

## How Tedious and Tasteless the Hours

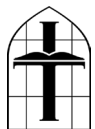
John Newton (1725–1807)

How tedious and tasteless the hours  
When Jesus no longer I see!  
Sweet prospects, sweet birds, and sweet flowers  
Have lost all their sweetness to me:  
The midsummer sun shines but dim,  
The fields strive in vain to look gay;  
But when I am happy in him,  
December's as pleasant as May.

His name yields the richest perfume,  
And sweeter than music his voice;  
His presence disperses my gloom,  
And makes all within me rejoice:  
I should, were he always thus nigh,  
Have nothing to wish or to fear;  
No mortal so happy as I—  
My summer would last all the year.

Content with beholding his face,  
My all to his pleasure resigned,  
No changes of season or place  
Would make any change in my mind:  
While blest with a sense of his love,  
A palace a toy would appear;  
And prisons would palaces prove,  
If Jesus would dwell with me there.

My Lord, if indeed I am thine,  
If thou art my sun and my song,  
Say, why do I languish and pine?  
And why are my winters so long?  
Oh, drive these dark clouds from my sky;  
Thy soul-cheering presence restore;  
Or take me to thee up on high,  
Where winter and clouds are no more.



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## ΤΩ ΧΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

### *In the Nick of Time*

#### Ordering the Theological System

Kevin T. Bauder

Before systematic theologians can deal with questions about content, they must first deal with questions of method and procedure. One of those questions is how to divide the theological curriculum. The usual answer is to follow ten traditional disciplines. These are theology proper (the doctrine of God), bibliology (the doctrine of Scripture), Christology (the person and work of God the Son), pneumatology (the person and work of the Holy Spirit), anthropology (the doctrine of humanity), hamartiology (the doctrine of sin), soteriology (the doctrine of salvation), ecclesiology (the nature and order of the church), angelology (the doctrine of created spirit beings), and eschatology (the study of last things).

These topics or *loci*, however, are subject to some variation. For example, instead of a general discussion of God (theology proper), some theologians will substitute paterology or patriology (the doctrine of God the Father). The term can be confusing, because the similar word *patrology* is used for the study of the early church fathers. Other theologians will substitute a discussion of Trinitarianism for theology proper.

Occasionally, some theologian will insert a completely separate discipline. For example, Arnold Fruchtenbaum has written a large volume on Israelology, the disciplined study of Israel. Other theologians may include separate discussions of marriage, the divine covenants, the divine decrees, apologetics, or practical ministry. The boundaries of systematic theology are not always clear.

Theologians also debate the proper order in which these topics should be discussed. For example, angelology always seems to fit poorly into the system. It does not follow logically from any of the other nine topics, and it is built upon evidence that is less substantial than the others. Angels and other spirit beings are almost never the direct focus of Scripture. They show up “by the way,” and most of what we know about them we gather by inference.

A significant debate involves which topic ought to come first. The three main contenders are God (theology proper), Scripture (bibliology), or hu-

manity (anthropology). Good reasons can be given for putting each of these in first place.

Some argue that theology proper should come first because God is the dominant subject of study. Everything else in the theological curriculum comes under the study of God. He is before all things. He created all things. All things exist for His pleasure. Nothing can be rightly known unless it is known in relation to Him. Therefore, we must know God before we can know anything else. These are powerful reasons for placing the study of God first in the system of theology.

Others suggest that the study of humanity ought to come first in the theological system. Granted, God is what we are supposed to study, but we are the ones studying Him. For God to be known, a knower is necessary. In this case, we humans are the knowers. We ought to judge how well our apparatus for knowing is adjusted to the subject that we are trying to know. In other words, before we pontificate about God, we ought to know our own limitations.

The danger is that placing the study of human nature first will lead to a humanly-focused theology. This does not have to be the case. For example, no one will question the God-centered focus of Calvin's *Institutes*. Yet the very first sentence of the *Institutes* says, "Without knowledge of self there is no knowledge of God." Still, in Calvin's reckoning, this initial knowledge of self only needs to be enough to drive us to God. Once it does that, Calvin acknowledges that, "Without knowledge of God there is no knowledge of self."

The third possible starting point for theology is the doctrine of Scripture. If God is the subject of study (the *what*), and if humans are the knowers (the *who*), then Scripture is the mechanism by which we learn (the *how*). It is the way in which knowledge of God is mediated to the human mind. Even if one has a robust doctrine of general or natural revelation (revelation outside of Scripture), the Bible remains the clearest and most detailed way in which God communicates Himself to humans. If we want to know God, then we ought to know how He has revealed Himself to us. Further, we should know how that revelation must be appropriated.

Nevertheless, if we place Scripture first, we are already assuming something about God. We are also assuming something about ourselves as readers of Scripture. If we place God first, we are assuming something about how He can be known, and we are assuming something about ourselves as knowers. If we place humanity first in order of study, then we are assuming something about our need to study God, and we are also assuming something about how He makes Himself known to us. We can never begin the process of doing theology without assuming something. There is no neutral, detached, assumption-free starting point.

Obviously, if we are going to do theology, we must start somewhere. Whether we begin with theology proper, with bibliology, with anthropology, or at some other point, we should recognize that we are plunging into the middle of a process that is going on before we enter it. The truth is that we never just isolate a single field—or even a single question—for attention. The whole system of theology is interconnected. Furthermore, it is all connected to the overall world of knowledge. Theology cannot be isolated from metaphysics, from epistemology, from ethics, from chemistry, from astronomy, or even from cooking dinner. As we do theology, we are responsible to begin where we are and to work out all those connections. Where we start matters less than getting started.



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This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.

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