

# **Dr. Robert A. Peterson, Theology Proper: God, Session 1, Cultural Context Resources from NotebookLM**

1) Abstract, 2) Audio podcast, 3) Briefing Document, 4) Study Guide, and 5) FAQs

## **1. Abstract of Peterson, Theology Proper: God, Session 1, Cultural Context, Biblicalearning.org, BeL**

Dr. Robert A. Peterson's "Theology Proper, Session 1, Cultural Context" initiates a study on the doctrine of God by examining the influence of modern and postmodern culture on understanding God. The lecture identifies a cultural paradox of material abundance alongside increasing emptiness, leading to a distorted view of God as a non-interfering, therapeutic figure focused on personal well-being. This perspective, exemplified by "moralistic, therapeutic deism," contrasts sharply with the biblical understanding of a transcendent and holy God. Peterson argues that contemporary culture's self-centeredness and rejection of objective morality obscure the true nature of God, emphasizing the necessity of knowing Him on His own terms through Scripture, recognizing Him as both holy and loving.

**2. 19 - minute Audio Podcast Created on the basis of  
Dr. Peterson, Theology Proper: God, Session 1 – Double click  
icon to play in Windows media player or go to the  
Biblicalearning.org [BeL] Site and click the audio podcast link  
there (Theology → Theology, Peterson → Theology Proper:  
God).**



**Peterson\_TheoProp  
er\_Session01.mp3**

### **3. Briefing Document: Peterson, Theology Proper: God, Session 1, Cultural Context**

#### **Briefing Document: Theology Proper - Session 1: Cultural Context**

**Overview:** This briefing document summarizes the main themes and important ideas presented in the first session of Dr. Robert A. Peterson's teaching on Theology Proper (the doctrine of God), focusing specifically on the cultural context that shapes our understanding of God in the modern and postmodern West. Peterson, drawing heavily on the work of David Wells, argues that contemporary Western culture presents significant challenges to understanding God as He has revealed Himself in Scripture. He identifies a prevailing "therapeutic deism" and a cultural paradox that have led to distorted views of God, emphasizing the need to return to fundamental principles, particularly the objectivity of God and His nature as holy love.

#### **Main Themes and Important Ideas:**

##### **1. The Foundational Importance of the Doctrine of God:**

- Peterson establishes the crucial nature of Theology Proper, stating, "No doctrine is more fundamental than the doctrine of God." While acknowledging the importance of the doctrine of Scripture, he emphasizes that understanding God is paramount.
- He notes a contemporary imbalance in theological understanding, where "so many things are built on an over-emphasis on God's supposed love and a downplaying of His holiness or justice." This imbalance necessitates a careful and comprehensive consideration of God's attributes.
- The session aims to address the cultural context that hinders a proper understanding of God before delving into His attributes and works (creation and providence).

##### **2. The Cultural Challenge to Knowing God:**

- Peterson highlights the influence of culture on our perception of God, referencing Anthony Thistleton's "The Two Horizons" (the horizon of the text and the horizon of the interpreter) and emphasizing the need to understand how our culture shapes our reading of Scripture.

- Drawing on David Wells' "God in the Whirlwind," Peterson asserts that "The first challenge, then, Wells writes, has to do with our culture. How is it that our culture may get in our way of knowing God as he has revealed himself to be?"
- He emphasizes a crucial baseline truth of Scripture: "It is that God stands before us. He summons us to come out of ourselves and to know him. This is the most profound truth that we ever encounter, or should I say, the most profound truth by which we are encountered." This contrasts sharply with the cultural inclination to look inward to find God.

### **3. The Paradox of Modern Western Culture:**

- Peterson, again citing David Myers, describes the "American paradox" prevalent throughout the West: "It is that we have never had so much, and yet we have never had so little." This abundance in material possessions, opportunities, and knowledge coexists with unprecedented levels of depression, anxiety, confusion, and social fragmentation.
- This paradox significantly shapes how people think about God and what they expect from Him. The experience of plenty fosters entitlement and the desire for a God who is a "cheerleader" and a "concierge" providing endless blessings. Conversely, the experience of emptiness and loss leads people to seek a God who is a "therapist" offering comfort, healing, and inspiration.

### **4. The Rise of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism:**

- Peterson discusses Christian Smith's study on teenagers, which revealed the dominant view of God as "moralistic, therapeutic deism." This view entails:
- God created the world and established a moral order but does not actively intervene.
- God is primarily concerned with solving personal problems and making people feel good.
- Religion is about personal happiness and obtaining material comforts.
- Peterson argues that this view is not limited to adolescents but is widespread in Western culture and represents a "distortion of what is true," making it "heretical."

### **5. The Shift from a Moral World to a Psychological Self:**

- Peterson, referencing his own work "Losing Our Virtue" and Wells' analysis, describes a significant cultural shift since the 1960s: "that in our minds, we have exited the older moral world in which God was transcendent and holy, and we have entered a new psychological world in which he is only imminent and loving."
- This shift is coupled with a focus on the "self" as an internal core of intuitions, leading to individualistic perspectives on truth and morality, unframed by absolute norms.
- The rise of the "psychological man" (Philip Reif) is characterized by a lack of external reference points, with personal interior reality becoming the sole basis for life and values.

### **6. The Erosion of Boundaries and Objective Reality:**

- Peterson discusses the postmodern influence leading to the blurring and disappearance of boundaries, including:
- The distinction between soul and body (leading to a purely materialistic view of human beings).
- Traditional understandings of gender and the redefinition of the family.
- The distinction between humans and animals, and even humans and computers.
- This erosion of boundaries is linked to a decline in the belief in an independent, objective reality, where "no longer is there a way to talk about what is good and no longer is there an appetite to talk about any good other than that of private self-interest."

### **7. The Danger to the Nation and the Church:**

- Drawing on Guinness' "A Free People's Suicide," Peterson argues that the self-preoccupation and erosion of virtue in Western culture pose a significant threat to the foundations of society, more dangerous than external threats. "It is virtue that does the rest, and that is precisely what is being eroded in this self-oriented, self-consumed culture."
- He critiques the church's temptation to adapt Christian faith to this context, often offering "little therapeutic nostrums" instead of "great thoughts about God, the meaning of reality, and the gospel." He questions whether contemporary believers would be receptive to a "deep, costly, and demanding" Christianity.

## 8. The Need to Return to Fundamental Principles:

- Peterson calls for a return to the foundational truth that "God is there and that he is objective to us. He is not there to conform to us. We must conform to him."
- He emphasizes that knowledge of God comes through His Word, not through our intuitions, and that we are called to know Him on His terms, not our own. "We are here to know him as he is and not as we want him to be."
- The local church is identified as the place for learning about God through His Word.

## 9. God as Holy Love:

- Peterson concludes by emphasizing the essential nature of God as "holy love." He clarifies that this is not to suggest love is primary and holiness secondary, but rather that these two attributes are intrinsically united in God's character.
- He notes the cultural tendency to separate these attributes, desiring God's love without His holiness, which is ultimately impossible.
- The true definition of God's love is found in the "sacrificial, substitutionary death of Christ," a stark contrast to the contemporary view of God's love as providing comfort, happiness, and material blessings.

## Quote Highlights:

- "No doctrine is more fundamental than the doctrine of God."
- "How is it that our culture may get in our way of knowing God as he has revealed himself to be?"
- "It is that God stands before us. He summons us to come out of ourselves and to know him."
- "It is that we have never had so much, and yet we have never had so little."
- "The dominant view, even among evangelical teenagers, is that God made everything and established a moral order, but he does not intervene... They see God as not demanding much from them because he is chiefly engaged in solving their problems and making them feel good."
- "that in our minds, we have exited the older moral world in which God was transcendent and holy, and we have entered a new psychological world in which he is only imminent and loving."

- "Under the post-modern sun, everyone has a right to their own version of reality."
- "It is virtue that does the rest, and that is precisely what is being eroded in this self-oriented, self-consumed culture."
- "God is there and that he is objective to us. He is not there to conform to us. We must conform to him."
- "We are here to know him as he is and not as we want him to be."
- "Today, our constant temptation, aided and abetted by as it is by our culture, is to shatter the hyphen. We want God's love without his holiness."
- "In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his son to be the propitiation for our sins."

**Conclusion:**

Session 1 of Peterson's Theology Proper provides a sobering analysis of the cultural landscape in the West and its profound impact on how God is perceived. The prevailing emphasis on the self, the pursuit of therapeutic comfort and material well-being, and the rejection of objective truth and moral norms have led to widespread distortions of God's character. Peterson argues for a crucial return to the foundational truth of God's objective existence and His nature as holy love, understood through the lens of Scripture. This understanding is essential for the church to effectively engage with the modern world and offer a genuine alternative rooted in the unchanging truth about God.

## 4. Study Guide: Peterson, Theology Proper: God, Session 1, Cultural Context

### Study Guide: Peterson, Theology Proper, Session 1

#### Key Concepts:

- **The Doctrine of God:** The fundamental theological teaching concerning the nature, attributes, and works of God.
- **Cultural Context:** The prevailing attitudes, beliefs, and values of a society that influence how individuals understand and interact with the world, including religious beliefs.
- **Two Horizons:** The concept, popularized by Anthony Thistleton, that biblical interpretation involves understanding both the horizon of the biblical text and the horizon of the interpreter.
- **Objective vs. Subjective Knowledge of God:** The distinction between knowing God as he has revealed himself (objective) and attempting to understand God based solely on personal experience and intuition (subjective).
- **Practical Atheism:** A way of life where individuals claim to believe in God's existence but live as if he does not exist or have any real impact on their lives.
- **Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (MTD):** A prevalent but superficial belief system, particularly among young people, characterized by a belief in a distant God who created the world and established a general moral order, but does not actively intervene in life and primarily desires human happiness.
- **American Paradox:** The phenomenon in Western society where increasing material abundance, choices, and opportunities are accompanied by rising levels of depression, anxiety, loneliness, and social breakdown.
- **Entitlement:** An attitude stemming from prolonged abundance and perceived opportunities, leading to an expectation that positive outcomes and blessings are deserved and should be readily provided, even by God.
- **Therapeutic Culture:** A societal emphasis on emotional well-being, comfort, healing, and self-fulfillment as primary goals, often influencing religious expectations.

- **Psychological Man:** A term describing an individual in postmodern culture who is self-focused, lacks external moral reference points, and whose internal feelings and intuitions are the primary source of meaning and truth.
- **Spiritual But Not Religious (SBNR):** A growing segment of the population who identify as spiritual and value personal spiritual experiences but are skeptical of or hostile towards organized religion, its doctrines, and institutions.
- **Erosion of Boundaries:** The postmodern trend of blurring or dissolving traditional distinctions, such as those between soul and body, humans and animals, and fixed moral truths.
- **Internal vs. External God:** The shift in cultural understanding from a transcendent God who exists objectively outside of humanity (external) to a God who is primarily located within the individual's self and experience (internal).
- **Transcendence vs. Imminence:** The theological concepts describing God's being beyond and independent of the created world (transcendence) versus his presence and involvement within it (imminence). Modern culture tends to overemphasize imminence at the expense of transcendence.
- **Holy Love:** A way to describe God's character as both perfectly holy (separate from sin and demanding righteousness) and perfectly loving (compassionate, merciful, and actively seeking our good). Modern culture often attempts to separate these attributes.
- **Moral World vs. Therapeutic World:** The contrast between a worldview grounded in objective moral principles and God's holiness versus a worldview primarily focused on individual well-being and emotional comfort.

### Short Answer Quiz:

1. According to Peterson, what makes the doctrine of God a fundamental topic in theology? What potential doctrine might some argue is even more fundamental?
2. What does Peterson identify as a common modern error in understanding God's character? What two attributes are often imbalanced in this error?
3. Explain Anthony Thistleton's concept of the "two horizons" in biblical interpretation. Why does Peterson emphasize one horizon more than the other in his own career?



4. How does David Wells describe the initial challenge in understanding the Bible's teachings on God? What pattern does our culture push us toward in seeking to know God, according to Wells?
5. Define "practical atheism" as described in the source material. Why does Peterson argue that simply believing in God's existence may be "skinny and peripheral" for many people today?
6. Describe the key characteristics of "moralistic therapeutic deism" as identified by Christian Smith's study of teenagers. What role does the Trinity play in this view?
7. Explain the "American paradox" as presented by David Myers and discussed by Peterson. How does this paradox relate to contemporary attitudes toward God?
8. According to Peterson, what are the two "mega-changes" that have been underway in Western culture since the 1960s that have significantly impacted our understanding of God?
9. Describe the concept of the "psychological man" as discussed in the text. What are the defining characteristics and potential consequences of this self-centered worldview?
10. What is the danger, according to Peterson, of the modern tendency to prioritize God's love while downplaying his holiness? What term does he use to describe the unified nature of these attributes in God?

**Answer Key:**

1. The doctrine of God is fundamental because no doctrine is more basic to understanding reality and our place in it. Some might argue that the doctrine of Scripture is even more fundamental, as it is through Scripture that we learn about God.
2. A common modern error is an over-emphasis on God's supposed love and a downplaying of his holiness or justice. This imbalance leads to a distorted view of God's complete character.
3. The "two horizons" are the horizon of the biblical text and the horizon of the interpreter. Peterson has emphasized the former throughout his career, focusing on the original meaning of Scripture.

4. The first challenge is how our culture may get in the way of knowing God as he has revealed himself. Our culture pushes us to go into ourselves to find God, the opposite of the biblical call to come out of ourselves to know him.
5. Practical atheism is when people say they believe in God's existence but live as if he were not real or active in their lives. Simply believing in God's existence may be peripheral if that belief does not significantly impact how one thinks and lives.
6. Moralistic therapeutic deism involves a belief in a God who created the world and established a moral order but does not intervene in life and primarily wants people to be happy and solve their problems. The Trinity and the Incarnation/Resurrection of Christ play little part in this view.
7. The "American paradox" is the phenomenon of experiencing great material abundance and opportunity alongside increasing levels of depression, anxiety, and social breakdown. This paradox contributes to a self-focused view of God who is expected to provide comfort and prosperity.
8. The two mega-changes are the shift from an older moral world with a transcendent and holy God to a new psychological world with only an imminent and loving God, and the shift in thinking of ourselves in terms of human nature to thinking in terms of the self as an internal core of intuitions.
9. The "psychological man" is stripped of external moral reference points, with their own interior reality being all that counts. Consequences include a lack of accountability, a focus solely on self-pleasure, and a rejection of the need for salvation.
10. The danger is that God's love without his holiness becomes something we simply cannot truly have, as his holiness defines the context and meaning of his love. Peterson uses the term "holy love" to emphasize the inseparable unity of these divine attributes.

## Essay Format Questions:

1. Analyze the cultural factors discussed by Peterson that contribute to the prevalent view of God as primarily a therapeutic, non-judgmental figure. How does the "American paradox" relate to this phenomenon?
2. Discuss the significance of understanding God as "objective" rather than solely "subjective," according to Peterson. What are the implications of prioritizing personal intuition over God's self-revelation in Scripture?
3. Compare and contrast the characteristics of "moralistic therapeutic deism" with a more traditional Christian understanding of God. What are the potential long-term effects of MTD on individuals and the church?
4. Explain Peterson's argument that Western culture has undergone a shift from a "moral world" to a "psychological world." How has this shift influenced contemporary understandings of self, morality, and the role of God?
5. Critically evaluate Peterson's analysis of the cultural trends he describes. To what extent do you agree with his assessment of the challenges facing the church in a postmodern context?

## Glossary of Key Terms:

- **Doctrine of God (Theology Proper):** The systematic study and articulation of the nature, attributes, and works of God.
- **Cultural Context:** The social, political, economic, and intellectual environment in which ideas, events, or individuals exist and are understood.
- **Two Horizons:** A hermeneutical concept emphasizing the need to consider both the original context and meaning of a text and the contemporary context and understanding of the interpreter.
- **Objective:** Existing or true independently of one's thoughts, feelings, or perceptions. In theology, referring to God's self-revelation as it is, apart from human interpretation.
- **Subjective:** Based on or influenced by personal feelings, tastes, or opinions. In theology, referring to an understanding of God derived primarily from individual experience.

- **Practical Atheism:** Living one's life as if God does not exist or is irrelevant, despite professing belief in God.
- **Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (MTD):** A common, often unarticulated, religious belief system characterized by a distant, non-intervening God who wants people to be good and feel good.
- **American Paradox:** The coexistence of increasing material wealth and technological advancement with rising levels of social and personal distress in Western societies.
- **Entitlement:** A feeling of deserving certain privileges or benefits, often stemming from a sense of having earned them or from societal expectations.
- **Therapeutic Culture:** A society that prioritizes emotional healing, well-being, and self-fulfillment as primary values and goals.
- **Psychological Man:** A postmodern individual characterized by a focus on the self, a lack of external moral authority, and the prioritization of personal feelings and intuitions.
- **Spiritual But Not Religious (SBNR):** Individuals who identify with spirituality and personal spiritual experiences but are disconnected from or critical of organized religion.
- **Transcendence:** The attribute of God by which he is infinitely beyond and independent of the created universe.
- **Imminence:** The attribute of God by which he is present and actively involved within his creation.
- **Holy Love:** A theological concept describing the unified nature of God's holiness (his perfect righteousness and separation from sin) and his love (his compassion, mercy, and active desire for the well-being of his creation).
- **Moral World:** A worldview grounded in objective moral principles and a belief in a God who establishes and upholds these principles.
- **Therapeutic World:** A worldview primarily focused on individual emotional well-being, comfort, and the avoidance of suffering.

## 5. FAQs on Peterson, Theology Proper: God, Session 1, Cultural Context, Biblicalelearning.org (BeL)

### Frequently Asked Questions: Understanding God in Our Cultural Context

- 1. Why is understanding the doctrine of God considered so fundamental, and what modern errors often distort it?** While the doctrine of Scripture might be argued as foundational, the doctrine of God is undeniably crucial. Modern errors often overemphasize God's love while downplaying his holiness and justice. This imbalance can lead to a skewed understanding of God's nature and his relationship with humanity.
- 2. According to the source, what is the primary challenge our current culture poses to understanding the biblical teachings about God?** The primary challenge is that our culture encourages an inward focus in seeking God, suggesting we look within ourselves. This is contrary to the biblical truth that God stands before us, summoning us to come out of ourselves and know him as he has revealed himself objectively.
- 3. How does the source describe the prevailing view of God within modern Western culture, particularly among younger generations?** The prevailing view is often described as "moralistic, therapeutic deism." This perspective sees God as having created the world and established a moral order but as generally non-intervening in daily life. He is primarily seen as a problem-solver and a source of personal well-being and happiness, often equated with material possessions and comfort. The Trinitarian nature of God and the significance of Christ's Incarnation and Resurrection are often minimized in this view.
- 4. What is the "American paradox" described in the source, and how does it contribute to our distorted view of God?** The "American paradox" (found broadly in the West) is the coexistence of unprecedented abundance, choices, and technological advancement with increasing rates of depression, anxiety, confusion, and social breakdown. This paradox leads to a two-sided yearning: an attitude of entitlement expecting God to provide endless blessings and comfort, and a desire for God to be a non-judgmental therapist offering relief from the emptiness and harshness of life.

5. **How have cultural shifts since the 1960s, particularly concerning morality and the concept of "self," impacted our understanding of God?** Since the 1960s, Western culture has largely shifted from a transcendent, holy God within a moral framework to an imminent, loving God within a psychological framework centered on the "self." The emphasis on individual intuitions and experiences as the primary source of truth has diminished the authority of external moral norms and the understanding of God as objective and holy. This has led to a "therapeutic deism" where the self's well-being and happiness become central.
6. **What does the source mean when it says the "external God has now disappeared and has been replaced by the internal God," and what are the consequences of this shift?** This refers to the cultural trend where God is no longer seen as a transcendent being who exists objectively outside of ourselves but is instead located within individual feelings, intuitions, and experiences. The consequence of this shift is the erosion of objective truth and morality, as each individual becomes the arbiter of their own reality. This can lead to a loss of meaning, purpose, and social cohesion.
7. **According to the source, how has the modern church sometimes responded inadequately to the challenges of contemporary culture?** The modern church has sometimes been tempted to adapt Christian faith to contemporary culture, becoming an echo of its values rather than offering a distinct, alternative worldview rooted in God's Word. This can manifest as offering superficial therapeutic messages focused on personal comfort and happiness instead of the deep, demanding, and costly truths about God, sin, and redemption.
8. **What fundamental principles does the source emphasize as essential for rightly understanding and relating to God in the face of these cultural challenges?** The source emphasizes the fundamental principles that God is objective to us, existing outside of ourselves, and that we must conform to him rather than expecting him to conform to us. We come to know him on his terms, through his Word, and not through our own intuitions. God is not merely there for our convenience or to fulfill our desires, but we are here for his service, to know him as he truly is – both holy and loving – and to be incorporated into his redemptive purposes.