

THEOLOGY FOR EVERYONE IN POSTMODERN TIMES

By Ed Cyzewski

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The following introduction is a sample chapter from my forthcoming book: *Theology For Everyone in Postmodern Times*. A complete proposal is available upon request.

Introduction

“Theology is not supposed to make you stupid.” This remark in my Theology One class at Biblical Theological Seminary was the beginning of my personal theological revolution. Dr. John Franke had just finished telling the story of a disastrous evangelistic encounter that ended with an acquaintance of his telling a woman, “Only God knows if you can be saved, I can’t help you.” Yes, we all agreed, theology should not push any of us to the brink of such idiocy.

Theology is best described as reflection on God resulting in our imitation (or “reflection”) of him. The complete definition of theology that drives this work is “the Spirit-directed and scripture-based contemplation of God by a mission-centered Christian community that occurs in dialogue with the local, global, and historic Church and leads to an imitation of him in a particular time and place.”

The sad truth is that theology often does more to divide and disrupt the church than to unite it and bring clarity. My own memories abound with theological discussions that took a nasty turn and became full-blown feuds. In other cases I have read vindictive comments, articles, and blog posts online by supposed Christians that would work in the context of a gossip magazine, but surely have no place in the body of Christ. And so at

this point in my seminary career, I despaired that I would never find a civil way to discuss theology without argument and division.

Theology is further complicated by today's cultural context. Our world has shifted from a modern to a postmodern philosophical outlook. Though a postmodern world offers just as many threats to Christianity as the modern world, any attempt to talk about God, scripture, and doctrine must include an awareness of and interaction with the contemporary context. The consequences of ignoring one's surroundings are far too costly: a short-sighted version of Christianity, blind to its syncretism with culture, unable to speak prophetically to the world and consequently sidelined as irrelevant.

Two roadblocks stand in the way of theology. First, it can be divisive. This is particularly galling because the body of Christ, with each part being essential, needs every member to contribute to theology in one way or another. Theology within Christian community will no doubt be messy, but it should be a unifying act of community, not something else to fight over.

Secondly, theology requires an awareness of our world. Like good missionaries, Christians must take time to understand the assumptions, language, and values of their surroundings. This approach both guards against cultural syncretism and prepares the church to speak within the culture.

Making Theology Accessible

Near the end of my seminary program, I possessed a renewed passion for theology and desired to share what I had learned with my home church. Unfortunately, many of the books and articles used in class were dense with theological jargon in

relatively bland academic writing that must be complemented with a 20 oz. coffee in order for the reader to reach the end of the eightieth page of Chapter One. I feared that many Christians would not benefit from the wealth of helpful theological teaching available without also signing up for a seminary class. While thinking through ways to bring contextual theology to the church, an idea formed in my mind.

I decided to develop a guide to contextual theology under Franke's direction during a course of independent study on postmodernism and Christianity. My goal has always been the bridging of the academic world of theology and the practice of it by the church. Franke provided the scholarly guidance for this work, while I made the scholarly material on postmodernism and Christianity accessible for everyone in the church.

The project has taken various shapes and forms over time, but the core thrust has remained: provide a simple contextual theology method for everyone in the church to use. When opening up theology for everyone to form, I also wanted to point out a way to practice it. This is where I began to explore the essential context of mission for theology.

Theology as the Servant of Christian Mission

I tremble at the thought of teaching thousands of Christians how to participate in theology and then watch our churches explode with theology debates and additional Sunday School classes. That's not my goal. I want to involve everyone in theology because it's an essential part of knowing God and of spreading the gospel.

As we share the good news of Christ in our workplaces, social circles, and in any other place we find ourselves, theological questions will be unleashed without warning. Is Christ the only way to heaven? How is the world going to end? Can a murderer really go

to heaven after repenting, while the unbelieving victim goes to hell? Why are Christians so mean to gay people? Why have Christians traditionally oppressed women? Isn't the Bible a product of Constantine's power grab? Why do Christians oppose evolution?

These questions will come up. Count on it. We must grapple with them not only as a way of drawing closer to the Lord and his truth, but also as a matter of winsomely sharing the message of Jesus. If we have drawn near to God and have his heart for the salvation of our world, then we must dive into the theological issues of our time. Theology is an essential part of being the Church and spreading the gospel.

My Own Theological Journey

How did I end up interested in theology, sitting in a theology class in seminary, and writing a book about it no less? To impress the ladies in my church? Though religion scholars do possess a certain irresistibility (thank you Robert Langdon), I didn't have that in mind. It certainly was not the money, and I would never describe myself as an intellectual.

So what gives? Why fill up two entire IKEA bookshelves with dense, poorly written theological works that drone on and on utilizing words I rarely grasp (such as "liminality")? Why spend three and half years at seminary for a Master of Divinity, when I could have breezed through two years in any other graduate program for a master's degree that would land a much higher salary?

I suppose you could say that I see theology everywhere. We constantly make theological statements and our beliefs radically affect our choices about where we live,

who we spend time with, how we entertain ourselves, how we treat fellow Christians, how we treat non-Christians . . . the list goes on.

Quite simply, I was drawn to theology because I saw so many doctrines and belief systems that are all over the map. Some even go off the map. I wanted to understand them and to make informed decisions about my beliefs. Moreover, I wanted to help others in their own theological choices.

The Prohibition of a Billy Graham Crusade

Chew on this example. In one of the first churches I attended (a fundamentalist Baptist church to be specific), there were prohibitions on seeing movies, using anything other than the King James Version of the Bible, singing anything other than hymns, and participating in a Billy Graham rally. “No Billy Graham?” you must be saying, “That sounds ridiculous!” Well, it is. Nevertheless, yes, many fundamentalists do not support Billy Graham. It basically boils down to the theological interpretation of a text:

“Therefore come out from them and be separate, says the Lord. Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you” (2 Corinthians 6:17. See also Isaiah 52:11; Ezekiel 20:34, 41).¹

Even if it’s not in the hallowed, anti-vernacular of the King James Version, you can at least grasp the meaning of this verse. It clearly states that born-again Christians should not make ministry partnerships with mainline denominations that have turned their backs on the truth. Nevertheless, this is exactly what Graham, disobedient to the end, did in New York City. Such an inglorious act did not bode well with the fundamentalist establishment, especially its spokesman Bob Jones. Jones was further offended by Graham’s solidarity with Martin Luther King Jr. (more about that later).

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all scripture citations are from the New International Version (NIV).

How a church could use such a passage—that seems to touch on Christian marriage and its shadowing of God’s pure unity with believers—to oppose an attempt at Christian unity has always been unbelievable in my mind. An entire branch of the church turned away from a leading evangelist on the merit of one loosely applied passage. That speaks volumes of why theology is important.

Follow My Lead, Or Else . . .

There are other events in my life that have attested to the relevance of theology. Read Numbers 14 for instance. This is a narrative passage about the rebellion of Israel against the Lord, while their godly leaders plead with them to be obedient. The result of their hardened resistance to God is forty years of wandering in the wilderness.

Now imagine you are sitting in church on a Sunday morning after the vote to build a new facility fell one point short of the 75 percent needed to move forward. And the new facility plan is a dandy. The leaders want to relocate the church to a big field near a major intersection. Location, location, location, is all the church needs to help it attract seekers so they can be saved.

The air grows tense as the pastor reads the passage from Numbers and then uses it as an example of what happens to disobedient people who will not follow their leaders’ plans. The people had voted to have these leaders over them, but somehow 26 percent of them refused to listen to the leaders they themselves had chosen. And by the way, the leaders also claimed the leading of God, and so any attempt to oppose them was groundless.

Meetings and debates followed this tumultuous Sunday, and another vote was scheduled. I'm not sure what the bylaws said about this, but heck, the leaders were just trying to follow the Lord's leading...right? Unfortunately the Lord's plan was shelved once again, with the vote falling below the 75 percent mark.

Events unfolded swiftly in the following months. On one Sunday, all of the pastors resigned and left the church. A large contingent of the church, roughly half, split off and decided to start its own church. In a rather slick move, the new church "called" the former pastoral staff to lead the new "church plant." They purchased the field and have since been able to do nothing with it. Well, they did put up a sign about it as the future home of their church, but I'm sure that's not exactly what the Lord had in mind.

This scenario brings up a host of theological and cultural questions. First of all, did the pastor handle the interpretation of the passage in Numbers responsibly? Second, why did this church think a vote was necessary if their leaders had discerned God's will so clearly? The implications will vary depending on the situation, but the answers to these questions among many others reside in the intersection of theology and culture.

Nuts and Bolts

In the spirit of Paul who was a Jew to the Jews and became a Gentile to the Gentiles (1 Corinthians 9:19-23), the church must explore the complicated cultural webs that touch every aspect of forming theology and sharing the truth of God today. The first half of this book will explain the basic features of today's cultural landscape. The second half will apply it to Christian theology.

The value of this method is two-fold. First, teasing out the cultural trends will help us become self-aware. We will learn about the world that has been passed on to us, as well as the world that is blossoming at this very moment. Such self-evaluation will help us see the ways that culture has affected Christianity and will prepare us to be appropriately wary in the postmodern context. Second, as we pursue theology in our Christian communities and then share it with those around us, we will find it necessary to operate within today's terminology and topics. This arises from the missionary nature of Christianity.

If we are going to succeed in providing a method of contextual theology for everyone in the church, it will be essential to move from our rationale to the nuts and bolts that will be our constant companions. These nuts and bolts are the terms *postmodernism* and *mission*. Our terminology must be carefully defined, but always keep in mind that each term defined within a paragraph or two merits its own book. The first word we need a handle on is postmodernism.

Postmodernism

Our world has been altered to a certain extent by a philosophy known as postmodernism. I'm not interested in debating whether or not the world has become completely postmodern, whether postmodern is the best word, or whether it's evil or beneficial. But let's at least begin with a few points of common ground. The world has shifted significantly. With new technologies, media, and politics have come a host of changes.

Our society, whether shaking violently or just feeling the aftershocks caused by postmodernism, has been irreparably altered. There are new metaphors and categories, authority structures, conventional wisdom, and business practices. The world looks different at this point and we must take the transformation from modern to postmodern into account when forming theology and sharing the gospel.

Postmodernism is often defined as a reaction against the philosophical period known as modernism. Modernity sought to find one vantage point or story from which to describe the world. To do that, modern thinkers sought to establish rationally the foundational knowledge from which all other knowledge was sought. You could say that modernism sought to build knowledge upon certain, verifiable data.

Postmodernism advocates that the world cannot be explained through one story or seen completely through one, objective perspective. The certainty that modernism sought is unattainable in the postmodern view because we live in a world where multiple perspectives exist. Postmodern philosophers tend to assert that knowledge is not completely objective, universal in scope, and inherently good. The interrelated nature of the world, the importance of community, the celebration of diversity, and the limits imposed by context are common features of the postmodern world.²

These definitions are inadequate and incomplete, but they give us a point of departure as we move forward with this conversation. We would do well to heed the words of Steven Best and Douglas Kellner:

There is no 'postmodern mind'; rather, there is a complex set of postmodern perspectives that sometimes coalesce into distinct paradigms and often coexist uneasily with each other and with modern perspectives.

² My class notes from John Franke's Christian Faith I course were referred to in this paragraph.

Reducing ‘the postmodern mind’ to a simple set of defining characteristics (relativism, irrationalism, nihilism, destructiveness, incoherence, or whatever) makes it easy for its critics to dismiss postmodern discourse, but in fact, as we are trying to argue, the postmodern turn is more complex and differentiated than many of its advocates and critics realize.³

I will not pretend to have a complete picture of postmodernism. It is my desire to introduce this important topic to the church and to create a constructive atmosphere for discussion and the plotting of possible courses for the church to follow in the wake of this cultural shift.

Mission

Mission or missional activity is another important concept in this book. The church is God’s called people, called in order to be his messengers of his truth and the bearers of his love.⁴ In a sense, every Christian is by God’s design a missionary. “The church of Jesus Christ is not the purpose or goal of the gospel, but rather its instrument and witness.”⁵ Every reference to mission or missional church employs this sense of being called and sent to share the gospel. It is this missionary calling of Christianity that drives us into the postmodern culture—seeking to understand it and then bring the truth of Christ.

³ Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, *The Postmodern Turn* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1997), 21.

⁴ Leslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 84-85.

⁵ Darrell Guder, *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 5.

Chapter Summaries

For those who haven't read much about the importance of mission as the defining activity of the church, the first chapter dives into the biblical grounds for that philosophy. You will be convinced once and for all that the church exists to bring the gospel into the world—the postmodern world in this case—and it must therefore devote time and energy to understanding its cultural context.

This chapter is followed by an introduction to the theological method I will be advocating throughout this book. Theological reflection is defined as the God-centered contemplation of God's relationship to scripture, tradition, the church, mission, and culture that leads to an imitation of him in a particular time and place. After we grasp our method, we can move forward with the components of the theological task.

The third chapter spells out the complexities of culture and provides some methods for sorting out the muddle of Christianity and culture. Christian missionaries in today's context must understand the dangers and benefits of their culture when sharing the gospel. The fourth chapter follows closely on the heels of this discussion with a brief survey of the modern and postmodern worlds. Understanding the basic contours of the postmodern landscape, we are prepared to grasp its importance for our time and for the impact of the gospel.

The focus of Chapter Five will be the emerging church, a global conversation about the church and its theology that has led to significant changes in Christian living, doctrine, and worship, to name a few areas. One does not have to be a part of the

emerging church to pursue theology in the postmodern context, but the emerging church is a good example of one group that is grappling with the changes of today and is seeking culturally appropriate ways to form and live out Christian theology.

With the potentials and pitfalls of the postmodern context in place, we move into the second part of the book: enabling the church to form theology today. Chapter Six begins with the cornerstone of all theology: God. God is the absolute who makes theology possible in the first place. The love of the Father for his creation leads to the sending of the Son to bring redemption, which results in the abiding of the Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit of God who continues to bring his revelation and understanding today. Without the revelation of God, we would be helpless when approaching the scriptures and would consequently be unable to form theology or to put it into practice.

The Bible, discussed in Chapter Seven, is the authoritative guide for Christians. Though God speaks through prayer and prophetic words, the Bible is one of the primary ways we learn about God. The shift into postmodernism has revealed a number of ways in which we abuse scripture and miss out on its full potential.

Ultimately, the Bible tells us the story of God's pursuit of his creation. It is illuminated through the Holy Spirit. The modern world's temptation is the reduction of scripture to a blue print of doctrine that is studied in a detached manner without clear connections to the rhythms of daily life. Though postmodernism provides some helpful categories in our study, it will nevertheless create its fair share of problems to theologians.

The following chapters introduce theology's participants. Chapter Eight highlights the importance of the historic church as a source of theological wisdom and orthodoxy, while providing a series of case studies in what can go wrong in the formation of doctrine. Without the voice of the historic church we are likely to repeat the mistakes of the past and overlook issues that our church fathers and mothers considered vital.

The other participant in theology is the global church, the topic of Chapter Nine. The global church is the architect of theology today, with Christians on each continent adding insights to what we know and how we practice. The universal church teaches us about the limits of our perspectives and enables us to grasp how vast and complex our God truly is.

In coming full circle, our exploration of theology in the postmodern world slows to a halt at Chapter Ten with some thoughts on theology's role as our guide in the mission to spread God's Kingdom. Since this mission is the place where theology should be taking place, Christians should take another look at Jesus' proclamation of God's Kingdom and its implications for theology as we are sent into the world.

With this final piece of the puzzle in place, I conclude with some practical ways to form and practice theology in Chapter Eleven. Whether in Christian community, informal gatherings over coffee, via e-mail, at discussion boards, or on blogs, there are numerous ways for the church to discuss and apply theology today. Joining the conversation is easy and essential. The only question that remains is whether we are willing to step onto the unfamiliar and uncomfortable ground of the postmodern context and seek the Lord in its midst.

Conclusion

Theology can be so much more than fodder for debates or a collection of baffling doctrines concerning extreme predestination. It is our attempt to know God, the driving force behind our call to make him known, and the very content of the good news. Far from inducing stupidity in its students, theology should be the greatest asset to the church in accomplishing its mission.