

“Thin” Doctrine

By Bob Young

In his book, *The New Christians: Dispatches from the Emergent Frontier*, Tony Jones addresses the relationship between theology (doctrine) and life. The church must never lose sight of the connection: logic and life, creed and conduct, doctrine and duty, preaching and practice. An inadequate doctrine means an inadequate foundation for genuine life, abundant and free and rejoicing. Christianity is joyless, routine, and unexciting when God and his eternal plan are not clearly in view.

Consider this excerpt from the book:

Some readers might be tempted, at this point, to say, "All this talk of philosophy and theology is really a waste of time. Why bother with it? The only important thing is that we love Jesus. That's it."

Well, I submit that "only loving Jesus" *is* a theology. It's a paper-thin theology, a reductionistic theology. It's a theology that avoids many things; for instance, (1) two millennia of argumentation over the nature of God, (2) the great difficulties in reading the Bible, and (3) all of the grief in the world. The refrain "Can't we all just love Jesus?" uses that unseemly word *just* (a word that we Christians use altogether too often in prayer: "Father, we just ask that you would just be here with us tonight ..."). *Just* is a term of minimization, of diminution, when used in this way. (Ironically, *just* can also be used to denote *justice*, which is at the very heart of the gospel.) But Jesus, the gospel, the Bible, theology, they're never "just" anything. They're always more, much more, than we might think. These items (Jesus, gospel, Bible) should *not* be qualified with the adverbs *just* or *only*. The gospel is always *more than* we imagine, the Bible always has something for us *greater than* we expect, and Jesus is always *beyond* what we can conceive.

Jones's call is for the church to rethink her basic teachings and understandings. "Bad" teaching leads to unhealthy churches, and there are many more ways for teaching to be "bad" besides the obvious "badness" of not aligning with Scripture. The amazing thing is that the unhealthiest churches I know do not know they are unhealthy! I agree with Jones: thinking that love is the entirety of the message of Jesus is an oversimplification at best and a fatal misunderstanding at worst. Wrong thinking leads to inadequate motivations, shallow worship, legalistic questions that seek bare minimums, and ultimately, to ethical, relational and moral failures. Those satisfied with little doctrinal substance (I think of persons who limit their Bible knowledge to a few dozen pet verses) will never understand the demands of discipleship. It matters not whether the few verses are "plan of salvation" verses or "love" verses. For people who insist on carrying a "whole" Bible but limit their knowledge and practice to the "abridged" version, Christianity will hardly become a way of life, and following Jesus will probably always be ill-defined and misunderstood. The clearest evidence of the failure is shallow lives. What Jones calls "thin theology" explains how Christians can live lives that are "a mile wide and an inch deep."

Thus I continually call my church to recognize how invigorating genuine theological wrestling can be. I preach theologically without apology. The Bible classes I teach pursue seldom-seen dynamics of the biblical text. I think, by and large, most of the church members have come to appreciate the challenge of text-wrestling, even if they struggle to know how to wrestle in their own personal Bible study. They enjoy watching me struggle, and even more, they appreciate the fact that what we believe and understand actually has something to do with how we live our lives in the street. I am more interested in what happens in the world of woe than in the ivory towers (thinking of a church song we sang in the little church where I grew up, “Out of the ivory palaces, into a world of woe...”). Christianity can never be adequately defined by what happens down at the church house.

The often-repeated phrase is true: every person is a theologian—even those who don’t know what the word theology means. Human activity is inherently theological, reflecting the basic meaning of theology, “thinking about God”. Or if you prefer, all human activity is doctrinal. Everything you do reflects what you believe to be the truth about God—who he is, what he is like, what he has done and is currently doing in the world, what he wants from human beings.... (Hopefully you recognize that the list could be much longer.)

This means that theology (or doctrine, teaching) is not just talking. When we teach and preach, we do more than talk. We are attempting to understand God and his word and his world. Not only are we attempting understanding, we are seeking guidance for life. We want to know how to make decisions, theological decisions. How should I spend my (God’s) money? What house should I buy—location, size, cost? What, or how much, car should I buy? In a world of hunger and poverty, which of my purchases and activities are wasteful (sinful)? Who should my friends be? This list also could go on and on, because these are the application questions that correlate to the God questions in the previous paragraph. (Such questions show the inadequacy of a theology that is limited to proclaiming love.)

Of course, one can decide (theologically) that God doesn’t care about any of the items in the list, that he doesn’t care where we live, which car we drive, when we spend our money on entertainment or extravagant vacations.... Such conclusions reflect our belief system. Our challenge is to determine whether our doctrine is too thick, too thin, or just right.

I consider the items in the lists above fairly important decisions, and as a Christian, I believe God cares about those matters. Other areas of life I consider mundane (having to do with life in this world), believing it improbable that God has a preference—red tie or blue tie, this route or that route.... I also recognize and sometimes covet (is this ok?) a deeper understanding of how intensely God is interested and involved and interacting with his children. Jones says it this way: “Some people pray for a good parking spot when they're driving to the mall. Others ask, ‘If God is allowing genocide in Darfur, why would he intervene in the traffic patterns at my shopping mall?!?’” I admit: I do not remember the last time I prayed for a good parking spot, I do pray about human tragedies around the world.

All of this to say that what you and I believe about those things that are “church topics” (more properly, God topics) can never stay within the four walls of the church building. Because life is composed of the “God stuff” that surrounds us, along with the “non-God stuff”, everything we do should be filtered through our understanding of God and his will. Our choices reflect what we think about God. Our decisions and priorities matter eternally—how we spend our time, our money, our life. “Thin doctrine” is insufficient for understanding the importance of life—such shallow understandings are almost flippant when one contemplates the depth and breadth and width of God.