Moses to have in Ex. 3—recognize we are on holy ground and bow in awe:

Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and he led the flock to the far side of the desert and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. ² There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up. ³ So Moses thought, "I will go over and see this strange sight—why the bush does not burn up." ⁴ When the LORD saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, "Moses! Moses!" And Moses said, "Here I am." ⁵ "Do not come any closer," God said. "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground."

Studying what God is like is the deepest of all human endeavors: to attempt to understand what our infinite Creator is like. Preaching at the age of 20 on January 7, 1855, C. H. Spurgeon described the task this way:

It has been said by someone that "the proper study of mankind is man." I will not oppose the idea, but I believe it is equally true that the proper study of [e.g. 'by'] God's elect is God; the proper study of a Christian is the Godhead. The highest science, the loftiest speculation, the mightiest philosophy, which can ever engage the attention of a child of God, is the name, the nature, the person, the work, the doings, and the existence of the great God whom he calls his Father.

There is something exceedingly improving to the mind in a contemplation of the Divinity. It is a subject so vast, that all our thoughts are lost in its immensity; so deep, that our pride is drowned in its infinity. Other subjects we can compass and grapple with; in them we feel a kind of self-content, and go our way with the thought, "Behold I am wise." But when we come to this master science, finding that our plumb-line cannot sound its depth, and that our eagle eye cannot see its height, we turn away with the thought that vain man would be wise, but he is like a wild ass's colt; and with solemn exclamation, "I am but of yesterday, and know nothing." No subject of contemplation will tend more to humble the mind, than thoughts of God. . .

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But while the subject *humbles* the mind, it also expands it. He who often thinks of God, will have a larger mind than the man who simply plods around this narrow globe. . . . The most excellent study for expanding the soul, is the science of Christ, and Him crucified, and the knowledge of the Godhead in the glorious Trinity. Nothing will so enlarge the intellect, nothing so magnify the whole soul of man, as a devout, earnest, continued investigation of the great subject of the Deity.

And, whilst humbling and expanding, this subject is eminently *consolatory*. Oh, there is, in contemplating Christ, a balm for every wound; in musing on the Father, there is a quietus for every grief; and in the influence of the Holy Spirit, there is a balsam for every sore. Would you lose your sorrow? Would you drown your cares? Then go, plunge yourself in the Godhead's deepest sea; be lost in his immensity; and you shall come forth as from a couch of rest, refreshed and invigorated. I know nothing which can so comfort the soul; so calm the swelling billows of sorrow and grief; so speak peace to the winds of trial, as a devout musing upon the subject of the Godhead. It is to that subject that I invite you this morning.

Is it possible to know God? Psalm 76:1 clearly says that God is knowable: "In Judah God is known; his name is great in Israel." John 17:3 tells us that this is an activity that will have no ending: "Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent." Eternal life is knowing God, not simply endless life. Every human being who ever exists will live forever. Since God is infinite, we can never exhaust what he is like. But what can we know about him in this life?

What can we know about his existence? It is a striking and very significant fact that the Bible nowhere gives a proof for God's existence. Instead, it assumes that he exists. This fits with the sequence of the two revelations he has given: general and special revelation. We learned from our studies in bibliology that all human beings can and are responsible to know from general revelation in nature that there is a powerful divine being (Rom. 1:21). Yet everyone suppresses that knowledge and even creates substitutes for God (v. 23):

¹⁸ The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, ¹⁹ since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. ²⁰ For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse. ²¹ For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. ²² Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools ²³ and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles. ²⁴ Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. ²⁵ They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen.

So, before special revelation existed, God had provided proofs of his existence—proofs so convincing that every human being goes to great lengths to suppress what he knows about God and what he is like. S. Lewis Johnson says that Adam knew that God exists from the moment he was created.² No one had to prove it to him!

We need to state this succinctly, because many Christians are unclear about it: every human being knows that God exists.

² See S. Lewis Johnson, Jr., "[Canst Thou by Searching Find Out God?, or the Knowability of God - I](http://www.believerschapeldallas.org/tapes/slj-69_systematic-theology/part-1.htm)," available at http://www.believerschapeldallas.org/tapes/slj-69_systematic-theology/part-1.htm.

Although the Bible does not give proofs of God's existence, it does provide statements about his existence. The opening words of the Bible assume God's existence and present his relation to creation: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." This at once negates atheism, polytheism (it says 'God,' not 'gods'), pantheism (God is separate from his creation), agnosticism, fatalism, materialism and evolution.³

Hebrews 11:6 tells us what our reaction should be to God's existence:

⁶ And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.

God's nature

If the Bible does not give us proof of God's existence, does it give a definition of God? No, for an important reason. If we could define God or understand a definition, we would be able to encompass him, to control him. We would be making ourselves larger than him.

But God does provide some information about what he is like. Just as we cannot define God, we cannot know him absolutely. We cannot know exactly what he is like in himself. In Moses' encounter with the burning bush in Ex. 3, God reveals his name to Moses:

¹³ Moses said to God, "Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' Then what shall I tell them?" ¹⁴ God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you.'"

¹⁵ God also said to Moses, "Say to the Israelites, 'The LORD, the God of your fathers—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob—has sent me to you.' This is my name forever, the name by which I am to be remembered from generation to generation.

We know that God is giving to Moses a name—in the Old Testament sense of an appellation that describes character or essence. "I am who I am" appears to refer to God's existence. God's character or essence is that he is the self-existent one. Everything we know has a beginning; philosophers call this contingent existence. By contrast, God is non-contingent or necessary. Thus God is giving the basic difference between himself and everything else: he exists by himself and everything else depends on him for existence.

In this same passage God also describes himself relationally: he is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. This must be a reference to his promises, his covenants with those three men. We know then that he is a being who enters into relationships with human beings. Yet while God describes or defines himself relationally, he never defines himself absolutely.

Revelation in Christ

During his ministry Jesus taught that he was a disclosure of what God is like, because he is God: "No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known." (Jn. 1:18). John 14:9 seems to say that seeing Jesus and being with him brings sufficient knowledge of the Father: "Jesus answered: "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father." When we see Jesus' love, mercy, compassion, omniscience and power, we are seeing the attributes of God. He is a person with no limitations such as we have. He shows all the manifestations of the acts of God in their fullest degree—love, mercy, etc. When we look at Jesus Christ we have seen God as he is. We do not need to see the Father because we have seen God in Jesus Christ.

³ Ibid.

The arguments for the existence of God

For thousands of years people have tried to devise ways to demonstrate the existence of God. We will briefly describe the ones that are most well known, along with their problems. Fuller treatment can be found in some systematic theologies and in comprehensive books on apologetics. There are many online sources that give further information.

The cosmological argument

As we have seen, something that does not exist or occur of its own accord is said to be contingent and so has a beginning. These are things such as human beings, cars and planets, which are the result or effect of the action of something else. If I see a cake, I know that someone baked it. If I see a child, I know that it had parents. The cosmological argument reasons from the existence of contingent things to a necessary entity or cause that must be responsible for all things. It appears that Scripture uses this line of reasoning in both Ps. 19 and Rom. 2, moving from what exists to something behind it, although in neither place is the writer trying to prove the existence of God. The abstract argument takes two forms: 1) reasoning from the existence of contingent entities back to an originating cause (this form is called the Kalam cosmological argument; ‘Kalam’ is an Arabic word that refers to dialectal argumentation) and 2) reasoning from contingent entities to a sustaining cause. The first form of the argument looks like this:

1. Everything that began to exist has a cause.
2. The universe began to exist.
3. Therefore, the universe must have a cause.

Twentieth-century philosopher Mortimer J. Adler phrased the second form of the argument this way⁴:

1. The existence of an effect requiring the concurrent existence and action of an efficient cause implies the existence and action of that cause.
2. The cosmos as a whole exists.
3. The existence of the cosmos as a whole is radically contingent (meaning that it needs an efficient cause of its continuing existence to preserve it in being, and prevent it from being annihilated, or reduced to nothing).
4. If the cosmos needs an efficient cause of its continuing existence, then that cause must be a supernatural being, supernatural in its action, and one the existence of which is uncaused, in other words, the Supreme Being, or God.

This argument depends on the acceptance of the principle of cause and effect—that contingent entities exist of a causing agent. Even if this is accepted (most people would) the main weakness of this argument is that it cannot establish the nature of an originating or sustaining cause (in the case of the Kalam form of the argument). In addition, the unsaved heart finds ways around this argument. To Christians it seems very reasonable, since they believe from Scripture that God has created the universe. Yet many non-Christians have posited that the universe has always existed and that, while cause-and-effect is valid, the chain had no beginning.

The teleological argument

This argument—also called the argument from design—looks at the detail of material things in the universe and moves from intricacy of detail and effectiveness of function to a designer who must possess the ability to

⁴ Wikipedia has helpful entries on these arguments. Adler’s argument can be found at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cosmological_argument.

create complex natural machinery such as the eye or hand. The name comes from the Greek word *teleos*, which means ‘goal’ or ‘end.’ The idea is that the material universe is not random but demonstrates functions that have goals. Like a watch of human construction that was designed and made for the purpose of providing an index of time, the human brain or the leaves of a tree give every appearance of being purposeful. Some have suggested that the psalmist is reasoning this way when he says “Does he who implanted the ear not hear? Does he who formed the eye not see?” (Ps. 94:9). Note, however, that the writer is not trying to ‘prove’ the existence of God. The teleological argument cannot identify the character and nature of the designer beyond his power and intelligence. This kind of reasoning is foundational to today’s Intelligent Design movement.⁵

The anthropological argument

This argues from the features of our makeup, such as intelligence and personhood, to the existence of a being who is responsible for these things. This can be seen as a variation of the cosmological and teleological arguments. As with the preceding two arguments, it may point to a being that is like us, but cannot take us to the infinite being that God in Scripture shows himself to be.

The moral argument

This argument is used by C. S. Lewis in his *Mere Christianity*. It moves from the existence of moral law in the universe to a moral law giver. As with the other arguments we have seen, this could only tell us at most that God is a morally oriented being.

The ontological argument

The name of this argument comes from the Greek participle meaning ‘being,’ and reasons this way:

1. God is, by definition, a being greater than which nothing can be conceived (imagined).
2. Existence in reality is greater than existence in the mind.
3. God must exist in reality; if God did not, then God would not be that than which nothing greater can be conceived (imagined).

The core problem with this argument is making the leap from the thought of a perfect being to the existence of a perfect being. It has been discussed and argued for centuries.

Failure of the arguments for the existence of God

In the previous study I presented presuppositional apologetics in connection with the self-authenticating character of Scripture. In particular I wanted to show that a person can only reach God when he accepts Scripture as the defining source of truth in spiritual things. This is because Scripture is necessary to open his sin-closed heart as the Holy Spirit teaches and convicts. No other source of information can do this.

The so-called arguments for the existence of God that I have described briefly all fail *as arguments* to prove conclusively the existence of the God of the Bible. At best, they are suggestive. They are used in various forms by classical apologists. The use of these arguments can be described as ‘natural theology.’⁶ These

⁵ Note that believing in intelligent design does not make a person a creationist. Michael Behe, for example, who has written an important book on biophysical mechanisms (*Darwin’s Black Box*), is an evolutionist who sees God as involved in some way in the evolutionary process.

⁶ In his *Baker Dictionary of Christian Apologetics* (Baker Books: Grand Rapids, 1999, 521) Norman Geisler says that “natural theology depends on the rational arguments for God’s existence.” This should be distinguished from the ‘natural theology’ that all

arguments fail because the unsaved mind always rejects the things of God unless the Holy Spirit is drawing a person to Christ. Reymond shows the fallacy of this approach⁷:

The natural theologian maintains that it is not right to ask skeptics to believe in Christ on the basis of scriptural authority before they have had a change to consider the evidence supportive of the Christian claims. But does the unbeliever possess some independent criterion of verification which can and *should* authenticate the truth of Christian revelation in advance of faith?

I appreciate these words from J. I. Packer⁸:

All arguments for God's existence, all expositions of the analogy of being, of proportionality and of attribution, as means of intelligibly conceptualizing God, and all attempts to show the naturalness of theism, are logically loose. They state no more than possibilities (for probabilities are only one kind of possibility) and can all be argued against indefinitely. They cannot be made watertight, and if offered as such they can be shown not to be watertight by anyone who knows any logic. This will damage the credit of any theology that appears to be building and relying on these arguments.

We are back where we started in this study. All human beings have knowledge of the existence of a divine being, but they suppress it because they are at enmity with God. Arguments that present the same information will likewise always be rejected for the same reason. While such arguments can be encouraging and informative for the Christian, they should not be used in evangelism.

But we must maintain a biblical perspective in our study of God, in coming to understand more about him. Packer puts us on the right track here⁹:

What matters supremely, therefore, is not, in the last analysis, the fact that I know God, but the larger fact which underlies it—the fact that *He knows me*. I am graven on the palms of His hands. I am never out of His mind. All my knowledge of Him depends on His sustained initiative in knowing me. I know Him, because He first knew me, and continues to know me. He knows me as a friend, one who loves me; and there is no moment when His eye is off me, or His attention distracted from me, and no moment, therefore, when His care falters.

This is momentous knowledge. There is unspeakable comfort—in the sort of comfort that energises, be it said, not enervates—in knowing that God is constantly taking knowledge of me in love, and watching over me for my good. There is tremendous relief in knowing that His love to me is utterly realistic, based at every point on prior knowledge of the worst about me, so that no discovery now can disillusion him about me, in the way I am so often disillusioned about myself, and quench His

human beings capable of rational thought engage in, reasoning from what appears in nature (hence 'natural') to the existence of a divine being. Reymond gives this distinction in his *A New Systematic Theology of The Christian Faith* (2nd ed. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998, 137): "There is a legitimate sense in which the awareness of God that all people have by virtue of their being created in his image and by virtue of his inescapable revelation of himself to them in nature (Rom. 1:20) may be called 'natural theology.' With this use of the term I have no problem; indeed, I wholeheartedly endorse it. But when I refer to 'methodological natural theology' I am referring to that theological method whereby a 'first floor' philosophical prolegomenon is first built by natural reason working independently with what is portrayed as 'neutral data' upon which a 'second floor' set of beliefs derived from special revelation is later placed." This is not to say that presuppositionalists avoid all arguments for the existence of God. Some espouse the transcendental argument, which attempts to show that things such as logic, science and ethics are not meaningful apart from a belief in the existence of the God of Scripture.

⁷ Reymond, 150.

⁸ J. I. Packer, "Theism for Our Time," in *God Who Is Rich in Mercy* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1986), 13. A helpful article ("Christianity in Conflict") on presuppositional apologetics and the arguments for the existence of God can be found at http://www.bible.org/page.php?page_id=3644.

⁹ J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 37. Every Christian should read this book.

determination to bless me. There is, certainly, great cause for humility in the thought that He sees all the twisted things about me that my fellow-men do not see (and am I glad!), and that He sees more corruption in me than that which I see in myself (which, in all conscience, is enough). There is however, equally great incentive to worship and love God in the thought that, for some unfathomable reason, He wants me as His friend, and desires to be my friend, and has given His Son to die for me in order to realize this purpose.

Study questions

1. Follow up on some of the links found in the footnotes. Of particular value is the “Christianity in Conflict” article.
2. What does the fact that we cannot define God have to do with what he is like?
3. Try to describe in your own words why the presuppositionalist rejects the arguments for the existence of God.

Running compilation of key definitions

1. Systematic theology: The organized presentation of all that the Bible teaches about God and His works.
2. Exegesis: The actual practice of studying or interpreting a document or other message to determine its meaning.
3. Context: Context in a document or utterance is the surroundings of a portion of a word, a word, or a group of words.
4. Bibliology: The doctrinal study of the nature of the Bible.
5. Biblical authority: The quality inherent in Scripture by virtue of which human beings are completely answerable to its content.
6. Revelation: The information about Himself given by God to human beings.
7. General revelation: God's disclosure of Himself, available directly to everyone, given through means other than dreams, visions, direct words and Christ Himself.
8. Special revelation: The disclosure of information from God that is not available directly to all human beings.
9. Inspiration: A term applied to the Bible denoting that it is the product of God's creative activity, figuratively breathed out from Him (2 Tim. 3:16); applies to the process of recording Scripture, not specifically to the people involved; actually, *expiration* would be a better term to reflect the concept of 2 Tim. 3:16; the result is *inerrancy*.
10. Textual criticism: The science and art of attempting to discover the original text of a literary work for which the original document does not exist. It is especially important for biblical studies, and the foundational endeavor to all subsequent investigation of the Scriptures.
11. Canon: Transliterated from a Greek Word meaning "standard"; as used of the Bible, it refers to books authenticated as possessing divine origin and therefore authoritative; the Jewish canon consists of thirty-nine books, the Protestant of sixty-six and the Catholic of eighty (including apocryphal books).
12. Inerrancy is a term applied to the Bible, although not specifically found in it; it denotes that the Bible, as originally written, possessed no humanly induced deviations from the message God intended to be recorded and that it is true in every respect; 2 Tim. 3:16; 1 Cor. 2:13; 1 Pet. 2:19.
13. Infallibility: Although some assert that this term has a different meaning from inerrancy, the two terms are, for purposes of biblical study, synonymous; the Bible is infallible because inerrant, and inerrant because infallible.
14. Illumination is the teaching ministry of the Spirit of God that imparts understanding of the message of Scripture to the believer; not to be confused with inspiration, which in the Bible is used of the work of God in giving Scripture (2 Tim. 3:16); 1 Jn. 2:20; Jn. 16:13.
15. Theology proper is the study of the nature of God.