

Theology for Life
Faith Presbyterian Church
Lesson 1: Knowing God

Opening Q: *Why study theology? What is the best argument against studying theology?*

Dogma¹ is the Drama

"We are constantly assured that the churches are empty because preachers insist too much upon doctrine—dull dogma as people call it. The fact is the precise opposite. It is the neglect of dogma that makes for dullness. The Christian faith is the most exciting drama that ever staggered the imagination of man—and the dogma is the drama." Dorothy Sayers

What do you think Sayers means by "the dogma is the drama"? Do you find theology dramatic?

Sayers explains the drama of the story: *"The tale of the time when God was the underdog and got beaten, when he submitted to the conditions he had laid down and became a man like the men he had made, and the men he had made broke him and killed him. This is the dogma we find so dull—this terrifying drama of which God is the victim and hero. If this is dull, then what, in Heaven's name, is worthy to be called exciting?"*

Sayers writes, *"The plot pivots upon a single character, and the whole action is the answer to a single central problem: What think ye of Christ?"* It is a drama that confronts us with that question. And, we need to know more, in order to respond to the question of "what we think of Christ".

But, doesn't studying theology make our faith too academic? Can't we just be Christian without needing to worry about our beliefs? The trend today is to downplay theology.

It is not so much that evangelicals cease to believe anything theological, it is rather that belief is no longer central to their identity and program!

Richard Lints, Fabric of Theology

Why don't we focus on other important aspects of Christianity?

- **Service:** The church that does good in the world, cares for each other, and lives the right way.
- **Experience:** The church that has powerful experiences of God where we feel his presence and engages our emotions.
- **Practical Help:** The church that offers useful guidance for the difficult situations of life.

These are all important aspects of a healthy church, but we are Christians because of what we believe. It is our faith in Christ that defines us. Galatians 3:1-9

[1] O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified. [2] Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? [3] Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? [7] Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. (see also Exodus 12:26-27, Deuteronomy 6:4-9, 2 Thessalonians 2:15)

Our identity as a church is most essentially what we believe, and our beliefs drive what we do. Our beliefs will be crucial to evaluating our experiences and determining what is godly guidance.

¹ Dogma refers to the doctrines or essential beliefs of the faith.

This class will study theology using the *Westminster Confession of Faith* as our guide. Later we will explain why we use a confession, but our point here is to argue for why theology is important.

We study theology because our goal as creatures is to know God. Theology is a crucial component of knowing God.

"Knowing God is more than knowing about Him; it is a matter of dealing with Him as He opens up to you and being dealt with by Him as He takes knowledge of you. Knowing about Him is a necessary precondition of trusting in Him, but the width of our knowledge about Him is no gauge of our knowledge of Him...What were we made for? To know God. What aim should we have in life? To know God. What is the eternal life that Jesus gives? To know God. What is the best thing in life? To know God. What in humans gives God most pleasure? Knowledge of himself." J.I. Packer

But, can we know him? This is the major contention by those who remain secular: the belief that you cannot know God or, at least, cannot know him for certain.

God the Revealer

At the core of Christianity is the firm belief that God makes himself known.

"...the religion of the Bible presents itself as distinctively a revealed religion. Or rather, to speak more exactly, it announces itself as the revealed religion, as the only revealed religion; and sets itself as such over against all other religions, which are represented as all products, in a sense in which it is not, of the art and device of man." B.B. Warfield

*Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush aflame with God;
But only those who see take off their shoes,
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries.*

Elizabeth Barrett Browning

What about people who have never heard the gospel? Can God condemn someone who has never heard of Jesus or has no access to a Bible?

General Revelation: The Book of Nature

Belgic Confession:

Q2. By what means God is made known unto us

We know him by two means; first, by the creation, preservation and government of the universe; which is before our eyes as a most elegant book, wherein all creatures, great and small, are as so many characters leading us to contemplate the invisible things of God... Secondly, he makes himself more clearly fully known to us by his holy and divine Word, that is to say, as far as is necessary for us to know in this life, to his glory and our salvation.

These are often called the two books of God's revelation, Nature and the Bible: Which one is infallible? Which one is authoritative?

Psalms 19:1-2

- 1. The heavens declare the glory of God,
and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.*
- 2. Day to day pours out speech,
and night to night reveals knowledge.*

God is revealed not just in birds and trees. He is most clearly revealed in humanity Genesis 1:26, "Let us make man in our image" (see also, Gen. 9:6)

Also, because of this, we have a knowledge of God implanted in us.

There is within the human mind, and indeed by natural instinct, an awareness of divinity. This we take to be beyond controversy. To prevent anyone from taking refuge in the pretense of ignorance, God himself has implanted in all men a certain understanding of his divine majesty. Calvin, Institutes I.III.1

Westminster Confession of Faith 1-1a

Although the light of nature, and the works of creation and providence do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God, as to leave men unexcusable;

How would an agnostic or an atheist respond to the claim that God has made himself clearly known?

Romans 1:18-20

18. For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. 19. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. [20] For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.

Insufficiency of General Revelation

WCF 1-1b

...yet are they not sufficient to give that knowledge of God, and of his will, which is necessary unto salvation

Note the ways in which the Book of Nature is **sufficient** and **insufficient**. Romans 1 tells us that it is sufficient to condemn. WCF explains that Nature is not sufficient for salvation.

The second half of Romans 1 explains the difference:

Romans 1:21-23

[21] For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. [22] Claiming to be wise, they became fools, [23] and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

We should worship God because of his creation. Yet, sin has so affected our minds (noetic effects of the Fall) and our wills that we suppress this clear knowledge and misuse it, worshipping idols.

When we say that sin is ethical we do not mean, however, that sin involved only the will of man and not also his intellect. Sin involved every aspect of man's personality. All of man's reactions in every relation in which God had set him were ethical and not merely intellectual; the intellectual itself is ethical. Cornelius Van Til

At this point, nature doesn't offer us any help; it only condemns. Nature does not communicate God's plan of salvation from condemnation; it offers nothing about Jesus or God's covenant promises of redemption. We need an in-breaking act of God. That act is only revealed in scripture.

WCF 1-1c

Therefore it pleased the Lord, at sundry times, and in divers manners, to reveal himself, and to declare that his will unto his church; and afterwards, for the better preserving and propagating of the truth, and for the more sure establishment and comfort of the church against the corruption of the flesh, and the malice of Satan and of the world, to commit the same wholly unto writing: which maketh the Holy Scripture to be most necessary; those former ways of God's revealing his will unto his people being now ceased.

Revealing and Knowing

God's Part: Revealing Himself (making himself known in Nature and Scripture)



Our Part: Knowing God (Belief)

So far, we explained the need for God's word, but not really the need for theology. Why study theology and why use a confession of faith like the Westminster Confession as our guide in studying theology?

While God's revelation is clear, we have already seen that our understanding of it and response to it is affected by sin. There are many factors that have led Christians to believe lots of different and even contradictory things about God.

Skepticism About Confessions or Tradition

Many churches will boast that they have "no creed but Christ." Behind this statement is the concern that tradition can obscure truth and creeds can place authority in something other than God's Word.

What are some valid reasons to be skeptical of appeals to tradition? What might be some dangers in operating without a creed?

Evangelical Christianity, in particular, rejects creeds in place of individual interpretation and personal experience.

The revivalist of the Second Great Awakening... argued (as the secularists had a century earlier) that God's revelation was not properly mediated by either tradition or theology; it came directly to each individual through personal experience. As a result, the individual became the arbiter of what the Bible did and did not say. The new evangelical coalition attached little importance to the aid of the past or even the present community of interpreters in matters of biblical interpretation. External authorities were jettisoned and divine authority was internalized-- a strategy not altogether different from that of the Enlightenment. Rick Lints

Nathan Hatch in "Evangelicalism as a Democratic Movement" puts it this way:

In America the principal mediator of God's voice has not been state, church, council, confession, ethnic group, university college or seminary; it has been quite simply, the people... the impulse to rework Christianity into forms that were unmistakably popular... and democratic in at least three respects: it was audience centered, intellectually open to all, and organizationally pluralistic and innovative.

What are some dangers of populist Christianity?

Is there really “no creed but Christ”?

“Christians are not divided between those who have creeds and confessions and those who do not; rather, they are divided between those who have public creeds and confessions that are written down and exist as public documents, subject to public scrutiny, evaluation, and critique, and those who have private creeds and confessions that are often improvised, unwritten, and thus not open to public scrutiny, not susceptible to evaluation and crucially and ironically, not, therefore, subject to testing by Scripture to see whether they are true.” Carl Trueman

Scripture alone is our only perfect rule for faith and practice. Most churches affirm this, but never explain what they understand the scriptures to teach. Our church recognizes the great value of creeds and confessions for summarizing the teaching of scripture.

We affirm that the historic creeds like the *Apostles' Creed* faithfully represent the essential beliefs in scripture. We also affirm that the *Westminster Confession of Faith* is a reliable testimony of the Bible's teachings.

The ultimate goal of a confession is to preserve biblical faith, not supplant it. The *Westminster Confession* itself affirms this:

WCF I.9. The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself: and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold, but one), it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly.

I.10. The supreme judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture.

A confession must never come between the Bible and the Christian. The Bible doesn't need a mediator to tell us what it says. The Reformation challenged that principle of Catholicism.

Catholicism: Bible → Tradition → Christian

Or, Revelation → Tradition → Knowing God and Believing

But, we also recognize the danger in private interpretations that have a way of manipulating God's word to say what we want it to say. Most, if not all, heresies in the church begin by well-meaning Christians attempting to defend the faith and arguing from scripture.

The Confession is a good servant but a bad master: it assists, but cannot replace, the act of confession.

John Webster puts it this way:

“a creed or confessional formula is a public and binding indication of the gospel set before us in the scriptural witness, through which the church affirms its allegiance to God, repudiates the falsehood by which the church is threatened, and assembles around the judgment and consolation of the gospel.”

So rather than standing between God’s revelation and our knowing God, a confession is our articulation of what we believe God is saying.

In our illustration, confessions belong on “Our Part” not on “God’s Part.”

God’s Part: Revealing Himself (making himself known in Nature and Scripture)



Our Part: Knowing God (Confession of Faith)

Webster says, “Confession is not primarily an act of definition; it is, rather, a ‘thankful, praising, self-committing acceptance of God’s self-revelation in Christ.’”

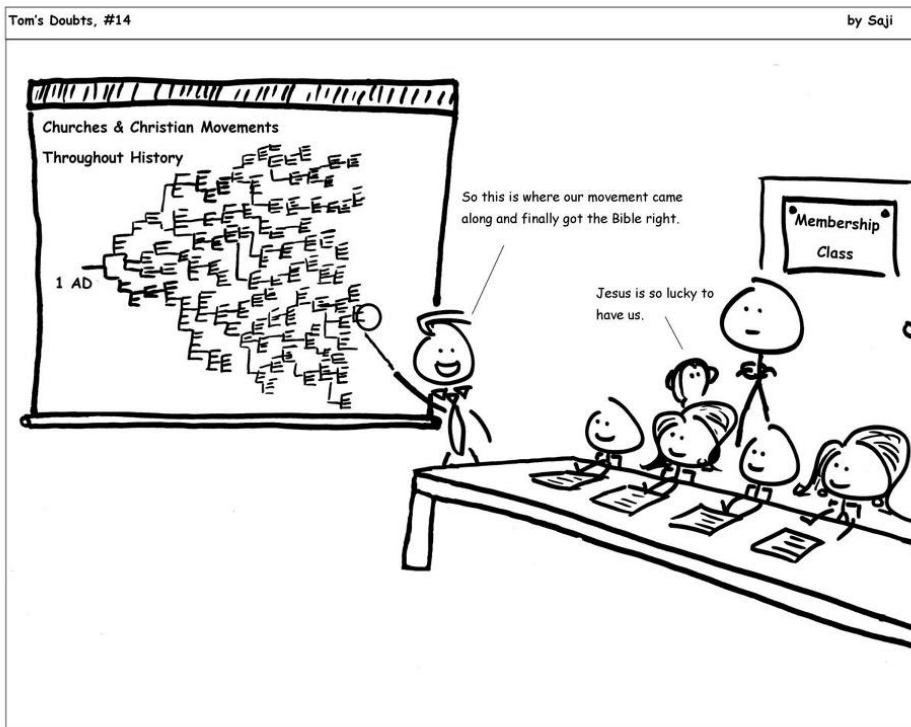
Reading scripture with our Confession can guide us and confirm our reading (letting us know we are on the right track) or it can expose mis-readings that need correcting.

Should Christians value unique and innovative readings of scripture or value interpretation that fits with what Christians in previous generations have said?

Why use the *Westminster Confession of Faith*?

Why use a document that was created in England in the 1630s? Carl Trueman writes, no one today would “consult a seventeenth-century textbook on surgery to find out how to remove a burst appendix.”

Westminster represents a particular branch of our spiritual family tree.



The major “ecumenical creeds” of the first four centuries set the “trunk” of the tree and determined what all Christians believe (against what can no longer be called Christian).

There are major breakpoints that are represented in this confession without getting too narrow. Here are some key turning points.



Each major branch of the tree sets the smaller branches on a trajectory that determine the subsequent beliefs. We shouldn't underestimate the vast core beliefs that we all share, illustrated above by the trunk of the tree. Most of the points in the *Westminster Confession of Faith* represent beliefs held in common with all Christians everywhere.

Focusing in on the specifics, Westminster follows the breakpoints of:

- Western Christianity (against Eastern Orthodoxy),
- Protestant (against Roman Catholicism),
- Reformed (against Lutheran and Radical Reformers),
- Reformed (against Anglican)
- Sacramental (against Baptist)

Westminster doesn't go further. It can be held by Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Christian Reformed, etc.

How can we make sure this class reaches its goal of knowing God? What ways can we get sidetracked from that goal?