

MIDWESTERN BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

FROM TOPIC TO THESIS: A GUIDE TO THEOLOGICAL RESEARCH

A BOOK REVIEW

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BY

MATTHEW C. WARREN

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Kibbe, Michael, *From Topic to Thesis: A Guide to Theological Research*. Downers Grove: IVP, 2016; \$9.50; 153 pages.

Biographical Information

Michael Kibbe completed a Bachelor of Arts in Pre-Seminary Bible at Cedarville University and afterward earned a Masters of Arts in Biblical Studies and Theology at Fuller Theological Seminary. Kibbe completed a Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) at Wheaton College. While earning his Ph.D. Kibbe was a guest instructor of Greek at Wheaton College and later became Visiting Assistant Professor of New Testament at Wheaton College.

Kibbe currently serves as an Assistant Professor of Bible at Moody Bible Institute in Spokane, WA. He has written several published books on theological topics and written a number of book reviews and articles for theological journals. Kibbe has research interests that focus on the letter to the Hebrews, how the Old Testament is used by the New Testament writers, and other doctrinal matters. Together, his education, published works, and areas of focus provide a foundation to instruct students on the importance of theological research. The broad experiences of his work qualify him for approaching this topic successfully.

Synopsis

From Topic to Thesis is designed to be a basic guide to teach its reader skills, encourage a healthy perspective of the process, and establish a clear method of successful theological research and writing. First, Kibbe gave an overview of the theological research and supported that by defining terms. Second, he encouraged the researcher to maintain a proper relationship with God, who is the topic of theological research. Designed to be a practical tool, Kibbe included a five-step method and noted helpful resources required for theological research. The

resources are found in six appendices and addressed such areas as software for library research, bibliography recording, academic book publishers, and more. Designed to be a “simple book,” *From Topic to Thesis* functions like a basic instruction manual (14).

Kibbe likens the theological research process to furniture that has “Assembly required” instructions included (11). The process is intuitive, because most researchers will have what is needed to do the research and writing, just like the purchaser of the furniture has the necessary tools. However, if the basic instructions are not mapped out clearly, the researcher could easily do something in the wrong order and find the end results unstable or unusable. Thus, Kibbe developed this material to be a basic instruction manual to help guide any theological researcher at any level of ability.

Critical Evaluation

From Topic to Thesis is a book that answered questions that might be raised by a novice theological researcher and writer. But more importantly, in this work, Kibbe introduced a five-step process designed to aid the researcher. Kibbe wisely indicated that the five-steps are linearly related, but often times require the researcher to revisit previous steps, as the researcher moves to write his thesis. Most likely, the five-steps are intuitive to anyone contemplating theological research. However, the explanations and illustrations proved concrete and clarifying.

Therefore, Kibbe wrote a basic instruction manual, which directed the researcher through the ordered steps. Kibbe took forty-two pages to cover the five steps, which is fewer in comparison to the Introduction. The Introduction is, in the opinion of this reviewer, the most important part of the book, though Kibbe concluded that the “meat of this book is about the process of moving from topic (assignment) to thesis (argument)” (43). The introduction provided an apologetic for the theological research and writing process and proved to be of great value.

One of the successful devices that Kibbe employed was defining terms. He focused on words like “topic” and “thesis” as well “theological,” and “biblical,” (15, 30-1). He also established the concept that “the research process is the movement you make from *identifying* that set of information (your topic), to making an *argument* about that set of information (your thesis)” (15). Succinctly developed concepts and approaches like these made this book easy to understand and the approach clear. Thus, no matter the level of the researcher, he is carefully guided by the skillful approach and ideas communicated.

Kibbe assessed that theological research is much like other research in its process. However, Kibbe identified a unique perspective that sets theological research apart from other academic research. He postulated that theological research is engaged relationally with God. He said this about theological research, “Great research always involves closeness, involvement, vulnerability-the willingness to get your hands dirty by investing yourself in ways that go beyond studying hard or reading extra carefully” (26). In other words, theological research places the researcher in position to engage with God. For Kibbe, research will not only unearth ideas or knowledge about God, but research will also develop intimacy between the researcher and God that requires the researcher to “get dirty” (27). These kinds of perspectives proved insightful and valuable.

Kibbe also highlighted three of the “many things” that cause a theological researcher to “get dirty” (27). The three he highlighted emphasized the relational nature that theological research produce with God. First, He acknowledged that theological research is “an act of confession” (27). He employed the term “confession” as a reminder of the limitations of the researcher both in understanding God and in understanding self.

Second, Kibbe identified that theological research is different because the Holy Spirit is ever-present to guide the researcher, who is a follower of Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit, as Kibbe noted, is an “ever-present subject-matter expert” (27). The perspective on the presence of the Holy Spirit clarified the distinction between theological research and other academic research. In other words, theological research is a unique dynamic between God and the researcher as the researcher grows in intimacy with the lord by his discoveries.

The third highlight is identified by Kibbe as a potential problem of theological research. He stated, “God is actually unknowable to us unless he graciously makes that knowledge available to us” (27). The reader was cautioned to carefully depend upon the grace of God and his relationship with the Lord because truth is revealed in the research process by the grace of God. The three highlights revealed the wisdom and understanding Kibbe possessed to write on this topic. Such elements increased the value of this book.

The process, described by Kibbe as the “meat of this book,” outlined the steps for theological research. Though it is normal to think of steps in processes as linear, the steps marked out by Kibbe function differently. Each step has its place but may be revisited at any moment until the thesis is completed. Kibbe identified the steps in the method as “finding direction, gathering sources, understanding issues, entering discussion, and establishing position” (43-4).

Each of these steps is ascribed a chapter by Kibbe. Through the use of inset boxes, he listed keys that aid the researcher as he completes his writing. Kibbe also included three helpful resources for each of the steps. The first resource consisted of “descriptions of two research papers” he wrote (50). The “descriptions” supported each step, clarifying the step with practical insights. The second resource were “excursus” in chapters, which focused on the usual mistakes

made in the related step. The final resource included a summary of the keys developed in each chapter. The resources functioned like a snapshot of the instruction manual and made the steps quickly reviewable. The inclusion of the resources ensured that Kibbe achieved his goal in writing *From Topic to Thesis* as the “simplest possible version of process” (33).

The final portion of this book provided a further set of useful tools for the reader. The final portion included six appendices that covered fifty-four pages. The appendices oriented the reader to issues particular to theological research and addressed some of the following: “Ten Things You Should Never do,” “Navigating the ATLA Religion Database,” software specific to bibliographic inventory, and more. Intended to be quick resources to streamline and improve the efficiency of the researcher, these appendices provided excellent finishing instructions for the reader.

Conclusion

Michael Kibbe accomplished the goal for his book as he addressed the spiritual and practical issues of theological research. His experience in the discipline of research and his love for teaching were combined to produce an excellent book. Though, the book was not intended to be exhaustive, the appendices supplemented the limited details of the main work. The six appendices pointed the reader to sources that would offer more extensive insight and information. Though this book is brief, it is a good overview of the entire process of theological research and will benefit any researcher as a guide. Kibbe made a practical contribution to the discipline of theological research that could be resourced repeatedly by a researcher as he goes *From Topic to Thesis*.