

ED CYZEWSKI

NAVPRESS 

Sample from *Coffeehouse Theology* / ISBN 978-1-60006-277-3

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ISBN-13: 978-1-60006-277-3

ISBN-10: 1-60006-277-6

Cover design by *studiogearbox*

Cover photo by *Veer*

Published in association with the literary agency of Sanford Communications, Portland, Oregon.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Cyzewski, Ed, 1979-
Coffeeshouse theology : reflecting on God in everyday life / Ed
Cyzewski.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references.
ISBN-13: 978-1-60006-277-3
ISBN-10: 1-60006-277-6
1. Theology--Methodology. 2. Postmodernism--Religious
aspects--Christianity. I. Title.
BR118.C99 2008
230--dc22

2008014836

Printed in the United States of America

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 / 11 10 09 08

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FOREWORD

I recently lost a bet to one of Ed's seminary professors, John Franke. I don't even know now what we were betting on—I think it was a Chicago Bears and Minnesota Vikings football game, but my punishment was to read John Calvin's defense of infant baptism in *The Institutes for Christian Religion*. When it comes to punishments, Franke's assignment doesn't get much better. But, besides being unconvinced by Calvin's arguments, I was overwhelmingly unconvinced by Calvin's *style of conversation*. Truth be told, I was a bit embarrassed by how Calvin berated his opponents as he blasted away at them from his bully pulpit.

Then I did what Ed is encouraging us to do in this book: I gave Calvin a break, I set Calvin in his context, and I realized that Calvin's theology was for Calvin's time. Calvin's theology, in other words, was contextually shaped. It was what Calvin heard God saying in Calvin's time and in Calvin's ways. God used Calvin to burn a hole

of holiness in Switzerland and to construct a contextually shaped theology that, while clearly revealing a sixteenth-century style, has endured the test of time. In many ways, then, Calvin provides for us a model of Ed's *Coffeehouse Theology*. The best way to read Calvin is to sit behind him as he speaks, to watch how his contemporaries responded, and to see in Calvin a model of how to do the same in our world.

Which is what good theology really is. Far too often preachers and teachers find a classical theologian they love—say Athanasius or Augustine, Luther or Calvin, Wesley or Edwards. Their enthusiasm for the theologian is matched only by the dull looks they get from their congregations or classes when the teacher does whatever he or she can to teach that theology as the best form of theology ever. Which it isn't—why? Because there is no such thing as the “best form of theology ever.” (Not even Calvin's, I remind my Reformed friends.) Theology is an expression of the biblical gospel and message in a specific time and for a specific time.

This kind of contextual theology is a bit like what I learned from a really good Anglican preacher. I had never heard this preacher, but I had heard what his listeners said about his sermons. So, one day in a British pub I asked him, “Can I have copies of any of your sermons?” His answer shocked me just a little less than it taught me: “I don't keep my sermons. When I leave the pulpit and enter into my study there is a dustbin. I toss the sermon in the dustbin before I begin to pray and prepare for next week's sermon.”

Which also means contextual theology is so targeted that it is missional. That is, what Ed is telling us is that our reflections on God and our attempt to speak those reflections into our context are missionally shaped. They are God speaking through his Word, through his Spirit, and through a theologian who is sitting at coffee in a particular place, at a particular time, with someone listening

who needs to hear that age-old biblical message in his or her way for his or her day. Once the theologian finishes his coffee, it is time to go home and let someone else sit in that same seat and talk to someone else—and do what the previous theologian did but this time for a new day and in a new way.

Which is a way of telling us that theology is a conversation—of God with the biblical authors, of the biblical authors with one another, with the early fathers with the biblical authors, and so on and on up to our own day. Most importantly, since theology is a conversation, when we pull up to the table we must invite many others, even those with whom we differ and those from global Christianity, so that together we can discern God’s voice for our age. And God’s Spirit hovers over all of this and does what God’s Spirit always does: pierces with that Word into our heart of hearts. But only God gets the Final Word, which is his Son, and that Word has been uttered once and will be uttered even more completely at the Final Day. Until then we utter words about the Word, but our words are only words—they must not be mistaken for the Final Word.

Which leads me to a final point that I like about Ed’s fine book—*Coffeehouse Theology* seeks to introduce us to where we are in history. Ed knows Calvin was a man of his time, and he knows he, too, is a man of our time. Call our time postmodernity, or if you prefer, call it late modernity. It doesn’t matter what you call it. What matters is comprehending it, and Ed can help you do that. Once you know where you are in history, you are invited to pull up to the coffee table, pull out your Bible, pray for God’s Spirit, know your world, and discern what God would have you say to our world.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book would still be the pipe dream of a theology student were it not for the timely direction provided by my professor Dr. John Franke during hours of conversation in his office. This book began as an independent study under his direction, and I am deeply grateful for Dr. Franke's commitment to Christ, culturally informed theology, and humble scholarship. The encouragement of Spencer Burke and Bill Senyard was also indispensable.

My grandmother Phyllis Quinn has been one of my biggest supporters throughout this project, and her constant prayers have been an enormous blessing. Words cannot express how grateful I am for the manifold ways she has provided encouragement and a steady stream of requests toward heaven.

The support of my family has been tremendous. I'm grateful to my in-laws who read through early drafts—the versions I now keep under lock and key lest anyone ever read them again—and offered

their comments and support. My thanks to my mother, who taught me diligence, and my father, who taught me about faith. The folks at Sanford Communications Inc. have gone above and beyond in guiding me through this entire process—from A to Z as they say—and managed to improve this book every time they touched it. My thanks go especially to David Sanford, Rebekah Clark (the fastest draw with an e-mail west of the Mississippi), Beyth Hogue, and Elizabeth Jones. It has been a joy working with NavPress, especially my acquiring editor Caleb Seeling. And I appreciate the contributions of my developmental editor, Brad Lewis, who had the uncanny ability to improve everything he touched—for that I am most grateful.

I am also grateful for all of my friends and conversation partners who helped make this book better by reading early drafts or working on some of its ideas. Though I will surely forget some of you, I would like to thank, in no particular order, Heather Cole, Nate Hulfish, Mark Willey, Josh Davidson, Eugene Miller, Heather Plier, John and Alta Ludlam, Molly Ludlam, Jack Ludlam, Roland Ludlam, Joel Ludlam, Scott Berkheimer, Makeesha Fisher, Jamie Arpin-Ricci, Spencer Burke, Adam Malliet, Derek Cooper, Bill Senyard, Adam Bennett, Jonathan Duncan, Christopher Fennig, Todd Hiestand, Adam Klein, Caitlin Bass, Lawrence Tom, and the many others who have been part of conversations both in person and online. I am also thankful for the spiritual guidance of Don and Nancy Loose, Joanne Hollway, and Hank and Jeannette Voss, and the theological guidance of my professors, Edward Meadors, William Heth, Larry Helyer, R. Todd Mangum, and David Dunbar.

I would also like to thank the kind owners of The Spiral Press (Manchester, VT), The Lawyer and the Baker (Manchester, VT), and the South Street Café (Bennington, VT) for making their establishments a safe pad for writers who need to get out of the house lest they end up puttering on household projects all day.

And of course there's my wife, Julie. Julie, without your support at crucial moments, this project would surely have failed. I can't imagine writing a book, let alone making it through the twists and turns of life, without you. You are my best critic, source of inspiration, and love of my life. It's a dream to spend my days with you reading, writing, hiking, and hanging with our rabbits—even if the rabbits are lazy freeloaders.

Introduction

CONTEXTUAL THEOLOGY

Understanding Ourselves, Understanding God

When was the last time you mentioned God in a conversation, said a prayer, or read the Bible? Perhaps you were helping a friend through a rough time, asking God to protect a loved one, or studying about Jesus' ministry on earth.

God has a way of showing up in everyday life, and just about everyone believes something about God. For example, just try suggesting in a crowd of people that you think there's only one way to get to heaven. You'll hear a wide variety of opinions, often expressed with a high degree of passion. In fact, we say all kinds of things about God, such as referring to the Bible as God's Word or expressing godly views on moral issues such as poverty, war, and the protection of the unborn.

Some people believe that God acts frequently in this world, bringing peace and justice. Others see God as very angry, on the verge of raining down judgment. Still others think he set the world

in motion and then walked away.

I want to know one thing: Where do these beliefs about God come from?

As a Christian, my beliefs come from the Bible—and I do believe it is inspired by God—as well as from traditions handed down from other Christians. Many Christians would agree with my list.

Even if we agree that the Bible and our traditions guide our beliefs about God, we still don't have a clear consensus about many of the particulars found in the Bible and within these traditions. Disagreements cover a range of issues such as the place of sacraments, the extent of God's control over the world, and how exactly salvation through Jesus happens. Even when we share the same sources regarding our beliefs, we have enough disagreements to drive us into thousands of different denominations.

What causes these deep divides when we try to understand God?

Maybe hidden influences change the way we read the Bible and talk about God. In fact, could our culture have a lot to do with our beliefs? People in the United States, just to name one example, have much to learn from Latin American theologians (and vice versa).

For example, think about how Christians from the U.S. and Latin America tend to read the Beatitudes (see Matthew 5:3-12; Luke 6:20-23). Most of us in the U.S. spend a lot of time reading Matthew's gospel, especially 5:3 where Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." When we read these words, we think Jesus' primary concern is humility, and so we think of the poverty mentioned here as a spiritual matter. This fits well with our experience of relative wealth, power, and prosperity. Because our culture focuses on image and pride, we read Matthew and think that Jesus wants to counter our culture, teaching humility and poverty in spirit.

Something very different happens when Latin Americans read Luke's account of the Beatitudes. In Luke 6:20 Jesus said, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God." Here Jesus speaks directly to the people, instead of *about* them as Matthew recorded. He also drops the words *in spirit*. Latin American Christians, who live amid poverty, injustice, and political turmoil, connect with the words as Luke recorded them. Here he seems to say that blessing comes from being physically poor, which is very different from the spiritual poverty in Matthew. The wealthy see blessings for the humble, while the poor see blessings for the destitute.

In these two different readings, we gain a glimpse of what happens when we read the Bible: Our local settings and cultural values—in other words, our context—influence how we read God's Word. When we read the Bible, we can't help but see God through a unique local lens.

The Bible presents a deep and rich message about God's concern for both our spiritual and physical worlds. Both interpretations are rooted in Jesus' teachings, and both are correct. However, when Christians in the United States focus solely on the spiritual message or when Latin Americans focus only on the physical part, Jesus' message loses some of its depth and richness.

UNDERSTANDING SEEKERS OF GOD

The lesson here is pretty simple: Beliefs about God change depending on context. So as we seek information about this God we want to know and to make known, we need to understand the often undetected influences of cultural context. The inescapable conclusion is that we're products of our times and locations, and these influences create a lens for our study of God.

All is not lost. In fact, culture is a good thing to understand.

Christians in the U.S. do need to hear Jesus' teaching about humility, and Latin American Christians do need to hear the hope of Jesus' message about the blessings promised to the physically poor. In this case, we can easily see how context becomes a valuable tool. And as we understand the values and challenges of our contexts, we can study the Bible with a greater willingness to hold our culture up to the scrutiny of God.

Of course, the danger occurs when we mistake our biblical interpretations from an isolated context as the definitive word. So we need to challenge ourselves to learn about God with an awareness of context—what we can call contextual theology—while at the same time making sure we value different insights from other cultures where Christians are learning about God in their own particular situations.

In brief, that's where we're headed together in this book. *Coffeehouse Theology* will help us form and live out contextual theology by helping us understand who we are and by including perspectives outside of our own in the midst of our study of Scripture. Together, we'll explore where our beliefs about God come from: our context, the Bible, our traditions, and Christians from other cultures.

CONCERNS ABOUT THEOLOGY AND CULTURE

We'll start with a long and hard look at who we are as theologians and the way our cultural contexts influence how we understand God. I'm not taking this approach because culture is more important than God. Rather our culture—who we are and our values—becomes both our greatest strength and largest obstacle in theology. Culture can be a strength because it serves as a tool when we use our understanding of culture to study God. Think back to the Beatitudes example: Christians in the U.S. tend to spiritualize the message of

Jesus because we understand the pride so prevalent in today's culture. Yet every culture has weaknesses. God is so much more than what we can see by ourselves. So while addressing the pride of our culture in the Beatitudes, we can easily miss out on God's concern for the poor and the blessings he sets aside for them.

You might be concerned about the amount of time we'll spend exploring the interaction of culture and theology, especially in chapters 5 and 6 on the influences of postmodernism on culture and on the church. You might already be asking, "Can't we just study the Bible and leave culture out of this? In fact, don't we just mess up the Bible by considering culture as a part of theology?" The truth is, whether we acknowledge it or not, we constantly deal with the influences of culture on theology.

Whatever philosophy dominates our culture, we can't afford to simply ignore it as we form our theology. If we do, we risk allowing the dominant philosophy to covertly influence our thinking about God. This is not to say that Christians should embrace a culture or philosophy. Instead, we should see our culture as a setting that we need to understand. Then we can either seek to overcome it or put it to use.

In fact, I want to make clear that I'm mostly ambivalent toward culture in that I don't believe one culture or philosophy is right or wrong. In chapter 3, I'll outline a number of ways we can approach the mixing of culture and theology.

Of course, this is difficult and messy work that requires practice and the input of a Christian community. However, letting an undetected culture or philosophy infect our theology can be more dangerous than ignoring culture. Here's the bottom line: If we truly want to study God, we must first understand the cultural lens that we view God through.

THEOLOGY: REFLECTING ON GOD

In light of the challenges posed by context, let's ask the question again, "Where do our beliefs about God come from?" We now understand that context plays a role, but we also need to consider specific ways we learn about God. If we want to understand where our beliefs come from, we need to understand theology (which literally means the study of God) and the role theology plays in our everyday lives.

I like to think of theology as reflecting on or thinking about God. *Reflecting* is a helpful word because it not only addresses the act of seeking an understanding of God, but it also implies the act of reflecting who God is as a result of seeking him out. In other words, theology—the act of reflecting on God—should change both how we think and how we live. We seek not to merely know *about* God but to know God in a personal and life-changing way.

Further, if we take the mission of Jesus seriously, we also reflect him for the benefit of others. Jesus instructed his followers to join his mission, to spread the good news that God isn't just present in our world but that everyone has an opportunity to know him. In this way, reflecting on God is not only essential in our own relationships with God but in our ministry to others around us and around the world. Understanding theology's place in our calling to know God and to make God known is a good place to start.

THEOLOGY IN EVERYDAY LIFE

Christians face tough questions about God all the time. One morning I walked in to work and made my usual stop in the kitchen to start brewing coffee. With that essential piece in place, I walked upstairs to my office. On the way down the hall, two of my coworkers were discussing a recent interview on a popular talk show. Joyce

Meyer, a widely known Christian writer and conference speaker, had said on this show that she believes God has forgiven her father for abusing her during childhood. If Jesus forgave this child abuser, then the way is clear for him to go to heaven. And that was the sticking point for my coworkers.

After sharing the main points of the interview, Stephanie asked me, “How could God forgive a child abuser but send a morally good atheist to hell?”

Grace is a curious thing. We love receiving it, but we really don’t like seeing it given out so lavishly to others.

“I don’t know if her father was sincere, but if he really did repent of his sins, change his ways, and ask God for forgiveness, then it is a very real possibility that God will save him,” I replied.

“But will God send good people to hell?” she persisted.

“It’s hard to say,” I said. “There’s a wide variety of perspectives on heaven, hell, and who goes where. Jesus did say that he is the Way, but I can’t speak for what’s truly in another person’s heart and whether or not that person has chosen to receive God’s grace. God clearly offers forgiveness to all who repent, but we can’t always figure out who chooses to be with God and who rejects God.”

“I just can’t believe that God would forgive such a creep.”

What a tough spot. I did my best to explain grace and the Cross: “I agree that it’s hard to believe. But we’re all separated from God by our sinful choices, and that’s where Jesus comes in to conquer sin and make new life possible.”

The conversation continued along similar lines. By the end of the discussion I believe that Stephanie had a clearer picture of God’s grace and forgiveness, even though she kept it at a theoretical arm’s length.

I’m not bringing up this incident to show how to “win” a theological discussion, but rather to show how important theology is.

When I least expected it, I walked into a very important discussion about God and salvation. That's often how theology pops up in everyday life. One moment I was carefully measuring coffee, and the next I was explaining the finer points of grace and salvation to a skeptic.

Prior to this discussion, I spent time reading the Bible, studying theology books, and interacting with Christians and non-Christians. I've weighed and wrestled with issues such as sin, grace, and forgiveness many times before Stephanie mentioned the interview that morning. Exploring our beliefs and how we form them isn't just important for a personal relationship with God but also for the way we explain God to others.

SOURCES OF THEOLOGY

After we understand the influences we face in contextual theology and the place of theology in everyday life, we're ready to look at the sources providing our beliefs about God. While most Christians begin with the Bible, we need to remember what the Bible says about itself: namely that the Holy Spirit of God provides direction and insight as we study Scripture. While anyone can read or study the Bible, Scripture itself says we need a relationship with God and a dependence on the leading of the Holy Spirit to lead us into God's truth (see John 14:26).

So, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and with an awareness of our cultural lens, we seek to understand God by studying the Bible, our primary source for understanding God. If we ask where our beliefs come from, the Bible usually lands at the top of the list because Christians believe God inspired its writers.

After studying the Bible, we'll arrive at some conclusions. But how reliable are they? We've already looked at how people from

different cultures can read the same Bible and arrive at very different conclusions. So how do we overcome the shortcomings of our context?

Thankfully, we have two allies that can help us see God in more complete ways.

First, we have the traditions of the church. These traditions uncover the ways Christians understood God in various cultures and circumstances. If we find that certain beliefs stand the test of time and hold their place in Christian theology, we can be sure they're important. For example, the Trinity, the doctrine stating that God is three persons in one substance, has withstood the scrutiny of Christians throughout history and has become a pillar of the Christian faith.

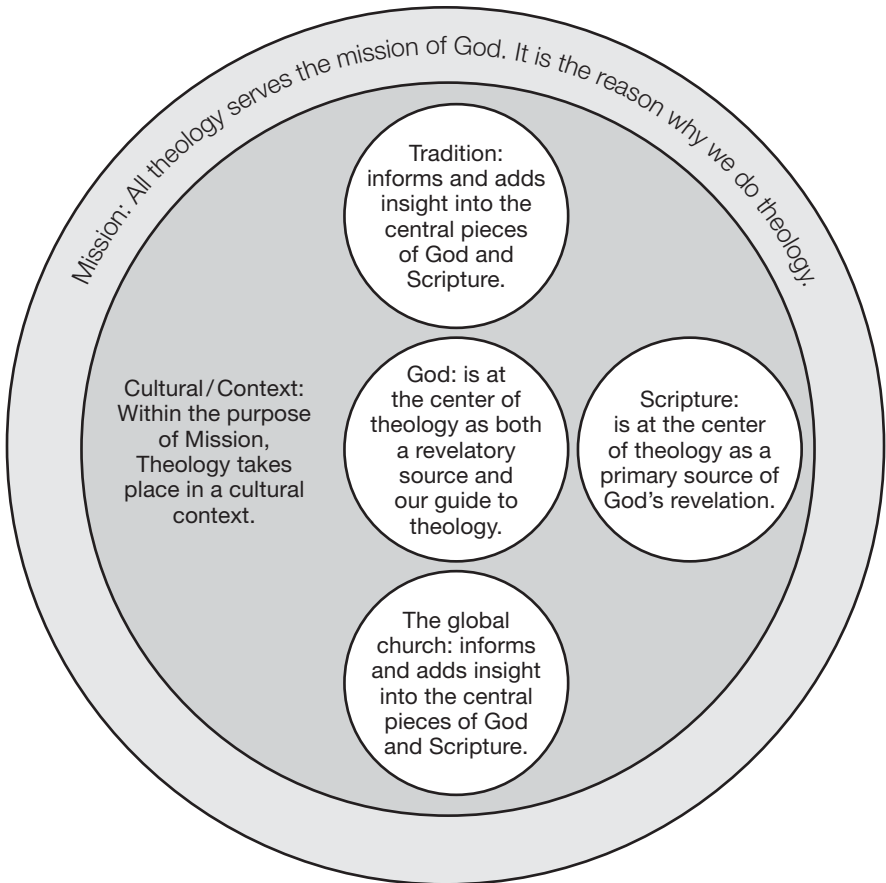
Christian tradition helps us determine what beliefs are most important, with those standing the test of time landing at the center of the faith. We can compare our beliefs today to Christian traditions and find points in history when someone took a different perspective or applied our doctrines of today in different ways. If we hold beliefs strictly unique to the present day, we should at least question why we differ from Christians before us. Perhaps we can give good reasons. However, if we're wise, we'll look to Christian tradition as a guide for what we believe today.

Second, interacting with global Christians provides another way to broaden our perspective about God and to fill in the weaknesses of our local context. As Christianity grows in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and other parts of the world, Christians in these places are all forming theology. Just as Latin American Christians broaden our understanding of Jesus' teachings about God's concern for the poor, the potential for additional insights only increases when we enter into dialogue with Christians in other contexts.

A Web of Theology

This web illustrates the interconnected nature of Christian theology's sources and contexts.

Current chapter topic will be in bold.



A PICTURE TO HELP US

Since we're talking about different influences on our theology, I've arranged a contextual theology web diagram that illustrates how the various parts fit together. The web appears at the end of most chapters to show how that particular topic fits into contextual theology. Because we study God within the context of our culture and God's mission to make himself known, culture and mission form circles around our web of theology, and we must take these ever-present factors in theology into account.

▶▶▶ FOR FURTHER READING

At the end of each chapter, I provide a list of suggested books for further reading. You'll probably notice that these recommendations reflect my evangelical background and draw from many authors in the missional and emerging church conversations. Of course, you can also find many excellent books beyond my list. But I've chosen to limit these recommendations to books I've read, browsed thoroughly, or at least know to be of high quality through the recommendations of trusted Christians. Keep in mind that I'm particularly concerned with contextual theology, so I haven't included many standard titles in theology studies because they don't speak to our particular focus here.

For additional resources and discussion, you can also check out my theology blog at <http://inamirrordimly.com/coffeehouse-theology/introduction>.

STEPPING INTO CONTEXTUAL THEOLOGY

As Christians, we can't undertake any greater quest than seeking an understanding of God. Imagine the outrage that would erupt

if someone stated in a conservative church that the Bible is full of errors, or if someone suggested to a Catholic that Mary was not a virgin. Either would be as startling as replacing an opera singer at the last minute with Madonna! Our passion for our beliefs suggests that theology is a sacred and integral part of our lives, worthy of study and careful reflection.

Our understanding of God influences where we live, how we distribute our wealth, how we spend our time, who we marry, and innumerable other areas. Theology's far-reaching influence into our everyday lives calls us to a careful consideration of just where our beliefs come from. If you want to know God in deeper and richer ways than ever before, I encourage you to dig deeper into the world of contextual theology with me. As we look into who we are, who God is, and what historic and global Christians have to teach us, our conversations, prayers, Bible studies, and relationships with others will be far richer than we could ever imagine.

Chapter 1

MISSION

Why the Church Needs Theology

I remember my own moment of salvation. When I prayed to receive Christ, I answered the essential Mac truck of a question asked by most Christians I knew: “If you were to die tonight, do you know for sure that you would go to heaven?”

Questions like that have a way of stopping a conversation. (Now that I think about it, I don’t know why the dying always had to happen at night. Perhaps night is just more frightening, especially after watching subtly terrifying movies like *Signs*. I can’t tell you how relieved I am that we no longer have a shed in our yard where I can see an imaginary alien stalking along the roof.)

My moment of salvation also involved a simple drawing of a vast sin chasm that separated me from God. You might remember a similar presentation, with the bridges of works and religious efforts falling short of spanning the gap between you on one bank and heaven on the other side. My salvation appeared hopeless until John 3:16

permitted the drawing of a large cross to fill the entire gap of sin separating me from God.

With my own eternal destination secure, heaven pushed its way to the forefront of my spirituality. Nothing was more important than securing the safe, heavenly passage of souls. I remember trying to share the gospel in spite of my quaking nerves and sweaty palms. I remember steering a conversation with my auto mechanic about replacing my timing belt to eternal issues. Even now, somewhere in Pennsylvania, a mechanic probably remembers an awkward conversation with a nervous seminary student every time he works on a timing belt.

These approaches to presenting the gospel remind me of a statement I once heard from a self-proclaimed agnostic: “Christianity and every other religion aims to control people by determining where they go after they die. Christians are obsessed with going to heaven.”

This provocative statement squarely hits on the importance of theology both as we walk with the Lord and in our call to share the gospel. Is the gospel simply a message about how to get to heaven? Or does it also hold a message for the here and now that radically changes how we should live?

What can help us understand the salvation God offers through the death and resurrection of Jesus? I believe the answer is theology. Christ’s saving acts established his lordship not just in heaven but also on earth, and his actions form the content of the gospel we preach and practice. Before returning to heaven, Jesus left his followers with a mission to take his message to the ends of the earth. Without theology as a guide, we run the risk of missing out on the good news of God not only for ourselves but for all people who need to hear this message about God’s love for us.

Theology plays a significant role not only in helping us understand the gospel in a life-changing way but also in how we carry this message of salvation to others and take our place in God’s mission.

WHERE DOES THEOLOGY FIT IN?

Theology determines the content of the gospel we believe, the way in which we share the gospel, and who we share this good news with. Our ability to faithfully form theology and then to put it into practice can either help or hinder our ability to carry out our mission to share the good news of Christ.

Each of us reflects on God—or each of us does theology—simply to carry on the mission of Jesus that began with his incarnation, continued through his ministry, and that he passed on to us before he ascended. The core of this mission brings humanity into relationship with God and under his caring rule. So we dig into theology both for the sake of our own walk with the Lord and for the sake of the world that needs to hear his message.

Theology becomes our tool to help explain the gospel to anyone with a question or challenge (see 1 Peter 3:14-16). We can't simply answer these questions with "Jesus once gave me the warm fuzzies when I prayed." Instead, we need solid theological content to connect with our experiences of God. We can't risk placing ourselves or anyone else at the mercy of a gospel message we don't think through completely or simply pass on as a matter of doctrinal hearsay.

TAKING RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE GOSPEL

I can't remember the exact moment this thought hit me, but it was sometime during my college years. While reading through one of Paul's epistles, I realized that I didn't understand why Jesus went through all the trouble of raising himself from the dead—however that worked. Somehow, I'd heard a lot about the cross, the blood, and the nails. But in spite of all the preaching, teaching, and singing I'd experienced in several different churches, I'd never really heard

much about the third day. Lyrics such as “Calvary covered it all,” “the Cross has done it all,” “the nails in his hands,” and so on, filled the worship slides on Sunday mornings. But the significance of Easter morning hopped by somewhere between the stations of the cross and a chocolate rabbit.

Of course, the Resurrection is a fairly important doctrine. Paul said that if Christ weren’t really raised from the dead, then we are to be pitied (see 1 Corinthians 15:17-19). So I felt a little disturbed about my realization. With Bible in hand, I began diving in to all of the relevant passages regarding the Resurrection. I looked into a few of the creeds that affirm Christ’s resurrection. Over coffee or dinner and during work, I kept my Christian friends and my family up to date on the progress of my study.

After typing out my half-processed thoughts on my computer, I set to work posting the findings online at my blog, <http://inamirrordimly.com>. This took the study up a notch, as my friends and fellow bloggers heard plenty about my search for answers and added their own thoughts to my study. After a few weeks of agonizing over this important event and doctrine, I came to the conclusion that the Resurrection is the perfect flipside of the Cross. Let me explain.

Jesus’ crucifixion on the cross is clearly a highly significant event. In the mold of the Passover lamb found in the book of Exodus (see Exodus 12; 2 Chronicles 35:1-19) or a sacrificial offering prescribed in Leviticus, Jesus died on the cross as the perfect sin offering for all humanity. In fact, Jesus’ agonized cry, “It is finished,” is his declaration of triumph over the powers of death. It marks the dawn of a wonderful new era when Jesus himself mediates our relationship with God and his resurrection becomes the beginning of that new life and new creation with God. The Cross was the end; the Resurrection is the new beginning.

At the end of my study, I discovered a new challenge to submit to

the rule of Christ and to receive the new life he made possible with his resurrection. For example, my prayer life changed radically in the light of the Resurrection. Instead of only asking for God's forgiveness and protection from sin, I began to claim God's victory over sin so I could live in that reality after repenting. The new life provided by Christ became my protection from sin. To paraphrase Paul, I'd died to sin and risen with Christ (see Romans 6:2,7,10), and now I lived under his protective rule.

I realized that it's just the first step to kneel before the cross and claim Christ's power over sin. God gives us so much more; he wants us to emerge from the nails and blood and begin a new life under his rule. In fact, I believe neglecting the Resurrection is one of the key reasons many Christians don't live in the freedom and power of God. In other words, many Christians still live in slavery to sin, still obeying the desires of an old nature that died with Jesus on the cross. But with his death and resurrection, we actually become new people. Perhaps no truth is more important than the Resurrection when we want to talk about living a new life in the freedom of Christ.

Besides the personal ramifications, my rediscovery of the Resurrection radically changed how I shared the gospel. The gospel no longer represented a simple cure for sin at the foot of the cross. It became a much larger story with the Cross at center stage, but not stealing the show. I could share the desire of God to be reunited with his creation and his plan to bring such a reunion about in the Cross *and* Resurrection. Instead of hammering a bleak message that ended on Good Friday, I could end with the hope of new life and restoration.

THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH

I'm telling you about my search for the significance of Christ's resurrection because I think it demonstrates our responsibility to understand our

doctrines and beliefs. As Christians, our theology is a key part of who we are. Understanding what we believe fits squarely into the mission of the church to know God and to make him known. Everything we hold true about God and our Christian faith has been taken from the Bible by someone and taken root as a doctrine.

We form theology to guide us into a closer relationship with the true God and to provide motivation and direction for sharing the gospel. Both of these purposes tie directly into the mission of Jesus, a mission that revolved around revealing God. Jesus' stories about sowing seeds and letting our light shine are all gentle hints about his mission to teach us about God and to restore a relationship between the Creator and all humanity. When Jesus told his followers, "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you" (John 20:21), that same mission became the main reason for leaving his church in the world. God is already at work in our world. We need to decide if we want to join his mission.

While we might think of mission set apart as missionaries taking the gospel to foreign people or providing physical and spiritual relief to people in an impoverished area, the truth is that Jesus sends out the entire church to make disciples, and to bring good news—physical and spiritual—to the poor. The mission of being "sent out" changes the church from an outside-in to an inside-out approach. Instead of asking how we can get people into church, mission asks how we can get church to the people. God is working all over creation, drawing people in, waiting for us to go out and join in this work. As Christians, we're not called to sit and wait, but to go and tell. However, if we don't take the time to know God through the task of theology, then we won't be formed into God's kind of people, and we won't be able to bring redemptive action and a redemptive message when we go.

In other words, we should always link theology to the work of

living out the gospel and drawing people to God. While we form theology for our own spiritual growth, we should also form theology to be transformed into God's people who demonstrate God to others and to respond to questions about God that arise every day among those who don't yet know him.

When we view theology in this light, we also happen to obey Jesus' essential commands to love God and to love one another. We reflect on God because we love him and want to know him better. At the same time, we reveal God to others by living in God's truth because we want the very best for them—the freedom and life that come from knowing God.

ORGANIZING OUR THEOLOGY

Now that we understand how theology lies at the very core of what it means to be Christians who are committed to joining the mission of God, let's briefly break down the different kinds of theology we might run into. Most experts place a word in front of the word *theology* to more accurately describe these different ways to organize Christian doctrine.

Each branch of theology plays a role in how we understand God and share the gospel. Just so we're on the same page, I'll briefly explain biblical theology, systematic theology, and contextual theology. However, as you read on, you'll quickly see that forming and doing contextual theology serves as the main thrust of the rest of our discussion.

Biblical Theology

Biblical theology organizes beliefs about God around the writers of Scripture. For example, if you've heard a series of sermons on the writings of the apostle Paul or the apostle John, you've been a part of one example of biblical theology. Or if you study all the books of a biblical

writer such as Luke, who wrote the gospel bearing his name and the Acts of the Apostles, you're using biblical theology to organize your study of God.

At a more detailed level, biblical theology seeks to understand the stories and letters found in the Bible in their historical settings. In addition, biblical theologians study the books of the Bible according to their literary type. For example, a pastor might begin a sermon on the Epistles of Paul by comparing them with other epistles from that time in history. The final conclusions reached in biblical theology are typically arranged according to the points made within the context of each biblical book.

Systematic Theology

Systematic theology organizes beliefs about God according to our contemporary categories. For example, if you've ever heard a sermon series on contemporary topics such as what the Bible says about cheating, lying, love, or grace, you've taken part in forming systematic theology.

While systematic theology doesn't ignore the unique elements of each biblical writer and book, it does require pulling verses from a variety of different books and arranging them under topical headings.

Contextual Theology

Just like biblical and systematic theology, contextual theology relies on the Bible as the primary source for information about God. However, contextual theology also recognizes that all theology takes place within a local cultural context. This cultural context colors our reading of the Bible and produces a wide variety of locally made theologies. Contextual theology also reminds us that each local understanding of God has strengths and weaknesses, and we

can fill in some of these holes by listening to other local theologies. In the introduction, for example, we looked at how the contextual theologies of Latin America and North America can inform each other about God's blessings for the humble and God's blessings for the poor.

PUTTING THEOLOGY TO WORK

If theology helps us understand the content of the gospel message as we join the mission of God, then using contextual theology will help us be certain that our beliefs don't contain any massive blind spots. Contextual theology makes us aware of the particular challenges we face in our unique situations and ensures that our understanding of God not only speaks to the needs of that context, but also takes into account the enriching insights of Christians from other contexts.

Whether we're trying to figure out the complete message of the gospel or addressing the concerns of a skeptic fed up with the obsession of Christians with heaven, theology serves as an indispensable tool. As we put theology to work, we'll require some simple steps to guide us through the influences of cultural context and other sources that fill in the details about God. Let's look at that next.

►►► FOR FURTHER READING

- *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), edited by Darrell Guder
- *Exiles: Living Missionally in a Post-Christian Culture* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2006), by Michael Frost
- *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), by David J. Bosch

- *Believing in the Future: Toward a Missiology of Western Culture* (Leominster, England: Gracewing, 2005), by David J. Bosch
- *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the Twenty-first Century Church* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), by Alan Hirsch and Michael Frost

For additional resources and discussion, see <http://inamirrordimly.com/coffeehouse-theology/chapter-1>.

A Web of Theology

This web illustrates the interconnected nature of Christian theology's sources and contexts.

Current chapter topic will be in bold.

