

Christian Doctrine

by Shirley C. Guthrie

Chapter One: "Who Is a Theologian?"

Overview

Shirley Guthrie opens Christian Doctrine with a simple but disarming question: who gets to be called a theologian? His answer will surprise most church members. Theology, Guthrie argues, is not the exclusive territory of scholars and seminary professors. It belongs to every Christian who has ever wrestled with what it means to believe in God.

The chapter serves as both an introduction and an invitation. Guthrie wants ordinary believers to take their own faith seriously as an intellectual and personal enterprise — not to impress anyone, but because the questions theology asks are the questions every human life eventually confronts.

Every Christian Is a Theologian

Guthrie's first major claim is that theology is not optional for Christians — it is simply unavoidable. Anyone who thinks about God, asks why they believe what they believe, or tries to explain their faith to another person is already doing theology, whether they know it or not.

"Every Christian is a theologian. Not a professional or scholarly theologian, but a theologian nonetheless."

This levels the playing field. The Sunday school teacher, the new convert, the lifelong church member sitting in the pew — all of them are theologians in Guthrie's sense. The question is not whether we will theologize, but whether we will do it carefully or carelessly, with open Bibles and honest questions or with recycled assumptions we have never examined.

What Is Theology For?

Guthrie is careful to explain what theology is meant to accomplish. It is not an academic exercise designed to produce correct answers on a test. It is a living, breathing attempt to understand and respond to God — and to help other people do the same.

"Theology is the attempt to speak meaningfully and truthfully about God and what it means to believe in God, live before God, and be the people of God in the world."

Notice that Guthrie links theology to life in the world. Doctrine is never merely intellectual. It shapes how a person gets out of bed in the morning, how they treat their neighbor, how they face suffering and death. Sound doctrine, in Guthrie's view, is always doctrine that has been lived — tested in real experience and found trustworthy.

The Danger of Sloppy Theology

One of Guthrie's most pressing concerns in this chapter is the danger of doing theology poorly. Bad theology, he argues, is not harmless. It distorts our picture of God, warps our understanding of human beings, and leads to harmful patterns of life and community.

"Unexamined and uncorrected, our personal, cultural, and traditional understandings of God can become idols — images of God we have created rather than the God who created us."

This is a serious pastoral warning. Every congregation carries inherited assumptions about God that have never been brought into the light and examined against Scripture. Some of those assumptions are rich and true; others are distortions that have done quiet damage for generations. Guthrie calls the church to the ongoing work of examining what it believes and why.

Theology Begins in Community

Guthrie insists that theology is not a solitary pursuit. We do not each develop our private understanding of God in isolation. We think and believe as members of the body of Christ, in conversation with Scripture, with the historic creeds, with teachers across the centuries, and with the living community of the church today.

"Christian theology is done in and for the church — the community of people who have been called to live by faith in the triune God."

This has practical implications for how we approach a discipleship class like this one. We are not here to arrive at our own personal conclusions and then defend them. We are here to think together, to be corrected and sharpened by one another, and to come away with a more faithful, more honest, more livable faith.

Discussion Questions

Take a few minutes to read each question carefully. There are no trick questions — Guthrie's goal, and ours, is honest thinking. Feel free to write notes in the space provided.

1. Before reading this chapter, how would you have defined the word "theologian"? Has Guthrie's definition changed how you think of that word? How so?

2. Guthrie says every Christian is already a theologian whether they realize it or not. Do you agree? Can you think of a time when you were "doing theology" in your everyday life without calling it that?

3. What is the difference between theology done carefully and theology done carelessly? What are the real-world consequences when a church or a family operates on bad theology?

4. Guthrie warns that our unexamined ideas about God can become idols. What are some common assumptions about God — in our culture, in our church, or in your own family — that may need to be examined more carefully?

5. Guthrie says theology is done in community, not in isolation. What does that mean for how we approach disagreements in the church about doctrine? How should Christians hold their convictions?

6. If theology is meant to shape how we live, not just what we believe — what is one area of your daily life that you think your theology ought to be influencing more than it currently does?
