The study of theology is a proper and needful exercise in the life of every Believer. One result of the UK 1904 Welsh ‘Revival’ was that virtually everybody discussed theology. Even coal-miners, working deep underground in harrowing conditions, talked nothing but theology in its smallest detail! But today? It is refreshing, but a rarity, to find Christians talking theologically. Many I know think their limit is to read popular books by famous authors, or glossy-covered books on the latest charismatic fad.

Theology has been hi-jacked by academics and made to seem beyond the experience of ordinary Christians. That is far from the truth. Every Christian can at least be a 'basic' theologian! For our present purposes, ‘theology’ can be defined as being the study of God. In scripture, God is not separated from what He says. As the Christian Bible is God's word, Christian ‘theology’ is, then, the in-depth study of God's word, the Bible. All Believers are called to study God's word diligently.

Two factors can affect the level we reach in theological study: one is the intelligence we were born with and the second is the level of spiritual understanding given to us by God. However, it does not follow that the more intelligent we are the higher will be our theological understanding. The reason for this is very simple: the two factors are not necessarily connected. Having a high intelligence may indeed produce excellent theology, but what the Holy Spirit does is of greater importance.

Understanding of scripture is a gift of God. We are told that He bestows upon all men whatever spiritual understanding they have. Thus, it may very well be that an academic genius can have a lower level of spiritual understanding than does the 'average (Christian) man in the street'. Or to put it in reverse order: in his theology, an ordinary man without academic qualifications can be head and shoulders above a highly intelligent man. God determines our level of theological understanding, NOT us. And whatever level we reach is perfect for the way God wants us to be. Reading and studying help enormously, but it will not help if the Holy Spirit has not given us greater understanding.

Not everybody is called by God to study scripture in-depth. Pastors need to understand scripture and God's will, but it does not mean that every pastor is endowed with a higher level of theological understanding. Being 'apt to teach' is a term used to denote something of secondary importance. The main point is that pastors must look after the flock's well-being. I have heard many, many pastors preach. Most of them may be good pastors, but they do not display intense understanding of scripture. It can be heard in their preaching. It is not disparaging to say that
they know their Bibles, but head-knowledge of scripture is not the same as understanding. Most will tell us what scripture says, but that is an activity that almost anybody can do. What is missing is interpretation.

It is all very well repeating Biblical texts, but the test of true understanding is that the person with the knowledge is able to speak it in his own words and in a fresh way. That is, the words of interpretation given to him by the Lord. Every Christian man, woman and child is called upon to study scripture to the best of their God-given ability. Only some will attain to a higher level of understanding, because that is the way God has gifted them. The main requirement is that we do not waste our time in superficial parrot-fashion reading.

Martin Luther advocated three main points to remember if we are to study theology: prayer, meditation and testing. Prayer should always be the very first action for a preacher. Sadly, in a rush to preach two or three times on a Sunday and once or twice in the week, many pastors neglect a proper approach to theology. If he does not write a single word for his sermon, a preacher MUST pray! It is through prayer that we show our earnest intention to teach God's word.

Then, after prayer and maybe even during it, we alight upon texts we are to study. We must then read and reread them until they become a part of our current thinking. God gives His own levels of understanding! After all that, we need to test ourselves. Often, the best way our theology is examined is when critics attack us. When they do, we are driven back to God to see if we are right! And so our thinking is finely honed until it reflects only what God says. At other times, our listeners ask questions, or make comments. All help.

Other things need to be borne in mind: Our knowledge of scripture and of allied Christian matters, can be legitimately categorised as follows:

1. Knowledge that is firmly displayed in texts, without any possibility of alternative meaning. For example, scripture plainly tells us that Jesus is the Messiah and that the Messiah is God. There is no other way of interpreting that statement. In this case - as in all major aspects of doctrine - scripture truly provides its own interpretation.
2.

Next in priority, are texts that are obviously based on plainly-stated truths. An example is that of the Trinity. Nowhere in scripture do we find reference to 'Trinity', but it is there anyway. This kind of textual interpretation is also 'fixed' and has no other possible meaning. It just means we have to study in greater detail to discover the interpretation. Both the plainly stated and the indirectly stated truths are obvious and incapable of alternative interpretations.

3.

Then there are texts whose interpretations can be implied from other truths in scripture. That is, their truths are indirect, but are based entirely on declared Truth. Many daily decisions are founded on this. It is when we get to these (very few) texts that it is possible to obtain alternative interpretations.

For example, think of Saul when he was chasing David. He one day entered a cave to 'cover his feet'. There are two genuinely possible interpretations for this phrase: one is that Saul went to the lavatory and the other is that he went in to sleep. The interpretation would not harm the text either way and so the issue is not vital to faith. (However, it is this writer's interpretation, given the general context, that Saul went in to sleep. How else could David get near enough to cut off the hem of his garment?)

1.

Finally, there are texts whose meanings are unclear, for one reason or another. It is in this grey area that many cults and sects enjoy themselves! They claim to 'know' the actual meanings of texts that have puzzled the Church for centuries, but when it comes down to it, their 'interpretation' relies more on emotion or theory than on actual Biblical evidence. In other words, it is nothing but human opinion. It is this latter kind of interpretation that can be dangerous (charismatics resort to this type).

It is my own practice not to waste time on expounding something that cannot be verified. If the meaning is really unclear no matter which way it is approached, then I usually leave it. In this way, my own opinion takes a back seat and it cannot cause problems. There is nothing wrong with opinion, unless it clearly contradicts scripture. For instance, the majority of texts are crystal-clear about the meaning of 'tongues' in the New Testament: an earthly foreign language.
Just one single portion of scripture could, possibly, indicate something more 'angelic' (which I do not accept personally) and unknown to mankind. Another example of opinion is the Millennium. Nowhere in scripture is such a physical time clearly shown to exist. It comes down to theory.

So long as we differentiate what is plainly scriptural and what is opinion, we are safe (and honest!). Too many theologians and preachers merge Biblically-obvious interpretations with opinionated ideas. Be honest and you will not go far wrong.

(Also see O-091 Legitimate Interpretation of the Word)