

Statements of Doctrine

WORLDWIDE CHURCH OF GOD

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Statements of Doctrines

of the

Various Christian Churches

and

Other Religious Bodies

APPROACH TO THEOLOGY

The first in a series of articles describing the present state of doctrinal understanding in the Worldwide Church of God.

Great art Thou, O Eternal, and greatly to be praised! "Know therefore this day, and lay it to your heart, that the Lord is God in heaven above and on the earth beneath; there is no other." (Deut. 4:30, RSV)

The Almighty Creator in his majesty, his immensity and his omnipresence is always with us; so we cannot just speak about him, we also speak to him. Hence the dedicatory opening praise.

The Beginning

This same Almighty Eternal Creator is the beginning of all things, the first and the last, the author and perfecter of our faith (Isa. 44:6, Rev. 1:8; Heb. 12:2). Having inspired his Word, the Bible, for all men and for all time, and having called out some of all races and all nations to serve him in spirit and truth, the Church of God, the Eternal has not left us without responsibility. Hence the opening scripture quotation.

Before we can become the "light of the world," the "salt of the earth," we must first know him, and take this knowledge to heart. We are to be rightly handling the word of truth (II Tim. 2:15); we are to teach these ways of the Creator to our children (Deut. 6:4-7), and we are to teach all nations the gosepl of the kingdom (Matt. 28:19-20).

It is in these responsibilities that theology begins.

Theology -- What and Why

Theology has several meanings. In its origin the word "Theology" (from Greek *θεός* and *λόγος*) means, of course, speech or knowledge of God. Before we expand this definition, let us return

to Deuteronomy 4:39. Assuming a christian name, hearing of God with the ear, joining a group, club or church which claims the name of God, is not sufficient. We must know and understand who God is, and he is revealed to us in the Bible and through the Holy Spirit. This knowledge involves theology -- the study of God, the "science" of God. In this sense, theology can and should be an objective study. But theology is more than this. We must also "lay (it or him) to heart." Here is the subjective (personal) side. Here is where science and theology differ most radically. Science requires strict methodology, and careful attention to detail, a desire for truth, etc., but theology by its very nature and as it is practiced in the Church of God also requires something further (note: good theology requires those elements of science as well): the requirement to participate in the results ("become you therefore perfect").

As an example of both the objective and subjective elements (in other words the rational and emotional requirements) we may return to the Deuteronomy four passage. "Understand" or "know" in Hebrew includes both the effort of mind (the intellectual side) and the personal experience and involvement (the existential side). "Lay to heart" includes both the areas of will and emotion. Moreover Jesus Christ tells us we must live by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God (Matt. 4:4 and Deut. 8:3). This "living" is not just intellectual, of course; it is also personal. Here we have what may be termed more properly religion, or belief, as distinct from theology strictly speaking. (This distinction does not prevent the word theology from including the personal side of course). But on the other hand, "living" involves-even requires-mental or intellectual understanding -- knowledge and comprehension of the facts. Here again is theology in the stricter sense.

Thus theology means the study of the data of revelation, the explanation of that Word of God by which we must live. The preaching of the Word, through intimately connected with theology, and (hopefully!) based on theology, is not itself theology. It is preaching, the acceptance of the message is neither theology nor evangelism; it is faith, obedience, response, or religion -- all personal, practical, existential.

Objections to Theology

Often we hear the objection: "The Church would be better off without all that technical stuff. I'm sure glad God has hidden these things from the wise of the world, and has revealed them to

"babes," True enough, as far as accepting Christ and his message is concerned. Read the context of Matt. 11:25 -- the entire chapter is dedicated to the person of Jesus, his work and ministry, and his miracles and message. For that, one does not need any technical background, thank God! True enough, accepting Christ and his message does not require technical background nor formal theological education. The basic and fundamental truths of God's Word are clear -- from practically any translation -- to anyone with a minimal education, once God's Spirit opens that person's mind. However, the answer to this objection is twofold.

First "wise versus babes" is only one quote of Jesus from among many quotes and deeds. Put another way, the "revealed unto babes" objection is a two-sided coin. Jesus was so learned, so skilled in the technical aspects of the Word that he was able to astound the doctors (Luke 2:46-47); stop the mouths of the most learned men of his day when they opposed him (Mark 12:34); instruct the most learned of his day when they sought him (John 3); and inspired the most learned man of his followers -- the Apostle Paul -- to go before kings and rulers (Acts 9:15; 23:26). Certainly this is not "babism." The gospel was/is not only a revelation for the few -- and perhaps we few are all "babes," though that is not what Jesus said -- it was/is a message and warning for the many who by strict parallelism in Jesus' statement are "wise." Need we draw out the parallel with our work today? While the simplest man may receive the gospel (some unfortunate illiterates excepted) with little technical understanding, the Worldwide Church is appearing before the most intelligent, the most learned, and the most up-to-date men in the world. We had better have our theology right! Second, though it is true that "not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, many were powerful, not many were of noble birth" when God called, it is also true we are not to remain in the state we were called. Moreover the ministry is responsible for a high-level knowledge of its profession. Such professional knowledge includes theology.

Other objections are also heard: that theology pulls us away from the simplicity of the faith, only to become lost in subtle distinctions, arid definitions, hazy abstractions and hair-splitting analysis. Or, the gospel calls us to active love and faithful obedience rather than to intellectual reflection. Or, that theology substitutes "true doctrine" for the Living God. Or, that theology arouses controversies which divide the church.

Rather than address each of those objections, we will look at what the Bible and the Church positively require, and the objections

will be answered. As a basis for the following discussion, and for all articles on doctrine, we posit the existence of God, and the inspiration of the Bible as his Word. (Later articles will take up the doctrine of God and the doctrine of inspiration.)

Does the Bible Require Theology?

First, the Bible does require "theology" if we mean by that term the "knowledge of God." Phil. 3:8-11, "Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ, and be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith: That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death; if by any means I might attain unto the resurrection of the dead" (KJV).

Again this passage brings together both the practical (existential) and the intellectual side of Christian living. But theology is not, as we have already said, the personal knowing of our Creator (vs. 10), but rather is more closely connected with the knowledge of Christ (vs. 8). The Bible requires knowledge -- a knowledge in several respects. Theology is necessary for us to determine what is most essential to Christian faith and what is less vital (for example, Acts 15 or the Law and Grace question). Theology is in fact necessary in order to determine what is and is not really a part of God's truth (a case in point would be I John 5:7-8). When new questions or misunderstandings or differences of opinions arise, it takes research, evaluation, and codification of scriptural truth for a correct solution -- a very theological process. This biblical requirement -- both positive and negative -- is expressed in such passages as I Thes. 5:21, "Prove all things, hold fast that which is good;" and speaking of the leadership in the Church, Paul says the ministry serves:

for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ: that we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and

fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lay in wait to deceive; but speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things . . . (Eph. 4:11-15, KJV):

The underlined words emphasize the importance of the mature mental evaluation and judgment of a Christian -- the intellectual side of theology. Theology is not determined by a feeling or an arbitrary decision or opinion. Our faith has to be carefully and systematically grounded, as is implied by Luke when he describes his method of operation (Luke 1:3, note especially the phrase "in order.") I Cor. 14:33, while dealing with a concrete situation in Church services, takes into account preaching, teaching, and learning: "For God is not a God of confusion but of peace."

Second, once we ourselves have responded to God's effective calling, once we have the "knowledge of Christ," we must go forth either exemplifying Christ's teachings, or in the case of the ministry, preaching Christ's teachings. (And let us not forget that both of those awesome duties are essential in the ministry!) If we are to preach, then what are we to preach? What the Bible says? Certainly. What the Church has taught us? Certainly. Here again is theology. If we are to preach correctly, we must constantly check what we are preaching against the only infallible standard we have: the Bible. That checking, that comparison, adjustment, correction and confirming is theology. "Preach the word, be urgent in season and out of season, convince, rebuke, and exhort, be unfailing in patience and in teaching" (II Tim. 4:2). This is theology.

Third, closely related with preaching there is teaching -- teaching at many levels. In the case of the ministry, we must be teaching Christ's teachings. Teaching is implied in the above quotation, and mentioned explicitly in the following verses: "For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own likings, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander into myths. As for you, always be steady, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfil your ministry." (II Tim. 4:3-5).

Fourth, in order to teach sound doctrine, one must know more about the Bible than what just superficial reading will provide. A careful reading of the Bible shows that God has revealed himself in

distinct and different ways, and in and through history, to different people for different purposes (Heb. 1:1). Hence revelation is not presented in text-book or dictionary order. Rather, revelation proceeds in a historical order -- through a multiplicity of distinct approaches, here a little there a little, etc. (Isa. 28:9-13). When we expound and clarify the unity of the Bible, rightly comprehending the total message (sometimes called "the doctrinal consensus"), we have theology. So we must exegete (the text of course, not our theories), we must clarify, we must connect, we must organize, and finally we must set forth the total or overall teaching of scripture.

Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth (II Tim. 2:16).

Here again is theology.

Finally, we must face the fact that the last written revelation is nearly 2000 years removed from our age. Older revelations are further yet removed, and all are in ancient languages. Thus we have to bridge

- a) a historical gap
- b) a cultural gap
- c) a language gap

To put it briefly, this threefold gap must be bridged by translation -- and translation here means theology. If this theology is not done, our people will not understand nor believe the gospel.

Purposes of Theology in a Nutshell

Summarizing all the above requirements and purposes, we might say that theology is testing and reviewing the message of the Church -- its beliefs, teachings, doctrines, and preaching, and by implication its counselling in order to critique, re-evaluate, purify, reaffirm, and clarify what the Church is proclaiming. This reflection or testing process should be understood as part of our growing in the grace and knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Since we are growing (meaning we have not yet arrived), testing is necessary. God is infallible; our language about him and our understanding of him is not. Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever. But the Holy Spirit is leading us into all truth.

Hence, the constant alertness to what is revealed in the Word of God, the constant testing process, is not a mere academic game played by a privileged few, but an essential life function of the Church participated in by all.

Beyond the bare dictionary definition of "knowledge of or speech about God" we may now list the purposes and functions of good theology.

1. To give shape, clarity, organization and explication to the overall teaching of the Bible, as well as to define at least by implication what is not admissible, or expedient, or official within the teaching of the Church and the fellowship of its members.
2. To provide proper data and material for the proclamation (preaching) of the Church.
3. To formulate the proper content and direction for instruction and teaching at all levels within the Church.
4. To research further and further into the meaning and message of Scripture for the sake of the advancement of truth, and for the sake of resolving life's problems in this complex age.
5. To bridge the long cultural, historical and linguistic gap which separates our age from the two Testaments.
6. To test the language of the Church in the light of Scripture and the leading of the Holy Spirit.

Theology may be thought of as the Church thinking and reflecting systematically on its faith and the content of its message. This reflection and even re-evaluation is necessary because 1) the purity of the essential message of God's Word has to be maintained, and 2) the church must confront new situations which are not explicitly addressed in the Bible. Old truths must be applied to new problems. New ideas must not corrupt or diminish or discard old truths. On the one hand, the Church has to phrase and present its time-honored message in a form understandable to the contemporary world of each new age. (Has not God's Church always emphasized the principle of being "all things to all men?")

On the other hand, the power of loosing and binding was given to the Church so that it can make decisions regarding situations not extant during the time of the Old and New Testaments. Theology on both hands!

End Part I