

Can Theology Define God's Nature?

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Throughout the centuries, the nature of God has been a matter of great controversy in Christian churches. Much has been written about the matter and many theories have been proposed. Some believe that the Bible does not contain sufficient information to permit men to come to a full understanding of God's nature. The result is that men have devised various means of using human reasoning to arrive at an idea of the nature of God that they feel could not otherwise be attained by simply reading and studying the Scriptures.

Enter theology. Most people in the church of God have only a vague, generalized idea about what theology is and how it is used. We tend to think of theology as being the same thing as doctrine or a system of beliefs about God or the Bible. This is one of the definitions of the word.

However, in the strictest sense, theology is more than just the teachings of different individuals or organizations. Viewed from the point of view of someone who has been schooled in theology, it is an academic discipline in much the same way that mathematics or any of the sciences are academic disciplines.

Simply stated, theology is humanity's reasonings and conclusions about God arranged in a systematic and formal way. "Theology" is derived from the Greek *Theos* (God) and *logos* (study or discourse). Theology uses a disciplined, precisely defined system of logic to come to conclusions which most theologians regard as unassailable because they seem so logical.

Perhaps the closest thing that we can compare to theology is geometry. Most of us took plane and solid geometry in high school and remember the theorems, axioms and corollaries associated with this discipline. We learned to prove certain theorems by a process of logical reasoning. Once proved, we developed axioms and corollaries which could subsequently be used to prove more complex theorems. Through this process, we could derive various formulas and apply this discipline usefully in the real world.

By a similar process of logical reasoning, men have developed an approach which they believe leads them to a knowledge of the nature of God—a knowledge which could not otherwise be attained by simply studying the Bible.

Most theologians will *claim* that the concepts and conclusions generated by this process of logical thinking are based on the Bible. This is because they usually start out with a biblical premise upon which the reasoning process is built. However, a careful analysis of both the process and the conclusions to which it leads shows that the theologian is really stepping outside of the Bible to arrive at conclusions that often contradict what God says in His Word.

Steps in the Process

Typically, the theologian will start out with a biblical premise and then follow a number of logical steps to reach a conclusion that supposedly is based on the original premise. To demonstrate how this reasoning process works, let us consider the theologian's approach to the subject of whether God has a form or shape. The theologian's logical progression would go something like this:

Premise: God created everything in heaven and earth (Colossians 1:16).

Therefore: God created time and three-dimensional space.

Therefore: There was a time when space and time did not exist.

Therefore: God is not a "spatial Being." ("Spatial being" refers to a being that has the familiar three dimensions of height, width and depth.)

Conclusion: God does not have a form or shape.

After going through this exercise of human reasoning, the theologian then goes back into the Bible and relegates any reference in the Bible which contradicts his conclusion to a metaphor, or he finds some way of explaining it away. In this example, the scripture that states that God created man in His image (Genesis 1:26-27) is explained by stating that what God really meant is that He created man with the ability to have a relationship with Him. The case where God showed Moses His back (Exodus 33:18-23) is explained by claiming that God used a metaphor so that Moses and the Israelites would find it easier to relate to Him. All such scriptures are "explained" in the light of the theologian's conclusions.

The Problems of Theology

What is wrong with this reasoning? Is the theologian right? If not, how do we refute such conclusions that seem to be so logical? What, if any, are the flaws in this apparently airtight argument that relegates many scriptures to metaphors? Does God play silly games with His people and pretend to be something He is not? How can we know?

The first thing that is wrong with the theologian's approach is that **it exalts human reasoning above the divinely inspired Word of God.** Throughout the Bible, God condemns human intellectual vanity and shows how His knowledge, understanding and wisdom are far above that of any human being. God states that He calls into His church those who are the weak and unlearned for the express purpose of putting to shame those who are the learned and wise of this world.

But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, that no flesh should glory in His presence. (I Corinthians 1:27-29)

Furthermore, God shows that He does not generally reveal His truth to the wise and learned of this world. Note Jesus' words in Matthew 11:25: "At that time Jesus answered and said, "I thank You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because You have hidden these things from the wise and prudent and have revealed them to babes." Most of the men that God used in the Bible to carry out His purpose were men who had little worldly education and training (see Acts 4:13).

Nevertheless, this still leaves us with the unanswered question, "Where is the flaw in this human reasoning?" Referring back to the original example, it is certainly true that God created time and

space. This may be a difficult concept for some to grasp because we tend to think of empty space as something that was always there and did not need to be created. However, even modern-day physicists are coming to realize that there was a time when space and time did not exist. As Einstein showed, we exist in a four-dimensional space/time continuum, where time is the fourth dimension in addition to the three dimensions of height, width and depth.

Since there was a time when this space/time continuum did not exist, how could the Creator of space and time possibly have a form and shape like we do? The simple answer is that "God is Spirit" (John 4:24). The flaw in the theologian's reasoning is that **his logic applies to the physical world that we know and understand but does not apply to the spirit world**. None of us has ever been spirit, and none of us has ever experienced what it is like to be spirit. The spirit world exists in a dimension that is beyond our understanding, and we cannot apply the same type of reasoning and logic to the spirit world that we apply to the physical world. To illustrate this point, let us look at an example from the world of science.

Quantum Mechanics

Back in the late 1800s, scientists were frustrated in their attempts at explaining the experimental results found for the energy emitted by a hot body as a function of the frequency of the radiation. For example, when you apply heat to a solid piece of iron, the iron gradually increases in temperature until it reaches a point where it begins to emit a reddish glow. The application of more heat raises the temperature of the iron until the frequency of the emitted radiation changes, and it begins to emit a white glow. The problem was that the experimental results did not match the conventional wisdom regarding the relationship between the frequency of the emitted radiation and the amount of heat energy emitted.

In 1900, a German scientist named Max Planck studied the problem. To the amazement of the scientific world, Planck discovered that matter interacts with energy in a different manner at the atomic level than it does at the macro level. His discoveries defied logic and revolutionized man's approach to the study of matter and electromagnetic radiation. An entirely new field of scientific study, quantum mechanics, was introduced.

The problem that scientists who came before Planck had was that "logic" told them that matter would behave in the same manner at the atomic level as at the macro level. This extrapolation of human reasoning and logic to the unseen world of atoms and photons is analogous to the theologian's extrapolation of human reasoning and logic to the unseen spirit world.

The same is true with arguments attempting to show that God can be only one Being. They propose that, if God is infinite, and there cannot be an "infinity plus one," then God can only be one, not many. However, no one has ever experienced infinity. Human beings have minds that are finite in scope and cannot comprehend or explain the infinite. An infinite Being has infinite capabilities that extend far beyond our power to add or detract. We cannot relegate God to a mathematical equation. Such arguments are nothing but philosophical nonsense.

The fact of the matter is that theology is completely worthless in elucidating the nature of God, just as human reasoning and logic apart from experimentation is completely worthless in elucidating the nature of matter and energy. The revealed Word of God is the only source of knowledge about the nature of God. Application of human logic only clouds the issue.

Nothing But the Bible

In I Corinthians, the apostle Paul explained a principle that is important to remember regarding the application of human reasoning to any spiritual matter. The Corinthian church had been having problems with divisions caused by some preferring certain ministers over others and having a judgmental attitude toward Paul and others. In addressing these problems, Paul writes:

Now these things, brethren, I have figuratively transferred to myself and Apollos for your sakes, that you may learn in us *not to think beyond what is written*, that none of you may be puffed up on behalf of one against the other. (I Corinthians 4:6)

The marginal comment on this verse in the New Revised Standard Version is, "*What is written*, in Scripture, thus avoiding speculations." Apparently, some of the ministers in Corinth were speculating on things that were not revealed in the Bible. They were using human reasoning to explain things that were not spelled out in the Word of God. This was probably one of the reasons that some members preferred some ministers over others, because they were "more interesting" than others.

The lesson we can learn from both the Corinthian experience and observing the fruits of theological speculation is that, to understand spiritual truths and grow in knowledge of the spirit world and spiritual principles, we must humble ourselves before the Word of God. In such matters, human logic and wisdom are totally worthless. Our understanding of God's nature is limited to those things that are revealed in His Word. All of our beliefs and practices must be based on the Bible, the whole Bible and **nothing but the Bible**.