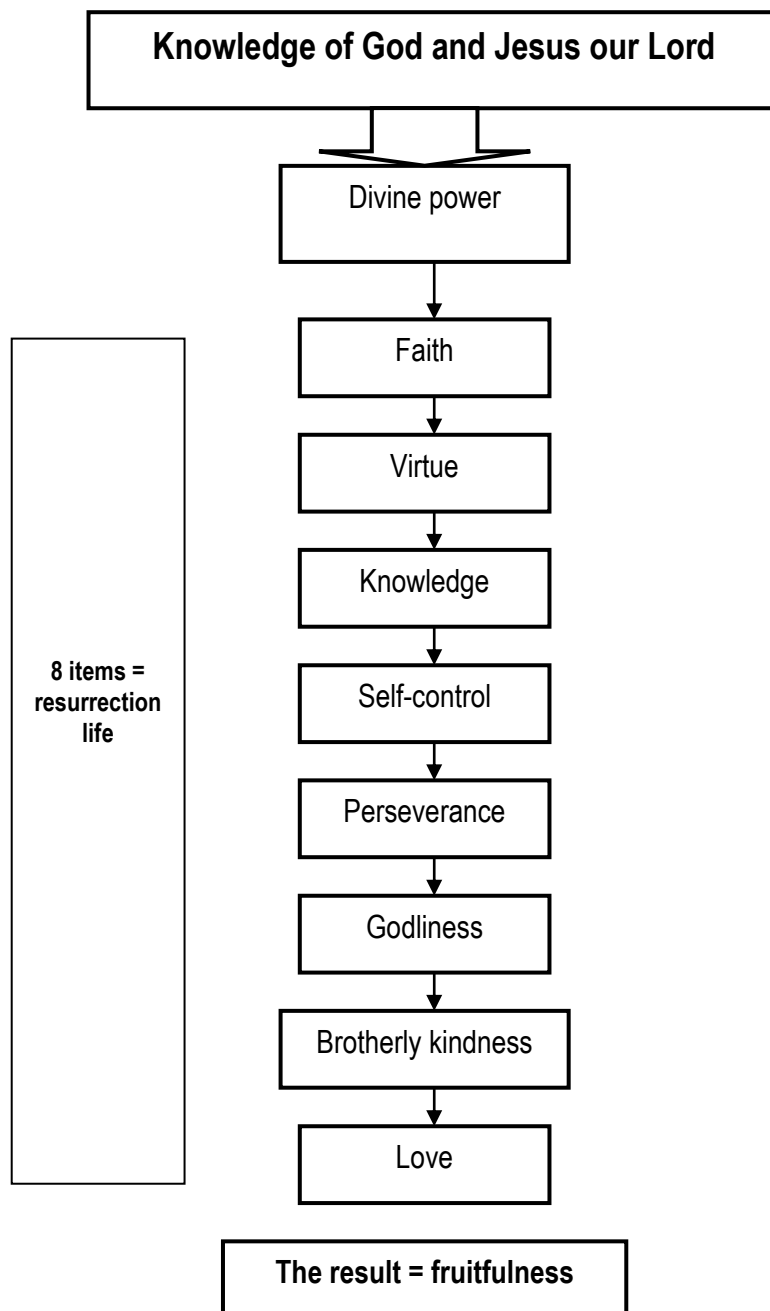
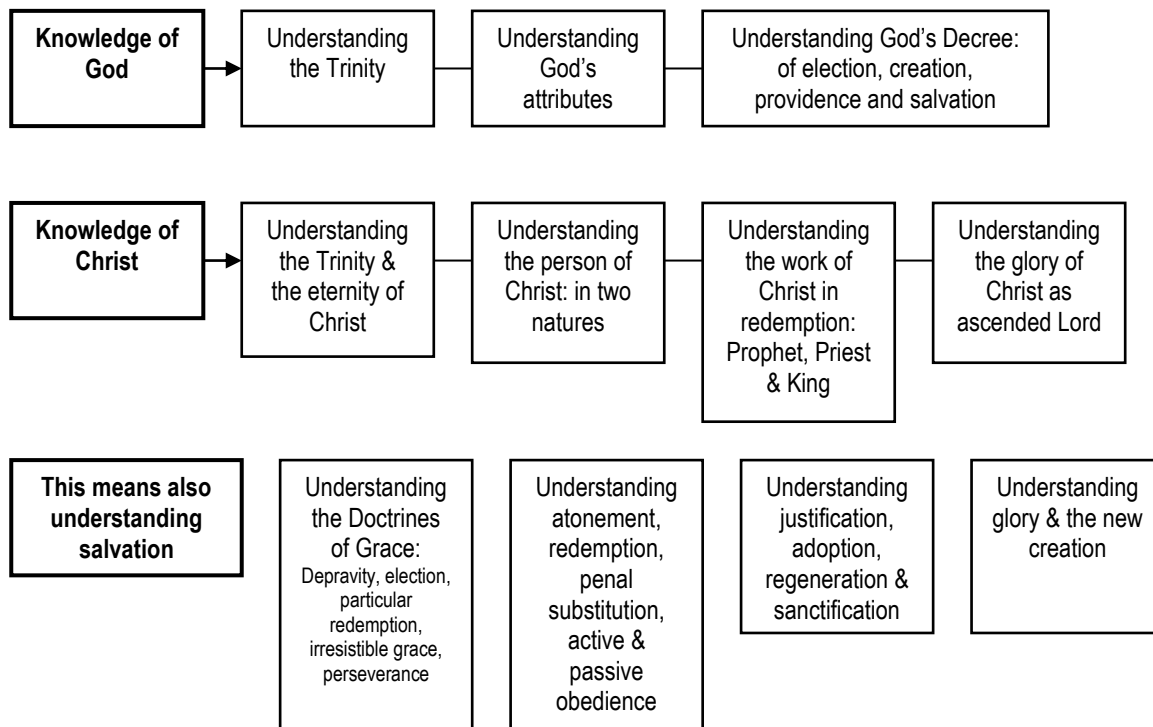


# Bearing fruit is based on knowledge of God

Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord, as His divine power has given to us all things that *pertain* to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue, by which have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption *that is* in the world through lust. But also for this very reason, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love. For if these things are yours and abound, *you will be* neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. 2 Pt 1:2-8





## History

These subjects preoccupied the early church for the first 400 years of its history. It took some of the greatest theological minds to formulate these doctrines<sup>1</sup> which became embedded in early church creeds and council declarations, such as:

- The *Apostles' Creed* [c. origin in early 2<sup>nd</sup> century, further developed by the 5<sup>th</sup> century]. Purpose: to summarise the fundamentals of the faith in very simple, memorable form. Used for new church members before baptism.
- The *Nicene Creed* [325, revised by the Council of Constantinople in 381; the filioque<sup>2</sup> was added at the Council of Toledo in 589]. Purpose: to explain the Trinity in the face of various errors, including Arianism.
- The *Chalcedon Creed* [451]. Purpose: to determine the person and natures of the Lord Jesus against Nestorianism,<sup>3</sup> Eutychianism,<sup>4</sup> and Apollinarianism.<sup>5</sup>
- The *Athanasian Creed* [c.650].<sup>6</sup> A fuller statement of the doctrine of the Trinity and the Person and natures of Christ.

These are often called the *Ecumenical Creeds*, because all the early evangelical churches agreed upon them. All Christians should be familiar with these creeds, which were often

<sup>1</sup> Such as Athanasius and the Cappadocian Fathers (Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory Nazianzus).

<sup>2</sup> 'And the Son' regarding the procession of the Holy Spirit.

<sup>3</sup> Nestorianism denied the unity of the divine Person in Christ: Christ was a man who was accompanied by the Logos. It sought to defend Jesus' humanity at the expense of the unity of his Person; i.e. suggesting two different persons. Cf. Apollinarianism.

<sup>4</sup> Eutychianism denied the duality and distinction of the divine and human natures of Jesus. It taught that the two natures of Christ united to form one compound nature. This later morphed into the Monophysite heresy (denial of the two natures, one composite nature).

<sup>5</sup> Apollinarianism denied the completeness of Christ's human nature and the distinction of the human and divine natures in Christ. Christ had a human body and soul but the Logos took the place of the spirit.

<sup>6</sup> Also called the 'Sybolum Quicumque' after the opening words in Latin. It was not written by Athanasius.

chanted weekly in early churches. They are simple summaries of the faith with an especial focus upon the Trinity, which was the target of special attacks by heretics in the early church.

The Athanasian Creed is the best, fullest, simple summary of the Trinity and the Person of Christ that can be found. If this is understood, Christological and Trinitarian errors can be avoided. Yet this creed is virtually unknown in modern evangelical churches, neither are any creeds read/chanted/spoken in evangelical church meetings, except those historic denominations that adopted some of them in formal liturgies.<sup>7</sup>

I urge believers to get these creeds for reference. They can be easily found on-line or various publishers print books of them (such as the *Protestant Reformed Churches*).<sup>8</sup>

## Theology is vital for fruit-bearing

From the foregoing it is clear that in order to bear fruit for God, in order to be godly, a believer must have a good understanding of the doctrines of God, Christ and salvation. Without this knowledge one cannot be a solid believer.

Sadly, theological understanding is out of fashion in many churches; it was replaced with a 'how to' methodology. Converts were not instructed in the depths of theology but instead were taught how to do this and that in a practical fashion – which doesn't work. People were often encouraged to follow the practices of some other leader and trust that they would then be like that leader: hence, pray like him, fast like him, discipline time like him, meditate like him, read his books and so on. Doctrines were taught in a simplistic fashion (if at all) and presented as a few simple points, such as evangelism in three or four points, leadership in three points, understanding the kingdom in three points etc.

This is putting the cart before the horse. It seeks to find a methodology for success in the Christian life instead of understanding that godliness comes out of character (not by copying some methodology) and that character emerges from understanding God.

The more you understand the theology of God, the more you change inside and that change in the inner man develops character in the soul, which then leads to doing God's will in the actions of the body. The job of a leader is to train people in understanding Theology,<sup>9</sup> Christology and soteriology.<sup>10</sup> It is doctrinal understanding that leads to solid character and godliness.

**[We] do not cease to pray for you, and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding; that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing Him, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God. Col 1:9-10**

**For it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. 2 Cor 4:6**

**That the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him. Eph 1:17**

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<sup>7</sup> E.g. Anglicans read the Nicene Creed and the Apostles' creed at certain meetings.

<sup>8</sup> The PRC produce an excellent booklet with these creeds and also the Three Forms of Unity (Belgic Confession, Heidelberg Catechism and Synod of Dort). This is good theology in a nutshell; superb.

<sup>9</sup> The doctrine of God.

<sup>10</sup> The doctrine of salvation.

Till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God. Eph 4:13

Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord. 2 Pt 1:2

Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. 2 Pt 3:14

That we may know Him who is true. 1 Jn 5:20

You do not become godly by learning how to do things; you become a doer of God's will as you learn about God and supplement your faith.

When Peter talks about 'adding' this and that to faith in 2 Peter 1, it is not what the Greek really means.<sup>11</sup> The process is really about the divine energy that comes from God to the believer whose faith is released into virtue and then knowledge and so on. We do not add these things by human effort; the more we understand God and Christ, the more our faith is released by divine power into more fruitfulness expressed in a multitude of ways.

The emphasis is not on human effort to be virtuous at all, it is about striving to learn more about the doctrine of God and Christ. Grace and peace are then multiplied to us (2 Pt 1:2).

Striving to be virtuous is Arminian and Roman Catholic and trusts in the strength of the old nature – a hopeless task. Biblical doctrine is that character emerges by God's power working within us (Phil 2:13). The things that pertain to godliness are given to us by God's power (2 Pt 1:3). This is not mystical at all; it involves a process of gradual understanding of doctrine 'Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord'.

This is why Paul put so much stress on didactic instruction. Teaching the church is didactic instruction – understanding doctrine; it is an educational process. Sadly today teaching is anything but doctrinal instruction, being blessed thoughts, illustrative ramblings, pleasant safe homilies, asking for money, pushing some human agenda, a dramatic performance and such like. Sermons in most churches today have nothing to do with Biblical ministry whatsoever. They do not a bit of good to anyone. Even good sermons don't do much good because they are not easily absorbed and that is not the method God ordained for ministry; instructive, shepherding teaching is.<sup>12</sup>

Genuine Biblical instruction, however, does great good. It releases our faith (a divine gift) into supplying virtue and other graces. The knowledge we gain opens up grace to express itself in more and more ways. People today seek power through some mystical experience, but the truth is that power to do good comes from knowledge and releasing faith into grace.

With God's grace our study of doctrine becomes a source of power within us to develop character and express grace. The secret of godliness is growing in knowledge of God.

## **But I cannot grasp theology; that is for clever people**

Nothing could be further from the truth. I have seen young children have a solid grasp of theological issues and articulate them in their own way.

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<sup>11</sup> 'Add' [*epichoregeo*] means to supply, furnish, present to be supplied, ministered to, assisted.

<sup>12</sup> See my paper: 'Eldership – a spiritual office'. RL Dabney said that after years of sermons he reckoned his flock absorbed about 4%.

One young Victorian girl, known for her godliness even at that age, was asked how she dealt with temptation. She replied, ‘*When Satan knocks at the door of my house, I ask Jesus to open it. He runs away*’. What she was articulating was: putting on the new man, being filled with the Spirit, putting on the armour of God, eating Christ’s flesh and drinking his blood.

We don’t have to be professors of theology. We don’t have to learn all the theological jargon (though that helps), we don’t need an ‘A’-level in divinity, but we do need to learn as God enables us. It is easy to get a straightforward, simple understanding of basic Christian doctrines as a start. All God asks is that you try to improve as you can, a little at a time.

If churches catechised young converts with a good catechism that would plant a firm foundation; sadly this is ignored today. If churches had solid confessions of faith and taught through them, that would also be a good start; again most churches don’t do that either. If pastors applied good didactic teaching in homes by personal visitation, that also would be a good start – how many actually do that?

There are multiple concise basic books on essential doctrinal issues that anyone can read. These are very helpful and form a good starting point. I could mention just a few:

- RC Sproul: *Essential truths of the Christian faith*; Tyndale. [American Presbyterian]
- Louis Berkhof: *Summary of Christian doctrine*; Banner of Truth. [Dutch Presbyterian]
- Louis Berkhof: *Manual of Christian Doctrine*; Eerdmans. [Dutch Presbyterian]
- RB Kuiper: *The Bible tells us so*; Banner of Truth. [American Presbyterian]
- EF Kevan: *What the Scriptures teach*; Evangelical Press. [English Baptist]
- John Calvin: *Biblical Christianity*; Grace Pub. [French-Swiss reformer] A severe abridgement of *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.
- John Calvin: *Truth for all time*; Banner of Truth. [French-Swiss reformer] A reprint of *A brief outline of the Christian Faith*, the forerunner of Calvin’s *French Catechism*.
- William Hendriksen: *Beginner’s book of doctrine*; Baker. [American Presbyterian] A short modern catechism (32pp).
- JI Packer: *Concise Theology*; IVP. [British Anglican]
- Alister McGrath: *Affirming your faith*; IVP. Exposition of the Apostles’ Creed. [British evangelical]
- Paul Little: *Know what & why you believe*; World Wide Pub. [American Arminian]

Just studying one of these would give you a sound foundation. Some more solid but concise books:

- AA Hodge: *Evangelical Theology*; Banner of Truth. [American Presbyterian]
- Louis Berkhof: *Introduction to systematic theology*; Twin Brooks. [Dutch Presbyterian]
- Loraine Boettner: *Studies in Theology*; Eerdmans. [American Presbyterian]
- James P Boyce: *Abstract of systematic theology*. [American Baptist]
- Abraham Kuyper: *Sacred theology*; Associated Publishers. [Dutch Presbyterian]
- Abraham Booth: *Reign of Grace*; Evangelical Press. [English Baptist]
- TC Hammond: *In understanding be men*; IVP. [English Anglican]
- Bruce Milne: *Know the truth*; IVP. [Scottish Baptist] The replacement for *In understanding be men* but not as thorough.
- William Ames: *The marrow of theology*; Baxter [English Puritan 1576-1633] It used to be said that this book was all that was needed in addition to the Bible.

- Ronald Hanko: *Doctrine according to godliness*; RFPA. A primer on Reformed doctrine. [American Presbyterian] Very short, pithy subjects.
- Robert P Lightner: *Handbook of evangelical theology*; Kregel. [American Arminian & Dispensationalist]
- HCG Moule: *Outlines of Christian doctrine*; Hodder & Stoughton. [English Anglican]
- Thomas Vincent: *The shorter catechism explained from Scripture*; Banner of Truth, [English Puritan]
- Gordon H Clark: *What do Presbyterians believe?*; Presbyterian & Reformed Pub. [American Presbyterian]
- RA Torrey: *What the Bible teaches*; Marshall Morgan & Scott. [American Arminian Congregationalist]
- *The Fundamentals* [A series of articles by a number of authors defending evangelicalism against modernism.]
- Millard J Erickson: *Introducing Christian doctrine*; Baker [American evangelical]

In previous papers I have given long lists of helpful books to aid doctrinal understanding, which see. These are just a quick sample; there are many more to choose from.

Now there may be minor issues here and there where I may disagree, but these are good sources for all the cardinal doctrines.

After these one can progress to larger systematic theology books, which I have covered before and won't list here as we are concentrating on introductory material. However, for a modern all-encompassing, thorough evangelical work see Robert L Reymond: *A new systematic theology of the Christian faith*, Nelson [American Presbyterian]; however, the older Louis Berkhof's *Systematic Theology*, Banner of Truth, is still worthwhile and easier to get and simpler to read. Calvin's *Institutes* is still very worthwhile, despite being nearly 500 years old.

After mastering systematics one can then progress to larger works such as multi-volume dogmatics or large volumes on a single topic, such as James Buchanan's, *The doctrine of Justification*, BB Warfield's *The authority of Scripture*, or Herman Bavinck's *The doctrine of God*. Some of these are easy to read paperbacks such as Packer's *Knowing God*, or John Murray's *Redemption accomplished and applied*.

In addition there are many good resources on theology available as lectures in audio formats or found on-line: such as Ligonier Ministries (RC Sproul), the PRC churches, The Martyn Lloyd-Jones Recordings Trust and many more. There are also various computer programmes and apps, but the best one is the free E-Sword – which has excellent exegetical, historical and theological resources.

If you prefer, there are sermons available in printed form of excellent teachers who gradually cover many areas of theology in expository Bible ministry, such as the works of CH Spurgeon [Baptist], Martin Luther and John Calvin [Continental reformers], John Flavel [Puritan], Thomas Watson [Puritan], Thomas Brooks, [Puritan]. Thomas Vincent [Puritan], Martyn Lloyd-Jones [Welsh Congregationalist] and many others. However, you would have to read very many sermons to get a good grasp of theology.

Banner of Truth provides the Puritan Paperback series which includes books or portions of books by eminent Puritan theologians in an easy to read format. These can often be found for pennies in charity shops. Many American publishers provide reprints of excellent

historical works, such as Baker, Eerdmans, Kregel, Klock & Klock (second-hand, now out of print), Twin Brooks, Gano Books, Sprinkle Pub. etc.

Furthermore, there are great books on Biblical subjects which gradually cover many theological issues in their exposition, such as George Soltau's *The Tabernacle, the Priesthood & the Offerings* or William Gurnall's *The Christian in complete armour*.

Classical standards of great use include:

- *The Westminster Standards*. [British Presbyterian] Includes the *Confession* plus the Shorter and Larger catechisms.
- *The Belgic Confession*. [Continental Presbyterian]
- *The Heidelberg Catechism*. [Continental Presbyterian]
- *The First London Confession*. [English Baptist]
- *The 1689 Baptist Confession*. [English Baptist] A condensation and Baptist version of Westminster.
- *The Savoy Declaration* [English Congregational] Influenced by Westminster.
- *The Irish Articles*. [Anglican]
- *The Lambeth Articles*. [Anglican]
- *The 39 Articles*. [Anglican]

There are very many catechisms available, some from church groups (e.g Westminster) and some from individuals (e.g. John Owen [Dissenting Puritan], Benjamin Keach and CH Spurgeon [English Baptists]). All of these have some value if they are evangelical. If you are interested I have my own catechism available freely on my website. Catechisms and confessions always need updating for each new generation. The Westminster standards are great but they major on some issues that are less relevant today (e.g. oaths and vows) and do not cover modern issues (such as evolution versus creation).

For reference, a theological dictionary is very useful; there are many to choose from, such as:

- Walter A Ewell: *The Concise Evangelical dictionary of theology*; Baker.
- Alan Cairns: *Dictionary of theological terms*; Ambassador-Emerald.
- Sinclair B Ferguson et. al: *New dictionary of theology*; IVP.

With resources like these it is very easy to get a grasp of basic theology. Even if you just read a good confession of faith and had a theological dictionary for reference, you could soon be very conversant in theological issues.

Now the point of all these is not to fill your head with knowledge but to help you get a grasp of Scripture so that you better understand it. Then on reading Scripture and understanding it better, you gain a better understanding of God and it deepens your relationship with him. The point is to know God better.

The goal of understanding theology is not to become an academic but to develop in godliness.

## Conclusion

The point of this paper is to emphasise the importance of Biblical knowledge; not just facts about the Bible but an understanding of its doctrines. It is knowledge that produces character and character that produces fruit. God is honoured by those who know him; these are the people who get things done:

**The people who know their God shall be strong, and carry out great exploits. Dan 11:32**

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