Why Does Theology Matter?

2. Theology: Why Doesn’t Everyone Agree About It?

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Theology: Why Doesn’t Everyone Agree About It?

Theology is done by people at specific times in history, with specific worldviews and in reaction to their own circumstances.

And so each theologian begins in a certain place.

For example ...
For example ...

[Looking around the room]

*Why is it this way and not some other way?*

(Creation)
For example ...

[Thinking about myself]

Why do I sometimes do things that I know aren’t good?

(Sin)
For example ...

[Thinking (as a Christian) about people across the globe]

*What happens to people who aren’t Christian?*

(Salvation)
Theology: Why Doesn’t Everyone Agree About It?

Each theologian begins in a certain place.

A contemporary example ...
A contemporary example ...

Henry B. Wright Professor of Theology at Yale Divinity School and Director of the Yale Center for Faith and Culture.

Based on a 1993 lecture reflecting theologically on the ethnic cleansing of the Yugoslav Wars in his home country.
Let’s see if we can agree about a few things by starting with the Bible as a guide ...

Biblical theology
In particular, let’s see if we can agree that “God is ________”

[Let’s make a list]

God is a gardener
And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. And out of the ground the LORD God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.
Let’s make a list ...

God is a rock
God is a rock

Isaiah 26:4

*Trust in the LORD for ever, for the LORD GOD is an everlasting rock.*

Psalm 18:2

*The Lord is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer, my God, my rock in whom I take refuge ...*
Let’s make a list ...

God is a shepherd
God is a shepherd

Psalm 23:1

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want ...

Ezekiel 34:15

I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God.
Let’s make a list ...

It ain’t much, but it’s all I got.

It’s all I ever wanted.

God is love
God is love

1 John 4:8

*He who does not love does not know God; for God is love.*

Psalm 136:1-3

*O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures for ever. O give thanks to the God of gods, for his steadfast love endures for ever. O give thanks to the Lord of lords, for his steadfast love endures for ever.*
Let’s make a list ...

God is peace
God is a peace

Judges 6:24

*Then Gideon built an altar there to the LORD, and called it, The LORD is peace.*

Ephesians 2:14

*For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.*
Let’s make a list ...

God is king
God is king

Psalm 47:7

For God is the king of all the earth; sing praises with a psalm.

Psalm 95:3

For the Lord is a great God, and a great King above all gods.
God is ...

A gardener
A rock
A shepherd
Love
Peace
A king

Etc., etc. etc.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Attributes</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Attributes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A gardener</td>
<td>Just</td>
<td>Creator</td>
<td>Savior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A father</td>
<td>Love</td>
<td>Merciful</td>
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<tr>
<td>A refuge</td>
<td>A sustainer</td>
<td>Righteous</td>
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<tr>
<td>A rock</td>
<td>Holy</td>
<td>Dwelling place</td>
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<tr>
<td>A potter</td>
<td>Peace</td>
<td>Man of War</td>
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<td>A spirit</td>
<td>A builder</td>
<td>A helper</td>
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<tr>
<td>A shepherd</td>
<td>A king</td>
<td>Judge</td>
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<td>A redeemer</td>
<td>A friend</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
And now the tricky part:

Let’s put those in order of importance

God is ...

1. ___________________
2. ___________________
3. ___________________
4. ___________________
5. ___________________
6. ___________________
Let’s put those in order of importance

For example, if it appears to us that two attributes conflict with each other in some situation, which would God manifest?

Exodus 15:3  *The LORD is a man of war; the LORD is his name.*

Ephesians 2:14  *For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.*
And now the tricky part:

What comes first?

God is ...

1. Sovereign

1. Judge

1. Gracious

1. Spirit
And now the tricky part:

What comes first?

God is …

1. Sovereign … John Calvin … Presbyterian

1. Judge … Martin Luther … Lutheran

1. Gracious … John Wesley … Methodist/Wesleyan

1. Spirit … Pentecostal
Consequences....

1. Judge ... Martin Luther ... Lutheran

In 1997, "The Use of the Means of Grace: A Statement on the Practice of Word and Sacrament" was adopted for guidance and practice by the Fifth Biennial Churchwide Assembly of the ELCA. In this document Holy Communion is generally reserved for those who are baptized.
Consequences....

1. Gracious ... John Wesley ... Methodist/Wesleyan

United Methodist “By Water and the Spirit” - "Because the table at which we gather belongs to the Lord, it should be open to all who respond to Christ's love, regardless of age or church membership. The Wesleyan tradition has always recognized that Holy Communion may be an occasion for the reception of converting, justifying, and sanctifying grace."
Right and Wrong

Does this mean that one tradition is “right” and other traditions are “wrong”?

Perhaps, instead, the various Biblical images of God function as a set of boundary conditions and that somewhere within those boundaries lies a description of God.

And perhaps each of these traditions lies within that set of boundaries.
What then of Orthodoxy?

Orthodoxy

Greek: *ortho* - straight, correct, right;

*Doxa* (from *dokein*, to think) - thought or opinion.

Orthodoxy as “right thinking” about God.

Let’s consider the position of one of these traditions – the Wesleyan/Methodist tradition.
Orthodoxy as One of Three “Correct” Ways

Orthodoxy – right thinking

Orthopraxis – right actions

Orthoritus – right rituals

Orthopraxis - Greek: *ortho* - straight, correct, right; *praxis* (from *prassein*, to do) - doing, actions.

Orthoritus - Greek: *ortho* - straight, correct, right; *ritus* (from Latin) - ritual or rite.
What comes first, the chicken or the egg?

Greek thought:
A person’s thoughts influence and control that person’s behavior (i.e. orthodoxy leads to orthopraxis and orthoritus).

Hebrew thought:
A person’s practices shape that person’s thoughts (i.e. orthopraxis and orthoritus lead to orthodoxy).
What makes someone “a Christian”? Is it Orthodoxy?

Must you know and believe the doctrine of the Trinity?

Must you know and believe the doctrine of the incarnation?

What, exactly, must you “know and believe” in order to be a Christian?
What makes someone “a Christian”?

Is it Orthodoxy?

“orthodoxy, or right opinions, is, at best, but a very slender part of religion, if it can be allowed to be any part of it at all”

John Wesley

What makes someone “a Christian”? Is it Orthopraxis?

Must you feed hungry people and, if so, exactly how many?

Must you clothe the naked and, if so, exactly how many?

What, exactly must you “do” to be a Christian?
Is it Orthopraxis?

Whosoever therefore thou art who desir'est to be forgiven and reconciled to God, do not say in thy heart, I must first do this...

... Alas my brother, thou art clean gone out of the way. Thou art still “ignorant of the righteousness of God” and art “seeking to establish thy own righteousness.”

John Wesley

What makes someone “a Christian”? Is it Orthoritus?

Exactly how many prayers must you say to be a Christian?

Exactly what percentage of your income must you offer to the church to be a Christian?

At what age must you be baptized to be a Christian?

Exactly what rites must you perform to be a Christian?
What makes someone “a Christian”? 

Is it Orthoritus?

“Go to church twice a day, go to the Lord’s table every week, say ever so many prayers in private, hear ever so many sermons ... ... None of these things will stand in the place of .... ”

John Wesley

What makes someone “a Christian”?

“Go to church twice a day, go to the Lord’s table every week, say ever so many prayers in private, hear ever so many sermons ... ... None of these things will stand in the place of the new birth”

John Wesley

What makes someone “a Christian”? 

The New Birth

Gracious acts of God:

Justification

Regeneration*

Assurance

* Wesley sometimes used “new birth” to refer to the entirety of the collective experience and sometimes to refer to regeneration alone.
What makes someone “a Christian”?

Orthodoxy
Orthopraxis
Orthoritus

These are means to an end, not ends in themselves!
What about people who are not Christian?

“As United Methodist Christians reflect anew on our faith ... we rediscover that God who has acted in Jesus Christ for the salvation of the whole world, is also Creator of all humankind, the “one God and father of all, who is Lord of all, works through all, and is in all” (Ephesians 4:6 TEV).

“[We] trust that because of what we know of God in Jesus, God deals graciously and lovingly with all people, everywhere.”

As we conclude ...

Any questions?