

Lesson 6: Systematic Theology Tools 2 (25)

Introduction: Everyone Has a Systematic Theology

If systematic theology is simply the attempt to answer the question, “What does the Bible teach us about [fill in the blank]?” then like it or not, whether you mean to or not, you are doing more or less systematic theology. *Every time you make a statement about what the Bible teaches, or what Christians should believe, or how Christianity relates to the world around it, both religious and secular, you are being a systematic theologian. You simply cannot self-consciously be and live as a Christian in the world without being a systematic theologian.*

That, at least, was the conviction of one of the earliest Christian theologians, the apostle Paul. People have long noted that most of Paul’s letters break into two parts. He generally opens his letter with an extended theological meditation. The second half of his letter then gives lots of practical advice and instruction. But the two halves are not unrelated. Almost every time, Paul places an important hinge in the letter—a massive “THEREFORE” between the theology he has been explaining and the practical instruction he’s about to give. What’s important to realize is the reason Paul wrote his letters is almost always in the second half of the letter. Paul may have been a theologian, but he didn’t sit down one day and say, you know, I think I should write the Ephesians an extended treatise on our election in Christ, and the Philippians could really use a meditation on the divinity and humanity of Christ. No, he wrote the Ephesians because they were struggling to know how Jews and Gentiles should relate in the church, and the Philippians were struggling with persecution from without and quarreling from within. Practical, even mundane problems prompted Paul to write to these churches. But what he offered them was not merely practical advice on conflict resolution or community life. What he offered them was profound theology. As Donald Macleod put it, “[Paul is convinced of] the applicability of the profoundest theology to the most mundane and common-place problems...[Paul] is telling them: *You have these practical problems; the answer is theological; remember your theology and place your behavior in the light of that theology. Place your little problems in the light of the most massive theology. We ourselves in our Christian callings are to be conscious of this. We must never leave our doctrine hanging in the air, nor hesitate to enforce the most elementary Christian obligations with the most sublime doctrines.*” (Donald Macleod, *The Humiliated and Exalted Lord*, cited by Ligon Duncan in T4G 2008 sermon.)

Now if that’s the case, and it is, then it makes sense for all of us who claim to follow Christ to attempt to be good theologians rather than bad ones, consistent theologians rather than inconsistent ones, systematic theologians rather than haphazard ones. To help you in that, we’re going to take this class to consider what doctrine is, how to think theologically, and why we should be engaged in such study in the context of the local church.

What is Doctrine? (25)

In lesson five I said that doctrine is simply a precise and accurate summary of what the Bible says on a topic that can be used to define the difference between truth and error, orthodoxy and heresy. But in this lesson I want to flesh that out a bit more. In fact, doctrine has at least three aspects to it, all of which are important if we are to understand what it means to think theologically.

1. Biblical Knowledge

Fundamentally, theological knowledge is knowledge of God. When you break the word apart, that’s what it means. But we’re after more than just theological knowledge. As Scripture presents the idea, knowledge

of God is more than simply having a head full of facts about God. God is not like a bug that we put under a magnifying glass, an object of our study and examination. God is a person. And so to know God is to know Him as you would know another person, whether it be a friend or a family member. But God is not a person just like you and me. And so our knowledge of Him is neither casual nor familiar, nor is it intuitive. God is spirit and God is holy. He is our Creator and our Lord. That means that knowledge of God will demand of us reverence, obedience and worship. It also means that such knowledge will have to be given to us; we won't be able to discover it on our own. If we are to know God, God must reveal Himself. And the place He has revealed Himself is through the inspired revelation of Scripture.

All of this leads us to the first aspect of doctrine, and that is that doctrine, theology, begins with biblical knowledge. As we've said throughout this class, the Bible is God's inspired self-revelation. It therefore is authoritative, not just about God, but about any question that theology asks and seeks to answer. *The Bible provides us a normative perspective on God, ourselves, and our world. And this perspective demands our submission and our obedience. To know God from the perspective of Biblical knowledge is to be subject to the Lordship of God, bringing every thought captive to Christ (2 Cor. 10:5).*

So just to make this more practical, let's take an example. What does the Bible say about stem cell research? You won't find a single verse using that term. But in fact the Bible has quite a bit to say about how we should think about it, when we begin to think theologically. It tells us that God is the Creator and giver of life, and that human life was formed in God's image. Therefore we do not have the authority to usurp God's prerogative over life, no matter how good our purposes are. According to God's Word, the creation of human embryos for the purpose of harvesting their stem cells, resulting in their destruction, is murder and therefore an affront to God's exclusive claim as the Lord of life. But in telling us that we are made in God's image, the Bible also tells us something about ourselves, which leads us to the second aspect of theological knowledge, or doctrine.

2. Personal Knowledge (26)

If theology is knowledge of God, and such knowledge is gained authoritatively through Scripture, we might be tempted to think that theological knowledge and Bible knowledge are identical. But in fact they are not. For in speaking of knowing God, we are also speaking about ourselves, as the ones who know and are known by God. John Calvin opened his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* with the justly famous sentence: *Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves. But, while joined by many bonds, which one precedes and brings forth the other is not easy to discern... the knowledge of ourselves not only arouses us to seek God, but also, as it were, leads us by the hand to find him. [But] it is certain that man never achieves a clear knowledge of himself unless he has first looked upon God's face, and then descends from contemplating him to scrutinize himself.*" (Institutes)

Theological knowledge, and therefore doctrine, always involves us in personal, or existential, knowledge. In light of who God is, and what He has revealed about Himself and His will, who am I? Who are we? And how do the two relate. Here is the connection that we talked about at the beginning between theology and life. To know God is to be subject to his authority and to be brought into his presence. True theology, worthy of the name, can never be mere abstract, academic, theoretical language. Rather, it relates me (and us) to God as subjects, as worshipers, as creatures. Of course, as we focus on ourselves in this aspect of theology, we don't do so independent of Scripture or in contradiction of it. Unlike liberal theologians,

who would put secular philosophy and sociology in the place of God's revelation, faithful theological thinking remains submitted to God's word. But it does not do so with the assumption that we can approach our knowledge of God as disinterested observers. Rather, our knowledge of God through his Word brings us to a knowledge of ourselves as simultaneously noble image-bearers and depraved rebels of the Most High God.

So what does this mean for our example of what the Bible says about stem-cell research? Well, it helps us understand why we desire to study and research such things. We are image-bearers, made to be like God, to explore and understand the world he made, which includes our bodies. But his image in us extends beyond creativity and curiosity. It also includes compassion. We naturally desire to heal the sick, to cure the diseased. But we are not only image-bearers, we are also sinful rebels. That means that even our best intentions and highest skills are likely to be twisted to selfish and self-serving ends. We are likely as sinners to evaluate the harm done to others not in absolute and principled terms, but according to a political calculus of cost and benefit. The diseased and disabled vote, earn money, pay taxes, etc. The unborn do none of those things. We are easily influenced by imbalances of perceived power and perception. Furthermore, we are motivated by the pride of accomplishment that brooks no restraint. If we can do something, we should. And so you see how systematic theology, in drawing upon knowledge of ourselves explains why some humans would define other humans as not-human, in order to use them for themselves and others in a program designed to heal and restore. It also provides a distinction between embryonic stem cell research and adult stem cell research. It explains both our longing to research and to heal, and why we should place limits on those longings. Finally, it provides a way for us to think about the value, dignity, and hope for human life in the midst of suffering and disease. For such value and hope is not found in utilitarian or functional categories, but in our relationship to God.

So doctrine, or theological knowledge, involves both biblical knowledge that gives a divine perspective, and personal knowledge that provides an experiential perspective. And the two are inter-related. They don't cover different fields of knowledge, but consider the whole field of knowledge from different angles. But if you've been following closely, you'll realize there is yet another aspect of theological knowledge. When we come to a knowledge of God and of ourselves, we don't do so in a vacuum. Rather, we know God in the midst of this world He made, at a particular point in history and in a particular cultural context. And that's the third aspect we need to consider.

3. Situational Knowledge (26)

All of us know ourselves and know God, not as timeless abstractions, but as people who are thoroughly situated in the context of reality—a reality that is external to ourselves. Paul tells us in Romans 1 that some of what can be known of God is revealed through the natural order and we come to that knowledge of God by knowledge of the world around us. But when I refer to situational knowledge, I don't just have in mind what theologians call natural theology—what can be known of God through nature. I also have in mind what sociologists call culture—the way in which we make sense of the reality around us, including ourselves and God as actors in that reality. Abraham Kuyper, a Dutch theologian and statesman of the early 20th century once famously said, “There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry: ‘Mine!’” (inaugural address at the dedication of the Free University). This truth has important implications for theological knowledge. To begin with, *to know something about the world and to know something about human culture, is to know*

something about the Creator who made the world, the Sovereign King who rules over all human endeavor; it's also to know something about ourselves as creatures who know God.

But there is even more. *To know our situation is to know a world that was made good, but now rests under God's curse.* This world is twisted, hard, and marked by tragedy and horror. And yet it is not merely a world under God's curse. Both common grace and saving grace are at work in it. So the curse is not carried out to its ultimate degree, yet life goes on, beauty and love exist side by side with ugliness and hatred. Work is toilsome, but entirely without productivity and satisfaction. Human culture and civilization provides a framework of meaning that makes God seem absent and belief irrational, and yet rationality has not entirely disappeared, and the products of human culture still reflect the marks of the good, the true and the beautiful. The world is corrupt and corrupting, but not as corrupt as it could be. What's more, forgiveness and reconciliation have broken into this world through Jesus Christ. The reality of the age to come, characterized by newness of life, peace with God, the beauty of holiness, has dawned even in the midst of the darkness of this fallen world.

Now, what does this situational knowledge mean for our discussion of what the Bible says about stem cell research? A lot. For one thing, it gives us an understanding of the ultimate causes of disease (the Fall), and their ultimate cure (Re-creation). Furthermore, it gives us categories with which to understand science, technology, and medicine as something more than mere intellectual processes and products. We see that technology is a component of culture, and human culture, in all its various manifestations, is dedicated to the denial of God and the deification of man, in which belief is irrational and unbelief is both rational and normal. But on the other hand, situational knowledge keeps us from rejecting this world out of hand. Our call under God is not to be people who refuse and reject all technology, nor to be Amish and withdraw from culture altogether. Rather our call is to explore this world and develop human culture, including science and technology, to the glory of God.

How to Think Theologically (27)

If those are the three aspects of theological knowledge, biblical knowledge, personal knowledge and situational knowledge—knowledge of God, knowledge of self, and knowledge of the world, how then do we put all of that together so that we can think through a topic theologically?

I tried to give examples as we went along in each of the different aspects, but let me attempt now to put it all together. When we ask the question, what does the Bible say about stem cell research, our answer begins with the authoritative Word of God, which *tells us that God is the Author and Creator of life, that humans are created in His image, and that therefore human life itself is uniquely set apart for the glory of God.* And yet, as we turn to our situation, we find ourselves in a world that is cursed, wracked not only by pathogens that attack from outside our bodies, but by corrupted genetics, so that our bodies turn on themselves in disease and decay. Because human life is made in the image of God, there is a moral obligation on us to use the knowledge and resources at our disposal to preserve, promote, and heal that life. When we do so, we are acting not only as image bearers, but as agents of redemption in a world subjected to the curse of God.

But the obligation to heal is not the only obligation we bear. We also bear the obligation to protect human life. God's word tells us that all human beings are made in his image, and therefore there is an equality of right to life that is not conditioned on ability, capacity, or usefulness. This means that there are limits on our obligation to heal, if the exercise of that obligation entails the deliberate killing or maiming of

another. As we turn to knowledge of ourselves, as that is *informed by Scripture*, we recognize that in our fallen state, we are prone to the selfish use of others for our own ends, and that we are more than capable of constructing a moral rationalization for our sinful motives and sinful actions. Furthermore, we are the producers and products of a fallen human culture that is committed to denying any and all limits that God would attach to us, and to establishing our individual and collective right to absolute self-determination. As gods, we want to set our own limits, and in fact live as if there are none.

Finally, *as we consider the reality of sin, as it impacts both our bodies and our cultural agendas, we recognize that physical healing is not an ultimate good, nor even a universally attainable goal. We also recognize that physical suffering is not an ultimate evil. So as humans, we are called to reject the idolatry of a modern medical utopia, and instead put our ultimate hope in the redemptive power of God, demonstrated through Christ's defeat of sin as he suffered on the cross and his defeat of death in the Resurrection.*

All of this leads us as Christians, thinking theologically, to reject any and all forms of embryonic stem cell research, due to the deliberate creation and then destruction of human life, even though it is for the sake of other human life. It also means that we can and even should support other forms of stem cell research, based on adult cell lines. But as we consider the aims and goals of such research, we understand that its purpose should be to heal and restore. Any attempt to use such research to reengineer life, to create hybrid forms of life, or designer babies, must be rejected as an infringement on God's rights as the Creator and Lord of life, and as a debasement and assault on the image of God in man.

We could keep going. But let me stop there and see if you have questions.

Theology & the Local Church (28)

It used to be, a century or two ago, that theology was primarily done in the church and for the church. It's not that Christian theologians were uninterested in engaging non-Christians. It's simply that they understood that the primary audience of theology, and the primary constructors of theology, were Christians gathered in the local church. Somewhere along the way, however, that ceased to be the case. *David Wells has made the case that not only is theology not done in the church, it's increasingly not welcome in the local church.* Instead, the church has become enamored of business practice and psychological method. Her leaders are expected to be CEO's, not pastor-theologians. The church's public gatherings are designed to be events that appeal to the outsider, rather than assemblies that give corporate expression to our identity as the people of God. And our habits of thought tend to be shaped more by the latest consumer-driven polling data, the sound-bite world of the blogosphere, and the image-driven media of internet and television. The thoughts of God and his glory, our nobility and depravity, and this world's value and transience, thoughts which shaped and characterized the minds of previous generations of Christians, rest lightly, if at all, on the church today.

If we are to be faithful as those who give witness to Christ, the Lord of Life, in this age, then we must recover not simply the ability to think theologically, but the commitment to do so together in the life of the local church. Until we recover theological vision in the church, then the nerve which gives rich and profound biblical life to our worship and mission will remain cut. Our public worship will remain shallow and entertainment driven, and our mission will either be indistinguishable from the methods and goals of any sales organization, or it will be co-opted by the agenda of a well-meaning, but ultimately hostile culture, that encourages us to do good, but to leave Christ out of it. "The church abandons theology only

at great peril to herself.” Without theological vision, a vision that wrestles with what it means to be God’s people, in God’s world, under God’s rule, the church inevitably loses both her identity as God’s possession, and her purpose, as the place where God’s glory is displayed in the Gospel and God’s praise is declared.

At the same time, *“theology abandons the church at great peril to itself.”* Outside the church, theology is disconnected from the context of worship and mission, and becomes nothing other than one more academic discipline talking to itself. Outside the church, theology knows no boundaries, no accountability. Sometimes this leads to heresy. Often in our age it has led to a withering of theology, as increasingly nothing can be said beyond a few essential points that most evangelicals can agree on. Maybe most important, outside the church, theology is bereft of the means God has provided to illustrate and display not just the truth, but the application of truth to life. The church is to be the display of the gospel, a living, breathing, growing colony of heaven, a community of people who are living out the world view that biblical theology articulates.

Conclusion

Why do we do systematic theology? Because theology is the application of truth to life; because theology is the foundation for every good work; because theology provides the framework, the worldview, that allows us to make sense of our lives and this world in relation to God and the gospel of Jesus Christ.

We live in a fallen world, a world now shaped by fallen human beings to make the theological project seem like an irrelevant waste of time. But systematic theology prepares us for that, tells us to expect it, and then invites us to pursue thinking theologically about this world anyway. Not on our own, but in the context of the church, with an ear open to what Christians that have gone before us have said, and with any to bring that thinking to bear on what it means to follow Christ in our own Age.

Next week, we start to put it all together, taking the tools of exegesis, of Biblical Theology, and of Systematic Theology, to construct a theology that tells the whole story of the whole gospel from the whole Bible, and that in doing so, orients us in this world to live as Christians, men and women who know God.