Basic Christian Theology

First Baptist Church Dandridge
Dr. Justin H. Terrell
justin@fbcdandridge.org

The study notes from previous sessions are available at www.fbcdandridge.org/wednesday-bible-study

Introduction

1. Epistemology

    a. **Definition**: Epistemology is based on the Greek word for "knowledge," and it's the philosophical study of how we gain knowledge and confirm knowledge, and the limits of our knowledge.

    b. **Revelation:** When it comes to what we know about God and his will, all we have is what God has decided to reveal to us. In other words, there is nothing we can know about God outside of what he has personally revealed. There are even limitations to what we can understand about God and his will in what has been revealed. However, God has revealed himself to us in two ways: Natural Revelation and Special Revelation.

        - **Group Discussion**: What mistakes can we make by trying to understand God or his will by going outside of what we has revealed? What are the dangers of trying to understand things about God that we are not humanly capable of understanding?

2. Christian Theology

    a. **Definition**: "Christian theology is a human description of the authoritative knowledge and wisdom that God has revealed in his Word so that we may know him and live unto him through Jesus Christ" (Beeke, 6).

    b. **Definition**: "Theology is the knowledge or wisdom of divine matters that God has revealed to people in this world…and that he has adapted to their capability." (Johannes Polyander)

Natural Revelation

God has made himself known in general through the beauty and complexity of the created universe and through the inner witness of his image placed in the human conscience. J.I. Packer summarizes, "[Natural] revelation is so called because everyone receives it, just by virtue of being alive in God's world" (28). However, while natural revelation is sufficient to reveal God's existence, it is not sufficient to lead a person to saving faith in Christ.

1. God's Revelation through Creation

    a. Principle: The existence of God is revealed through the beauty and complexity of creation, which is the visible universe and world around us. When a person gazes at the stars, watches a beautiful sunset, observes the grandeur of majestic mountains, forests, canyons, and oceans, the most common assumption is that someone with great power made all of this. It is too hard to imagine that everything in the universe fell into place by chance. The world around us points to a Creator and tells us something about his nature.

        - Psalm 19:1 – "*The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.*"

        - Romans 1:20 – "*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.*"

        - Belgic Confession (1561) – "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 see clearly the invisible things of God, even his everlasting power and divinity, as the apostle Paul says in Romans 1:20. All which things are sufficient to convince men and leave them without excuse" (Article 2).

        - Quote: "*I'm not an atheist. The problem involved is too vast for our limited minds. We are in the position of a little child entering a huge library filled with books in many languages. The child knows someone must have written those books. It does not know how. It does not understand the languages in which they are written. The child dimly suspects a mysterious order in the arrangement of the books but doesn't know what it is. That, it seems to me, is the attitude of even the most intelligent human being toward God. We see the universe marvelously arranged and obeying certain laws but only dimly understand these laws.*" – Albert Einstein (when asked if he believed in God), Ortlund, 52-53.

    b. Apologetics: The beauty and complexity of creation is the source of several strong arguments for God's existence — Cosmological argument (everything has a cause); Teleological argument (creation appears to have a design and purpose).

2. God's Revelation through Conscience

    a. Principle: Since all humans are created in the image of God (Imago Dei), even in our fallen condition there is enough of God's image remaining in the heart to give us an internal sense of his existence.

- Genesis 1:26 – "*Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.'*"

- Romans 1:18 – "*For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.*"

- Romans 1:21–23 – "*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. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.*"

- Romans 2:14–15 – "*For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them.*"

- Psalm 14:1 – "*The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God.'*"

b. Problem: Some may deny an inner awareness of God, but this detail is often negated during a time of personal crisis or tragedy (e.g., "no foxhole atheists."). However, such revelation isn't sufficient to lead a person to saving faith in Christ. We need more.