



THEOLOGICAL CLARITY

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COMPETENCIES

Introduction

While the communal aspect of church planting is gradually becoming a foregone conclusion, it may be at the expense of theology. This would be unfortunate because the Church is the institution commissioned to making theologically formed disciples (Matthew 28:18-20). With this in mind, a church planter must be mindful of theological clarity. Such an effort will allow the church's theological assertions, and their transformative prowess, to have an effectual impact on the community.

Biblical Foundations

1st Timothy 4:1-11 records Paul's formative language toward Timothy as he prepares him for his pastoral responsibilities. I wish to emphasize four key points from the passage.

First, Paul's imperatives are juxtaposed against the practices of "deceitful spirits and teachings of demons" (4:1). This assertion firmly identifies the church planter as a spiritual warrior. While it is true that the false teaching is conveyed through human beings, "the insincerity of liars, whose consciences are seared" Paul characterizes the false teaching as a demonic effort to subvert the freedom purchased by Christ (4:2-4). Sound theology ranks among Timothy's effectual weapons. Paul's use of the word "sound" (lit. healthy) is properly understood as the desired alternative to disease or ailment.¹ Due to the invasion of deceitful spirits and their corresponding fraudulent doctrine, the Ephesian church was in need of the combative intervention of the theologian for the sake of healing. This reality identifies the conveyance of sound and clear theology as an imperative of the pastor. It is not merely wise; it is ethically obligatory. Just as a physician in the presence of the physically infirmed must take action, the pastor in the presence of the spiritually infirmed is compelled to render care. Second, theological clarity begins with the theologian first acquiring personal lucidity. Paul's imperative does not presume that Timothy is capable of rendering theological aid if he is merely motivated by good intentions and natural ability. Theological clarity is an intentional act. In an effort to drive the point home, Paul reminds Timothy that he is living evidence of what sound teaching can accomplish. He was "nourished" under the effectual covering of "sound teaching" (4:6). In pointing out his personal experience, Paul reminds Timothy that the spiritual maturing of those under his care will serve as evidence of his qualifications as a "good servant." We know that Timothy received his own clarity from his mother, grandmother, and the church (2 Timothy 1:5; 3:14-5; Acts 16:2). We can also know that, by the very act of writing the letter to Timothy, Paul was providing additional clarity. In fact, the present tense of the word "nourished" presumes that theological comprehension is an ongoing process.² Essentially, Paul is challenging Timothy to pursue clarity for himself and, as a pastoral responsibility, lead the Ephesian church along the same path.

¹ Craig L. Blomberg, *From Pentecost to Patmos: An Introduction to Acts through Revelation* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2006), 368.

² Walter L. Liefeld, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus: The NIV Application Commentary from Biblical Text...to Contemporary Life* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 157.

Third, theological clarity bears fruit that is of lasting value. The false teaching that was rampant in the Ephesian church was both simple and pleasant to the immature palate of the church. Doubtlessly, this was its draw. Yet, in Paul's estimation, the focus on simplicity gave rise to "myths" that were void of demonstrable substance. They were correspondingly "godless." Godless theological ideas are void of both authority and the capacity to bear results.³ In an effort to categorize such theological brokenness, Paul contends that the false teaching in the church was worth no more than "old wives' tales." Essentially, he was critical of teaching that was on par with the concocted stories that were commonly shared by a grandparent with young children.⁴ Like a sugary snack, it was pleasing to the palate but was void of lasting nourishment. In Paul's estimation, theological clarity is the appropriate way in which one draws a church from the futile simplicity of false teaching. Timothy bore the responsibility of teaching profound theological ideas in a manner that could be received and appreciated by the Ephesian church. The truths of God can be momentarily palatable to the budding believer. As a theologian, Timothy was to take the truths of Scripture, both simple and complex, and present them in a coherent manner. This was essential as the false teaching is, at best, of only temporal value. At its worst, it is destructive. (Apparently, both extremes were present in Ephesus). In contrast, sound doctrine and the corresponding godly life "holds promise for both the present life and for the life to come" (4:8).

Fourth, Paul did not merely challenge Timothy to pursue theological clarity, but he also modeled it himself. Within the passage, he carefully appeals to a contextual quality of the Ephesian culture in an effort to drive home his point. He has spent the brunt of the passage distinguishing between health and infirmity. Physical fitness would have been an appreciated point in the city of Ephesus. Paul seems to appeal to it in order to make a contrast between the physical asceticism that was flourishing in the church and eternal godliness that derives from theological understanding (4:3). His use of the word "sound" (*kalos*, lit. "healthy") and "exercise" (*gymnazō*, lit. "train") do not appear accidentally. They seem to be an effort to address the circumstances found in Ephesus while using terms that were common to the false teaching. His careful use of their language models the intentional contextualization of the theological message and an overt desire to package deep theological ideas in a manner that can be ingested by his readers. Such an approach would have allowed the church at Ephesus to appreciate the depths of his point and the need to respond with their lives. The upshot of this should not be overlooked. Paul was modeling theological clarity for Timothy while charging him to convey theological clarity to those under his charge there in the church. The fact that he both ordered this approach and modeled it himself seems to identify it as a normative practice for pastoral theologians.

Theological Method

One cannot overlook the reality that the equipping of the saints is a biblical presumption of the church planter (Ephesians 4:11-12). While it is true that equipping encompasses the development of a disciple and includes more than a mere appreciation of theology, it cannot be done independent of theological understanding. One must know and comprehend

³ Ibid., 158.

⁴ Ibid.

theology before it can be lived out. It is inappropriate for the pastor to be content with merely transferring information from mind to mind without fixating on comprehension and practice. Despite common presumptions, theology is intrinsically practical. However, lack of clarity undermines its applicable value and results in the perception of a futile effort. There are key components that lend themselves to effectually pursuing theological clarity.

First, if a theologian is to value clarity they should emphasize the Bible as a theological source. One's theological hermeneutic cannot be at odds with one's biblical hermeneutic. An emphasis on systemic coherency is a necessary methodological attribute, but treating it as the sole value carries the risk of revising each doctrine for the sake of shoehorning them into a prescribed theological system. Following the lead of theologian Michael Bird, it seems that a more credible approach would be to assess the individual doctrines by way of biblical theology.⁵ Such an approach treats one's theological method as accountable to Scripture, which is the paramount source of theology.⁶ It also honors the authority and intentionality of God's special revelation. The theologian should not look to the Bible and treat it merely as a record of what God has said about his divine actions. Instead, one should recognize the Bible as a divine action. When the theologian recognizes that the Bible is a mighty act of God that cannot return void, then theological clarity becomes a matter of clearly conveying its contents.⁷ If the theologian's agenda is to grow closer to God by gathering understanding of what God has said about himself, the Bible is the supreme source of such understanding. As such, it should be the source from which doctrinal views are gleaned. Theological clarity is an inevitable byproduct of effectually using the Bible as the central theological source. To this end, theologian Kevin Vanhoozer says, "It follows that hermeneutical theology (doing theology by way of biblical interpretation) and theological hermeneutics (bringing Christian doctrine to bear on the principles and practice of interpretation) are equally ultimate. I therefore propose theological hermeneutics as my candidate for first theology."⁸ A clear conveyance of the Bible's theology is the reputed way in which theological clarity is achieved.

Second, while reason is essential to the doing of theology, one must put it in its proper place. Treating reason as superior to biblical revelation undermines the surrendering of one's heart and narrows the means by which God makes himself known. If the heart is open only to that which the mind can affirm and/or prove, then much of God's testimony regarding himself will go unheard. Instead of seeking a starting point that is merely rational, it behooves the theologian to accept the God of the historic Christian faith. A church planter should be a student of both his theological system and the theological history that informed his system. While doctrinal truths originate with God and exist independent of human minds, their earthly formulation is contextually bound. Theological clarity will be undermined if a church planter is unaware of the contextual manner in which God elucidated a doctrine. A poor historian will merely parrot ideas inherited from predecessors without grasping them as his

⁵ Michael F. Bird, *Evangelical Theology: A Biblical and Systematic Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 64.

⁶ Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 22, 34, 121–2.

⁷ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *First Theology: God, Scripture and Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 130.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 38.

own. Familiarizing himself with theological history allows the pastor to embrace doctrines as personal convictions. Such is essential for clarity.

Third, in addition to appreciating the minutiae and history of a theological matter, a pastor must be surrendered to God; the one toward whom doctrine points. In a post-Enlightenment era, modernity has informed the way in which we approach every field of study, including theology. This is unfortunate because modernity presumes that the pastor is ultimately responsible for clarity. The Bible does not lend itself to such a presumption. Preparing to elucidate theology requires a silent start. Quiet time in God's presence is not cliché.⁹ One must recognize that the doing of theology is a Spirit-led act. The Holy Spirit is not merely an object of study; he is the means by which we gain theological clarity. Attempting to avoid this is a fool's errand. An affectionate approach to theology draws one closer to God. Pursuing divine understanding without consulting and surrendering to the divine is an exercise in disingenuous theological methodology. It treats God as a widget to be mastered instead of a relational being who affectionately self-reveals. A heartfelt theological method compels one to seek the Spirit of God and appeal to him for clarity regarding God's nature and character.¹⁰

Cultural Engagement

Theological clarity presumes the theologian's capacity to be fluent in the language that is relevant to the audience. To do this well a theologian must be competent in the practice of cultural exegesis. Attempts to convey ivory tower ideas without being mindful of one's listeners may result in either theological ambiguity or highbrow discussions that treat practical truths as irrelevant to the listener. This tendency has resulted in a poor and ineffectual contextualization of theology and, consequently, undermines the value of clearly communicating theological ideas.

The nature of the Christian mission compels church planters to see themselves as one with the people to whom they have been called. Such an approach presupposes the relational engagement of pastors. It is wholly unproductive to stand independent of listeners and wax eloquent without valuing clarity. Instead, pastors are to act as representatives of the higher kingdom; placing themselves in the midst of the culture as ambassadors of Christ, the king who has risen and presently reigns. Some may reject this approach and contend for a separatist model. However, cultural missionaries, which every church planter should be, recognize the responsibility to circumstantially and culturally contextualize the unchanging Gospel in a manner that is comprehensible to hearers and relevant to their lives.

While contextualization is fundamental to the nature of Christian mission, it is also its greatest difficulty. Often, contextualization is complex because Christian theology can be in overt conflict with the presuppositions of the predominant worldview. Missiologist

⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works* (English), ed. Victoria J. Barnett and Barbara Wojhoski, vol. 12, Berlin: 1932-1933, ed. Larry Rasmussen, trans. Isabel Best, David Higgins, and Douglas W. Scott (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 299-360.

¹⁰ Vanhoozer, *First Theology*, 63.

Lesslie Newbigin, on the other hand skillfully calls us to gain a comprehensive view of non-Christian culture, and then lovingly communicate the Gospel in a clear manner.¹¹ While we are called to be *in* the world, it is inappropriate to be *of* the world. Serving a modernist culture compels us to diligently focus on appropriately distinguishing the Gospel from pagan norms. Our doctrine must be sound and uncompromising. While it is not always easy to stand firm in the face of cultural opposition, a pastor must value both contextualization and creedal faith.¹² Such a practice is normative and has been modeled throughout church history. While theological opposition has taken many forms, and the cultural makeup is ever shifting and building upon previous ideas, the church planter is to walk the fine line between contextualization and theological conviction. This approach, therefore lends itself to theological clarity while preserving intellectual integrity before God.

Missional Significance

A church planter should approach theology with the eyes and heart of a missionary. The missionary asks, 'How do we engage a lost culture with the Gospel?' As I consider the mission field to which God has called me I find myself pondering how I can strategically Christianize the culture for the sake of making God famous. I am responsible for discovering the way God desires to package his Gospel for the ingathering of his elect. In no way does this amount to inapt compromise. Contextualization of this sort is a presupposition of the New Testament. If this is true, I am responsible for soundly exegeting both the Bible and the culture. If there is no intentional dialogue between the two, then I have failed as a missionary. I cannot overlook such a responsibility.

The church planter who values clarity benefits from approaching the doctrines of Scripture in a manner that values God as the affectionate clarifier of theology. If a believer approaches the study of theology fully believing that a demonstrative God seeks to be known and he has made himself known by way of Scripture, then one inevitably grows in intimacy with him. If theological clarity is the priority of the pastor, the process is not merely an academic venture but, rather, an act of devotion. Such an approach lends itself to a heart that is shamelessly open to God. Progressive transformation is the inevitable byproduct of such a heart (Romans 12:1-2).

¹¹ Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 133.

¹² *Ibid.*, 137.

In my estimation, church planting is by far the most effectual means toward making disciples and Christianizing the culture. Such a responsibility requires a church planter to have gone through the process of personal theological formation (e.g., academic understanding, routine quiet time with God). However, he must also recognize that the context in which he experienced his personal formation is not universal. For clarity's sake, he must use the lenses of a missionary when considering how to impact his community. Being culturally informed will allow him to properly contextualize universal theological assertions. This is essential if one values clarity. The church planter's theological understanding is irrelevant if he is merely bloviating over the heads of those before him. He must learn to benefit from his own formation by clearly contextualizing it for the community to which he has been called. He can do this only if he surrenders his person, message, and mission to God.

Further reading and reflection questions are available at acts29.com/competencies.