

MentorNet #25
Defragmenting Christian Theology

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This message is longer than usual; it challenges some sacred cows that need ampler clarification.

While coaching novice church leaders, you will meet some who imagine that their task is to think true thoughts and to explain those thoughts to passive listeners. Therefore, you must explain and demonstrate that truth must be experienced and that it must be experienced in loving relationships with God and with one another. **Teachers, churches and small groups can make this experience easy by following biblical guidelines.**

1. Help disciples to experience God's Person and not simply learn facts about Him

"Mr. Sunday, thousands have come to Jesus through your teaching, but it seems a bit simplistic to us theologians. Tell me, what is your theology?"



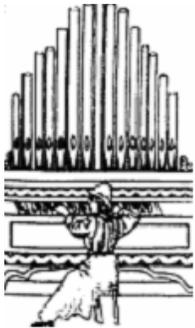
**My theology?
Why, if I had a theology, I would sell it to a museum!"**

This conversation with Billy Sunday, an evangelist of the First World War era, reflected an attitude that is now strong **and growing stronger** among young Western Christians. Sunday's sweeping rejection of theology was unfortunate, for sincere Christians love to learn about God and that is essentially what theology does. Its rejection may reflect a rebellious spirit, but more often is due to the approach to theology that unwise educators have inflicted upon sincere believers.

Billy Sunday's relationship with God was too dynamic, too life changing and too close to his heart for him to dissect the Almighty into separate attributes and operations. That would have been as unthinkable as seeking to appreciate the beauty of the Mona Lisa by analyzing the pigments of its paint. Sunday's complaint was with the method of breaking down truths about God into neat but useless lists.



The 'portrait' that believers enjoy contemplating is that of *God Himself*. Jesus, the Son of God, took on human flesh and gave us the most complete image of the invisible God (Col. 1:15). We 'see' **Christ** not by indexing details of His Person and work, but by entering into a relationship with Him, and thus with the Father through the work of the Holy Spirit who transforms all aspects of our lives.



"How can she inflict such ugly noise on God's ears?"



In the West, many 'post moderns' feel alienated by traditional churches. Some churches try using louder, contemporary music but this bridges only one aspect of the alienation. A deeper cause is that many people simply cannot bear the dogmatic, one-way communication of fragmented facts and seek a more relational worship experience.

I want to discover God and His truths by interacting together with you. I cannot connect with my parent's church the way they present biblical truth as isolated propositions!

Can we know God as a meaningful whole and not as a bunch of little pieces?



Many are simply asking for what the New Testament requires in church body life. Traditional churches often claim to follow the Bible while straying far from its standards of integration and interaction in teaching.

When ‘postmodern’ people put their faith in Christ, they seldom attend more than a few traditional worship services — except a few who already had been exposed to traditional worship and became inured to it. It is too painful for them. To turn their pain into a wholesome experience churches must apply God’s Word in the same way that Jesus and His apostles did so.

George Patterson recalls, “Training pastors in Central America at first I used the usual fragmented approach to theology and it led to sterile church bodies that did not reproduce. We closed the lecture halls and began training on the job. Students started or shepherded churches; we geared our teaching to their flock’s needs. We taught doctrine along with its moral duty, with practical field assignments. We showed how truths about God relate to church life and how God’s works of grace interact like the organs in a normal human body. The churches that resulted were healthier and reproduced.”

2. Let the Holy Spirit integrate different disciplines, ministries and truths in the body

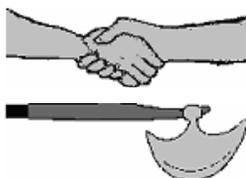
Let us bring cohesion to Christian teaching, worship and ministry. May we call this kind of fusion *integrated theology*? Integrating theological truths and works of God is not merely a mental exertion. It requires purposeful interaction in churches and the lives of believers. For example, we grasp the death and resurrection of Jesus as the two sides of one saving work. His death makes forgiveness possible, but does not impart life by itself. Eternal, holy life comes by being united with Jesus in His resurrection; our mortal bodies will be clothed in His immortality (1 Cor. 15). To teach Jesus’ crucifixion as His entire saving work neglects His resurrection that was the event that the apostles emphasized more when they announced the gospel. Let us proclaim salvation not as abstract ‘doctrine’ but as our entrance into a new family and an eternal life of constant transformation.



Traditional systematic theology *dissected* God. It analyzes its separate ‘ologies’ as though each one were an isolated category that we understand by examining it without reference to the other theological truths or to the Christian life. That old, fragmented, analytical approach to systematic theology is neither the only nor the best way to know God and appreciate His work.

Integrated thinking does not oppose *system* but the lack of a whole system. Theology that isolates divine truths destroys the grand theological system that exalts our Lord Jesus Christ as the Head in whom all things exist and hold together. To isolate theological details is the *opposite* of a true system.

Webster’s dictionary defines *system* as “an assemblage of objects united by some form of regular interaction or interdependence; an organic or organized whole; as, the solar system; a communications system.” What some erroneously call *systematic theology* is technically a perversion of the term *systematic*. True *system* requires integration, such as seen in the human nervous system. God’s whole, beautiful, interactive, interdependent system becomes fragmented in student’s minds by the fragmented way in which teachers present it. Let us do the *right kind* of analysis:



Integrative analysis of facts includes the *system* itself, showing the relationship between the facts, experiences, and moral duties that they entail.

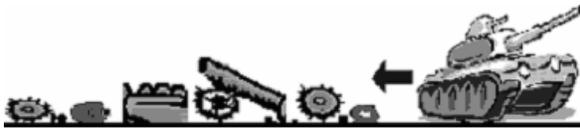
Linear analysis chops truth up, isolating interrelated truths without showing their relationships. Its non-system omits much true theology. Of course, teaching unrelated facts is still better than no teaching about God at all.

Wise communicators teach about God and humans by using the system that the Bible displays. It shows the logical relationship between truths about God, church, duty and morality. Unlike other religions, biblical truth builds on true stories. Its truths grow out of dealing with real people and events.



Many of us who love analytical theology have seen in pastoral and missionary ministries that its neatly categorized details fail to meet the current needs of God’s people as well as simply teaching

God's Word does. Doctrines listed analytically do not flow easily from one person to another. People communicate more effectively by teaching in the way that Scripture does.



Oh no!
Stop the conveyer belt!
It is going backwards!

George Patterson confesses, “When I trained new pastors to think in an analytical way, their teaching failed to touch people’s hearts. To correct this, I pictured an army tank on a conveyer belt moving backwards, disassembling the tank into neatly sorted piles of wheels, gears and canon barrels. I explained that good teaching moves towards cohesiveness. The pastors understood this, except one who refused to flex. His ministry proved short lived.”

Educators should teach in a way that the average Christian worker can easily imitate and apply at once, passing it on to other leaders who train still others, as 2 Timothy 2:2 requires. Some educators show the relationship between two or three areas of theology, but they should integrate many more disciplines. **The Holy Spirit harmonizes different ministries if we let Him (1 Cor. 12). Ministries that need to be integrated include history, prayer, spiritual warfare, serving the needy and other social duties, Bible, evangelism, stewardship, relationships, character transformation, worship, discipling, new churches, small groups, organizing, missions, family life and spiritual care.**

3. Some things that integrated theology is *not*



Integrated theology **goes beyond** simply dealing with the whole person and not just his soul (**called holistic ministry**). A development worker sought to combine mercy ministry with church planting. An agency assured her, “Our statement of purpose requires such holistic ministry.” When she arrived in Chad, her supervisor said, “Yes, you can plant churches on weekends!” A fence still separated the two works.

Integrated theology is not driven by ecumenical unity. Let us neither fuse theologies to create unity among religions nor enforce conformity of practice! Unity in Christ harmonizes *different* interests, spiritual gifts and cultural differences in love. A church body comes alive when different spiritual operations interact in love. Observe plants, people, animals and landscapes. Nature displays the Creator’s passion for variety, with diversity harmonized in one grand system! Even ethnic groups will retain their distinct identities throughout eternity (in Revelation 7:9-10).



Integrated theology differs from ‘right brained’ thinking. Anyone with normal intelligence can think with both sides of their brain. Failure to do so derives from faulty education. Integration is not simply a product of fertile imaginations. Rather, normal thinkers can easily see the relationships between truths, if educators will let them.

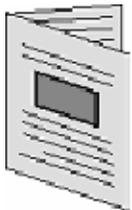
4. Practical helps to integrate truths and experiences in a biblical way

- Let believers teach and serve one another in small groups (search for all the occurrences of ‘one another’ in your concordance’). Avoid teaching only by monologue, and let the Holy Spirit harmonize the various gift-based ministries in love (one Cor. 12; Rom. 12:1-13; Eph. 4:11-16).
- Let Jesus act as the Head of the body. He is *the* unifying factor. “In Him you have been made complete, and He is the head over all rule and authority” (Col. 2:10). “By Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through Him and for Him. He is before all

things, and in Him all things hold together” (Col. 1:16-17). If Jesus is our Head, then we must learn to obey His commands, building all ministries on this foundation (Matt. 7:24-29; 28:18-20).

Jesus showed how to integrate relationships, revelation and service. God the Father exercises loving authority, the Son the lovingly submits to work out the Father’s will on earth within time and space, and the Holy Spirit lovingly and powerfully applies the Son’s work to our lives and ministries. Each Person of the Trinity was and is co-active in every aspect of redemption.

- Train leaders on the job in their church body where God harmonizes various ministries.
- Avoid abusing the gift of teaching by letting it eclipse others’ ministries. Avoid the arrogant ‘omniscience’ of some who impose the last word on every point.
- Teach a doctrine by helping people to apply its moral obligations (Eph. 4:11-16; and 2 Tim. 3:16-17). Scriptural doctrines include duties. For example, the purpose of the Holy Spirit’s filling in Scripture is not to grant an ‘experience’ but to enable believers to serve others in practical ways.
- Organize in a way that brings people together who have different ministries, rather than by isolating the people and their ministries in separate *programs*. A church’s greatest weakness is often its greatest strength taken to excess, which leads to imbalance. A good way to maintain balance is to let a small group practice all the ministries that the New Testament requires.
- Discern between true theology and merely advertising a denominational dogma. Unbalanced theologians defend their denomination’s doctrines, or the current views of their associates. Loyalty to one’s peers is admirable, but does not necessarily produce honest theological research.
- Use leadership-training curriculum that teaches the Bible in the biblical way. Download *Paul-Timothy Leader Training* studies in ready-to-print .PDF files from www.Paul-Timothy.net.



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