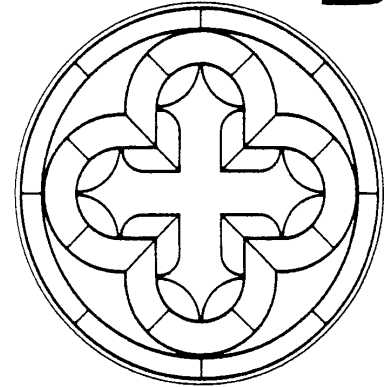


EMERY H. BANCROFT

# Christian Theology



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Ronald B. Mayors, Editor

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# CHAPTER ONE

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## INTRODUCTION: THE MEANING AND PURPOSE OF THEOLOGY

### THE DEFINITION OF THEOLOGY

Theology is the science of God and of the relations between God and the universe. Though the word "theology" is sometimes employed in dogmatic writings to designate that single department of the science which treats of the divine nature and attributes, prevailing usage has included under that term the whole range of Christian doctrine.

### THE AIM OF THEOLOGY

Its aim is the ascertainment of the facts concerning God and the relations between God and the universe, and the exhibition of these facts in their rational unity, as connected parts of a formulated and organic system of truth.

1. It is the work of theology as a science, not to create, but to discover facts. Schiller, referring to the ardor of Columbus's faith, says that if the great discoverer had not found a continent he would have created one. But faith is not creative. Had Columbus not found the land — had there been no real object answering to his belief — his faith would have been a mere fancy. Because theology deals with objective facts, we refuse to define it as "the science of religion." Both the facts and relations with which theology has to deal have an existence independent of the subjective mental processes of the theologian.

2. The work of theology as a science also includes the recognition and manifestation of the relations between these facts, and the synthesis of both the facts and the principles which unite them in the comprehensive, rightly proportioned, and organic system. Science is facts plus relations.<sup>1</sup>
3. As theology deals with objective facts and their relations, so its arrangement of these facts is not optional, but is determined by the nature of the material with which it deals. A true theology thinks over again God's thoughts and brings them into God's order, as the builders of Solomon's temple took the stones already hewn and put them into the places for which the architect had designed them.

No hammer fell, no ponderous axes rung;  
Like some tall palm, the mystic fabric sprung.

#### THE NECESSITY OF THEOLOGY

1. Theology is necessary as a means of expressing the meaning of Christianity because man is reasonable as well as emotional.
2. It is necessary in order to define Christianity. The definitions may not be exhaustive, for the objects and experiences involved are beyond our capacity for knowing, in some of their aspects. But we may apprehend what we can not comprehend. We may know in part if not in full. We may know truly if not exhaustively.
3. It is necessary in order to defend Christianity against attack.
4. It is necessary in order to propagate it. Christianity is a missionary religion; it is aggressive and diffusive in motive and aim. But no possible success can attend the propagation of Christianity without doctrine. The truth is employed to produce experience, then experience gives a new appreciation of truth.

#### THE POSSIBILITY OF THEOLOGY

The possibility of theology has a threefold basis.

1. It is grounded in the existence of God who has relations with the universe. It has been objected, however, that since God and these relations are objects apprehended only by faith, they are not proper objects of knowledge or subjects of science. We reply:
  - a. Faith is knowledge, and a higher sort of knowledge than that obtained by mere sense perception.

- b. Faith is knowledge conditioned by holy affection (Gal. 5:6).
  - c. Faith, therefore, can furnish, and only faith can furnish, fit and sufficient material for scientific theology. As an operation of man's higher rational nature, though distinct from ocular vision or from reasoning, faith is not only a kind but the highest kind of knowing. It gives us an understanding of realities which to sense alone are inaccessible, namely God's existence, and some at least of the relations between God and His creation.
2. It is grounded in the capacity of the human mind for knowing God and certain of these relations. But it has been urged that such knowledge is impossible for the following reasons:
  - a. Because we can know only phenomena. We reply —
    - (1) We know mental as well as physical phenomena.
    - (2) In knowing phenomena, whether mental or physical, we know substance underlying the phenomena, as manifested through them and constituting their ground of unity.
    - (3) Our minds bring to the observation of phenomena not only this knowledge of substance, but also knowledge of time and space, of cause and right, realities which are in no sense phenomenal. Since these objects of knowledge are not phenomenal, the fact that God is not phenomenal cannot prevent us from knowing Him.
  - b. Because we can know only that which bears analogy to our own nature or experience. We reply —
    - (1) It is not essential to knowledge that there be similarity between the knower and the known. We know by difference as well as by likeness, by contrast as well as by comparison.
    - (2) Our past experience, though greatly facilitating new acquisitions, is not the measure of our possible knowledge.
    - (3) Even if knowledge depended upon similarity of nature and experience, we might still know God, since we are made in God's image and there are important analogies between the divine nature and our own.
  - c. Because we can know only that which we can perceive in the sense of forming an adequate mental picture or image. We reply —
    - (1) It is true that we know only that which we can perceive if by

- the term *perceive* we mean our distinguishing in thought the object known from all other objects.
- (2) But the objection confounds conception with perception which is only the frequent accompaniment and help, namely, the picturing of the object by the imagination.
  - (3) That the formation of a mental image is not essential to conception or knowledge is plain when we remember that, as a matter of fact, we both conceive and know many things of which we cannot form a mental image of any sort that in the least corresponds to the reality — for example, force, law, space, or our own minds. So we may know God, though we cannot form an adequate mental image of Him.
- d. Because we can know truly only that which we know in whole and not in part. We reply —
- (1) The objection confounds partial knowledge with the knowledge of a part. We know the mind in part, but we do not know a part of the mind.
  - (2) If the objection were valid, no real knowledge of anything would be possible, since we know no single thing in all its relations. We conclude that although God is a being not composed of parts we may yet have a partial knowledge of Him, and this knowledge though not exhaustive may yet be real and adequate to the purposes of science.
3. It is grounded in the provision of means by which God is brought into actual contact with the mind, or in other words, in the provision of a revelation of God Himself and certain of these relations. As we do not in this place attempt a positive proof of God's existence or of man's capacity for the knowledge of God, so we do not now attempt to prove that God has brought Himself into contact with man's mind by revelation. Our aim at present is simply to show that, granting the fact of revelation, a scientific theory is possible. This has been denied upon the following ground: that revelation as a making known is necessarily internal and subjective — either a mode of intelligence, or a quickening of a man's cognitive powers — and hence can furnish no objective facts such as constitute the proper material for a science. To this objection, urged mainly by idealists in philosophy, we reply:
- a. We grant that revelation, to be effective, must be the means of including a new mode of intelligence or, in other words, must be understood. We grant that this understanding of divine

- things is impossible without a quickening of man's cognitive powers (1 Cor. 2:14). We grant, moreover, that revelation, when originally imparted, was often internal and subjective.<sup>2</sup>
- b. But we deny that revelation is therefore useless or impossible. Even if religious ideas sprang wholly from within, an external revelation might stir up the dormant powers of the mind. Religious ideas, however, do not spring wholly from within. External revelation does impart them. Man can reveal himself to man by external communication, and if God has equal power with man, God can reveal Himself to man in like manner. If idealists can teach by books, can God not do the same?
  - c. Hence God's revelation may be, and is in great part, an external revelation in works and words. The universe is a revelation of God. We claim, moreover, that in many cases where truth was originally communicated internally, the same Spirit who communicated it has brought about an external record of it so that the internal revelation might be handed down to others besides those who first received it.
  - d. The external record is given under proper conditions a special influence of God's Spirit that so quickens our cognitive powers that the external record reproduces in our minds the ideas with which the minds of the writers were at first divinely filled.<sup>3</sup>
  - e. Internal revelation, thus recorded, and external revelation, thus interpreted, both furnish objective facts which may serve as proper material for science. Although revelation in its widest sense may include, and as constituting the ground of the possibility of theology does include, both insight and illumination, it may also be used to denote simply a provision of the external means of knowledge, and theology has to do with inward revelations only as they are expressed in, or as they agree with, this objective standard.

We have suggested the vast scope and yet the insuperable limitations of theology. So far as God is revealed, whether in nature, history, conscience, or Scripture, theology may find material for its structure. Since Christ is not simply the incarnate Son of God but also the eternal Word, the only Revealer of God, there is no theology apart from Christ, and all theology is Christian theology. Nature and history are but the dimmer and more general disclosures of the

Divine Being, of which the Cross is the culmination and the key.

#### THE SOURCES OF THEOLOGY

God Himself, in the last analysis, must be the only source of knowledge with regard to His own being and relations.<sup>4</sup> Theology therefore is a summary and explanation of the content of God's self-revelations. These are, first, the revelation of God in nature; secondly and supremely, the revelation of God in the Scriptures.<sup>5</sup>

##### *The Theology of Nature*

By nature we here mean not only the physical facts, or facts in regard to the substances, properties, laws and forces of the material world, but also spiritual facts or facts with regard to the intellectual and moral constitution of man and the orderly arrangement of human society and history. The universe is a source of theology. The Scriptures assert that God has revealed Himself in nature.

1. The outward witness to His existence and character is in the constitution and government of the universe (Ps. 19:1-6; Acts 14:17; Rom. 1:20).
2. The inward witness to His existence and character is in the heart of every man (Rom. 1:18-20; 2:15).

There are two books: nature and Scripture — one written the other unwritten; and there is need of studying both. The systematic presentation of these facts, whether derived from observation, history, or science, constitutes natural theology, or the theology of nature.<sup>6</sup>

##### *The Theology of the Scriptures*

The Christian revelation is the chief source of theology. The Scriptures plainly declare that the revelation of God in nature does not supply all the knowledge which a sinner needs (Acts 17:23; Eph. 3:9). True science and the Scriptures throw light upon each other. The same divine Spirit who gave both revelations is still present, enabling the believer to interpret the one by the other and thus, progressively, to come to the knowledge of the truth.

Because of our finiteness and sin, the total record in Scripture of God's past communications is a more trustworthy source of theology than our conclusions from nature or our own private impressions of the teachings of the Spirit. Theology therefore looks to Scripture itself as its chief source of material and its final standard of appeal.

## Study Questions on Theology

1. Define theology.
2. What is the aim of theology?
3. Give four reasons for the necessity of theology.
4. What is the threefold ground of the possibility of theology?
5. Discuss the various objections to this threefold ground for the possibility of theology and the replies to each.
6. What, in the last analysis, is the only source of theology?
7. Of what is theology a summary and an explanation?
8. What is meant by *nature* in terms of theology?
9. In what twofold way does the Scripture assert that God has revealed Himself? Quote one passage with each.
10. What is the chief source of theology?
11. What do the Scriptures plainly declare concerning the revelation of God in nature? Quote one passage.
12. What is the relation of true science to Scripture?
13. Why is the record in the Scriptures of God's past communications the most trustworthy source of theology?

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Scattered bricks and timbers are not a home; severed arms, legs, heads and trunks from a dissecting room are not living men; and facts alone do not constitute science.

<sup>2</sup>The revelation on the way to Damascus would not have enlightened Paul had it been merely a vision to his eye. Nothing can be revealed in us. The eye does not see the beauty of the landscape nor the ears hear the beauty of the music. So flesh and blood did not reveal Christ to us. Without the teaching of the Spirit, the external facts will be only like the letters of a book to a child who cannot read (Gal. 1:16).

<sup>3</sup>We may illustrate the need of internal revelations from Egyptology, which is impossible as long as the external revelation in the hieroglyphics is uninterpreted; from the ticking of a clock in a dark room, where only the lit candle enables us to tell the time; from the landscape spread out around the Rigi in Switzerland, invisible until the first rays of the sun touch the snow-capped mountain peaks. External revelation (Rom. 1:19, 20) must be supplemented by internal revelation (1 Cor. 2:10, 12). Christ is the organ of external, the Holy Spirit the organ of internal, revelation (2 Cor. 1:20; Eph. 1:17). In Christ, "the yea" and "the Amen" — the objective certainty and the subjective certitude, the reality and the realization. Objective certainty must become subjective certitude in order to be a scientific theology. Before conversion we have the first, the external truth of Christ; only at conversion and after do we have the second, "Christ formed in us" (Gal. 4:19). We have objective revelations at Sinai (Exod. 20:22); subjective revelation in Elisha's knowledge of Gehazi (2 Kings 5:26).

<sup>4</sup>Ambrose wrote: "To whom shall I give greater credit concerning God than to God Himself?"

<sup>5</sup>Von Baader said: "To know God without God is impossible; there is no knowledge without Him who is the prime source of knowledge."

<sup>6</sup>God is present in nature and is still speaking thru it. Someone once said that Spurgeon told of a godly person who, when sailing down the Rhine, closed his eyes lest the beauty of the scene divert his mind from spiritual things. The Puritan turned away from the moss-roses saying that he would count nothing on earth lovely. But this is to despise God's works. "The Himalayas are the raised letters upon which we blind children put our fingers to spell out the name of God."