

THE DISCIPLINES OF KNOWING (1): THEOLOGY



KNOW, LOVE, SERVE
PART 4

T. M. MOORE

A REVISION STUDY FROM
THE FELLOWSHIP OF AILBE

The Disciplines of Knowing (1): Theology
Know, Love, Serve: Part 4
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The Fellowship of Ailbe

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Welcome to *The Disciplines of Knowing (1): Theology*

We have been considering the various skills we need to master as we approach the revelation of God in Scripture and in creation. The revelation of God shines with the Light of truth, but we need to know how to access that light through proven disciplines, beginning with the disciplines of theology.

Theology is the disciplined pursuit of the knowledge of God and His glory. It consists of six related and overlapping sub-disciplines, each of which offers a vantage point or window onto the knowledge of God. As we learn to “look through” these windows on the revelation of God, we can expect to increase in the knowledge and love of Jesus, and to be more consistent and effective in serving Him.

ReVision studies are designed as brief introductions to the subject under consideration. We hope they will enlarge your worldview, help you to become more firmly rooted in Scripture, equip you to minister to others, and stimulate you to want to learn more about the Word of God and the Biblical worldview.

We’re happy to provide this study at no charge. If you find these studies helpful, we hope you’ll consider sending a gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, to help us in making these resources available to others.

And if you find this study helpful, please let us know. How have you benefited from this study? Go to our website, www.ailbe.org, and use the Contact Us button to share your story.

May the Lord bless your study of His Word.

T. M. Moore
Principal

1 Theology

We're all theologians, like it or not.

"For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the LORD, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon Me and go and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart." Jeremiah 29.11-13

Natural-born seekers

Human beings are natural-born seekers. It is built into the warp and woof of our souls to discover things.

Consider just a few of the ways this instinct comes to expression: looking for hidden Easter eggs; playing hide-and-go-seek; putting puzzles together; solving problems; looking for a job or a new home; figuring out a recipe for a new dessert; playing "20 Questions" over dinner; working on some new invention; spelunking with some friends; going on a scavenger hunt; searching for just the right Christmas or birthday gifts; and much more.

Human beings are made to seek. And this deep-seated, natural-born instinct has an overarching purpose, which is designed to aid us in growing in the knowledge of Christ.

As we have seen in this study, our chief end in life is to know, love, and serve God. He has embedded His glory in Scripture and created things. The essential theme of all Scripture is Jesus Christ (Jn. 5.39). Moreover, because He made and upholds the cosmos, we expect to discover there glimpses of and insights to His majesty, wisdom, goodness, power, love, and more. God, Solomon explains, has "concealed" things for His royal children to "search out" (Prov. 25.2). And if our search is unwaveringly focused on growing in the knowledge of Jesus, we have God's promise, that if we will pray and call on Him, and seek and search for Him with all our heart, we will find Him.

Find Him! Could there be any more motivating incentive for us to take up the task of increasing in the knowledge of God? God has made us to seek Him in all the places He is making Himself known, and He promises that, if we'll devote ourselves to this with all diligence, *we will find Him*, discover His glory, increase in the knowledge of and love the Lord, know fullness of joy and holy pleasures forevermore (Ps. 16.11), and serve Him as living sacrifices all the days of our lives.

I hope you're persuaded by now that this is a pursuit well worth engaging.

Seeking God

The pursuit of God – which leads to Him and His pleasures and joy – is also known as *theology*. Now I hope that by mentioning that word, I have not put a damper on anybody's rising hopes and aspirations. In our day, *theology* is not a term that rings a bell or flips a switch in most of us. Our instinctual response to the word *theology* is something like, "Boring!" or "Snooty" or "High-minded" or perhaps simple "Meh". Rarely is our response to the prospect of theological study something like, "Let me at it!"

But theology is nothing more or less than the disciplined pursuit of the knowledge of God and His glory. The word derives from two Greek words, *theos* or "God" and *-ology* or "a word". Theology is just a word about God, and in the work of theology, we're simply trying to combine and compare words about God, to improve our understanding of Him, and draw closer to Him in love, so that the fragrance of the knowledge of God might more firmly attach to us.

In a very real sense, therefore, every route that we might take to increase in the knowledge of Jesus Christ is a form of theological study. Whether we're examining creation, reading history or a biography, taking up our paints, composing or studying music, examining a poem, sitting in on a science class, attending a seminar or workshop – in all these activities, if we keep in mind that Jesus is making Himself known here, and if we pursue *Him* in all our searching, we may expect to increase in Him. And as we do, we'll be doing the work of theology – the disciplined pursuit of the knowledge of God and His glory.

Theologians all

As you might expect, doing theology takes a little preparation. Just as learning to paint requires a few lessons on color, texture, themes and subjects, perspective, iconography, and much more; so learning to do the work of theology requires some preparation and familiarity with how the pursuit of God is properly engaged. When God says, "Seek Me!", our response must be, "Your face, LORD, I will seek" (Ps. 27.8). But as in any other seeking activity, we need to answer the question, "How?"

Because we are all natural-born seekers, and because what we're all created to seek is God Himself (cf. Acts 17.24-27), there's a sense in which, whether or not we know it or agree with the idea, we're all theologians. We're all seeking God. Even lost people are seeking God. If they won't worship the God Who made them, they'll create other gods – wealth, sex, fame, power, things – and pursue those with the ardor God intends they should apply toward knowing Him (Rom. 1.18-32).

We're all theologians, all God-seekers. The problem is, most of us aren't very *good* theologians. Not because we wouldn't like to be, but because – like the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8.31) – we've never had any real guidance in pursuing the Lord through all the means and by all the disciplines available to us. We want to know, love, and serve God increasingly, but we're not quite sure how to go about it.

As we take up the disciplines of theological study – don't wince, just accept it – we will find that everything we do in life takes on a new perspective. Now we have means and tools for searching through the brush and jungle of life to discover paths that lead to Jesus, and to observe markers He Himself has left for us to urge and guide us in our searching.

In this study we will examine six foundational theological disciplines, with the idea of becoming better theologians and making greater progress in knowing, loving, and serving our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

For reflection

1. What has been your approach to seeking the Lord with all your heart? Can you see ways you might improve in this?
2. We are made to seek God, and everybody is seeking Him. Why isn't everybody finding Him? Why aren't even many Christians making much progress in this calling?
3. How would you explain to an unbelieving friend what it's like actually to have *found* the Lord, and to continue *finding Him* day by day?

Next Steps – Preparation: Talk with a Christian friend about the idea that everybody is a theologian. Share some of your thoughts about how you are hoping to improve as a theologian.

2 Biblical Theology

The pursuit begins here.

And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself. Luke 24.27

Overlapping disciplines

We begin to explore – really, just to fly over – the disciplines that make up the work of theology. Let’s remember that theology is that raft of disciplines by which we pursue God, that we may find Him, as He has promised, and increase in the knowledge of Jesus Christ. Put more formally, theology is the disciplined pursuit of the knowledge of God and His glory, which we undertake through six disciplines, each of which offers a “window” on the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

As with any bank of windows, the more of them we look through, the clearer will be our vision of whatever they open to us. The disciplines of theology are separate and unique. At the same time, because they focus on the same end – knowing God through Jesus Christ – and depend on the same divine illumination – that which the Spirit provides – a certain amount of overlap exists between these disciplines, so that we are never *purely* making use of one of them without some input from others.

The six disciplines – Biblical theology, creational theology, historical theology, systematic theology, practical theology, and spiritual theology – allow us to seek the Lord in every place where He is revealing Himself. They also furnish us with the outlook and mindset for seeking the Lord through a wide variety of other disciplines, including those which make up a traditional school curriculum. And they guide us into the wisdom of God through the daily application of what we are learning about Jesus.

The place to begin in using these disciplines effectively is where the light shines brightest and the vision is most explicitly clear. And that is in the discipline of Biblical theology.

Foundation and cornerstone

Biblical theology lays the foundation and sets the cornerstone for seeking the Lord by every other available means. Unless we are grounded in Scripture, and know how to look through the lens of God’s Word at all our experience and all other sources of the knowledge of Christ, we will always be susceptible to being blown off course in our pursuit of God and His glory, by the winds of self and worldly thinking.

The discipline of Biblical theology unlocks the narrative of Scripture, teaching us how to discern God’s overall purpose in having created all things, and guiding us by stages to the redemption and reconciliation He has provided in Jesus Christ. In Biblical theology we study the books and themes of Scripture, following a historical timeline by which God’s overarching plan and economy unfold. Three primary themes guide the revelation of every book and section of Scripture – God’s glory, God’s people, and God’s work of redemption – and these themes weave together to create a consistent and ever-clearer narrative of God and His work on our behalf.

To practice Biblical theology we must first commit to regular and faithful reading of all the Bible. Reading the Bible over and over again will help us improve our understanding of the overarching narrative and flow of Scripture, at the same time allowing us to increase in the knowledge of God with each successive pass through His Word.

We’ll want to learn the differences in the types of revelation God uses in Scripture – history, biography,

poetry, prophecy, gospel, epistle, and apocalyptic, for example. When we're working in the discipline of Biblical theology, we move back and forth with increasing ease and depth between all the different kinds and periods of divine revelation, following the development of primary themes, and noting the contribution of each section to the overarching narrative.

And, of course, at all times, we want to hear the voice of God in His Word, speaking directly to us about our need and calling, and guiding us by stages into ever-increasing knowledge of Christ and deeper intimacy with Him.

It can be helpful, in our study of Scripture, to have available to us works of Christian thinkers who have devoted themselves to the discipline of Biblical theology, to help us along the way and keep us from straying off the path God Himself indicates in His Word. Many excellent resources are available in the form of Bible dictionaries, commentaries, study guides, and writings specifically about the discipline of Biblical theology.

Biblical theology lays the foundation and sets the cornerstone, not only for all theological study, but for all study of any aspect of life. If we want to find Jesus in the things He has revealed, we must first learn to do so consistently and personally from His Word. The disciplines of Biblical theology can train and guide us in this effort, and thus prepare us for a life of seeking the Lord through other areas of reading and study.

Themes and structure

In His great high-priestly prayer of John 17, Jesus revealed the things that were most urgently on His heart, and which we can assume are the primary themes of all Scripture: the glory of God, the people God has chosen for Himself, and the work of Christ in redeeming and securing that people for God. Wherever we are reading or studying in Scripture, we are engaged with all three of these themes. As we work our way from Genesis to Revelation, we find our understanding of these themes – how they weave together into one powerful narrative of redemption – grows, is embellished and enlarged, and becomes increasingly personal as a source of great comfort, confidence, and joy.

In addition, we find a structure to Scripture that sees the revelation of God unfolding according to His covenant and toward His Kingdom. Each of these is present from the very beginning of Scripture; but each develops more fully as the narrative of Scripture unfolds. The covenant – with its promises, mandates, and sanctions – is ultimately fulfilled in Jesus. And Jesus announces and “brings near” the promised Kingdom of God, that holy spiritual realm over which He reigns and which operates by the power of grace and the Spirit of God, according to the teaching of God's Word.

We will benefit the most from our studies in Scripture if we will learn to take this Biblical theology approach – always seeking greater understanding of the primary themes of Scripture, making note of the glorious unfolding of its structure, and listening for the Spirit to bring us to Jesus, so that we may know, love, and serve Him day by day.

For reflection

1. Why do we say that Biblical theology must be the foundation and cornerstone of all our seeking to increase in the knowledge of Jesus Christ?
2. Biblical theology provides a “lens” to help us make the best use of all other disciplines. Explain.
3. What can you do to begin making better use of the discipline of Biblical theology?

Next Steps – Preparation: As you read and study God's Word, always ask what you are learning about its primary themes and commanding structures. Seek Jesus at every place in His Word, and always look to Him to guide you in applying Scripture to your life.

3 Creational Theology

*I will meditate on the glorious splendor of Your majesty,
And on Your wondrous works.
All Your works shall praise You, O LORD,
And Your saints shall bless You.
They shall speak of the glory of Your kingdom,
And talk of Your power,
To make known to the sons of men His mighty acts,
And the glorious majesty of His kingdom. Psalm 145.5, 10-12*

For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse, because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Romans 1.20, 21

The second book of divine revelation

At various places in this study on growing in the knowledge of Jesus Christ, we have mentioned that creation is a powerful source of revelation. While Scripture is the *primary* light of divine revelation, creation is a *secondary* light, a reliable source of information about God, His attributes, and His will. God speaks to us through the book of creation, and because He does, we hope to find Him there, and should apply ourselves to seeing and hearing what He has to say.

As Paul observed, those who refuse to follow through with God’s revelation in creation will not give Him thanks, will become misguided in their thinking, and will find that their hearts become darkened, so that they are no longer interested in God or inclined to pursue knowing Him. Indeed, those who ignore the messages of God in creation – which continually praises Him and provokes His saints to bless and thank and declare His mighty acts – come under the displeasure of God, and grow continually more distant from Him (Rom. 1.22-32).

This second book of divine revelation is rich with insights into our Lord Jesus Christ. All who ignore God’s revelation of Himself there are “without excuse” before Him. We who know the Lord must not neglect this area of pursuit. Rather, let us listen to the psalmist, who insists that we will need to “meditate” on the revelation of God in creation; and meditation takes time, and a disciplined approach to seeking the Lord in His works.

This theological discipline is referred to as *creational theology*.

Creational theology

In the work of creational theology we are simply pursuing the knowledge of God through the works of creation. These include *all* the works of creation – the natural world, culture and cultures, and the workings of the human soul (mind, heart, conscience). Even those who do not believe in God understand that the world and its creatures and cultures are a rich source of information to help us in various ways. The disciplines of the humanities and sciences are designed to mine these works of God for as much as we can learn, to improve our lives in the here and now.

We can benefit from such studies; however, if we want these studies to help us in knowing, loving, and serving the Lord Jesus Christ, we’ll have to put on our Biblical and creational theology goggles as we go into the arena and lab of the humanities and science studies.

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In creational theology, we focus on the works of God. Paul could see the work of God in the daily grind of agriculture (Acts 14.17) and the lofty speculations of unbelieving philosophers and poets (Acts 17.27, 28). Jesus pointed to such everyday aspects of creation as birds, seeds, gardens, coins, trees, human relationships, and more to draw out valuable lessons concerning His Kingdom. Think how impoverished our understanding of the Gospel would be without the parables of Jesus!

Jesus and Paul were simply doing creational theology, just as you and I can do. But we will need to make the time for it, and learn to practice meditation – waiting on the Lord, pondering His works, asking questions about what we see, and listening for any insights from the Spirit.

Doing creational theology

It's good to have something to write on – either some note cards, a small journal, or a note-taking app in your phone – as you begin to read and observe the works of God for what they can teach you about Jesus. A few basic steps in this meditative process can get you started in a richly rewarding new discipline for knowing the Lord.

First, choose something to *observe*. It can be anything – a songbird, favorite tree, painting, tool, item of food, musical composition, anything. God is in it all. Look or listen carefully, making notes of what you see or hear. Jot down everything that comes to mind, even if it seems inconsequential, and don't try to be too philosophical or spiritual at this point. Just make note of everything that is unique and interesting about the object you have chosen to observe.

Then, ask yourself: Does this remind me of anything in Scripture? Does an object like this appear in Scripture? If so, in what context? Does something about its use or its function lead you to think about anything in the Word? Try to *associate* your observations with Scripture, and especially as you are able to connect that Scripture with Jesus.

As you do this, *integrate* your observations from the creation with the Scriptures they suggest. Try making a sentence that connects the two, or show how the one illustrates, explains, or uses the other. Do some additional writing at this point, to help in clarifying your thoughts

Then, *meditate* for an extended period on the work you've done thus far. Let your meditations extend through several sessions, even spread out over a few days, if necessary. Ask additional questions. Consider what you might learn about Jesus from this object. This simmering of the work you've done thus far will yield rich aromas of revelation for you to delight in as you contemplate Jesus, Who is Lord over all.

As you meditate, *celebrate* in prayer or singing what God is showing you about Him. Then, look for some way to *proclaim* His works – an email to a friend, sharing at dinner, a poem or drawing, anything that will help you to declare to others what God has shown you, and what has led you to give Him thanks and praise.

Adding some time for creational theology as you pursue growing in the knowledge of Jesus Christ will enrich your vision of Him, heighten your awareness of His presence, and expand the horizons of your praise, thanks, and witness. Isn't it worth all that to make the investment necessary to open wide this window of revelation on the glory of our Lord Jesus?

For reflection

1. Are you willing to take the time to introduce creational theology into your pursuit of God? Where will you begin?
2. What will you have to give up to make room for creational theology in your daily life? How can you use

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your time better for this exercise?

3. How can you see that doing creational theology can enhance your worship and improve your witness for Christ?

Next steps – Transformation: Look around you right now. Find an object to contemplate for a day or two. Get started, using that object, in the work of creational theology. Carry this exercise all the way through to the end.

4 Historical Theology

Your roots matter more than you might think.

*Give ear, O my people, to my law;
Incline your ears to the words of my mouth.
I will open my mouth in a parable;
I will utter dark sayings of old,
Which we have heard and known,
And our fathers have told us.
We will not hide them from their children,
Telling to the generation to come the praises of the LORD,
And His strength and His wonderful works that He has done.* Psalm 78.1-4

The roots craze

Discovering their familial roots is a growing interest among Americans and people elsewhere. Several companies exist, using DNA and various forms of historical research, to help you discover your place of geographic origin, and something about the people who – though you’ve never met them or ever known much about them – have contributed to your being who you are today. At least one television program runs on PBS in which celebrities are introduced to their roots by an Ivy League researcher, almost always to their great delight.

I think it’s safe to say this present craze for discovering our roots traces back to January, 1977, when, over a period of 8 days, ABC broadcast the mini-series, *Roots*. *Roots* is Alex Haley’s story about discovering his own family’s roots, which he traced from a young 18th-century African named Kunta Kinte up to the (then) present day.

People loved it. *Roots* won a variety of awards, including an Emmy for best mini-series. And it was not long before the current craze for discovering our roots was up and running.

We shouldn’t be surprised by this. After all, as natural-born seekers, it makes sense that we should want to learn something about our provenance, the people in our family line, and what they may have contributed to the persons we are today. Many people believe that discovering their roots can help them understand who they are and what they might hope to become.

There’s no doubt truth to this, and this argues for Christians to become more familiar with the third window of theological studies, *historical* theology.

God’s works in history

Historical theology is that discipline that seeks the knowledge of God and His glory through the works He has done for, in, and through His people in ages past. History since the first Christian Pentecost is filled with amazing and glorious stories of the spread of the Gospel, the good works of Christians, the transformation of people and societies under the impact of the Good News, and the great saints and teachers who have left a legacy of example and instruction for us today.

The faithfulness of those who have gone before made it possible for the Gospel to have come down to us today. We would not enjoy the many and varied advantages of the Gospel – either in our churches or our world – apart from the diligence, courage, sacrifice, and contributions of those who have preceded us in the faith. It ill behooves us to be indifferent to their lives, works, struggles, achievements, and legacy.

Historical theology is the discipline that gives us their stories, opens the treasures of their teaching, introduces us to their many good works, encourages us to follow in their footsteps, and helps us to appreciate the permanent and transformative presence of the Gospel throughout human history.

It's a very large field of study, to be sure. But this does not excuse us from making some effort to learn from and carry forward the heritage of those who have made it possible for us to know the Lord in our day.

Making use of this discipline

Where to begin? You might want to acquire an overview of the various periods of Church history; to learn how the Gospel spread from the Roman world to Asia, Africa, and the New World; who the key figures were in this expansion; what struggles the Church had to overcome; and what institutions and blessings were introduced by believers at various stages in the process. You might find a dictionary of Church history to be a valuable companion in this effort.

Pick a theologian or writer from the past, and begin to familiarize yourself with their work. Subscribe to a Church history newsletter; learn the stories behind the great hymns of the Christian tradition; read about the development of the various creeds and confessions of the Church; take an interest in a particular era, movement, or development; learn the history of your own denomination.

Take your time. Be patient and persistent. You don't have to learn everything all at once. Line upon line, precept upon precept, here a little, there a little, is as true for historical study as it is for the study of God's Word.

Keep your focus on Jesus. He is the Prime Mover of all history, as He brings His Kingdom into being on earth as it is in heaven – winning people to Himself, building His Church, doing the work of restoring the world to God, and making known the knowledge of God and His glory in every nation, culture, and tribe. Jesus is the Centerpiece of *all* history, and especially of Church history, as He moves, fills, empowers, directs, and leads His people to seek His Kingdom and righteousness.

As Christians, our roots are sunk deep and spread wide through all of world history. Historical theology opens a window of divine revelation to help us grow in understanding the greatness, goodness, power, and rule of King Jesus over all nations, peoples, cultures, and times.

For reflection

1. Can you think of any aspect of Church history that has had an impact on your walk with and work for the Lord? Explain.
2. What are five things you'd like to know more about concerning the Christian movement through the ages?
3. How can a better knowledge of historical theology help you to increase in the knowledge of Jesus Christ?

Next Steps – Transformation: Do something this week that will get you into the discipline of historical theology. Make note of how this exercise affects your understanding of Jesus. Share the results of this exercise with a Christian friend.

5 Systematic Theology

The fourth window onto divine revelation establishes a framework for all the rest.

For to which of the angels did He ever say:

“You are My Son,
Today I have begotten You”?

And again:

“I will be to Him a Father,
And He shall be to Me a Son”? Hebrews 1.5

Putting it all together

In Hebrews 1, the writer begins a powerful argument for the supremacy of our Lord Jesus Christ. He wants to give his readers – who are drifting from their firm confession of faith in Jesus – solid food to digest, to help them recover their former witness.

He begins by showing that Jesus is more exalted than angels. That’s the logical place to begin, because if Jesus is greater than angels, He’s greater than everything else, including Moses, the Law, the sacrifices, the Levitical priesthood, and even the persecutions we may have to endure for His sake.

To accomplish his objective in chapter 1, the writer draws from a wide range of Scriptures – in the Law, the psalms, the histories of the Old Testament, and the prophets. What he has done, in essence, is ask a question: “Just Who is Jesus Christ?” His intention was to answer that question from throughout the Scriptures of the Old Testament, in a thorough and systematic manner, so as to remove all doubt concerning the supremacy of Jesus over the old Jewish ways of seeking God, and to restore his readers to a place of firm confidence in the Lord.

To do so, the writer of Hebrews makes use of his broad Biblical knowledge (Biblical theology) and his understanding of history (historical theology) to put together from throughout Scripture an argument that will answer his question thoroughly and convincingly. He is doing, in other words, the work of *systematic theology*.

Questions and answers

The *aim* of systematic theology is to seek from the Scriptures answers for the most foundational questions of life, and to arrange those answers in a logical order, so that the teaching of Scripture is organized into a *system* of faith. The *method* is to search the Scriptures on whatever question we may be addressing (the analogy of Scripture), and to look to respected theologians of the past and present to help guide our search (the analogy of faith). Whatever our question, this approach enables us to gain reliable answers and helpful guidance.

With respect to the Christian faith, the basic questions to be answered are:

How can we know God?
Who is God?
Who are we, and what are we here for?
Why are things the way they are?
Who is Jesus Christ, and why does He matter?
How can we be saved?
For what purpose does God save people?
How shall we live as saved people?
Where is all this headed?

These questions, thoroughly pursued by *concentrating* on the issue, *comparing* and *combining* Scripture, and seeking the wisdom of our forebears in the faith, provide the content for the classic “heads” of systematic theology: Prolegomena, Theology Proper, Anthropology and Hamartiology, Christology, Soteriology, Pneumatology, Ecclesiology, Ethics, and Eschatology.

Under these headings we may explore a wide range of related topics, to develop our way of thinking about the faith with ever-increasing fullness, and grow in the knowledge of Christ as we do.

The writer of Hebrews is dealing with only one aspect of Christology, the supremacy of Christ. We have many other questions about Jesus, and a fuller Christology will outline and flesh out each one of them, until we have a thorough mapping of the teaching of Scripture about the second Person of the Trinity. Systematic theologians do the same for all the other heads of doctrine in our system, and this explains why books on systematic theology can be so very thick!

A place to start

Anyone who has ever taught a topic from Scripture has practiced systematic theology. So has anyone who has ever used a concordance or Bible dictionary to search out the teaching of Scripture on such everyday topics as marriage, work, raising children, growing in the Lord, and many, many more. Since we all do the work of systematic theology at some level, it behooves us to have a working knowledge of the overall system of doctrine, so that our own studies in these areas can fit within a framework and pattern of sound teaching.

One effective place to begin in gaining a grasp of the whole subject of systematic theology is by becoming familiar with some of the great confessions written during the period of the Reformation (16th and 17th centuries). By reading and meditating on such confessions as [*The Westminster Confession of Faith*](#), we can become familiar with the scope of systematic theology, and learn how the various heads of doctrine – which outline primary themes of Scripture – relate to one another and come together as a coherent whole.

The Westminster Confession of Faith (1643-1648) is arranged by chapters and paragraphs, supported by a sampling of the texts that are the sources for the content. My practice is to read and meditate on a paragraph daily, looking at the proof texts and journaling a few thoughts, as the Lord leads. Daily reading in a confession like this can help us appreciate the overall framework of the teaching of Scripture about Jesus, and serve as a guide for our daily reading and study of God’s Word.

Many excellent and accessible books are also available addressing different aspects of the system of doctrine. One can also find dictionaries of theology which offer concise discussions of the many questions addressed by this window of theological study.

The teaching of Scripture makes sense and is logical. Systematic theology helps us to see the logic of Scripture, the framework of doctrine and instruction, and the broad scope of the teaching of God’s Word for every aspect of life and faith. It can be a reliable window on divine revelation that can help us grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

For reflection

1. Why do we say that this kind of study of God’s Word is *systematic*?
2. Why is it important that every believer should have some grasp of the overall system of doctrine taught in the Bible?
3. What benefits would you expect to gain by adding some work in systematic theology to your study of God’s Word?

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Next Steps – Preparation: Download a copy of [The Westminster Confession of Faith](#) and read it through over the next several days. How might regular re-reading of this, in smaller chunks, help you to grow in the Lord?

6 Practical Theology

Practice, you know, makes permanent.

But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some brethren to the rulers of the city, crying out, "These who have turned the world upside down have come here too. Jason has harbored them, and these are all acting contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying there is another king—Jesus." Acts 17.6, 7

The more you practice

The late Dr. Earl Radmacher used to delight in pointing out that the old saying, "practice makes perfect" isn't quite right. "Practice", he would insist with a twinkle in his eye, "does not make perfect. Practice makes permanent."

The Christians in Thessalonica were accurately described by their unbelieving neighbors, who said of them, *πράσσοσι βασιλέα ἕτερον λέγοντες εἶναι Ἰησοῦν* – "they *practice* another King, saying Him to be Jesus." As we can see from even a casual reading of 1 and 2 Thessalonians, the believers there were serious about their faith. They excelled in love. They stood firm in the midst of persecution. They ordered their churches according to the Biblical pattern, and they worked hard at becoming true disciples. We would say, "they practiced what they preached", and we would be correct.

The first Christians *practiced* Jesus as King – not Caesar, not their own puny dreams or desires, not the almighty denarius: They worshiped and served Jesus. In their daily lives, as individuals and as a community of believers, they worked out their salvation in all their relationships, roles, and responsibilities; and they were so constant, consistent, and confident in this, that even their unbelieving neighbors took note. From them we learn that the more we *practice* the life of Jesus, the more *permanent* the reality of Jesus becomes in and through us. This is what the people in Thessalonica were seeing, and it's what we want people today to see in us.

The Christian life can be concisely explained in just this way – practicing the Kingship of Jesus. In our daily lives, we practice Jesus. In our community lives, we practice Jesus. We are the Jesus-practitioners, as He increases in us individually (Jn. 3.30; 2 Cor. 3.12-18) and in our communities (Eph. 4.11-16).

The theological discipline that provides a window on revelation to fit us for becoming believers like those in Thessalonica is referred to as *practical theology*. Practical theology teaches us how to bring every aspect of our lives – individually and as congregations of the Lord's people – into joyous and fruitful submission to King Jesus.

Personal and corporate practice

Practical theology teaches us how to order our *personal* lives so that we may glorify God in whatever we're doing. It teaches us to understand *the time of our lives* as a gift of God, and guides us in making the best use of the time God gives us.

It helps us to identify our *personal calling* in life, and shows us how to be witnesses for Christ in that calling, and how to make disciples of the people God brings into our sphere of influence.

Practical theology helps us to understand *how relationships work* in the Kingdom of God, so that the love of Jesus flows through us to touch others with His grace.

It teaches us about *the work we've been given to do*, and equips us to do that work heartily, as unto the Lord and not merely to men.

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And it shows us *how to use the various artifacts, institutions, and conventions of culture* in ways that allow the goodness, beauty, and truth of God to come to light in the land of the living.

Practical theology also helps build the Lord's church in ways that follow His plan and seek His ends. Through this discipline we learn how to *worship the Lord* as a community; what the most reliable means are for *making disciples*; and how to *conduct our mission* in the world as both a sign and outpost of the Kingdom of God.

Practical theology gives direction to the work of *church leaders* – shepherding, preaching and teaching, building fellowship into the community – as well as to the *members of the church* – identifying and using gifts, giving and serving, watching out and caring for one another.

Clearly, practical theology is a most important area of study for us who are seeking to grow increasingly in the knowledge and image of Jesus Christ. How do we learn to look through this fifth window onto the revelation of God?

The resources for practical theology

First, realize that by far most of the theology you will be exposed to in your local church will be *practical* in nature – designed to help you grow as a follower of Christ, and to help the church increase in unity and maturity before the Lord. Pay careful attention to how the worship, preaching, and teaching of the church aim at your daily practice as a follower of Jesus. Test everything you hear by the Word of God, and then begin practicing whatever can help you to be more consistent in living for Christ each day.

Do some additional reading and study in areas that are germane to your personal calling – your Personal Mission Field. Study up on how to love your spouse and raise your children to the Lord. Search the Scriptures concerning your work and how to do it as unto the Lord. Good books exist on every topic that falls under the heading of practical theology, and these can be very helpful to shore-up areas of your life where you need to grow more in practicing the Kingship of Jesus.

Make sure you understand and are active in those aspects of practical theology that can help your church increase in Jesus as well. Do you understand how to worship the Lord? What your role should be in supporting the officers and other leaders of your church? How to identify and use your spiritual gifts? How the work of disciple-making proceeds? What are you giving – time, talent, or treasure – to the ongoing mission of your church, and how can you contribute more as God leads?

Again, Scripture is the starting-point for all such questions – and thus you can see how practical theology overlaps with both Biblical and systematic theology. By doing some additional reading, taking a course, and being more diligent to work your own Personal Mission Field, you can acquire the power and enter the joy of practicing the Kingship of Jesus in ways that will permanently change your life.

And don't think others won't notice. They will.

For reflection

1. Why do we refer to this discipline as *practical* theology?
2. What do we mean by saying that Christianity is practicing the Kingship of Jesus?
3. What are some areas of practical theology in which you would like to grow? How will doing so help you to increase in knowledge of, love for, and service in Jesus and His Kingdom?

Next Steps – Preparation: Practicing the Kingship of Jesus in the world begins in your Personal Mission Field. Have you identified and begun working your Personal Mission Field? Watch [this brief video](#), download the worksheet, and get started right

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away. If you're already working your Personal Mission Field, share what God is doing through you. Send me a brief report on how you're working your Personal Mission Field and what fruit you're seeing. Write me at tmmoore@ailbe.org.

7 Spiritual Theology

Growing in the knowledge of Jesus is from the inside-out.

Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely; and may your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful, who also will do it. 1 Thessalonians 5.23, 24

The work of the Spirit

We have been looking at the various disciplines of theological study as windows on divine revelation, practices that allow us to seek the Lord and His glory from a wide range of perspectives – Biblical, creational, historical, systematic, and practical.

Foundational to all these is Biblical theology, which provides us with the understanding of God’s Word essential for guiding all our other efforts at increasing in the knowledge of the Lord. But at the core of all theology, and of every discipline – whether of the humanities or the sciences – by which we grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ, is *spiritual* theology, the sixth and final window on divine revelation.

Spiritual theology is concerned with how the Holy Spirit, working in our soul, makes it so that Jesus increases in us and we decrease. Thus, the Spirit fills our lives and Personal Mission Fields increasingly with Jesus, which is why He has been sent to us (Eph. 4.8-10). Spiritual theology is concerned with *what* the Spirit does in us, and *how* and by *what means* He accomplishes that work.

In a nutshell, we can say that the Spirit’s work is to transform us, from the inside-out, into the very image of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 3.12-18). Take a moment and re-read that sentence, then sit back and relish the wonder, mystery, delight, awesomeness, and power of this incredible privilege. Is this what you want for your life? It’s what God is seeking for you, and why He has sent His Spirit to be in you and with you always.

The Spirit enables us to access the *mind* of Christ, so that, more and more, we think the way Jesus does. He renews us in the *heart* of God by convicting us of sin and teaching the things of Christ to us. He firms up our conscience by rewriting the Law of God on our heart, and training the conscience – or will – to value God’s will above all else. The effect of the Spirit’s work in us is that we become encouraged and empowered to stretch out beyond our present experience of the Lord into new areas of sanctification, fruitfulness, and service.

The Spirit of God is the power of God at work within us to enable us to will and do that which is pleasing to the Father – that is, to be more like Jesus (Phil. 2.13). Our responsibility is to make sure we understand the goals the Spirit is pursuing, and that we devote our time – *all* our time – to working out our salvation in fear and trembling (Phil. 2.12; Eph. 5.15-21).

Focus on the soul

Paul’s phrasing in these verses may be a bit confusing, since he refers both to the *spirit* and the *soul* as being entities within us, which are being made whole in Jesus. Mary seems to have equated these in her response to the angel’s message (cf. Lk. 1.46, 47), and Calvin provides an insight that assures us there is only one spiritual dimension within our bodies, consisting of the interacting entities of heart, mind, and conscience (will): “The word soul means often the same with spirit; but when they occur together, the first includes all the affections, and the second means what they call the intellectual faculty. So Paul, writing to the Thessalonians, uses the words, when he prays God to keep their spirit, and soul, and body blameless until the coming of Christ; he meant no other thing, but that they might continue pure and chaste in mind, and will, and outward actions.”

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The *heart* is the seat of our affections; the *mind* processes, stores, and synthesizes information; and the *conscience* holds our values and thus serves as the arbitrator between heart and mind to discern the will of the Lord.

In spiritual theology we are interested in understanding as much as we can about each of these aspects of the soul, so that we can exercise proper care and nurture for them. If we neglect any aspect of the soul, that aspect will surely yield to the law of sin, which remains at work within us (Rom. 7.21-23), thus gumming up the holy working of our soul, and impeding the Spirit's work of sanctification.

To make sure our soul is healthy and growing in Christ, we must impose on it certain disciplines, which we repeat, refine, and increase in order to subdue the soul to Christ and allow the Spirit to do His work within us. These *spiritual* disciplines infuse all the time and work of our lives with the Presence of Christ, and thus help us to be increasingly sanctified, blameless, and whole as followers of the Lord.

The care and feeding of the soul

Many good books are available to guide us in the use of spiritual disciplines. But we can see in the Scriptures various recurring disciplines that the Spirit has recorded there for our learning. Chief among these is *prayer*.

Prayer is communing with the Lord, whether in spoken words, words uttered within the heart, or by waiting on and listening for the Lord. For the strengthening of our soul, we need daily prayer, as well as prayer without ceasing. We need prayers of praise and thanksgiving as well as of supplication and intercession. We must work to be people who travel in an ambit of prayer, so that we are always connected with our Lord, and open to His leading or prompting; and we can always turn to Him in any situation for mercy and grace to help (Heb. 4.16).

Of equal importance is daily reading and study of the Word of God. Here also we include other disciplines, such as meditation and journaling, that enable us to dig deeper into the Bible, to discover more of Jesus there (Jn. 5.39). Also in this connection, we include listening to the Word taught, reading the comments and studies of others, and participating with others to grow in our understanding and use of the Word day by day (Col. 3.16).

Other spiritual disciplines are also mentioned in Scripture, such as solitude, fasting, giving to the Lord's work, assembling for worship, and singing. Each of these should have some place in our lives. These disciplines make unique contributions to the nurture of the soul; and they can be especially helpful in accessing the Lord's Presence at any time during the day, that we might refocus on Him and be renewed in Him regularly.

If we are feeding our soul as the Scriptures command, we will find a hunger for the Lord growing there. We will pant like a deer at the brook to come into His Presence and sink ever more deeply into His truth and love (Ps. 42.1). We will find His Word and Presence increasingly the joy and rejoicing of our lives (Jer. 15.16; Ps. 16.11). We will want to make increased use of all the theological disciplines, and to seek the Lord in other arenas as well, as we shall see.

We must not neglect the care and feeding of the soul, for as the soul thrives, so thrives our pursuit of the knowledge of God and His glory, our increase in Christlikeness, our love for and enjoyment of Him, and our witness to the watching world.

For reflection

1. Why do we say that growing in the Lord is from the inside-out? Is it ever from the outside-in? Explain.
2. Summarize the work the Spirit does in helping you to increase and be transformed into the image of Jesus Christ.

3. Why are spiritual disciplines so important for increasing in the knowledge of Jesus Christ?

Next Steps – Preparation: Review your practice of spiritual disciplines. Where do you need to improve? What can you do to make better use of these resources?

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Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. Why do we say that theology is the “discipline pursuit of the knowledge of God and His glory”? How does that make all of theologians?
2. In what ways are the theological disciplines like “windows” on divine revelation?
3. Briefly define the six “windows” on divine revelation which are the disciplines of the theological study.
4. Why do we say that Biblical theology is the foundation, and spiritual theology is the core of all theological study?
5. What’s the most important lesson you’ve learned from this study? How are you putting that lesson to work in your Personal Mission Field?

For prayer:

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Fellowship of Ailbe is a spiritual fellowship in the Celtic Christian tradition. Our goal is to promote revival, renewal, and awakening, following the teaching of Scripture and the example and heritage of our forebears in the faith.

The Fellowship of Ailbe offers many opportunities for training, prayer, personal growth, and ministry. Visit our website at www.ailbe.org to learn more.

We hope you found this study helpful. If so, please consider making a gift to The Fellowship. You can contribute to our ministry by using the contribute button at the website, or by sending your gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, 360 Zephyr Road, Williston, VT 05495.

Thank you.