

Why Theology?

The question

At its core, Christianity is a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Anyone who has had a conversion experience knows that Christianity is very personal¹ and relational. So it's not surprising that pious Christians sometimes ask a question that goes like this: "I have a personal relationship with Jesus. Why do I need *theology*? Faith is something to be *lived*, not *studied*!"

Before responding, we should admit that holiness is not a matter of knowledge. Unlike the gnostic heretics of the first few centuries,² we do not believe that salvation is attained by secret knowledge, or that 'smarter is better'. We must enter the kingdom of God like a child (Mk 10:14-15).

Knowledge and Love

Yet our relationship with Jesus is not meant to be a blind one. It is an ancient philosophical principle that *love* is based on *knowledge*. We can't love what we don't know. If we love Christ, we will naturally want to know him better. When I began dating Corinne, the woman who is now my wife, I immediately felt an intense emotional attraction – I fell in love. But this emotional magnetism didn't lead me to simply spend more time with her. I wanted to know as much about her as I could. And the more I learned about her, the better I could love her. The same is true in our relationship with Jesus. This is the first part of our answer to our question.

We're not alone

So, how do we get to know Jesus? This can happen through prayer, sacraments, and other ways, but we can't limit this knowledge to our own individual experiences. It is true that Christianity is essentially a relationship with Jesus. Yet we are not the first ones to encounter this living Lord. For the past 2000 years, people have been encountering Jesus in a real relationship. So, as a secondary answer to our question about the usefulness of theology, we can say that we don't have to struggle away on our own. As divine, Jesus is infinitely knowable; no one can plumb the depths of his person or understand the entire truth about him. Thankfully, we have two millenia of theology (starting with the New Testament) to help us in our quest to know Christ.

What is Theology?

Theology is the exploration and attempt to understand what God has revealed to us in Jesus Christ. From the very beginning of Christianity, believers realized that the Christian message was a *living* word – it was not enough to simply write everything down and then tell future generations "read the book!" Christianity is not a lifeless letter but an encounter with the Living Word.

Since the Church always exists in the world, it is always in contact with cultures outside of it. Theology can therefore also be understood as Christianity's interface with culture. In other words, it is the Christian's attempt to explain the hope that he has in Christ to those around him (1 Peter 3:15). The greatest examples of this are the Fathers of the Church, who used the language of Greek philosophy and Roman culture to explain the gospel message in a way their listeners could understand.

In fact, because of the influence of the philosophies of various cultures, the Church must always guard against losing or disfiguring parts of her treasure which is the gospel. Protecting and enhancing this treasure is the task of theology, particularly the Church's magisterium. The important thing for us is that

1 *i.e.*, involving *persons* – this does not mean individualistic!

2 Gnosticism (from the Greek word for knowledge, *gnosis*) is a general term for a huge family of sects, many of which considered themselves Christian. They blended Christianity with Platonic philosophy and Greek mythology. Some characteristics of gnosticism are: a disdain for all things material (especially the human body), a devaluation or denial of the incarnation, and an exaltation of secret knowledge which a select few were privy to and which provided access to a higher level of salvation than common Christians.

we can understand and explain our faith in reference to the pressing questions of our time.

Christian Balance

So how does all this relate to me today? What relevance is there for my relationship with Jesus? As humans, we are capable of relating on several levels. For a relationship to be strong and healthy, all levels must be active. Relationships can't be only physical, or emotional, or intellectual. In our relationship with Christ, there must be a *symmetry* between the intellectual and the other levels (e.g. affective, emotional). When the intellectual lags behind, one of three things will happen.

1. *Rejection of Reason*

In this first situation, the person encounters questions posed in his intellect that seem to have no easy solutions (e.g., the problem of evil, the Trinity, evolution, Church moral teachings). In an effort to preserve his Christian faith, he shuts the door on his intellect, locking these questions in the closet. On the religious level, he operates without his intellect, basing his relationship with Christ entirely on faith (*sola fide*) without reference to reason. But this faith remains in a precarious position.

2. *Rejection of Faith*

This person encounters the same difficult questions, yet cannot ignore them. Not seeing any answers (nor trying very hard to find any), his faith gradually wastes away. In his heart he makes a decision that the questions raised by his culture are more powerful than his faith, which he has little proof for. He either stops practicing his faith and becomes a “nominal” Christian, or he adopts an easier version of Christianity which emphasizes the moral teachings of Jesus (i.e., love your neighbor) and downplays hard-to-believe elements of the gospel like miracles and the divinity of Christ.

3. *Theology*

In the final situation, the person realizes that the questions posed by the culture must be answered. He turns to these questions and allows his Christian faith to cast light on them. He struggles and comes to a point where his Christian faith (guided by the Church's magisterium) is in harmony with his intellect. In other words, he does theology. His relationship with Christ is now active and fruitful on both the intellectual and affective levels. This person is what the Church calls properly *formed*. He is not lopsided; he is symmetrical. His faith and reason are united and he is ready to explain his faith in Christ to anyone.

Why theology?

So why do we need theology? In short, because we have brains. Our intellect is part of who we are as human persons created in God's image. Christianity is about a relationship with Christ, but we can have no relationship that isn't intellectual. Theology is simply faith-filled reflection on God's revelation to us; it is the fulfilment of our desire to know the God we believe in.³ In a well-balanced relationship with Christ, theology doesn't quench or stifle the fire of faith – it fuels it and makes it burn ever hotter and brighter so that we can become a light to the nations.

3 The Church Fathers see theology as the quest to understand the God grasped by faith. In the words of St. Irenaeus (2nd c.) and later, St. Augustine (4th-5th c.), “*credo ut intelligam*” - “I believe in order to understand”.