

Is Theology Unspiritual?

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In certain circles of Christianity, there is an often implied or blatant disdain of theology. One might understand the aversion to theology in contemporary culture, where privatized feeling is thought superior to traditional or consensual thinking. But, it is disturbing to find many, even conservative, Christians who align themselves with the culture by placing the practical, emotional, and experiential above “contending for the faith.” I am concerned that a growing number of divergent Christian camps is tracking the culture by treating theology as politically incorrect.

The spectrum of theological minimalists is broad. Those who come from a fundamentalist or anti-creedal tradition tend to assume that there is something inherently wrong with the whole idea of theology. Fundamentalism works off the assumption that the Bible needs little or no interpreting. The fundamentalist takes the Bible “literally” while unconscious of the fact that it is his *interpretation* of what is literal that really determines the outcome. Others from a more Anabaptist or Pentecostal/Charismatic tradition see the work of theology as less the formation of the mind and more the formation of the spirit. Revivalism tends to see subjective experience as the source of truth, thus spiritual experience is prized over objective truth. Why would a Christian need to exercise his mind to edify his faith in Christ, when he can simply pray for a direct experience? Sacramental Christians place more weight in the effective grace channeled by the sacrament than in the faith that receives it. In short, the sacramental *system* obtains the needed grace, therefore the quality of a Christian’s *faith* is not linked to the quality of one’s theological knowledge.

In these spiritualistic or mystic forms of Christianity the source of theology tends to be the individual rather than the Bible and the historic faith of the Church. They are persuaded that theology, with an inordinate focus on the intellectual, slights of the work of the Spirit in the soul. These groups tend to minimize theological reflection. There is a growing trend among evangelicals, pastors, churches and seminaries to minimize the intensity and extent of theological training, while dedicating more concentration on the pragmatic demands of church growth. Focusing on the individual’s personal needs and developing programs to satisfy them, church growth reverses the Church’s historical priority of grounding believers in the foundations of the faith – theological formation – as the chief resource for all religious issues. For these and others, theology is deemed cold, arid and spiritually stifling. Basically, theology is either regarded as unspiritual, or *not spiritual enough*.

In my experience working with many Christians from these traditions, it seems their most fundamental concerns and struggles are centered on the *way they believe*. While more immediately focused on some practical issue, their *way of believing* is the real center of their dilemmas. Felt needs are more the result of faith malformation. So satisfying surface needs may lead to the neglect of the deeper need for stronger, biblically informed, Gospel-centered faith. I am convinced that our real and greatest needs grow from the *ways we believe*.

True, the practical questions are usually the most urgent: Which career? Who do I marry? Where do I go to church? How should I worship? To whom should I listen? Where should I live? All these are important. Nonetheless, all these practical questions are rooted in issues of faith. Faith issues pertain to *what one believes and how one believes*. When we enter into this field, we are talking theology. These issues are essentially theological. The theological issues must find some healthy, biblical resolution in order for Christians to work out their conflicts -- practical, psychological, spiritual, relational or ecclesiastical. Unfortunately, the urgent of the practical often displaces the expediency of sound theology.

The truth is, *all spiritual issues are theological issues*. When we engage in practical or spiritual Christian issues, we do so through our theology, however conscious or unconscious of it we may be. Theology is unavoidable in any talk about spirituality. *What we do is the direct result of how we think about what we believe*.

“ . . . we hold to a time-honored conviction that when Christians are baptized they enter into a ministry they all share, responding to a God-given call to disclose the Gospel (God’s good news of Jesus Christ) through all they say and do. Their calling makes them witnesses of faith, and hence theologians as well. This is because the witness they make in the course of their daily lives sets forth their understanding of the meaning of the Christian faith, and – in keeping with another time-honored conviction – because Christian theology is at its root a matter of faith seeking understanding. [Howard W. Stone & James O. Duke, *How to Think Theologically*, (Fortress Press, 1996), p. 2.]

Theology is a demanding work. It can be a long, laborious process. The rewards are not always immediate or apparent. It is regarded as too rigorous for some to commit the time necessary to study religious movements in the history of the Church, the original languages of the Bible, improve understanding of biblical interpretation, and wrestle with the development of the Christian faith in history (Certainly, not every Christian can engage all these topics proficiently. But Christian leaders certainly must). That is why many cut the Gordian Knot and take shortcuts. Some of those shortcuts are *fundamentalism* (Bible doesn’t need interpreting), *authoritarianism* (truth is what I say it is), *pragmatism* (If it works, it must be good) and *mysticism* (God told me). When examined closely, these shortcuts end up being more unspiritual because they deprecate intentional theology. That is, they neglect God-centered and revealed, objective truth that is communicated through words, preferring instead, individual-centered, human discovered, subjective, beliefs obtained through intuitive and affective experience.

The truth the Christian believes is also *mediated* truth. That is, we cannot obtain it by any mystical experience (direct personal contact with God) or intuition (attained by a human “sixth sense”). It is revealed to us by the mediating work of the Holy Spirit. Our esoteric perceptions should never rival the vouchsafed knowledge that God has revealed in Scripture by the Holy Spirit.

Despite the claims of mysticism and the intuitive, one can't believe what one doesn't *know*. Granted, only knowing *about* God is not enough. Nevertheless, knowing about God is indispensable. It is unquestionably a part of saving faith to know what God has done for us in Christ. This is not *all* faith is, but it is *part* of it. Where I grew up, three cities lined up North to South on I-79: Morgantown, Fairmont and Clarksburg. You could not say going from Morgantown to Fairmont was all one needed to do to get to Clarksburg. That would leave out the last twenty miles between Fairmont to Clarksburg. On the other hand, you could not say that to get from Morgantown to Clarksburg you avoid the trip through Fairmont. Going through Fairmont is part of the trip from Morgantown to Clarksburg. Faith is more than *knowing* about God. Based on what one knows, one trusts and loves God, commits to and obeys Him. While I admit knowing *about* God is not all there is to faith in God, it is certainly a fundamental part of it.

Some often pit “head” knowledge against “heart” knowledge. It is easier to disparage theology and seek pietistic shortcuts around the process, rather than engage the effort and commitment good theology demands. In a Christian faith that is centered on the Gospel of Christ, *all heart knowledge is dependent on head knowledge*. This is because the knowledge given to us by God is revelation. The Bible is an expression of divine revelation – it is God breathed – and therefore it is *spiritual*. It is both head and heart knowledge. To know, study, and believe the words of Scripture is a *spiritual work*. True faith embraces the revelation knowledge of Scripture. It knows what God says with the mind, and trusts, loves and commits to it with the heart. This theology is spiritual.

A perfect example of faith seeking understanding, and the importance of healthy theology is found in Luke chapter twenty-four. Two disciples, disappointed by the crucifixion of Christ, walked home to Emmaus crestfallen. Jesus, being disguised to them, inquired about their *understanding* of the Christ. He diagnosed their problem as being “slow of heart to *believe* all that the prophets have spoken.” It was a faith issue. Their failure to believe was based on what they did not *understand*. Their faith lacked the true knowledge to interpret the meaning of the Cross. They did not properly understand the Scriptures. Jesus' solution: “And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself” (Luke 24:27). Jesus interpreted the knowledge of the Bible, which transformed their understanding, re-centered their faith and changed their lives.

Jesus' ministry to them was both *theological* and *spiritual*. He did not teach them how to have a subjective experience. He taught them the knowledge and understanding of objective truth. He taught them an *interpretation* of the Scripture they had not known. They did not get the ‘obvious’ literal interpretation, as fundamentalists assume. Jesus' interpretation changed their understanding, and that transformed their faith. Their eyes were opened as Jesus broke bread in their home, while they made direct connections to teaching he gave them on the highway. He healed their faith with truth, meeting their real needs; and thereby He transformed their felt needs by changing their lives.

Later, Jesus appeared to his frightened disciples in Jerusalem. While they were in a stupor of fear and doubt, Jesus revealed himself to them. He showed them his Cross wounds. He ate broiled fish to show them he was no docetic spirit. He most effectively ministered to them when “he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures and said to them ‘Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead . . .’” (Lk. 24:45-46) Jesus opened their minds to truth. Jesus gave them theology rather than play to their felt needs. He saw no contrast between head and heart knowledge. They worked together. Jesus did not lead them into a mystical experience. Rather, he mediated truth – the meaning of Scriptures they had missed – about Himself. He showed them that the reality of his resurrection body was the fulfillment of theological truth. He gave them knowledge that changed their theological understanding. When they believed it, their faith exploded and their minds were transformed. Their transformed faith reoriented their whole lives and moved them to act in a new way. They returned to Jerusalem to join the disciples in telling the story of Jesus.

So, is theology unspiritual? Not if it is biblical, Gospel-centered theology. Spirituality is a theological matter. *Theology is a spiritual issue*. Ultimately Christian theology, be it many things, is *thinking about the Gospel and what God has done throughout history to give us His Son*. Christian theology is thinking about the Christian faith. To think and talk about spiritual issues is theology. That is why fundamentalism, authoritarianism, pragmatism and mysticism are detrimental theologies. They are ways of thinking about faith that are not Gospel-centered. Those who think them probably don’t recognize them as theology. Even so, the goal of *thinking about the Christian faith, in a way that is truly Christian, is to believe the Gospel*. Sound theology, beyond knowing what God says, is to *trust what God says*. It is to love and surrender to the gift of truth that God unfolds in Scripture and in Jesus Christ.