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THEOLOGY BASICS

*A Summary of Fundamental
Christian Beliefs*

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Introduction

Welcome to Theology Basics! I wrote this short book as a light overview of Christian theology—an introduction to basic Bible teaching about Christ, the gospel, and life with Him! If you are new to theology, the more expansive books can be a bit intimidating, especially if you don't know the terms or where the concepts are found in Scripture. I hope this book serves as an introduction to these concepts without the intimidation and overwhelm!

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

For personal use: If you're reading Theology Basics by yourself, I recommend reading a short section as your personal quiet time with God or after your study time is complete. I have included suggested Scripture passages for further study on each topic, so you can easily use these passages as a foundation for Bible study (to learn how to break down a Bible study passage, see the Bible Study Basics book in the Every Woman a Theologian shop or utilize the free tips I share on social media!). The discussion questions can be used as journal prompts to help you critically think through the topics!

For small groups: This revised and updated Theology Basics includes passages and discussion questions for small group exploration! I recommend reading a short section of the book

aloud, then looking up the relevant passages as a group. Take turns reading these passages aloud, being sure to follow cross references and read study Bible notes. The discussion questions will provide further ideas for group discussion.

Theology can be a touchy subject in group settings. We bring our church experiences and childhood traditions to these conversations. Be sensitive to the diverse experiences in your group. The leaders are responsible for creating a structure to keep the conversation from devolving into debate. While healthy conversation is great, intense theological debates do not produce the kind of intimate Christian unity God is after for His church! Quieter members may feel intimidated and discouraged from sharing their opinions if louder, more opinionated members talk over them or speak in a condescending way about a different view. Understanding the “tiers of theology”—first, second, and third tier theological issues—is very helpful for leaders who are directing theological conversations (listen to the podcast episode of Verity with Phylcia Masonheimer: How to Determine Core Doctrine or find the book by the same name in the Every Woman a Theologian shop).

Remember: the goal of studying theology is not to prove us right and others wrong. The goal is intimacy with God, understanding of His purposes, and a renewed desire to share Him with the world.

I am praying for each person who reads and uses this book, that it may launch you into a deeper walk with God and ignite in you a passion for the world to meet Him through you!

Phylcia Masonheimer



What is *Theology?*

By its most simple definition, theology is *the study of the nature of God*. By that definition, every Christian should be a theologian! In fact—believe it or not—*you already have a theology*.

It's true! Every person has assumptions and beliefs about God's nature from which they form their view of the world. Our job as Christians is to check those assumptions against objective truth and to ask, "Is what I assume about God and His nature actually true?"

Many things can color our theology: An abusive parent, a legalistic church, false teaching, and political ideology can alter our view of God in ways that do not line up with who He has revealed Himself to be. We can even embrace wrong theology based on *good* things, such as love or a comfortable, conflict-free upbringing. Any time we allow our view of God's character to remain subjective—or unchecked by the universal standard of Scripture—we make God small.

We all have a theology. We just need to check it against the Word of God. Is what we believe about Him accurate to Scripture? Or is it laden with our own assumptions and experiences?

This short book will give you some foundational principles of Christian theology. They may be helpful in explaining the Christian worldview to secular friends, for understanding the

church in which you were raised, and for discerning through worldview material you encounter in everyday life. But ultimately, theology is meant to draw us closer to the heart of God as a person. As C. S. Lewis said, “Doctrine leads to devotion!” The more we dedicate ourselves to studying who God is and how He chose to reveal Himself in the world, the more confident we become in our faith. And that is not just confidence with unbelievers; it is an inner confidence in our personal walk with Him.

Every author of a systematic theology brings a particular bias to their text. Though this is by no means a systematic work—we are only in the kiddie pool of theology!—I, too, bring a particular stance to what I write. I have striven to present multiple viewpoints wherever possible so the reader can continue their research into alternative views. However, since we lack resources from an Wesleyan-Arminian perspective and I am a Wesleyan, I have highlighted ideas and sources from that persuasion to bring an often-ignored viewpoint to the table.

There is so much we could cover in this edition of *Theology Basics*, so we will be concentrating on a few essentials that I believe will equip readers to understand deeper theological works that will use similar terms.



Bibliology

The Authority of Scripture

Before we can talk about the nature of God, man, sin, or anything else, we have to discuss the place from which we gather this information—the Bible! Christians ground the truth of their beliefs in the objective standard of God’s Word. But how do we know we can trust this compilation of documents? Where did they come from? Aren’t they full of errors?

These are valid questions, and we need to know their answers. Remember: It is not wrong to question the Bible. Studying theology often brings as many questions to light as it does answers. But the Christian life is not one of constant questioning; it is not existing in a state of never-ending doubt. There are fundamental truths we can stand on, and those truths are rooted in history, just like the Bible itself.

WHERE DID THE BIBLE COME FROM?

The Protestant (non-Catholic) Bible is a compilation of sixty-six individual books (originally scrolls). There are thirty-nine in the Old Testament and twenty-seven in the New. In the original Hebrew Bible, many of these Old Testament books were combined together. The Tanakh (an abbreviation for the three sections of the Hebrew Bible) contained either 22 or 24 scrolls, depending on which version was used. Kings, Chronicles, and Ezra-Nehemiah were known to be combined.

When Greek culture began to influence the Jewish faith, many scrolls were converted to codexes, and the order of books changed—even though it was all the same content.

The Old Testament we have today was transmitted orally at first. Oral tradition was the norm even into the days of the early church when the New Testament was being written! In fact, it was so customary that one Roman orator said, “For my own part, I think we should not write anything which we do not intend to commit to memory.” What kept oral histories accurate was:

- Community accountability
- Expectation of memorization
- Connection to eyewitness

Those boring genealogies in Genesis? Those were a way of keeping track of lineage, but they also serve as a record showing how closely connected these accounts were to those who lived them.

Though oral transmission was important, so was writing down the accounts. We know Moses did this with the law (e.g. Exodus 34). We see other people recording what God did such as Joshua (Joshua 24:26), David (Psalms), Isaiah, and other prophets as time progressed. By the time of Jesus there was an accepted Hebrew Bible made up of the three Tanakh sections, beginning in Genesis and ending in Chronicles. This is the Bible Jesus would have studied, quoted, and understood, and it is the Old Testament we have today—just in a different order!

The New Testament likewise began as eyewitness testimony. Here are some quick facts about the gospels specifically:

- All four were written during the lifetimes of the eyewitnesses.

- When an apostolic text was written, it was counted as authoritative (2 Thessalonians 2:15, 3:14; 2 Peter 3:15-16). Texts after eyewitnesses died were not authoritative because no actual witnesses were available.
- 2nd century church father Irenaeus testified to the gospels: “Matthew published his Gospel among the Hebrews in their own language, while Peter and Paul were preaching and founding the church in Rome. After their departure, Mark, the disciple and translator of Peter, passed down to us in writing those things that Peter preached; and Luke, the attendant of Paul, recorded in a book the Gospel that Paul declared. Afterward, John, the disciple of the Lord, who also reclined on his bosom, published his Gospel while staying at Ephesus in Asia.”
- 1 Timothy 5:18 indicates early Christians viewed both Old and New Testament accounts as authoritative; it quotes Deuteronomy 25:4 and Luke 10:7.

WHY CAN WE TRUST THE BIBLE?

The Bible was compiled progressively (over time) and closely to the eyewitness accounts; it was preserved in community and held doctrinally accountable. But why should we trust it?

First, the narrative of redemption, God’s character, and the themes of justice and reconciliation are consistent from Genesis to Revelation. How could sixty-six books, authored by half that many people across thousands of years, maintain doctrinal consistency in a purely fictional account? And if they did manage it, why all the effort? What would be gained by the authors’ labor? Either these authors really believed the accounts were true, saw testimony in creation (Romans 1), and trusted divinely-inspired authority (1 Timothy 3:16)...or they were

crazy!

The Old Testament is adamantly opposed to false prophets, or people who claimed to speak in the name of ‘HaShem’ (God) but who actually did not serve Him at all. In fact Deuteronomy 18 outlines what to do with a false prophet, and it is not pretty! Later in 1 Kings and the minor and major prophetic books we see harsh judgments brought upon people who lied about God’s character. The Bible has a consistent message of grace and blessing for those who walk with the Lord, and followers of God preserved that message.

We see the same dedication to truth about God in the New Testament era. The early church vetted material about Jesus to make sure it aligned with Christian doctrine. Gnostic gospels, or books written about Jesus and the apostles but which denied the humanity of Christ, were rejected. These books were not connected to eyewitnesses, and they contained major theological flaws. By rejecting books that did not align with the existing Scriptures, the biblical narrative was preserved.

We trust the Bible because it is historically rooted, progressively canonized, and consistent in its doctrinal teaching. It is also the only religious book where God makes a way to know man instead of man having to make his way to God! The concept of grace—the solution to man’s sin—is specific to Christianity and is revealed to us in Scripture.

WHAT ABOUT ERRORS?

Both the New and Old Testaments were carefully preserved by copyists. Old Testament scribes were painstakingly meticulous in how they recorded the law of God, as well as the writings and prophets up to and past the time of Jesus. Before the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered, the earliest Old Testament manuscripts we had were from approximately AD 900. But when the scrolls were found, they included

manuscripts from as early as 125 BC! When the Isaiah Dead Sea scroll was compared to the Masoretic Text (the one from AD 900), the results were astounding.

Scholar Millar Burrows describes it:

“Of the 166 words in Isaiah 53, there are only seventeen letters in question. Ten of these letters are simply a matter of spelling, which does not affect the sense. Four more letters are stylistic changes, such as conjunctions. The remaining three letters comprise the word ‘light’, which is added in verse 11, and does not affect the meaning greatly... Thus, in one chapter of 166 words, there is only one word (three letters) in question after a thousand years of transmission—and this word does not significantly change the meaning of the passage.”

Can you say WOW?! Over one thousand years of copying a text—an important Messianic text, we might add—and the variations are *that* slight!

Likewise, the New Testament we have today is based on early Greek manuscripts. So many of these survived that they were used as a measure to confirm accuracies in later texts.

Scholar Timothy Paul Jones says about the Bible’s accuracy: “In the few instances where uncertainty about the right reading remains, none of the possibilities changes anything that Christians believe about God or about His work in the world.” In other words, small copy errors do exist in the Scriptural narrative. But these do not change the narrative story about Jesus or the gospel.

You might ask, “Well yes, but what about inerrancy? Doesn’t that mean no errors at all?” Actually, no! The definition of inerrancy is ‘not in error’ or ‘unable to deceive’. The original Hebrew and Greek texts (called ‘original autographs’) are

considered inerrant and infallible, not every copy made afterward. In ensuing translations, there may be variations in language or minor copy errors along the way; inerrancy means none of these alter the core doctrinal truths of Scripture—truths which are unable to deceive us.

*For more on how the Bible was compiled and more on translations, errors, and objections, listen to the 12-part Canon Series on Verity Podcast or visit the Every Woman a Theologian shop to grab the complete transcription of that series in the book *How the Bible Came to Be*. The series includes a discussion of translation methods, the apocryphal books, and more.*

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Does this definition of inerrancy challenge you? Why or why not?
2. How does the accuracy of the Bible affect your view of God and His Word?
3. If the Bible is not accurate or trustworthy, what alternatives do we have? What effect does that have on our faith?



Theology

The Nature of God

The Bible is ultimately about God. It is His story, one in which we get to participate! But while the Bible teaches us everything we need to know about God, there is not a Cliff's Notes to God's nature. We do not pick it up and find a list of God's character traits ready to go! Rather, the character of God is woven through stories about humans like us. He is portrayed in songs praising His love and justice. He is assumed in prophetic speeches about judgment and reconciliation. We learn God's character by learning to study God's Word!

When theologians study the Bible, they create terms to express concepts found within it. For instance, the word 'Trinity' doesn't exist in Scripture, but the concept clearly does! Similarly God's 'omnipotence' is not expressed using that word, but it is implied through the authors' writing about His power and sovereignty. Understanding God's nature in Scripture requires a little digging, comparing notes across the Bible, and reading the trusted works of orthodox (which means 'sound teaching') scholars from the last two thousand years of church history.

God has many attributes, and we could never cover them all in this short guide! Instead, we will highlight a few of the most obvious traits of Father, Son, and Spirit that are core to Christian doctrine and belief.

GOD IS TRIUNE

No analogy to the Trinity can ever fully express the nature of God, but it is important that we discuss this vital doctrine all the same! The concept of God as Trinity is found in the Bible from Genesis to Revelation. This doctrine is so important, scholar Michael Reeves said, “because the Christian God is triune, the Trinity is the governing center of all Christian belief, the truth that shapes and beautifies all others.”

As shared earlier, some argue that the Trinity is not *actually* in the Bible, since we do not find that word in its pages. But neither do we find other doctrinal terms such as complementarian, Baptist, or any of the many descriptors Christians use to define specific doctrines. God as three-in-one—Father, Spirit, Son—is woven in Scripture from the creation narrative (Genesis 1:1, 1:27-28, 2:7) to under the oak with Abraham (Genesis 18). It is seen empowering Joshua to battle (Numbers 27:18), guiding judges in wisdom (Judges 3, 6, 13), inspiring prophets (Ezekiel 2), and filling and empowering followers of the Son, children of God (Acts 2).

The Angel of the Lord, seen in several instances throughout the Old Testament, is considered by many scholars to be a ‘theophanic appearance’—an appearance of God/Christ in human form before Jesus walked the earth. This is assumed because the Angel speaks for God in the first person (Genesis 16:10, 22:11, 31:11). One of the three men who visit Abraham under the oak is believed to be an Old Testament visitation from God, because he not only remains and speaks with Abraham but “goes on his own way” in human form (Gen. 18:33). In 1 Corinthians 10:9-10, Paul equates the Israelites testing God with the church testing Christ, saying these two are one and the same.

One of the most powerful testimonies to God’s triune

nature is in Isaiah 11:

“There shall come forth a Rod from the stem of Jesse, And a **Branch** [Messiah, Jesus] shall grow out of his roots. The **Spirit of the Lord** shall rest upon Him, The Spirit of wisdom and understanding, The Spirit of counsel and might, The Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the **Lord**.”

(Isaiah 11:1-2, NKJV)

How do we express the Trinity as a concept without making it seem like we worship three gods? And how do we describe God in such a way that we do not fall into heresies like modalism—the idea that God is one but has three ‘modes’?

Father John Behr’s succinct way of describing the Trinity grants some clarity to the issue:

“...there is one God and Father, one Lord Jesus Christ, and one Holy Spirit, three ‘persons’ (hypostases) who are the same or one in essence (ousia); three persons equally God, possessing the same natural properties, yet really God, really distinct, known by their personal characteristics. Besides being one in essence, these three persons also exist in total one-ness or unity.”

Another way to think of it: I am human, but I am also daughter, sister, and mother. I am all three of those ‘people’ or roles, but I am still one in essence (human). Again, no analogy is perfect. The Trinity must be made up of both individual persons and one monotheistic spirit to reflect what the Bible teaches. That is hard to express! If your head is still spinning a little, it is okay. The theology of the Trinity is a lot to grasp! But what we can take away is very simple:

The Bible speaks clearly to the Trinity in the Old and New

Testaments.

The concept of the Trinity is fundamental to Christianity and, in particular, to salvation.

Because God is Trinity, He is by nature loving (Father loves the Son and the Spirit, and they love Him); this outward, communal nature is so inherent to who God is that it underlies every other doctrine of the Christian faith and distinguishes Christianity from monotheistic religions like Islam.

God's triune nature is in perfect unity. Because God is unified by nature, He can (and does) ask us to pursue unity with Him and with our fellow Christians.

Passages to read: 1 Corinthians 8:6, 2 Corinthians 13:14, Colossians 2:9, John 1, Luke 1:35, Ephesians 4:4-6, Colossians 1:15-17, John 14:9-11

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. If God is not triune, how does this impact our daily walk with Him?
2. If God is triune, how does this impact our daily walk with Him?
3. How is the Trinity a foundation for the Christian ethics of love and unity?
4. What would happen if one Person of the Trinity were removed? What effect would that have on Christianity?

GOD IS OMNIPOTENT

What does omnipotent mean? Biblically, this term describes God's *all-powerful* nature. The word comes from two Latin roots, *omnis* (all) and *potens* (power). When this attribute is expressed over creation, we say that God is sovereign. Wayne Grudem describes omnipotence as God's ability to do "all His holy will." This definition is important because it is not the same as saying "God can do anything." There are certain things God cannot do—things that deny His nature! For example:

God cannot sin (Hebrews 6:18)

God cannot stop being God (2 Timothy 2:13)

God cannot tempt us to evil (James 1:13)

All of these things would require God denying His perfection, power, or purity. Therefore, God is able to do anything consistent with His character, and He is unable to do things that deny who He is. This "inability" is a form of self-restraint; His holiness restrains Him from doing evil.

Where does the Bible teach about God's power and sovereignty? Many places, but here are a few:

"Great is our Lord, and abundant in power; his understanding is beyond measure." (Psalm 147:5)

"Ah, Lord God! It is you who have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and by your outstretched arm! Nothing is too hard for you." (Jeremiah 32:17)

"For behold, he who forms the mountains and creates the wind, and declares to man what is his thought, who makes the morning darkness, and treads on the heights of the earth— the Lord, the God of