

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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PERSPECTIVE NUMBER ONE

The Importance of a Theology of God

Broadly speaking, our evangelical culture in America is dumbing down doctrine and theology. Rarely in the typical evangelical church in America will you hear sermons or teaching sessions on God as Trinity or the importance of the deity and humanity of Jesus Christ. Yet, both of these doctrines are central to our faith and have major implications for culture and life. In this *Perspective*, I want to illustrate the importance of sound doctrine to our lives.

- First of all, the importance of the doctrine of God as Trinity. Genuine, biblical Christianity has at the core of its theology the doctrine that God is Trinity. The Bible clearly reveals this truth from chapter 1 of Genesis on through the closing chapters of Revelation. As the early church struggled with the precise terms to define what the Scriptures clearly articulate, the Council of Chalcedon in AD 451 was perhaps the critical tipping point. At that Council, church leaders stated, in effect, that God is one essence of three persons who differ both relationally (i.e., Father, Son and Spirit) and functionally (e.g., Ephesians 1:3-14, where we learn that, in terms of salvation, the Father chooses, the Son redeems and the Spirit seals). The doctrine of God as Trinity is difficult but is central to our understanding of who God is as He has chosen to reveal Himself in Scripture. A few examples: You cannot read the Gospel of John without the clear conviction that Jesus is fully God, especially the “I am” passages and the central passage of John 5:19-24, one of the greatest defenses of Christian monotheism in the entire Bible. Further, 1 John 4:8 teaches that “God is love” a predicate nominative that defines one of the central elements of God’s character and nature—love. But love is a relational concept and, since God is Trinity, that concept makes much more sense. God is love because through all eternity God the Father, the Son and the Spirit experienced love and communion with one another. That is certainly one of the reasons God chose to create humans as His image bearers: His creatures will enjoy the same love and communion that God as Trinity has enjoyed for all eternity. God desires to walk with us and fellowship with us (see Genesis 2 and Revelation 21-22) but our sin makes that impossible. Therefore, the God who is love sends the second person of the Trinity, who adds to His deity humanity, to die for our sin and be resurrected in power, proving that the price for sin had been paid. God as Trinity enables us to more fully understand His love and His redemptive plan for us. Without this doctrine, His redemptive work does not make sense.
- Second, consider a broader understanding of God as Trinity. Paul makes the case for God’s diversity as the basis for diversity in the body of Christ, the church, in 1 Corinthians 12. The diversity of the body also extends to the ethnic makeup of the church as well—witness Acts 2 for example. As even the book of Revelation makes clear, in heaven and in the new heaven and new earth, every tongue, people, tribe and nation will be represented. The ethno-cultural differences of humanity reflect God’s love of diversity and variety, which are rooted in His nature as Trinity. Contrast this fundamental belief with Islam. The Qur’an teaches adamantly

that Allah is absolutely one. Indeed, in the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, Islam, after conquering Jerusalem and establishing the supremacy of Islam in the Holy Land, built the Dome as a memorial to Allah so that it would dominate Jerusalem and stand higher in elevation than the church of the Holy Sepulcher on Temple Mount. In the Dome of the Rock, there is this founding inscription inscribed around the inside of the Dome: “O you People of the Book, overstep not bounds in your religion, and of God speak only the truth. The Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, is only an apostle of God, and his Word, which he conveyed unto Mary, and a Spirit proceeding from him. Believe therefore in God and his apostles, and say not Three. It will be better for you. God is only one God. Far be it from his glory that he should have a son.” This inscription was an obvious invitation for Christians (and Jewish monotheism) to abandon belief in the Trinity and in the divinity of Jesus!! Therefore, Allah lacks diversity within himself and this belief impacts Islamic culture as well. There is an authoritarian unity that is demanded in Islam, at least in religious matters, and it does not share the appreciation of diversity that one sees in biblical Christianity. The Qur’an has been translated into other languages, but Arabic remains the language for worship and prayers (e.g., the ritualistic prayers prayed five times daily are always prayed in Arabic, even if you do not understand the language). There is a hesitation to embrace cultural differences within Islam, with a strong impetus to create a monolithic society and culture. This is certainly the agenda of radical and extreme Islam but is also the case among the conservative Islamic cultures of, for example, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. One’s belief in God as absolutely one, as in Islam, has a direct impact on how the culture and society develop.

- Third, consider the importance of affirming the authority of God’s revelation in Scripture. The Bible is adamant that this Trinitarian God is also the Creator of all things, including creating humanity in His image. But now, within evangelical Christianity, there is a movement to deny the biblical teaching that God directly created humanity in the persons of Adam and Eve—in other words, that Adam and Eve are our “parents” and that their sin was a historical event, not simply a metaphor or a story without historical foundation. The Darwinian hypothesis has challenged genuine, biblical Christianity since 1859. But within evangelicalism today, there are leaders such as Francis Collins, Director of the National Institutes of Health, who converted from atheism to Christianity. He argues that he is both a committed defender of Darwinian evolution and a Christian who believes in God as Creator. He basically defends a theistic evolutionary model, one which doubts the historicity of Genesis 1-3. For Collins, one cannot believe that God directly created Adam and Eve. But, in my view, the Bible does not give us this option. It declares forcefully and unequivocally that God created directly Adam and Eve, in His image, and that through their sin and rebellion all humans sinned. Further, the Apostle Paul in Romans 5 makes it clear that the Second Adam, Jesus Christ, through His obedience, undoes the disobedience of the First Adam. Such a conceptual framework for the entire redemptive plan of God is impossible if there is no first historic couple. If there is no Adam and Eve, there is no gospel! These two are inextricably linked in Scripture.

In conclusion, today’s typical evangelical church must return to detailed and systematic teaching and preaching of what Paul calls “sound doctrine.” The current cultivation of superficiality and shallowness within evangelicalism must come to an end. Every dimension of our lives and our culture depends on well-taught and well-equipped Christians. As Ephesians 4 makes clear, the key to equipping the saints for ministry is God’s Word, which is the source of “sound doctrine.” There is no other way to do it and the illustrations in this *Perspective* demonstrate why teaching sound doctrine is so important!

See *Christianity Today* (June 2011), pp. 23-27 and 61.

PERSPECTIVE NUMBER TWO

The Failure of Head Start

One of my favorite columnists is Joe Klein of *Time* magazine. Although decidedly liberal in the political sense, Klein is honest and straightforward. I respect that about him. For that reason, his most recent column on Head Start was intriguing. The Head Start program was one of the signature elements of LBJ's War on Poverty in the 1960s. At that time, it was administered out of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare. [Today, it is still administered out of the Health and Human Services Department.] In the 1960s, evidence indicates that the pilot programs of Head Start were effectively run and achieved their articulated goals. But today Klein categorically declares Head Start a monumental failure. It is now 45 years since this program was begun. Today, we spend more than \$7 billion each year on the Head Start program, serving over 1 million children. Klein writes that "there is indisputable evidence about the program's effectiveness, provided by the Department of Health and Human Services: Head Start does not work." The title of the HHS report is "Head Start Impact Study" and it declares that the positive effects of the program are minimal and vanish by the end of first grade. "Head Start graduates performed about the same as students of similar income and social status who were not part of the program." Klein reports that "these results were so shocking that the HHS team sat on them for several years." Correctly, he observes that Head Start is a classic example of government-run social programs. They often succeed as pilot programs but fail when taken to full scale. There are several key questions about Head Start today: (1) Why is Head Start administered through HHS and not the Department of Education? The answer—it was LBJ's War on Poverty directive! His vision was to have community action programs (i.e., local agencies) administer programs to rebuild poor communities. Head Start was to be a signature one of these community action programs. Klein writes that "These outfits soon proved slovenly; often they were little more than patronage troughs for local Democratic Party honchos—and, remarkably, to this day, they remain the primary dispensers of Head Start funds." These local community action projects today that administer Head Start are really "make work" jobs. In other words, Head Start is now a jobs program, not an early education program that works!!! As Klein observes, since we are talking about the lives of children, "this is criminal." Head Start is in one sense a metaphor for federal government waste and inefficiency—a noble idea that does not work. Instead, it has become a government patronage machine that swallows up \$7 billion annually and does not really aid the children it is supposed to help. So, it is actually a case study for the waste and lack of integrity of the national government. It is also an example of the waste in government spending that has helped in no small way to create the financial crisis we are now in as a nation. Reading this report has been one of the saddest things I have done in quite some time.

See Klein's essay in *Time* (18 July 2011), p. 27.

PERSPECTIVE NUMBER THREE

Thinking Biblically About Immigration

America has been experiencing a crisis for some time now in the area of its immigration policies and practices. In this *Perspective*, I want to add a biblical perspective to the discussion. There is little doubt that politics and economics frame the immigration debate in our culture. Two biblical mandates, instead, should also inform our thinking as Christians—the Great Commission and the Great Commandment. Dr. Alex Mindes, National Director of Hispanic Ministry and Gateway Theological Training of the Evangelical Free Church of America, asks that we view the nearly 18 million undocumented people living in America as an opportunity: “Many of these people are outside of their home in countries, separated from their families, and outside of their own governments’ systems. They are prime for the gospel.” It is demonstrably illegal for us as Americans to hire them or to provide false paperwork for them, but we can evangelize them. Three fundamental parameters are dictated to us by Scripture: (1) All immigrants, even those who are illegal, are made in the image of God and of infinite worth and value. (2) Both the Great Commission and the Great Commandment inform our approach to illegals. (3) The Apostle Paul walked a fine line between compassion and the execution of the law. [The best example of Paul’s demeanor is in the book of Philemon. Onesimus, the slave, was running away from his master. Paul disciplined him and then eventually sent him back to his master. But he told Philemon, the master, to treat Onesimus as his brother and that Paul would pay any of his debts.] Dr. Michael Pocock, Chairman and Senior Professor of World Missions at Dallas Theological Seminary, offers three key points that enable us to maintain a biblical perspective on immigrants:

1. Because all people are in God’s image, immigrants should be treated with dignity, even if they attempt to circumvent the law. They must be held accountable but at the same time the state should do everything it can to prosecute abusive employers who also are breaking the law.
2. The Old Testament helps us see that God makes provision for alien and poor workers, exemplified in the case of Ruth and Boaz. Boaz permits an alien, Ruth from Moab, to glean in his fields and offered her protection from his own male workers as well as safety, respect, water, and shelter.
3. National governments are basically units of government established by God to accomplish His purposes. Rule of law must be respected and government has the obligation to establish policies for the well-being of its people—and this includes laws that establish a reasonable and manageable flow of immigrants into its nation. Somehow, Christians must find a way to embrace a policy that reflects understanding, compassion and respect for immigrants, while at the same time urging respect and honor to government and its laws. Pocock writes that “Christ’s immigration policy would stress ministry to migrants and also the responsibility and privilege of Christian migrants to spread the gospel wherever they are.”

Finally, the Bible makes it clear that many biblical persons were in fact immigrants at some point in their lives: Abraham; Isaac; Jacob; Joseph; Moses; Elimelech; Naomi and her sons; Ruth; David; Joseph, Mary and Jesus; Aquila and Priscilla; and Jewish Christians fleeing persecution. Pocock concludes: “Whether it is hospitality to strangers (Rom. 12:13), or entertaining those who cannot repay (Luke 14:12-14), doing good to all persons (Gal. 6:10), or considering all people equally no matter their culture or ethnicity (Col. 3:10-11), the Bible speaks to our attitude toward those of other races or cultures.” The church should lead the way in finding the balance between treating immigrants with dignity and obedience to the rule of law. Compassion mixed with respect for law must be realized in the church.

See the Spring/Summer 2010 issue of *Kindred Spirit* for the authors cited in this *Perspective*.