

WHY ALL OF US (AND NOT JUST “THEOLOGIANS”) NEED TO STUDY THEOLOGY

By Joseph Dear

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I. INTRODUCTION

Having a good grasp on the truths of God, as laid out in the Bible, is of enormous *practical* value. Some have complemented me because of my Bible knowledge. I thank them. Encouragement is always a good thing. However, I need to make clear to everyone, having great Bible knowledge isn't about being smart or knowing things. This isn't academia. This isn't about knowing lots of stuff to feel good about yourself. This isn't about knowing as much as the next guy and trying to "keep up." I don't talk about theology because it is interesting (though it is). I don't write article length (and even book-length) commentaries and essays and put them out to all of you and whoever on earth has internet access, all free of charge, in order to make a name for myself or because it is fun. There are far better ways to do that. We don't learn what the Bible says for the sake of knowledge. This isn't academia. Don't get me wrong, professors and academics serve a purpose and we need them for the purposes they serve, but that isn't what this is about. Theology means the study of God, and what matters more to us than Him?

Now, I will say, studying theology for the sake of truth, and therefore for the sake of the Lord, is reason enough. However, a lot more is at stake than just that much.

We need to know what the Bible teaches because it is practical.

There is a reason I spend so much time trying to have good doctrine. It isn't because good doctrine saves you; many of you who know me know I am a lot more ecumenical than some of the fire-mouthed evangelical preachers and authors we can come to adore. Some illiterate tribesman in Africa can be saved by simply knowing and believing "Jesus loves me, this I know, because the Bible tells me so" (I'm being kind of tongue-in-cheek there, but you get the point).

No, I spend so much time and energy understanding what the Bible says, and how to apply it, because it actually matters on *practical* levels. Did I mention that it's practical?

II. FIRST THINGS FIRST: WHAT DO I MEAN BY “THEOLOGY”?

When I say “theology,” I am referring to what the Bible says. I do NOT mean a bunch of smart people stuff that your friends don’t know. I mean what the Bible says (and more importantly, what it means), not a bunch of obscure Latin terms that are conceptually simple but sound complicated (like *Ordo Salutis* or *Infra-Lapsarianism*). God didn’t inspire our “theological terms,” but He did inspire the books in which we hopefully get them from. This isn’t about a bunch of really interesting but ultimately kind of useless historical facts about what some French guy who wrote a book on God in the late 16th century. I’m much more concerned with the word of Paul than of any pastor, because Paul’s writings are scripture (2 Peter 3.16). I am more concerned with the few small letters of John the apostle than the thousands of pages written by John Calvin. Malachi matters more than Martin Luther, and Isaiah matters a lot more than the teachings of Isaac Watts. The writings of C.S. Lewis may be useful and inspiring, but ultimately, his writings are at best the work of a pious, Spirit-led man, and not the Holy Spirit Himself.

Now, don’t get me wrong. I’m all for listening to good theologians: I subscribe to Edward Fudge’s *GracEmail* (and highly recommend it). I listen to all kinds of great podcasts. I’ve read a lot of books by a lot of authors, some of which have been pretty good (like C.J. Mahaney’s *The Cross Centered Life*). I even listen to and take detailed notes on podcasts of lectures from real graduate level seminary classes (iTunes U is a great resource, and though I am definitely not Presbyterian, Covenant Theological Seminary puts up over 28 full courses). However, this isn’t about academia - it’s about knowing what God teaches us through the scriptures, which all these great resources at our fingertips should be used to do.

III. WE NEED TO HAVE GOOD THEOLOGY TO HELP SPREAD THE GOSPEL

A. Many Arguments Against the Faith Can be Addressed By Really Understanding The Bible

We all have to, to varying degrees and extents, spread the Gospel to others. Having been in Campus Crusade for 4 years, I know Matthew 28.18-20 like I know beige cargo shorts, and I know most of you whom I know do as well. We all have to spread the word about Jesus at some point to somebody. If we are going to do that, we need to understand what we are telling them. This is especially true here in America, where lots of people know about “Christianity,” but not nearly as many people really know about Jesus Christ. Many don’t even give the Gospel a second thought because they think the Bible teaches lots of things that it doesn’t. Think about it from their perspective: why even bother considering something if you think it can’t be logically possible? We need to know our theology so we can explain why what we believe can be true, so that skeptics might be put to shame and even brought to repentance.

Now, there are all kinds of arguments raised against our beliefs, but many of them are based not on what the Bible actually teaches, but what they have heard and think the Bible teaches. Sometimes, they just are misled by TV and pop culture. Other times, it is not necessarily the fault of the world, but rather of Christians who believe that the Bible teaches something other than what it teaches, and in doing so, impugn the reliability of the Bible and the faith we profess. In either case, knowing what the Bible really says can address these kinds of problems.

B. Example: Partial-Preterism

Here’s an example: There is some debate about the doctrine of preterism (usually referred to as partial-preterism by me to avoid confusion with a similar but totally unorthodox doctrine

that sometimes is also called preterism). For those who don't know what that means – check out my blog (hey, it's relevant). Basically, it is the belief that many (though certainly not all) of the prophecies in the New Testament about the future were not about the end of the world, but about what would occur in AD 70 with the fall of Jerusalem. It's not a particularly popular doctrine, but I hold to it because, as silly as it sounds at first, it really makes a lot more when you look at what the Bible actually says in the relevant passages (like the Olivet discourse in Mark 13).

Why does this issue even matter to the average Christian? After all, it's not a matter of salvation, so isn't this really just a bunch of head knowledge for seminary professors to talk about over tea by the fireplace? No. It matters because it may affect the accuracy of what Jesus Himself is recorded as saying in scripture. Anyone who has spent a few minutes on any skeptics website knows that Jesus, when telling His disciples about what many think is the end of the world, said, “truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place” (NASB, Matthew 24.34). This pronouncement is mimicked in Mark 13.30 and Luke 21.32. Now, it has been over 1950 years since then. That generation definitely has passed away! And yet, the world hasn't ended. Jesus hasn't physically returned. What He is believed to have said would have to have happened a long time ago has not happened. This is a very common argument made by critics who say that Christianity is false, and who can blame them? Our Lord and Messiah would have made a false prophecy (or, the synoptic Gospels were wrong to say He said that, which, though less problematic, is still an enormous challenge to us). Under the normal interpretation, it seems likely than that Jesus would have gotten it wrong.

Here is where partial-preterism becomes relevant. If Jesus was talking simply about the fall of Jerusalem using the same imagery and metaphors the prophets would use to speak of an earthly judgment of a nation (which, as silly as it sounds at first, is actually a much stronger

argument), then this is not a problem. A long time would have passed (about 40 years), but some people of that generation would have still been alive, and therefore Jesus would have been right. We need to know if partial-preterism is true, because if it is, then we have an answer to this objection. If it is not, then we need to know that it is not so we can see if we can find other possible answers to this problem (which some non-preterists have done, though whether they are successful or not is beyond the scope of this).

Furthermore, if partial-preterism is true, not only could we show the skeptic that Jesus wasn't wrong, but we could show that He was quite the prophet (among other things of course). Although over 1 million Jews were slaughtered in the war with Rome (Josephus, *The Jewish War*, Book VI, Chapter IX, Paragraph 3), historians across the board note that very few Christians when Jerusalem fell. Maybe the Christians took heed to Jesus' words, "but when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then recognize that her desolation is near. Then those who are in Judea must flee to the mountains, and those who are in the midst of the city must leave, and those who are in the country must not enter the city" (NASB, Luke 21.20-21). Some may argue that Luke's account was written after A.D. 70, and therefore he must have interpreted it this way after the fact (there is a great deal of controversy there, as there is a great deal of fluidity regarding when the gospels were believed to have been written, and even just the three years between 68 A.D and 71 make a lot of difference here). However, even if that is the case, it is still true that Jesus warned people to flee when "the desolation of abomination" was revealed (ASV, Mark 13.14). This statement would have meant something to the Jewish and Jewish-Christian readers of Mark and Matthew. Is it a stretch to say that maybe, just maybe, Luke (who wrote to Gentiles who would not be as familiar with Old Testament language) was right that "abomination of desolation" meant "Jerusalem being surrounded by armies?" It could be

coincidence that the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem saw the city surrounded by armies and fled to the hills, just as Jesus told His disciples to do when the abomination of desolation came, while the Jews stayed behind in hopes of overthrowing Roman rule, it need not be. If partial-preterism is true, we can use this as a good apologetic point, as even many unbelievers concede that at least Mark was written before A.D. 70.

C. Examples: Eternal Punishment, The Scope of Salvation, And Election

God's judgment, and how it affects evangelism, is an example of when the "theological" becomes entirely practical to our mission. I am an annihilationist. I believe that the lost will eventually be completely destroyed in Hell, not subject to torture and suffering for ever and ever. I have written on this extensively, and my defense of the doctrine can be found on my website. Why does this matter? Well, there are plenty of good reasons why it matters. For starters, many people on both sides of the debate will argue that what they believe is better for evangelism. Traditionalists (those who believe in eternal torment in Hell) sometimes argue that being annihilated is not as bad as being burned alive (or its metaphorical equivalent) for eternity. Because it is not as bad, people who hear the Gospel will have less reason to repent and accept Jesus, because their fate will not seem so bad. Also, they argue that our missionary zeal as believers will wane. After all, if the fate of the unsaved isn't as bad, then there is less incentive to put forth as much effort to save them, so the reasoning goes. Annihilationists would counter that many people are turned away by the idea of a God who would torment people for eternity (like philosopher Antony Flew), and that the traditional doctrine of Hell makes more unbelievers than it does believers. Now, as far as the truth of annihilationism or the truth of traditionalism goes,

what is better for evangelism is absolutely irrelevant. However, what we believe either way has practical implications.

Because what we believe about final judgment and the eternal state will have some sort of effect on evangelism, we really need to know the truth about it so we can counteract the negatives, and ultimately, use the truth to our advantage. If eternal torment is true, we need to know how to explain to the unbeliever that God is not a monster, but that He is just and merciful, and that nobody will be treated worse than they deserve. If annihilationism is true, we can use this for the sake of those who deny the faith because of the traditional doctrine (thus using the truth to our advantage). Also, we would need to be able to emphasize how important it is to still preach the word and accept it (counteracting a possible negative), if for no other reason than because it is the truth and God demands it of us.

There are other such issues as well. Take the debate between inclusivists vs. exclusivists (those who believe that those who never hear of Jesus can still potentially be saved, and those who do not). Why is this important? Well, what do we tell unbelievers who ask us what happens to those who have never heard of Jesus? If inclusivism is true, then we can tell them that those who never have the chance to believe might not necessarily all go to Hell, and therefore they cannot say God is not a monster (as many do). If exclusivism is true, then we need to explain why God is not a monster. If, like me, you aren't totally sure either way, you still need to be able to explain why, if exclusivism is true, God is not a monster. This is all aside from the questions of our own consciences. This isn't something to break fellowship over (I believe few doctrinal points are), but it is important to have a well-reasoned stance, and an explanation and justification for it, because when we share the gospel, people will ask. Granted, some will hope

to use it simply as an excuse not to believe, and but some will really care, and those are the ones we need to reach.

What about issues of election (Calvinism, Arminianism, pre-destination and freewill, etc.). Why do those issues matter? Well, for starters, they affect how you present the faith to an unbeliever. If Calvinism is true, and Jesus' death was only for the saved (what is called "limited atonement"), it would be wrong to say "Jesus died for you" because He might not have.

Explanations and defenses of God vary depending on your view of election. To say that free will is the cause of evil in the world requires that you believe in free will (although regarding that argument, one could say that the first humans had free will at least, and as a result of their choice evil entered the world, even if now we do not have truly free will since we are by nature sinners as a result). If God chooses who is saved beforehand, and therefore ultimately decides that some will not be, some may find this objectionable, and for that, we need an explanation. One doesn't need to have a thorough grasp of how one comes to accept the gospel in order to accept it or present it to others. However, if the person we preach to seeks to go much deeper than just the fact that Jesus died and rose again, this will come up.

D. Examples: Jesus' Christhood, Faith Vs. Works, And Our Relationship To The Law

Is Jesus the Messiah? In order to even entertain the notion, before we can even address the reliability of the New Testament, we need to be able to affirm that Jesus as presented in the New Testament fits what the Old Testament says about the Messiah. If He doesn't, then there is no point in going any further. What is the Messiah supposed to do, according to scripture? What has been fulfilled? We say that what hasn't been fulfilled will be fulfilled at the second coming. On what grounds can we say that? It helps if you know that even Jewish rabbis before and after

Jesus were well aware that the Messiah, as described in the scriptures, would not fulfill everything in one go (Klett, Miller). They would have had no reason to make this idea up, since they believed he was still to come, and therefore they could still say the Messiah was going to fulfill everything at once when he came (had they not believed the scripture taught otherwise). That said, if Jesus is the Suffering Servant from Isaiah 53, how come it says the suffering servant will see his seed (offspring)? It helps our case when you know that the Hebrew word for offspring, “zera”, though very seldom used figuratively, is used figuratively at other times in Isaiah (57.3 and 57.4), and possibly on other occasions. These aren't issues brought up by people with Ph.Ds in debates that 23 people watch; this is what people all over the place ask about.

Are we saved by faith alone, or by faith and works? If we are saved by faith alone, we better be able to give a good response when a skeptic points to Matthew 25.31-46, where on the surface it appears that one is judged solely on actions and not faith. That's not what actually happens there of course, but you need to be able to explain why not. Likewise, if some passages say we are saved by faith, and that all who have faith will be saved apart from works (e.g. John 3.16 and Romans 10.9), does the Bible contradict itself when we compare that to passages like Matthew 25.31-46 and James 2.24? If not, why not? This will come up, and it comes up often.

What about when someone confronts us with the Old Testament Law? How can we defend the fact that most of us readily eat pork and shellfish without concern, when both were forbidden (Leviticus 11.7; 10)? How come we do not stone people who commit adultery or homosexual relations (Leviticus 20.10; 13)? And how can we defend what God commanded in the Old Testament, given how immoral it sounds to many people? These aren't things that you only come across when you have a PhD in theology. These are real, practical concerns that real

people express all the time, and how can we justify what we believe if we don't ourselves know the answer?

E. Examples: "Fulfilling" Scripture, Creation, And "Christians" Who Do Evil

What about when certain scriptures are "fulfilled," like in Matthew 2.15? That passage speaks of how Mary and Joseph ran to Egypt with Jesus and later returned, claiming that this fulfilled the words of the prophet (Hosea) that "Out of Egypt I called my son" (NASB). In the context of Hosea 11.1, those words have nothing to do with Jesus or the Messiah. It isn't even a prophecy about the future. The reason it is in past tense is because God is referring to what He had done in the past; He had called His figurative "son," Israel, out of Egypt. This comes up all the time, and understandably so. Can you explain to the unbeliever why Matthew wasn't wrong, and how what he was actually saying about the scripture being "fulfilled" doesn't always mean "a prophecy said something would happen in the future, and here it did"? For more on this, why not check out my essay on the matter, "Fulfilling the Scriptures: What It Means When It Says Jesus Fulfilled the Scriptures, and Why It Matters (With Special Focus on Isaiah 7.14 and Matthew 1.27)," also available on my website.

Everyone from biology professors to 12-year-olds will bring up evolution as a reason not to believe, so knowing how to handle it is incredibly important. While many scientists are beginning to question some elements of evolution and no longer regard Darwin as their god, most still would never say that the earth could possibly be 6,000 years old as young-earth creationists believe. What does the Bible say? Is young earth creationism (the idea that the days in Genesis 1 are literal 24-hour days and therefore the world is only thousands of years old) the only viable interpretation of the scriptures? Or, are other theories consistent with what the Bible

says? If old earth creationism or theistic evolution or other such explanations that allow for much of modern science to be true are also biblical, then we can use this to defend the Bible. If the Bible doesn't disagree with science regarding evolution and the formation of life, then this argument against the Bible is defeated. If young-earth creationism is the only viable interpretation of scripture, than we need to know that so we know to look to other ways to explain how the scripture, despite disagreeing with a lot of modern science on the issue, is still correct.

A lot of people point to the evil done by professing Christians over the years as evidence that Christianity is wrong. Some are just making an ad hominem attack (which is a fallacious form of argumentation). Others, however, might reason it out better. After all, Jesus was supposed to be perfect, and if Christianity is true, His followers are supposed to be made good and righteous like Him. We claim God's Spirit changes us and makes us new creations (e.g. 2 Corinthians 5.17). If they are doing lots of evil, what then? That would seem as evidence that this "Holy Spirit" is just made up.

What if the same Bible that says that Christians will be made to be righteous and kind also says that some people will call themselves believers but will not be? What if this was even happening in while the New Testament was still being written? The Bible teaches this to be the case (e.g. Matthew 7.21-23; 2 Peter 2.1-3; 1 John 2.18-19; Jude 4). Being able to point out that sitting in church no more makes you a Christian than sitting in a garage makes you a car can have a lot of sway, especially if you can point to the fact that scripture confirms this. Hitler may have been baptized as a Catholic when he was 8 days old, and many "reformers" may have had no qualms about burning other professing Christians alive, and there may have been violent crusades, but that doesn't matter. The Bible tells us that there will be false believers! Just

because people carry our banner while doing great evil doesn't mean the Spirit that lives in us doesn't do all that we say it does.

Beyond that, the Bible also helps by strongly affirming that while believers no longer walk in sin (1 John 3.6), it also reminds us that it is possible for believers to still sin and be forgiven (same book, 2.1-2). If believers couldn't ever do wrong, why does the book of 1 Corinthians even exist? The Bible says that the Holy Spirit makes us anew, but it also shows that He doesn't do so instantly. Therefore, even if a true believer does do evil, that doesn't disprove the Bible. This will come up. It always does.

F. Conclusion

The atoning death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is the center of our faith. Our faith in that, and not our personal doctrinal statement, is what matters. However, we are not homeless and illiterate. We have libraries and the internet and what may be the most widely used language on earth at our disposal. The one thing that we don't have is excuses.

You may not be theologians, but I'm not a missionary – that doesn't mean I don't spread the Gospel. Just as we all need to share our faith sometimes to some people, we all need to have some grasp on what the Bible actually says, if for no other purpose than for spreading the gospel.

IV. WE “DEFEND” GOD NOT FOR HIS SAKE, BUT FOR THE UNBELIEVER

Some may question the need for all of this. After all, it is the power of God, and not that of ourselves, that saves people. And this is true. However, we are the tools that our creator uses to do that job. I want to make this clear about “apologetics” and “defending the faith.” We’re not defending God. God doesn’t need our defense. The practice of apologetics isn’t for ourselves or for God – it is for the unbeliever. We may have heard a saying that, though with some variations, goes something like this: “defending God is like defending a lion. He doesn’t need your help – just unlock the cage.” But here’s the thing – if you let the lion out, it will maul people. We bring people to God and defend the viability of our faith not because God is weak, but *because* God is a lion. If you attack a lion, you will probably die (and God is not actually a lion, so you will die). We know God. We love God and understand His unfailing love. Because we know God, we also fear God. We would never try to attack this lion. We defend the name of God, this “lion,” so that others will not attack him; not because God would lose, but because God would destroy them. It is primarily for their sake (though God’s too, since He did so love the world that He gave His only begotten son and so forth). Apologetics isn’t about defending someone who can absolutely destroy all that opposes Him. It is about talking fools out of trying to oppose the one who can absolutely destroy anything that opposes Him!

V. UNDERSTANDING THEOLOGY STRENGTHENS YOU AND YOUR BROTHERS

From time to time, we all have our doubts and our hard questions about God. If not dealt with, they can be devastating. Knowing the truth, as expressed in the Bible, is one of the ways God brings us relief. Of equal importance, it is how we can find the answers to comfort our fellow believers when they end up in the same position.

Often times, doubts about our faith occur when unbelievers bring up lots of hard questions about the validity of the gospel. In theory, some abandon the faith entirely when this happens (although that opens up all kinds of questions about eternal security and what makes a Christian a Christian and so forth). However, if we know the Bible, then we won't be phased by these problems in the first place. And when these questions do affect us, it is by finding the truth that the problems are resolved. Just as we need to know what the scriptures teach in order to reach the unbeliever, we need to know it to remember why we ourselves believe.

Now, when the questions of skeptics do raise doubts, there are two things we must do. First, we must have faith in God despite this, and have faith that even if we can't quickly find the answer, that Jesus still is Lord. Second, we need to find the answer. I have done this a million times, and the good news is, the more you do it, the easier it becomes. There comes a point where it barely bothers you, because you can expect from experience that God will show you the answer soon enough. The more you know, the stronger your faith will be, and the fewer doubts you will have to grapple with.

Furthermore, misunderstandings about all kinds of issues about the nature of God, the depth of His love, the greatness of His promise, and other such questions can be absolutely devastating. I lived this out early on in my faith. Learning the truth about God may be difficult

and even painful at times, but it sure beats the alternative! I have been through this, and this has allowed me to help others. Others of us have been through this. Knowing God's word has gotten us out of it and allowed us to help others who find themselves in the same position.

Of course, scripture alone is not what rescues us in our times of fear and doubt. God's healing hand reaches us in all kinds of ways. His power we access through scripture, and also through prayer, and through trusting in brothers and sisters whom God has sent to comfort us in your time of need. But having good theology is key, because if the Bible is inspired by the same Holy Spirit that is our comforter and counselor, then it might just be a relevant source of comfort and counseling.

VI. WE NEED TO KNOW WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS TO PLEASE OUR FATHER

How do we know what the righteous thing to do in any situation is? Sometimes there may be a lot of guesswork and hoping we are being led by God (which is why you need to acknowledge Him in all things, so that He will make your paths straight – Proverbs 3.6). But a lot of what we need to know can be found in the Bible.

Is something a sin or not? Well, what does the Bible say about it?

Knowing God does change your nature and how you are naturally inclined towards people and so forth. For example, you will, by default, develop some degree of rapport with someone, even someone you just met, when you hear that they are a believer too. However, while the Holy Spirit changes us from the inside, He has a tendency to use the words He inspired in conjunction with that. I may be more inclined to look favorably at another Christian, but it wasn't until I read what the Bible had to say that I really understood what was expected of me, and of all of us, because of our faith and salvation. The Bible says that “no one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us” (*NIV*, 1 John 4.12). It also quite sternly warns us that “If someone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen” (Verse 20). That's an incredibly tall order. Even with the Holy Spirit in me, I might still not initially love every believer I come across. And some people, even believers, don't exactly grow on you. Some have really hurt me and shown me anything but love and kindness. So what do I do? I pray, and God changes my heart. There isn't some dichotomy between scripture and God, between our head knowledge and our heart. They are intertwined. Only by the power of God did the scripture mean anything to me, and only because of my head

knowledge did I know where I needed to submit, and from there the power of God worked further. It is a similar idea when it comes to forgiveness, since we know from passages like Matthew 18.35 and Ephesians 4.32 what God says about forgiving one another (that it must be “from the heart,” not just callously saying you “forgive” someone in the false hope that just saying it and deciding not to think about it will let you off the hook, as is the common “Christian” thing to do). If our hearts were made perfectly righteous in an instant, we couldn’t need to call on God all the time to make them right. Since they are not, the Bible tells us how we should be, and therefore we know what to ask of our Father.

Is it okay to eat foods forbidden in Leviticus? Most of us do without question (as do I). But if so, why is it okay now? If it is not okay, and the rules set forth in the Law all still apply directly to us, we better stop eating bacon wrapped scallops and rabbit stew because to do so would be sinning against God Almighty, same as slandering your brother or watching porn without some redemptive purpose or whatever else.

Sometimes, understanding what God wants out of believers does require knowledge of history and ancient cultures, since the words in scripture were written to ancient peoples. Idioms, figures of speech, modes of expression, use of hyperbole, situational and historical context, all of these things do come into play. This would understandably require outside sources from the Bible, such as commentaries or asking your pastor. However, though this goes beyond just studying the biblical texts, it is still relevant since it all has to do with what the Bible says. If we do consider the Bible to be the inerrant (or at least in some way inspired) revelation of God to man, it is imperative that we know not only what it says, but what it means. Otherwise, it is useless to us (or worse, it could cause us to think it teaches what is actually ungodly). Most

literal is not always best (even though it may make you sound like a better “evangelical”). We need to know what God is actually saying, and how it applies to us.

Is divorce ever okay for believers? If so, under what circumstances? This will hopefully never be an issue for us, but this will come up for somebody sometime.

If your Christian friends are going to a bar, should you rebuke them? Should you feel free to go with them if you want to? I imagine we all agree that the Bible teaches that drunkenness is a sin (e.g. 1 Corinthians 6.10 and Galatians 5.21). But is it a sin to drink at all, as some preach? Or is it okay as long as we are careful? Are there times where it is okay, and times when it is not? If sin is so horrible that a single sin warrants eternal condemnation of some sort, if it is so horrible that it required the death of Jesus in order to save us from its results, then we better have some grasp on what sin is and what it isn't. The alcohol issue has other implications as well. If drinking alcohol in any quantity is a sin, was Jesus a sinner for drinking wine? Or did wine really just mean grape juice as some claim? Via the internet and public libraries, we have access to information that believers throughout all of time before now could only have dreamt of. Use it.

As you could imagine, I could go on with this for quite some time. Not every moral issue has a straight biblical answer, but even if they don't, it's the best starting point we have. What our parents and leaders teach us isn't inspired by God, but the scripture is. Preachers and authors may have clever sounding quips to help us remember what they teach about a particular doctrine, but that doesn't mean what they say is true or that some pithy saying has any inherent value. What matters is what the Bible says, not what (insert name of author/pastor) says. That's not arrogance, that's common sense. We all have our biases and predispositions based on our life experiences and our cultures and things we have learned from the world. But these aren't always right, and it's because of these things that a lot of honest and devout Christians, including our parents and

pastors and leaders, all believe so many different things about so many different things. They can't all be right. But if the scriptures are God-breathed, as we believe, then they are always right. It's just a matter of how well we understand them.

VII. WE NEED TO HAVE GOOD THEOLOGY FOR THE SAKE OF FELLOWSHIP

What do I mean by this? Well, depending on what our beliefs are about certain doctrines, it may affect who we consider to be a believer.

Why does this matter? This matters because we are not just some “religion” where other people who follow it happen to follow the same religion. Jesus said “whoever does the will of My Father who is in heaven, he is My brother and sister and mother” (NASB, Matthew 12.50). Paul, inspired by God, told Timothy “do not sharply rebuke an older man, but rather appeal to him as a father, to the younger men as brothers, the older women as mothers, and the younger women as sisters, in all purity.” That doesn’t just mean “treat everyone with respect;” it means “appeal to them as brothers, sisters, mothers etc.” It’s not a stretch, especially given what Jesus says, to assume that we are to do the same. We are to love our enemies too (Matthew 5.44), but in regards to believers, this is taken to a whole new level. We are even told in 1 John 3.16 to be willing to die for our brothers (not that it isn’t really good and righteous to give your life for an unbeliever too, but here that isn’t brought up). Whoever is a fellow believer is part of our family – not biologically, but by blood. Together, we form the very body of Christ. Therefore, it is important that we have some idea who believers are.

For example, whether or not baptism is necessary for salvation matters here. If proper baptism is essential to salvation, and someone hasn’t been properly baptized, then they are unsaved, and are not part of the body of Christ. If, for example, you are not a child of God unless you were baptized after coming to faith (as those in the Churches of Christ tend to believe), then that means a lot of people whom I could not hesitate to call Christians are not real believers. Most who believe baptism is essential to salvation would consider me a brother because I was

baptized willfully upon coming to faith and repentance (even though I disagree with them about it). However, someone who is born into a Presbyterian home who is baptized as an infant and stays Presbyterian as an adult would have only been baptized as an infant, and therefore isn't a child of God. The same goes for Catholics, Lutherans, Methodists, various Orthodox Christians, and many others.

I believe that you are saved by faith alone, but must you believe that to be saved? Some of my fellow evangelicals would say yes, and would exclude those who believe something else is necessary (which includes not only Catholics and Orthodox Christians but also many Protestant groups like Lutherans and at least some Methodists). I do not take that attitude, since I believe you are saved by faith alone, not by faith and belief in faith alone (or put another way, I believe you can believe in your heart that Jesus rose from the dead and can confess that He is Lord without believing you are saved by faith alone). However, this matters, because what the Bible teaches here determines who we regard as brothers and who we regard, at best, as every other unbeliever who is to be treated kindly but not as a brother (and at worst, treated like the Gnostics and other heretics we are to not even let into our homes according to 2 John 7-10).

An unfortunate result of the existence of false teaching in the church, (which I argue started early on with the belief that baptism is essential for salvation), is that these disagreements force us to turn against one another. We can't all be in perfect unity as the Bible commands, but knowing what the Bible teaches about who is saved will, at the very least, help us minimize the damage that the Devil can do to the body of Christ until the day that God restores everything, when the time is right.

VIII. CONCLUSION

My beloved brothers and sisters, have I made my point? We should all care about theology, because it literally is the study of God. Theology isn't just what you get your seminary degree in; it's the study of what we center every aspect of our lives around. We aren't all the same. I understand some things better than some, and others understand them better than me. But we all love God, and we all have access to Him in prayer, in His Spirit, and in His divine revelation to man. We won't find all the answers, but we have a lot of the answers right there in front of us on our mantles and in our backpacks, if we are only willing to look. It's not about how smart you are (though among you is an extraordinary amount of brainpower). This is, in the many ways I have described, about serving God, and allowing Him to lovingly serve His servants. What the Bible says matters not for the theologians, but for the children of God.

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RECOMMENDED (FREE) FURTHER READING AND LISTENING

- **Chris Date's Theopologetics Podcast:** <http://theopologetics.podbean.com/>

I really love this podcast (and not just because I was on it once). Chris deals with an exceptionally broad array of theological issues, often supplementing his own knowledge and insight with regular interviews with numerous scholars and experts in their fields (and in all seriousness, I mean real experts, not just people like me).

- **Dee Dee Warren's Preterist Site:** <http://www.preteristsite.com/>

She has a lengthy commentary on Matthew 24 (Note: I haven't read the whole thing, but I assume it is the same as the content of her podcast, which is quite good). Also has a list of free online books with links.

- **Kenneth Gentry's *Before Jerusalem Fell* (1st edition).**

His doctoral thesis which sets out to show that the book of Revelation was written before the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Sometimes I question some of his arguments, but on the whole I think he gets the point across well.

{ http://freebooks.commentary.net/freebooks/docs/2206_47e.htm }

- **My Website** (in case you got a hold of this essay somewhere else): <http://3-ringbinder.weebly.com/>