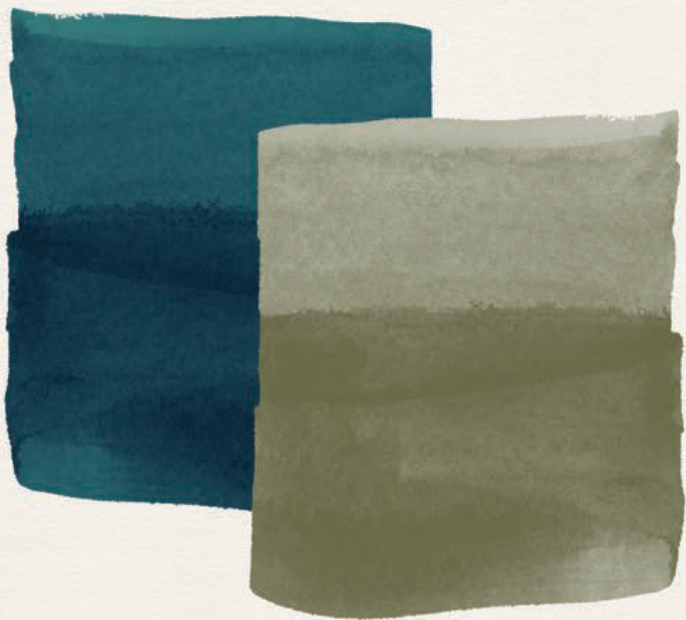


QUICK THEOLOGY

Interpreting the Bible Correctly



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INTRODUCTION

This booklet explores how we can make our theology sound. Everyone, even atheists, has a theology—a view of God and how He works. For Christians, the question is: is your view consistent with God's nature? Is the theology you hold the one God teaches in Scripture? Is it the theology that leads to the freedom and holiness that Jesus has for you? This may be repeat information. But even if you know, hearing it again equips you to share with others who think theology does not matter.

Before we get into practical details, let's define what theology is. Many Christians associate theology with dusty books and seminary degrees—things beyond them or that they do not have time for—but it is not about a library of books or going to seminary. Theology is about cultivating a view of God, a curiosity about our beliefs, and a willingness to own our faith through wrestling with difficult topics.

Some people inherit faith from their parents. They grew

up in a Christian home or were raised in the Church. Even people who did not grow up that way might spend 10 or 15 years in a church without questioning their beliefs or checking what they are taught against Scripture. Even those who do check their theology against Scripture may not own that faith for themselves. How much impact does following Jesus have on your life? A deep, thriving, growing faith will affect every choice you make and show in every relationship you have.

Our theology already dictates our choices. It affects how we parent our kids: when we teach them right and wrong; when we explain why they need to honor others; or why they should respect their parents. All of that is theological. When we discuss workplace rules we do not agree with ethically, we communicate our theology. When we decide how much time to give Bible study and how much time to give to other commitments, we base our priorities on our theology.

We must understand what we believe about God, His purpose for us, our humanity, our salvation, and the end times to know how to live well. That is why this is worth discussing again and again. We only have one life: one chance to live well for God and with God. This should not make

us live in paranoia; we should live with intention, and we should ground that intentionality in our understanding of God's nature. This understanding is not just for seminarians and people with big book budgets. All our questions about God's nature are answered in Scripture.

CHAPTER ONE

Growth in Theology

If we do not pursue theological growth, we will have a static understanding of God. Where is the harm in that? To understand, we must first understand the damage an unhealthy or unbiblical theology can cause.

Suppose you hold a theology of guilt or legalism: “I go to church three times a week. If I do not, God is angry at me.” Where did that theology come from? Maybe no one expressly taught it to you. Maybe you absorbed it from the culture you grew up in. Perhaps your family went to church three times a week, and your parents seemed anxious if anything prevented that. What consequences did they fear? God’s judgment or human judgment? Perhaps they did not

know themselves. But you absorbed their fear into your view of God: it became part of your theology. As you got older, perhaps going to church three times a week became impractical. That guilty weight could make you question whether going to church less than three times a week is worth anything at all. Or perhaps you go to church three times a week, regardless of the struggle. Pride in that decision might make you look down on people who do not do the same.

Does Scripture say you have to be in church three times a week to please God? Hebrews 10:24, says:

“We should keep on encouraging each other to be thoughtful and to do helpful things. Some people have given up the habit of meeting for worship, but we must not do that. We should keep on encouraging each other, especially since you know that the day of the Lord’s coming is getting closer.”

According to biblical scholar Justo González, at the time that was written, the early church met early Sunday morning or around midnight on Saturday for the breaking of bread, the apostle’s teaching, and prayer. With this context, we know we should prioritize spiritual growth in Christian

community, but we do not have specific instructions on how often that has to happen.

This is one example of how an improper or unbiblical theology can lead to guilt, shame, or even sin. We must check our beliefs against Scripture, and the proper context of that Scripture. That is how we know our theology is true, good, and leading us to holiness and freedom. If we do not check what we believe, we will remain in a static, unhealthy place. From there, we can easily slide into legalism (idolatry to a personal version of God, enforcing our convictions as if they were God's law, trying to be "good" for fear of other's opinions, and the pride or bitterness that comes of those things) or licentiousness (abusing our freedoms, living for our own desires and pleasures, exchanging core truths for personally appealing doctrine, addictions, and illicit sex). Studying our theology helps us better understand God's heart and better balance holiness and freedom.

CHAPTER TWO

Power of the Bible

Now that we understand the need for theological study and the danger of ignoring it, we reach the next question: where do we begin? We should always begin and end our search for God's nature in the Bible. Why should the Bible be our primary source? Because it is the inspired, infallible, inerrant Word of God.

The Bible's intent is to reveal God to humanity. God wanted to dwell with humans, that is why He made them, but sin entered the world and broke that relationship. The biblical narrative is the story of God returning to His dwelling place with people. It tells in detail how things went wrong and how God is making them right.

We see God's promise to make everything right in Genesis 3. Right after the fall of humanity (when humanity rejects God's way) in summary, God says, "You have brought a curse upon this world, and it can never be the same. But even so, I am going to bring a snake crusher who is going to win and redeem this world." From that moment on, the Old Testament records the preparation process for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, who bridges the gap between humanity and God. Through Jesus, God offers the hope of a relationship with Him, reversing the fall of man.

One vital thing about the Bible is its consistency about who God is. One prophet did not miraculously show up and say, "Listen to me, I found this book." No, God revealed himself in these ancient societies over thousands of years, and those revelations were written down and became Scripture. God is the same yesterday, today, and forever. When we look at Scripture, we see that what He says about Himself and humanity is consistent. We see again and again God's intent to dwell with humanity and draw us into a relationship with Him. Whether it is the Gospels, a prophetic word from someone like Isaiah, or the Exodus, these events had many witnesses. These eyewitnesses are very important to the biblical narrative. Its historical rooting, its consistency,

and its affirmation by eyewitnesses all speak to the Bible's trustworthiness.

The Bible may be an accurate record, but why do we need it? What power do these historical events have in daily life? The Word has the power to discern the thoughts and motives of our hearts (Heb 4:12). It can also open our hearts to what God is doing in the world and in us. Through the Word of God, we do not only learn about God's nature; God uses it to show us more about ourselves. We start by learning who He is and through that knowledge understand better who we are. Some people read a few passages, but when they do not feel anything or see immediate change, they get discouraged. We must remember that the Bible is not a novel and will not read like modern fiction. The Bible is ancient literature and contains many genres. It will not be an easy read, and we may not understand everything immediately. But when we study the Bible, it will always bring fruit (convicting, leading, and comforting us when we open our hearts and receive the truth it contains) because the Holy Spirit works through the Bible to show us the heart of God. People can resist the work of the Spirit. We can grieve Him, quench His voice, and choose to reject what Scripture says. But that does not make the Word

of God less powerful. When we approach the Bible with humility and a desire to understand, the Spirit will lead us to understanding. The power of the Word is an essential piece of having correct theology.

CHAPTER THREE

Genres of the Bible

Once we acknowledge that the Bible has authority (it is the Word of God), is infallible (it will not deceive us), and inerrant (it will not lead us to error and does not have errors that affect the overarching story and the consistency of the text), we are ready for the next question: how do we determine the correct interpretation of the Bible?

The Bible is not a simple book. It is a gathering of sixty-six ancient books translated from Hebrew and Greek—which most people today do not speak or read. The genres of the books of the Bible also affect how they should be interpreted.

Let's take a moment to explore the structure of Scripture. First, we have the Old Testament. The first five books are

called the Torah, or the Pentateuch, and these are a mixture of historical narrative and law. Historical narrative tells us the story of what happened in history—exactly like it sounds. When you read in Genesis about Jacob or in Exodus about Moses, you are learning something that happened in history. Then you get to Leviticus—that is the law. Another genre in the Old Testament is prophetic books. Prophecy uses parallelism and repetition to make a point about God and to bring truth and challenge to the people the book was written to. We also have Psalms, which are songs of praise to God that would have been set to music. Finally, we have wisdom literature like Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon. These are a mixture of repetition, like we see in prophecy, and simplified values and ideals about how to live an ethical and godly life.

Next, we will look at the New Testament, or the New Covenant. This compilation of books is made up of the Gospels, the book of Acts, and then a series of epistles (or letters) to specific churches talking about how Christians were to live. The Gospels outline four different perspectives of Jesus's life and ministry. Acts is the story of the early church, its founding, and how the missionary movement started. The Epistles describe how God met His church in

those early years. It also explores the problems the Church encountered and the things they needed to be taught about Jesus and life in Christ. Finally, Revelation is apocalyptic literature. Altogether, the Bible tells us about God's ultimate plan for the reconciliation of all things.

How does this all apply to biblical interpretation? Let's say, for example, you sit down to read Proverbs. Proverbs is relatively simple. In many ways, it can be taken at face value, and you can learn something from it quickly. However, some take what they read in Proverbs as promises. That is not how Proverbs is intended. It is not a list of guarantees: it is a list of observations about life and advice for living in a godly way. For example, the proverb that says, "Train up a child in the way he should go. And when he is old, he will not depart from it." This is not promising that if you do all the things right as a parent, your child will for sure walk with God. It is saying that if you train a child in the way of God, that child will most likely walk in God's way in the future. That understanding will help us interpret Proverbs more accurately.

In the world of the Church, there are so many different denominations and arguments around certain topics, and many point back to Scripture to confirm their stance. How

do we navigate these topics? If you are a new believer, or even if you've been a Christian for a while, you might wonder, "How the heck am I supposed to sift through all that?" Thankfully, God did not leave us with the Bible and say, "Good luck, figure it out." He did not leave us with massive gaps in the redemption story, either. God spoke pretty clearly on core elements of Scripture. We must also remember that we have the help of the Holy Spirit in the interpretation process. It takes time, but here is the great thing: you have your whole life to be a Bible student. You do not have to know it all right away. It is okay to be on a continual journey to understand the Bible. God wants to walk with you in this, and He reveals things to us as we need them.

CHAPTER FOUR

Exegesis and Eisegesis

Many differences in denomination and interpretation concern the details of Scripture and how to apply those details in daily life. But even on these issues, there is a process we can apply when interpreting a biblical text. To measure if our view lines up with God's intent and the historical teaching of the Church—which is called orthodoxy or sound teaching—we can ask a series of questions. The first question is: “Am I reading my own desired meaning into this text?”

When you read the Bible, are you trying to justify beliefs you hope are true, or are you drawing out the author's intended meaning? This is the difference between “exegesis”

(which means to draw the meaning out) and “eisegesis” (which means to put the meaning in). When we study the Bible, or any book for that matter, we want to understand the author’s intention and meaning to the audience they wrote for. We also need to keep in mind the pre-suppositions of the writer—something they assumed about God that is less obvious to us in our distant culture and time. Only then will we accurately translate that meaning to modern-day. If you are reading to justify a behavior, choice, or lifestyle you are more likely to search out the meaning you want rather than letting the text speak for itself.

Two closely related issues are allegorizing and false appropriation. Allegorizing happens when instead of reading the passage for what it is, some may try to find a mysterious or allegorical meaning behind it. This happens more often in a charismatic context. We need to be careful with this. Yes, sometimes the Lord does speak miraculously through a passage, and when He does, it can have profound meaning in an individual’s life. But most of the time, that is not the case.

False appropriation is when we take things we are acquainted with in contemporary culture and read them into a scriptural text, despite the author’s intent. I have seen this happen a lot recently. Gordon Fee, who wrote an excellent

book on these sorts of errors in interpretation, gives us the friendship between David and Jonathan in Samuel 20 as an example. The Bible says that “David loved Jonathan as he loved himself.” Sometimes people take this passage and say, “Clearly there was a homosexual relationship between David and Jonathan.” But Scripture does not say this anywhere at all. There is no indication of this. It is just two friends who love each other with a healthy love. When we take modern ideas about sexuality and read them into the Bible, it distorts our ability to find God’s nature and His truth.

The second question we can ask when refining our theology is: “What does the context of this verse or passage indicate about the author’s intent?” Often when people misinterpret the Bible, they take one verse out without acknowledging how the passages around it affect its meaning. This is so important. If you ignore the context of what you are reading, whether you ignore the surrounding passages or historical context, you can warp the meaning of a verse into whatever you want. An example is Psalm 46: “God is within her, she will not fall.” This verse is often quoted as an example of God’s support for women. But this verse is not talking about a woman: it is talking about the city of Jerusalem. When you look at the context, it does not mean

what people are trying to make it mean.

The third question is: "Does the conclusion I am drawing align with the whole counsel of Scripture?" Is your conclusion consistent with God's nature as portrayed through the whole Bible, or are you drawing a completely new conclusion that the Bible does not support? An example is Oneness Pentecostalism, which denies the Trinity. This view says, "God is not three persons in one: God, He is completely one and there is no Trinity." This conclusion is not supported in Genesis, the Gospels, or anywhere else in Scripture. If we create ideas about what Christianity is that are not supported by the whole counsel of Scripture, our interpretation cannot be correct.

The fourth question is: "Is this view consistent with both God's love and His holiness?" Most misinterpretations of Scripture emphasize either God's holiness or God's love, but not both. When interpretations overemphasize God's holiness, judgment, and righteousness, they demand repentance or proclaim unworthiness without acknowledging that it is God's kindness that draws us to repentance. When interpretations overemphasize love, they talk little about sin, judgment, God's just wrath, or His righteousness. Because Jesus is our friend and our brother, some portray God as

lenient. You will see theologians and pastors throughout the ages take both sides of this argument, but both are misinterpretations because they ignore the whole counsel of Scripture. They do not look at all of who God is.

CHAPTER FIVE

History of the Church

The fifth question is: “Does this interpretation contradict the historically held teachings of the Church?” This is why church history is so important. When you do not know your legacy of faith—the family lineage you have all around the global Church going back to the book of Acts—you will feel unrooted and isolated. It can feel like it is just you and Jesus doing this on your own. But that is not true. Through Acts 15, The Nicæan Creed, and the Athanasian Creed, the Church summarized the essence of Christian faith. These principles are called “core doctrine.” Think of Christianity as a tree with branches that represent interpretive methods or traditions within theology. So long as the branches lead back

to the trunk of the tree—which represents core doctrines—we have Christianity. There might be some variance in how people interpret things like baptism, the order of events in Holy Week, and things like that. But they do not challenge the core truths of God’s nature, humanity’s nature, the nature of sin, or God’s plan for salvation. This knowledge gives you the tools to understand what is a difference of opinion and what is truly false doctrine.

Equipped.org has a helpful article on the interpretation process:

“It is simply false to claim that no one can know the correct interpretation of a passage of the Bible. If in principle such accurate understanding cannot be achieved, then there would be no basis upon which to conclude that any given interpretation was not correct.”

This is called the fallacy of lost distinction, and it leads to moral relativism in biblical interpretation. Again, this is why theology matters. We have to know how to answer someone when they say, “That’s just your interpretation.” If it is a question of core doctrine (such as the resurrection, the

atonement, the virgin birth, the holiness required of Christians, or how we treat others), we cannot agree to disagree.

The written works of other Christians can also aid you in your study of theology. Most of us will never be Greek and Hebrew scholars and you do not have to be. Resources written by scholars can be very helpful. You do not have to do a deep study every day, but when you do, the work of Greek and Hebrew scholars who know the meaning of the original words can help you wrestle with the text. Commentaries, Bible dictionaries, and encyclopedias can also help you understand the historical and cultural setting behind Scripture. Some even have maps and extra cultural context to help you better understand what you read. There are many other helpful books, including *Every Woman a Theologian*, that divide theology into areas of study that focus on a specific aspect of God and His plan. These resources can help a lot, especially with learning specific terms and breaking study into manageable pieces. While learning from the journey of other Christians can be helpful, we always come back to the Bible. The ultimate foundation of a trustworthy commentator or scholar is his or her respect for the Word of God as an inspired text. We are looking to learn from people who have a high respect for the Word

of God: who see it as the historical and trustworthy word that it is. Only then can we trust that we are shaped by the Word of God in a way that equips us to share our faith effectively with others.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of all this study of theology is not so you can have head knowledge, but to usher you into a deeper faith and prepare you to be a compelling disciple-maker in this world. Regardless of whether or not we are in formal ministry, all of us are called to witness for Christ. If someone asked you to explain the gospel, could you do it? If your coworker came to you with questions about why Jesus had to die or your child asked you to define the Trinity, could you provide an answer? This world needs you. You have a unique voice, unique equipment, and the ability to reach people who will never listen to anyone else. People will listen to you because you are in their lives: they know you and trust you. Your witness shines an invaluable light in their journey.

You are a theologian. Maybe a theologian in the making but a theologian, nonetheless. As you follow Jesus, He is going to shape you and prepare you as you devote your mind and

Conclusion

heart to knowing Him better. That deep, thriving, growing faith will fill your life and provide a bright light to others.

IS THE THEOLOGY YOU HOLD THE ONE GOD TEACHES IN SCRIPTURE?

Delve into understanding the Bible and explore how theology shapes everyday choices and impacts relationships. By focusing on core doctrines, the historical teachings of the Church, and openness to the Holy Spirit, this guide equips readers to engage with theological diversity with wisdom and discernment while staying rooted in a sound understanding of God's nature and His redemptive plan.

This book addresses pitfalls like guilt, legalism, and misinterpretation of Scripture. It also offers practical advice for cultivating a balanced and biblically grounded theology.

Phylicia Masonheimer is a bestselling author, Bible teacher, and host of the *Verity* podcast. Her blog and shop, *Every Woman a Theologian*, exists to teach Christians how to know what they believe and live that out boldly. Because theology touches every area of life, you'll see content on everything—from baptism to motherhood to marriage! She lives in Michigan with her husband and three children.



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