

THEOLOGIES THAT WOUND: An Introduction

Part II

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THE TROUBLE WITH DISCERNING TRUTH

There is one Bible, one truth and one intent of God for His words. However there are thousands of different (sometimes opposing) interpretations. Why does God allow it, and why can't people agree on biblical truth? It appears there is no limit to the number of possible approaches to interpretation (biblical, systematic, constructive, etc.), all of which have preconceived rules for determining the Bible's meaning.

Many factors influence Christians to follow or resist the Holy Spirit, including their past, present situation, teachings, experiences, needs, wants, core pain, biology, spirit, sin nature and chosen beliefs. The result is that no two of us are or ever will be alike. We are uniquely created and distinctively developed human beings. Consequently, it is profoundly impossible for two independent thinking people to come to complete theological agreement. Sometimes we even argue with ourselves.

Some of the influences that affect developing a coherent and universally acceptable theology are:

- God and the universe are infinite.
- People find security and simplicity in a black and white theology.
- There is considerable gray in almost every subject the Bible speaks about.
- Abstract thinking is required to understand the Bible.
- Flexible thinking is necessary to grow one's theology.

God and the Universe are Infinite

If God wrote down every bit of truth for us, we would not have enough time to read it all, or ability to contain but a tiny portion of it. Since our knowledge, language and understanding will never be perfect, God and the universe will be largely unknowable in our lifetimes. Therefore, our scriptural interpretation and the development of a philosophy and our system used to comprehend Him will change as we grow and mature. The goal is to progress in truth until Jesus' return. We

What we should end up with are degrees of confidence in what we believe and not a rigid dogmatism.

can realistically attain degrees of confidence in what we believe, rather than a rigid dogmatism. "For now we see in a mirror dimly... now I know in part, but then I will know fully..." (I Corinthians 13:12, NASB)

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Security And Simplicity In A Black And White Theology

Many people find a sense of security and welcome the simplicity of a theology that is black and white, concrete and fixed. To varying degrees, we all need the structure of a system of beliefs. It gives us some order, control and stability in a world torn between good and evil, right and wrong, and predictable and erratic, where pain is a frequent consequence. The structure gives us a sense of understanding and peace, even if what we believe is false. For example, a popular statement says, “Nothing happens in this world without God’s approval.” However, this statement is not theologically accurate. Sin in our world never has God’s approval, yet it happens all around us. The statement persists, however, because it provides comfort to those who feel there is no other way to understand or perhaps even cope with a chaotic world or the unknown. To remove the belief leaves people feeling more vulnerable and less secure. Something that yields an emotional benefit can be difficult to give up, even when the belief is false.

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Relying on a simple, concrete and fixed theology can be a temptation, but it leads to harm. Our security should rest in the truth and not in rigidly holding on to an inflexible and unalterable system of beliefs.

The Gray In The Bible

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God has revealed Himself and the laws governing his people just as He intended. Yet, an ocean of gray exists in most any subject in the Bible. The gray comes to light when our unanswered questions reveal the limited scope of the Bible and when we attempt to apply general principles to complex situations. God chose to leave out a significant amount of detail. An obvious reason for this is if scripture were to cover all the underlying principles and exceptions to every law and their applications in everyday life, the Bible would be too long to read in a person’s lifetime.

The Bible contains about 1600 pages. Compare its length to the 15,487 pages that comprise the 1928 edition of the *The Oxford English Dictionary*, which only defines words in one language, and doesn’t attempt to define the universe, the vastness of God or the intricacies of humanity.

It does address some issues we struggle with even today, but without direct and definitive direction on every possible situation. For instance, Moses, other prophets and later rabbis wrote specific rules about permissible divorce, based on their interpretation of God’s law. They were given great liberty to define and clarify the general laws of God, to shed light on the gray areas. Pharisaical laws became the standard for Jewish behavior and were upheld by Jesus, who said, “... all they tell you, do and observe, but do not do according to their deeds...” (Matthew 23:3)

When Jesus discussed divorce with religious leaders who questioned Him, He didn’t give an exhaustive treatise on the subject, but focused on the most salient points. (Matthew 19) He did not elaborate on all the specifics of separation, divorce and remarriage (see I Corinthians 7). For a more accurate theology on divorce we must scour scripture, collect the bits of information and connect the dots by discerning God’s intent, the best we can. The church has the power and

authority, as do individuals to a limited degree, to cautiously move beyond the dots to shed light on the gray areas, as did the prophets and rabbis. We must look for and understand the underlying principles of what God has revealed in order to make application to everyday life situations not spelled out in Scripture.

Abstract Thinking

God is glorified in our searching out His abstract and concretely presented truths...

A person needs to have some ability to think abstractly to understand Scripture. Theology, moral reasoning, personality and the existence of God are abstractions, and things we can touch, sense or readily define. They are ideas, conceptualizations and symbolic representations we may not be able to prove, but by faith we believe in their existence.

Jesus' parables are stories with a central truth wrapped in everyday situations to make them easier to understand. We can't get the meaning He intends if we read them literally. In the same way, eschatology (study of end things) can't be understood or appreciated if someone doesn't think abstractly about a dragon (a crafty and evil being) with seven heads (kingdoms) and ten horns (kings). (Revelation 12:3) Each person must move beyond concrete thinking (literal, unimaginative and logical) to abstraction.

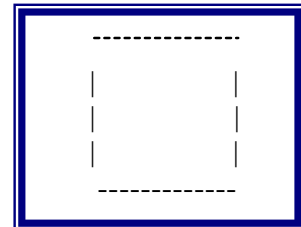
Let me illustrate with another example. I am a patriotic person (concrete) who willingly served my country in Vietnam, but my patriotism (abstract) is separate from my role as a patriotic person. I am also a recovering perfectionist (perfection is an abstract idea—we believe it exists). To some degree, abstract thinking can be learned, but its teaching is extremely challenging to teach because the cognitive process is not well understood. Abstract thinking requires considerable effort, but it offers great rewards. God is glorified when we search out His abstract and concretely presented truths, and in the process we acquire knowledge and a faith not easily shaken.

Flexible, Not Rigid Thinking

Our thinking process must be free flowing so the Spirit, who moves like the unknowable winds, can lead us. If we are free from a single-approach system of interpretation we can engage in a more eclectic or free borrowing model. Just as no person has been able to formulate a single, coherent model of Jesus' counseling because of His incredibly flexibility, so too, a single, fixed model of interpretation will likely skew our beliefs. Mental flexibility makes it possible for scripture to tell us its truth even when it appears to contradict other references because of our fixed, flawed beliefs. We can then retain and not ignore or reject confusing verses or principles.

Psychologically, we all attempt to make sense of what we see, hear, feel and think by associating something *similar* in our memory banks to what is being presented to us.

For example, what do you see inside the rectangle to the right? Most people say they see a square or box. In reality there are only a series of short lines or dashes—two horizontal and two vertical. It is common to finish connecting the lines to form a shape that is familiar to the observer. Making sense of the image by completing the connections is called assimilation. Think of it as a negative process of distorting incoming information to fit preconceived ideas. We all do this to varying degrees when we interpret Scripture. We assign interpretations to verses that make sense to us, but may be far from God's meaning.



To illustrate, the phrase, “Be anxious for nothing” (Philippians 4:6) will be interpreted by a person’s usual patterns of thought and belief. Someone may think God is being critical when they read

One person interprets God as critical when he commands us to, “Be anxious for nothing.” But...

the verse, even though commands can be given in love with a soft voice. We fill in the blank spaces with our worldview. It is easy to assume that God is referring to the feeling of anxiety. However, though the feeling may be the consequence of our action, God is telling us not to give ourselves to over-thinking, which is a mental process. The interpretation that God is being critical of us in this verse would lead people to feeling guilty over any feeling of anxiety. A better translation might be, “Do not give yourself to over-thinking anything.”

There is great benefit in being flexible in our thinking and avoiding rigidity by being open to new ideas. We need to be steadfast in our beliefs until we discover though study new truths that require reforming our beliefs.

TAKING THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED—FINAL THOUGHTS

We all would likely agree, none of us have yet arrived or become perfect or complete, but are continuing in a lifelong process of growing spiritually—becoming more like Jesus. Given this reality, it is apparent that the majority of our theological beliefs should be held in a state of perpetual change.

Every discipline goes through endless revisions. No field of study is ever complete. Theories of business, science, ethics, law, etc. evolve over time as we mature and increase our knowledge. We challenge present beliefs so that we can make improvement.

Theology is not a closed-end or fixed system of beliefs. In our lifetimes we will not come close to understanding the complexities of Scripture, God, nature or the spiritual world. Therefore, the only sensible position a thoughtful Christian can defensibly take is to be open-minded, flexible, continually learning and always redefining theology. For me, this is an exciting,

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never-ending, fascinating adventure. With each new understanding of God my soul is more profoundly knitted to His. It strengthens my faith in and increases my admiration for Him. I have always found it somewhat painful to shed an old image of God, people or the universe in light of newfound clarity and truth. But the pleasure of the new dulls the loss of the old. Accepting that life is a series of deaths and rebirths makes this journey easier.

To help ensure your growth, commit to do the following:

- Do not permit anything to keep you from being open to altering or growing your theology, such as theological pride—“I’ve got my beliefs together. I’ve got the truth, and that’s that.”
- Do not become a slave to your theology or refuse to reconsider points of it for fear of what others might think.
- Challenge yourself to thoroughly investigate verses that trouble you and do not fit in with or that seemingly contradict your beliefs.

- Dare to ask questions, and “Study to show yourself approved...” (II Timothy 2:15a)

A strong and intelligent person asks hard questions and pursues difficult answers. Consider there is an answer for every question—it may not be perfect or complete, but it is a beginning. In Proverbs, God implores us to search out knowledge, wisdom and understanding. We are to bind them around our necks—a place between our logical minds and our feeling hearts—to guide us throughout our lives. By doing this, we will avoid some wounds that result from a poorly developed or rigid theology.

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