

Theology Engaging Culture

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I remember being challenged in my own understanding of the place of theology in the Christian life when I read David Wells' book, *No Place for Truth*, published in 1993. Since that time, my commitment to the primacy of theology as essential to all Christian activity has continued to mature. It seems to me that unless theology stands as primary in the church, the risk remains that much done in the name of Christ will not be done in the nature of Christ.

If theology and practice are in any way split apart, our lives will lose the authenticity essential to our calling. Living authentically as light and salt in a place of spiritual darkness and decay requires understanding theology as something more than organizing Bible information about God.

Theology must inform not only what we say to culture, but how we speak. Therefore, if Christians are to bring theology to bear upon culture they must have an adequate understanding of both theology and culture.

Theological efforts should reflect an attempt to construct a coherent understanding of the triune God and to present a view of life where God forms the center and circumference. The concern is two-fold: expressing truth about God accurately and learning to love God and neighbor through a proper understanding of God. Constructively, theology informs how one ought to think about God, what one ought to do for his neighbor and the spirit in which one lives authentically in the world.

In this sense, theology is at the heart of everything we do as Christians, and we must never slight it for a moment. In this view, theology is never a terminal endeavor, or so it seems to me. Not only this, but a robust theology must avoid radical doctrinal specialization but rather order each particular doctrine within the larger theological framework, as no one doctrine stands by itself.

Cultural Analysis

Theology by definition implies that which is unified and, therefore, should be viewed as holistic in scope and integrative in focus. It defines everything rightly by placing it in its proper relationship to God. That is to say, theology is not only about particular doctrines (though it is that in some sense); in the end, our theology should order coherently our understanding of God, provoking love for God and neighbor.

To live as light and salt requires living theology at this level. It should promote authentic lives that exhibit redemption's power and act with redemption's love, proactively engaging culture at those points at which theology and culture intersect.

The concept of culture, at least technically, requires a few words of explanation as well. Unfortunately, today the term “culture” is used to signify that which is contrary to Christianity or, in a more general sense, what people often refer to as traditional values. However, I suggest that this understanding unfortunately advances unwanted and unintended perceptions of Christianity by those outside the Christian community. It suggests that Christianity sees culture as something contrary to Christianity, when, in fact, that is not the case (or I hope it is not the case).

Culture primarily refers to the institutions, practices and politics of any defined social group which, incidentally, includes the church. Surely Christians have no quarrel with education, science, the arts and so forth. Rather, the concern centers on the manifestation of the “spirit of the age” in the different spheres of culture. In addition, phrases such as “cultural wars” often create within the Christian community an attitude of us-against-them which, from the start, places Christians in an adversarial role when engaging cultural issues.

This not only tends to minimize personal effectiveness, but also sponsors a spirit contrary to the Spirit of Christ when engaging those outside our own community. A proper understanding of our relationship to culture will contribute to a more winsome demeanor as we stand as a faithful witness at the intersection of theology and culture.

Still, effective engagement of culture requires something more.

First, we must understand at what point western culture has gone wrong because an effective solution rests in a proper analysis. Presently western culture is experiencing a socially debilitating fragmentation, due to its denying or forsaking the unifying element that theology supplies - God. Without God - who transcends the human experience -providing the necessary grounding for human behavior, in time everything becomes relative (a point made by Richard Weaver in *Ideas Have Consequences*, 1948).

What theology brings to our relativistic culture is the idea that there is something that transcends experience. This underscores the necessity of a theology that centers on the doctrine of creation, not merely as a statement about origins but as the proper understanding of nature. Without God, there is nothing to unite the particulars of life. Moreover, without God mankind lacks an external moral reference by which to find direction and purpose both in life and in death.

Western culture, in its rejection of God as creator, has lost its external reference point leaving it with an unhealthy and unjustified obsession with the particulars of this life.

Western culture acts as a man lost in the woods who, instead of fixing his eyes on an external reference point, merely watches his feet in an attempt to find his way out of the woods. The end result is that he goes in circles, becoming increasingly disoriented and hopelessly lost.

This is a picture of western culture with its increasing loss of social stability at its very core. There is a moral failure precisely because “truth has fallen in the streets” (Isa. 59:14).

The world does not understand the nature of its *lostness*. It knows something is wrong, but fails to comprehend the true nature of that *lostness*. Of course, on a personal level, that *lostness* is only remedied in Christ, but I use the term *lostness* to speak of the philosophical and moral calamity that has come upon western cultures.

Increasingly we have witnessed the blunting of belief in God. Even among those who claim to believe that God exists, there is very little edge to that belief - it is weak and ineffective. This has left people without an external reference for moral direction and without a metaphysical grounding for morality. Clearly, this is a decisive point of intersection of theology and culture.

There is Hope

Here the Christian message offers the missing piece deleted by naturalism - the personal, infinite Creator God who stands above nature and has spoken. This points first, not to a religious truth, but a truth about the nature of reality; that is, the world is one way if God is there, and it is another way if He is not. However, our voice in the name of truth will have little weight if our theology has no edge and we do not order our lives any differently than those without the truth.

Second, we must understand that we are first called to love the Lord our God with all our hearts, with all our souls and with all our minds and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Whatever we do must flow from this or else we lose our way in attempting to speak meaningfully at the intersection of theology and culture.

Some time ago the late Francis Schaeffer spoke at a large meeting just months before his death. He responded to a question regarding if there was any hope that the church would win the battle against the onslaught of secularism. Schaeffer's reply has stayed with me all these years-he said that we do not stand for truth because we are winning; we do it because our risen Lord commands it of us.

It seems to me that engaging culture could get us off point if we forget this. We must remember to keep first things first. I am not saying loving God and engaging the spirit of this age are somehow mutually exclusive. What I am saying is that engaging culture, even for the sake of truth, must never become a substitute for loving God.

The danger, as I see it, would be that the Christian community becomes simply a task-oriented community. That is, it thinks only in terms of what it must accomplish, prior to its theology moving it to love God and neighbor. When a community becomes task-oriented, what matters is the goal being achieved. Of course, many good things must be done, and it is right and proper to accomplish those things. However, when the emphasis lands on the end, the danger exists that achieving the end muffles any concern for the theological approval of the means.

It seems to me that theology does not have its proper place in the church's engagement of culture unless all methods pass through the theological grid to insure they do not distort the message or confuse others. What is more, if loving God is not the motivation behind engaging culture, then that engagement may look more like a merging of theology with culture instead of theology giving direction to culture.

Third, engaging culture requires the wise application of theology to the issue at hand; but, furthermore, it must be done in a winsome fashion. You might call this the more excellent way spoken of in 1 Corinthians 13 - the way of God's love. The more excellent way not only honors truth, it exhibits a commitment to something higher in principle than is common in the world. A fuller commentary on the more excellent way is the way of love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Gal 5:22-23). This is the way of the Spirit and not that of the flesh.

Furthermore, it distinguishes between the essential and the trivial while refusing the temptation to mix the sacred with the profane, regardless of what one thinks it might accomplish for good.

The world deserves to see the true nature of Christian theology, not just by what we claim is true, but by how we go about communicating it to those who do not understand their own *lostness*.

Engaging our culture means not only having the right answers, but helping those in culture to understand what the right questions are, questions that have been muted by the noise of the world or willfully discounted by an unfounded optimism in human potential. In the end, our theology ought to be not only the stuff found in sermons (though it should be found in our sermons) telling us what to do, but our understanding of God ought to inform us rightly on Him, how to love Him and our neighbors and how to keep all things in order when engaging culture.

For this, we must give strenuous attention to doing theology, striving for a proper understanding of culture and dedicating ourselves to the more excellent way as we engage the spirit of this age in every sphere of culture. This requires no less than living, thinking and speaking with a theological faithfulness at every point in life and ministry. By this, may the world not only hear our theologically-tuned voice, but also see our theologically-shaped heart as we engage the culture with grace and truth.