

Theology as Discipleship

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What difference does theology make for our lives?

This book emerges out of my experience teaching theology to undergraduates. Although my students typically enjoy learning the material, they often have difficulty relating it to their Christian lives. The question appears like clockwork in nearly every course. *What difference does theology make for our lives?* Often it appears during our discussion of the doctrine of the Trinity, or perhaps while we are looking at the distinctions that prompted the divisions of the Reformation. The arguments of previous centuries seem archaic and irrelevant to the faith of my students. *Why does this matter?* Convictions that prompted heated debates and church divisions in the past seem unimportant today. *Shouldn't we just focus on following Jesus?* And my students are not the only ones with these sorts of questions. I have found over the years that many if not most Christians who study theology either have these same questions or have had them at some point. I often ask them myself.

The fact that these kind of questions can be asked at all – and, more importantly, the fact they are asked for sincere and substantive reasons – reveals a problem in the way we teach and learn theology. It demonstrates, for example, that the discipline of theology has become so divorced from the everyday practices of the Christian life that it is difficult for smart and committed Christians to figure out how they relate. It also reveals that the long-acknowledged tension between the academic discipline of theology and the life of discipleship to Jesus Christ may, in fact, be a great chasm. It is possible for a Christian to participate in the church for years and never engage in disciplined theological thinking about core Christian doctrines or the history of the church's debates about them. It also is possible for academic theologians to devote their careers to the discipline and never be asked to translate or apply the content of their scholarship to the concrete realities that shape the daily life of the church. Taken together, these problems point to another, even deeper issue: we often pursue theological learning without a clear understanding of how and why we do so.

These problems form the background to this book. In the pages that follow, I argue that the discipline of theology and a life of discipleship to Jesus Christ are integrally related because the practice of theology is one of the ways we participate in the life of the triune God. I make this case by explaining what theology is, how theology is possible and what it looks like for a theologian to practice the discipline as an act of faith and obedience. My goal is to show how the study of theology enriches Christian practice and how faithful obedience to Christ enables the learning of theology.

-Taken from the preface



Keith L. Johnson (PhD, Princeton Theological Seminary) is associate professor of theology at Wheaton College. His research focuses on systematic theology, including the doctrines of the Trinity and Christology and the relationship between Protestant and Roman Catholic theology. He is author of *Karl Barth and the Analogia Entis* and coeditor of *Bonhoeffer, Christ and Culture*. An ordained Baptist minister, he and his wife Julie have one son.

In Pursuit of the Discipline of Theology

Why did you decide to focus on the importance of theology in the church?

Keith L. Johnson: Many smart and faithful Christians cringe when they hear the word *theology* due to the negative connotations the discipline carries. They worry that the formal study of theology distracts us from the most important activities of the Christian life, that it inhibits rather than helps our discipleship to Jesus, and that it produces unnecessary divisions in the church. These worries reveal a problem in the way we teach and learn theology. It shows that the study of theology has become so divorced from the everyday practices of the Christian life that it is difficult for smart and committed Christians to figure out how they relate. It also shows that the long-acknowledged tension between the academic discipline of theology and the life of the discipleship to Jesus Christ may be, in fact, a great chasm. Taken together, these problems show that we often pursue theological learning without a clear understanding of how and why we do so. My book hopes to address these problems and show how a faithful theologian can be academically excellent and how an academic theologian can be faithful.

What are you arguing for in *Theology as Discipleship*?

Keith: I argue that the discipline of theology and a life of discipleship to Jesus are integrally related because the practice of theology is one of the ways we participate in the life of the triune God. The argument begins with the confession that Jesus Christ is Lord and the belief that God raised him from the dead (Rom 10:9). On the basis of this confession, I describe the place and role of the practice of theology within God's eternal plan for created reality and history. This involves working out the implications of our union with Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit for our knowledge of God. The central claim is that we know God as we participate in the mind of Jesus Christ and then live a life that corresponds to this participation within the context of the church and its mission to the world. I close the book by listing several characteristics theologians should display as they practice the discipline of theology within the context of God's saving work in Christ and the Spirit. Together, these characteristics show how the practice of theology corresponds to, rather than conflicts with, a life of discipleship to Jesus Christ.

What is distinctive about *Theology as Discipleship*?

Keith:

- It offers an introduction to the proper method and practice of the discipline of theology that will be beneficial to both scholars and their students.
- It connects the practices of academic theology and the practices of Christian discipleship.
- It provides a Christ-centered account of created reality, God's eternal plan for history, and our place within them.

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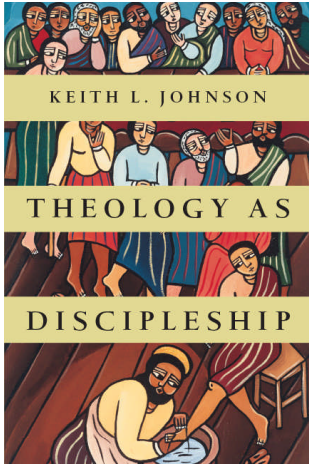
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Q & A



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In this engaging and accessible introduction, Keith Johnson takes a fresh look at theology. He presents the discipline of theology as one of the ways we participate in the life of the triune God.

Without suggesting it should be removed from the academy, Johnson argues that theology has to be integrally connected to the traditions and practices of the church. If academic theology is to be genuinely theological, then it has to be carried out in obedience to Jesus Christ and in service to the church.

Why is this book important to you?

Keith: This book marks my attempt to explain how and why I pursue the discipline of theology faithfully within an academic context. I wrote it not only for my students but also for myself. I wanted to be able to explain why my academic work was an act of obedience to Christ and service to the church.

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