

## **Topic 4: Classic Paradigms and Contemporary Approaches to Theology**

Having looked briefly at the task of theology and the soil from whence theology springs, it will be useful to step back and scan the history of Christian theology. I will begin with a sketch of five great "ages" in pre-Christian and Christian history, reviewing how each impacted the development of Christian theology. This will be followed by a glance at three classic paradigms of theology that have most powerfully influenced Western Christianity, and several contemporary approaches to theology. This will set the stage for the topic to follow which takes up the challenges facing theology today.

**I. Major Eras in the History of Christian Theology** - Ancient Israel: The theological trajectories developed in ancient Israel represent the key elements in the pre-history of Christian theology. Through an investigation of their origins, Christians recognize an educational process unfolding through the process of revelation. This allows them to recognize in this process the "dogmatic character of the Christian faith." The key point is that revelation is primarily a process of education, not a content ("deposit of faith"). In the process, imperfect and transitory things have their own necessary moment. The "dogmatic formulas" of the Old Testament are better viewed as a creative process of tradition rather than as absolute expressions or timeless truths.

The New Testament Era: Under the impact of their experience of Jesus - his captivating life and ministry, his traumatizing death and his unexpected triumph in the resurrection, the theologians of the early Church (the Gospel writers, Paul, and others) began to think about God and the world in new ways: God is a Jesus shows God to be.

The Patristic Era (the first five Christian centuries): This period represents the first great interpretation of the Christian faith in terms of a cultural matrix (Greco-Roman culture) that was different from the one in which Christianity grew up (Aramaic-Hebraic). Along with this first great experiment in inculturation, the theologians of the early church addressed a number of crucial issues that led to the development of our Classical Christological and Trinitarian understandings, not to mention a new understanding of the role and dynamics of theology itself.

The Middle Ages (6-15 centuries): The middle ages witness the emergence of scholasticism, the re-introduction of Aristotle, The Protestant Reformation and the Catholic Reformation of Trent (16th Century), Vatican I (1870), Vatican II (1962-1965)

**II. Classical Paradigms:** St. Augustine (4th-5th century) Born in North Africa and lived during the time of the decline of the Roman Empire. A convert to Catholicism (his mother, St. Monica, prayed for years for his conversion) and later the Bishop of Hippo. Augustine is responsible for so many key developments in doctrine and theology, including his conception of original sin, his understanding of grace and salvation, but for our purposes we are especially mindful of his impact on theology itself.

Crucial to Augustine's achievement is the distinction he draws between Christian doctrine (theology) as wisdom and his understanding (sapientia) of knowledge (scientia). Wisdom takes as its object the eternal and unchangeable reality, knowledge is the rational insight into visible, perceptible, changeable and temporal things. Knowledge for Augustine is not the product of modern empirical method but stems from three fonts: knowledge from experience, knowledge based on authority and knowledge from "signs," including natural signs and revealed signs.

Augustine developed principles and rules for the interpretation of the Scriptures that have had an enormous impact on the centuries to follow. His primary conviction: what is of primary importance is not our knowledge of material signs that enable us to interpret the eternal reality, but our knowledge of the eternal reality that enables us to interpret the material signs. To understand the words of the Bible properly as signs of eternal reality, one must acknowledge that reality.

Augustine was perhaps the first great systematic theologian (one could argue that Origen could be considered this...) Certainly, Augustine's influence on all subsequent Western theology is profound. His approach influenced the method, content and arrangement of medieval theology. He was the most important theologian cited by Aquinas and his influence helped shape the great summas of the Middle Ages.

St. Thomas Aquinas (13th century): Throughout the middle ages we see the rise of what came to be known as the scholastic method which accompanied the rise of the medieval university. From the practice of reading (lectio) there developed the practice of disputation of questions, Neo-scholasticism (19th century)

**III. Contemporary Approaches to Theology:** Karl Rahner's transcendental theology, Hermeneutical Theory (Gadamer and Ricoeur), Method of Correlation (Schleiermacher and Tillich), Liberation Theology

## REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What are some of the main eras in the history of the Christian theology and what historical events characterized those eras?
2. What are some of the important features of the approach to theology of St. Augustine? St. Thomas Aquinas? Neo-Scholasticism?