

WHEN THEOLOGY IS MERELY HEAD KNOWLEDGE

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One of the fears a number of Christians have about attending a Bible college, a Christian university, or a seminary is that their spiritual lives will quite possibly “dry up.” Though these places may seem like “paradise” to some, what these students are told is that they will soon discover that they will be lost in the hot desert wilderness of theology. It is believed that theology and the theologians will cause these dear believers to become isolated from God, from ministry, and from the church—no matter how well meaning theologians and institutions are. This fear seems to find expression in every generation and in nearly every denomination.

This sort of fear may be likened to the effects of a hot-desert sun and sand-filled air. The forces of theology will do their work on these students, day in and day out, as they wander more and more in their academic studies. Confusion, scorched rocks, and poisonous creatures will be found at every bend as they go from one “human” author to another. After the initial excitement of studying “new” and “different” theological beliefs, ideas, opinions, movements, and systems wears off, the regular exposure to theology will generate dehydration. After a while, dehydration will give away to disorientation. While the longing for spiritual nourishment will grow greater within the depths of their souls with each course of study, these students of theology will cry out for relief and dream of restoration. Unfortunately, since they are at bible colleges, Christian universities, and seminaries, no one is listening. As the sun and sand scorches their dispositions and the cold windy nights numb their faith, these once healthy Christians slowly devolve into “walking skeletons.”

It is believed that if they do make it through these academic institutions with a certificate or degree, they will graduate with spiritual lives looking more like dried out corpses than an oasis of agape love. The passion for God is gone; the joy of the Christian life evaporated. As a result of studying theology, the God of the universe is nothing more than a collection of facts, an impersonal set of propositions. The lack

of intimacy between them and God has taken its toll; God is nothing more than a distant memory, a dream barely remembered.

Are you serious?

Now this type of caricature does harmonize with certain people I have encountered or known. I have met a few who have left institutions wondering if it was “all a joke,” a mockery by a cruel friend. To be sure, some have left in a state of confusion, bewilderment, and perhaps even feeling betrayed by their pastor, their mentor, the friends, and family. But among those who studied theology with a wrong mind-set, namely, studying theology merely as head knowledge, arrogance, pride, and self-focus found pertinent expression. Arrogance, pride, and self-focus leads to such things as the personal quest for power, the need to always be right, and a state of spiritual exhaustion. How? The “sinful, flesh nature or sphere of life” was more often than not the source of their strength and not the Holy Spirit.

But in either case, before attending such programs, there was an expectant attitude, a wellspring of hope, a love for people and ministry, and a passion for God. But through the drudgery of theological studies, this passion for God has been replaced with cynicism, joy with bitterness, the earnestness to know biblical truth with apathy, and intimacy with silence, and God-worship with self-worship. The desire to relationally serve others is erased, a deep, caring love for the local church is dead (though perhaps cloaked), and a fervent passion for God and His ways replaced with spiritual exhaustion.

What happened?

Theology is not the source of their problems as some ignorantly claim, wrongly diagnose, or maliciously assert. Just as we can deceive others, we can also deceive ourselves by blaming theology. But over the years of my experience as a student, pastor, and educator of theology, what I have discovered, time and time again from my observations and interactions with this type of tragedy, is that theology had been treated merely as head knowledge. The most common reason for this kind of result

is failing to pro-actively love God from out of one's mind as one studies theology (Mark 12:28-34). Failing to see one's studies as an expression of worship, just as failing to love God in any area of your life, generates interpersonal distance from God. Theology is not the problem per se (unless it is unbiblical). Rather, it is a failure to allow God's Word to seep into one's affections by not heeding its instructions.

Certainly, a division can develop between what we intellectually know and our affections, that is, the control center of our personality. But the very idea that we need "heart knowledge" and not "head knowledge" is illogical; it is a false dichotomy, a logical category mistake. It is as if we are saying the color purple tastes good.

Or let me put it this way:

When theology is merely head knowledge...

1. Jesus Christ is not your focus of worship.
2. You are negligent of God's reasons for knowing theology and its intended consequences (e.g., Psalm 19:1-11; John 17:17; Romans 12:1-2; Hebrews 4:12-13; 1 Peter 3:15; Jude 3-4).
3. You pursue knowledge for the sake of knowledge and promotion of self.
4. You study by means of the "flesh" and not by means of the "Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:16-18; Eph. 5:18).
5. You commit the fallacy of reductionism by focusing on formal theological arguments to the neglect of both the (1) existential struggles of the soul and (2) significant practical applications (personally, relationally, corporately, and culturally).

Sadly, when theology is mere head knowledge and you fail to allow God to allow theology to seep into the soul, change your life, and develop your disposition unto His glory. The results are costly:

1. Pride finds solid footing.
2. The need to always be right develops.
3. Blindness grows about the condition of your own spiritual life.
4. Intimacy with God becomes cold in your every day experience.
5. Other theologians look like competitors & not partners in ministry.
6. You value your own opinion over and against others.
7. Conflict with others becomes known.
8. The pressing existential desire for “revival” grows... on one hand you find yourself longing for intimate encounters with God but at the same time you might dismiss these events as silliness.
9. The intimacy gap between you and God becomes evident to those who know you as you fail to appropriately handle problems.
10. Callousness towards sin becomes evident in what you appreciate, permit, and tolerate.
11. Sin becomes more attractive; you are amused by sin.
12. The failure to thoughtfully listen to other point of views takes hold.
13. Self-idolatry becomes your activity.
14. Division between thought and practice finds expression.
15. You may seek to assimilate the personalities of other theologians you admire. Their ideas occupy your thoughts more than God.
16. The capacity to really trust God with your circumstances diminishes.

17. You feel the angst of hypocrisy within your own soul, as your theology is divorced from appropriate and intended application.
18. Comfort in ministry becomes important; it is all about you.
19. Disagreement with you is an act of insubordination, a sign of disloyalty.
20. The littlest theological issue within your church or among your “rivals” becomes encompassing, overriding, and taxing.
21. You fail to continually develop interpersonal relationships within your sphere of ministry.
22. Spiritual exhaustion becomes evident to those who observe you.
23. Sincere repentance and mortification of sin is not taken seriously.
24. Serious prayer life is negligent or becomes routine.
25. Sincerely appreciating those who are different from you is difficult;
26. Taking time to do pastoral ministry is neglected.
27. You are not well rounded and healthy in your Christian life, thought, and Christian experience.
28. Serving others is a burden, not a delight.
29. In the midst of your studies you fail to remember, “God is both good and dangerous.”
30. You serve God out of orthodoxy, not fervent love.

But when you pursue your theological studies as an expression of worship...

1. God is ever so beautiful;

2. Accurate knowledge is translated into appropriate and specific applications in day-to-day living;
3. Loving others, even if it cost you, becomes a joy, a delight. This finds expression in how you serve others on a daily experience.
4. Your understanding of God regularly enlarges.
5. Your passion for God is contagious.
6. Your pursuit of God is consistent.
7. Your intimacy with God is dynamic.
8. You do not worship Him in a routine way.
9. Your prayer life is taken seriously; it is an ever qualitative, enriching experience.
10. Repentance and mortification finds consistent expression in your life.
11. It is truly okay if someone disagrees with you; you have nothing to prove to others. There is not a need to prove yourself right every time.
12. Duplicity is not commonplace in your ministry.
13. You value others to the extent that you want to enable them in ministry... not simply indoctrinate them with your knowledge or show how much you know and how little they know.
14. You appreciate the thoughts, insights, and enriching legacies left by those who came before you while not magnifying them above God.
15. God is God; you know your place as expressed in a disposition of humility.
16. Your spiritual life is growing, healthy, and well rounded.

17. Personal applications become significant as you study theology. You keep asking yourself how you can apply the truths you are learning.
18. You are burdened to equip others.
19. You model truth carefully knowing that people are watching and perhaps following your example.
20. Intellectual and moral excellence is necessary (virtue). Therefore, you purposefully strive to translate biblical commands into habits for you recognize that character is the sum-total of your habits.

How can you make your studies an expression of worship?

In sum, when you study theology, develop a disposition whereby you find yourself praying, praising, and meditating upon Him. You must develop this disposition and practice each and every time you study. See, a worshipful interpersonal feedback occurs between you and God as you study that affects your heart, mind, soul, and bodily powers.

Therefore, before you open up any book, whether fictional or non-fictional, biblical or non-biblical, historical or contemporary, examine yourself and see where you stand in your intimacy with God. Probe your heart and your mind with the intent that what you are about to do is worship the one and only God. Sincerely confess your sins (1 John 1:9). Allow the Holy Spirit to control you! In other words, yield yourself before Him and invite God to enable you, exhort you, illuminate you, equip you, and even chastise you in order that you might deeply and reverently honor Him in life, thought, and practice (Romans 12:1-2). Ask the God of the Bible to help you harmonize your desires and your responsibilities into an expression of worship. Before you sit in a theology class, take time to probe where you are in your relationship with Him.

As you study and encounter a new truth or are reminded of a truth you once discovered in previous studies, pause and praise God! Worship Him! Thank Him for

what you are learning! Ask Him to help you apply this truth to your life.

Maintain this disposition of worship throughout your studies. Afterwards, praise Him for all that He has taught you and ask Him to help you deeply know, diligently practice, and whole heartily protect the truth-no matter what situation you face. God will be more to you than a collection of facts. You will experience relief, release, and satisfaction. Your love for Him will dynamically grow rather than degenerate. Your fascination with truth will become all the more lovely to you because truth points you to the God of the Bible. So, you will not merely be looking at theology, you will be following it along to God, the ultimate source of theology.

In conclusion:

The opportunity is before you to pursue your studies in a manner that exalts God or you! The former yields blessings whereas the former generates conflict, deprivation, loss, and obscurity. You will discover, as I have, that even if you find yourself in the midst of a hot desert, life is teeming around you. You simply need the requisite disposition.

P.S. If this insight resonates with you or if you would like to pursue this topic more, I would encourage you to read B. B. Warfield's *Religious Life of the Theological Student*. In fact, if you are a student of mine, you are obligated to read this little pamphlet. Other outstanding sources I would encourage you to read and know is J. P. Moreland's *Love God with All Your Mind* and John Piper's, *The Life of the Mind and the Love of God*.