

# WRITINGS OF SHANE ROSENTHAL

by Shane Rosenthal

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*A collection of theological writings, sermons, and essays by Shane Rosenthal, compiled for study and devotional reading.*

3 Chapters

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S. Why Study Theology?

## S. Meriting Unmerited Favor

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Meriting Unmerited Favor? by Shane Rosenthal When forced to choose between salvation by works or salvation by grace, most evangelical Christians, indeed, most Christians of any stripe would probably side with salvation by grace. Many are familiar with Bible passages such as, "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23), texts which clearly indicate that earning our own way to heaven is just not going to cut it with God. But most Christians go no further than this in their thinking. To them, God has his standard which we fail to live up to, so he overlooks our shortcomings by his grace. But when this very important Biblical term is left in this vague and relatively undefined state, a serious problem can develop; a problem that can in some cases even begin to undermine the meaning of grace itself. So What Does Grace Mean?

If it is possible to undermine the meaning of grace, it seems important that we start off with a proper definition of the word from the outset. The New International Dictionary of The Bible defines grace as "that unmerited favor of God toward fallen man...." This quite an adequate definition. Notice here that grace is described as disposition of God (God's favor upon the undeserving). Some people speak of grace as though it were a substance God pours into us, but as the Bible describes it, when we receive grace, we are receiving approval, acceptance, and favor, from God himself. This is why I also like one of the definitions found in Webster's Collegiate Dictionary which describes grace as, "a disposition to or an act or instance of kindness, courtesy or clemency." This is exactly how the Bible describes our relationship with God. We do not earn this kindness or clemency, but it is caused or initiated by God's own character. In his mercy, he is gracious to us. But to say that grace is related to mercy, is to say that grace is totally undeserved, unmerited, and unearned, for if we have received mercy, the implication is that we have received a special exemption from justice. Therefore, one will not sufficiently understand grace and mercy until he or she has acquired a basic understanding of God's holiness, righteous requirements (i.e., his law), and the predicament of human sinfulness. We simply will not have an adequate view of ourselves or any doctrines relating to grace until we have understood these basic concepts.

### God's Holiness

In the book of Leviticus, God demands that he "be acknowledged as holy by the Israelites," in addition to warning his people against "profaning his holy name" (Leviticus 22:32). Although this is a very common theme throughout the Old Testament, many today often push aside such a concept of God in favor of a more "chummy" deity whose chief desire is to make sure that everyone is having a good time. But if we are to call ourselves Christians, we simply cannot brush aside these references to God's holiness in favor of a God of our own imagination. As the Israelites were instructed, we too must acknowledge our God as holy, and in order to do this, we must go to the Scriptures to see what God has revealed about himself.

Isaiah's encounter with God's holiness is probably the most instructive for our case. In the sixth chapter of the book of Isaiah, this prophet describes how he was given a vision of the heavenly throne, with cherubim and seraphim continually crying, "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the

whole earth is full of his glory." And what is the prophet's response? Rather than getting "caught up in a wonderful worship experience," Isaiah realizes something is dreadfully wrong. The problem was sin.

"Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty." Many today are claiming to have ecstatic mystical experiences with God (or simply with the divine), but what is notably missing from all these accounts, from whatever religious persuasion, is the conviction of sin. We simply cannot have a relationship with God until we face the fact of sin head on. Isaiah was not being melodramatic here. He knew that something was intrinsically wrong with the fact that he should behold God in all his Glory, for as God explained to Moses, "no man may see me and live" (Exodus 33:20). But as Isaiah goes on to explain in his case, "one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said, "See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for." God provided a way, not by lowering his standards, but through atonement, "your guilt is taken away." And what God did for Isaiah in this passage was foreshadowing of greater things to come, things that would ultimately find their fulfillment in Christ. Isaiah himself writes of this coming one a few chapters later:

See, my servant will act wisely; he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted....he sprinkle many nations, and kings will shut their mouths because of him....he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities....We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all....Yet it was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the LORD makes his life a guilt offering, he will see his offspring and prolong his days....(Isaiah 52:13, Isaiah 52:15, Isaiah 53:5-6, Isaiah 53:10).

If we are to have a relationship with the God of these inspired words, it behooves us to proceed according to the terms he has spelled out for us. If we do not keep God's holiness in mind, we will ultimately find that there is no need to focus on our sin, guilt, and conversely, Christ's atonement. It is interesting to note that this lack of emphasis on the central redemptive themes of the Bible used to be characteristic of liberal mainline churches, but now has become all too common even in conservative Christian circles. Therefore we must come to grips with God's holy character, and as a consequence, begin to reflect on our own sinfulness as a contrast to God's holiness. Once we engage in this process, the words God spoke to Isaiah can be fulfilled in us, "For this is what the high and lofty One says--he who lives forever, whose name is holy: "I live in a high and holy place, but also with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite" (Isaiah 57:15).

#### Man's Condition

"Everybody knows that the boat is sinking, everybody knows that the captain lied, everybody's got this broken feeling, like their father or their dog just died." These are lyrics from an old Leonard Cohen song, recently re-recorded by Don Henley. In a similar vein, Bill Mallonee of the Vigilantes of Love sings, "there's a smaller place you go where there's hardly any sound, where the deals have all gone sour and the house of cards comes down, and the damage is costly it's beyond all dollars and sense, you can't measure it with graphs and charts or any instruments, yeah the thing

we cannot speak of, the secret we all know...oh this blister soul." So what exactly is this "broken feeling?" What is this "secret we all know?" The problem is what theologians have called original sin. Our first parents rebelled from God, and as a consequence the children of Adam and Eve are conceived and born in sin. Just as Romans 5:1-21,

"sin entered the world through one man" (Romans 5:12)

"The judgment followed [one man's sin] and brought condemnation" (Romans 5:16)

"by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man" (Romans 5:17)

"the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men" (Romans 5:18)

"through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners" (Romans 5:19)

Thus, as a result of this, we can all say with David, "Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful at the time my mother conceived me" (Psalms 51:5). But some might respond by asking, how can we be "condemned" by God for the sins of another person? How can the disobedience of Adam be attributed to me? Surely this is unfair and unjust! But it must quickly be pointed out that if this is the case, that is, if it is true that it is unjust for us to be considered guilty for the acts of another, then we will have destroyed the heart and center of the Christian faith. You see, Christ was a man who was credited with our injustice. He took our sin upon himself, and was judged in our place. Therefore, if it is unjust for us to be considered guilty for Adam's sin, then it would be equally unjust for God to consider Christ guilty for our sins, an assertion that essentially destroys the Christian doctrine of salvation. This connection between Adam's sin and Christ's redemption is a something that Paul makes explicitly clear, "just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men. For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous" (Romans 5:18-19). So how can we make sense of original sin? We must look at Adam as our representative. He sinned in our place. When he declared war against God by his defiance, the entire human race (in whose care he was entrusted) became God's enemies. This doctrine is not simply not an excuse to focus our blame on our first parents, but rather we all seem to be co-conspirators in this spirit of self destruction. This is why we can be called "rebels from birth" (Isaiah 48:8). In fact the Bible has a lot to say about the human condition after the fall, "All have gone their own way, there is no one who seeks God, there is no one who does good...not even one" (Romans 3:10-12). We are depicted as "slaves to sin" (Romans 7:14), "enemies of God" (Romans 5:10), "altogether worthless" (Romans 3:12), "powerless" (Romans 5:6), "controlled by the sinful nature" (Romans 7:5), "bound to disobedience" (Romans 11:32), "captive to a dominion of darkness" (Colossians 1:13), "corrupted both in mind and conscience" (Titus 1:15), "foolish, disobedient, deceived" (Titus 3:3), and "dead in sins" (Ephesians 2:1-2). All men by their very nature deserve God's wrath, for every man woman and child is wholly corrupted by sin. We sin because we are sinners and we do acts of sin because of our corrupt nature. Man's condition is therefore utter helplessness, that is, being powerless, disobedient, enslaved, deceived, captive, controlled, etc., man is altogether averse from good and unable by his own strength to convert himself, having lost all ability of will to any spiritual good. To ignore the Biblical imagery of man's bondage to sin would be to miss one of the most important and clear doctrines of the Bible.

## Jesus' Pessimistic View of Man

It is ironic that Jesus is often portrayed as the messenger of love in contrast with the God of wrath presented in the Old Testament. You begin to wonder if the folks who say these things have ever read the New Testament (or the Old Testament for that matter). This is particularly clear when you read Jesus' remarks about the coming judgement, and of God's wrath, but it is also evident when you notice what Jesus says about the human condition. Rather than being optimistic about "human potential," Jesus presents us with the sobering reality of the problem of sin, and the fact that the problem does not merely lie on the surface, "For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. These are what make a man 'unclean'... (Matthew 15:19-20). Jesus was confirming the words of the prophet Jeremiah who wrote that, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked..." (Jeremiah 17:9). In my own production work for the White Horse Inn I have polled a wide number of believers from various backgrounds, and on one occasion I asked approximately one hundred Christians what they thought of that quote (without immediately letting them in on the fact that it was a Bible verse). Forty percent of the folks I polled disagreed with Jeremiah's statement about the deceitfulness of the heart; a quite troubling statistic. Jesus' statement that all sins are rooted in the heart seems also to be what he was getting at in his Sermon on the Mount when he said: "whoever looks at a woman to lust after her has committed adultery with her already in his heart." I once brought up this verse to a non-Christian friend who looked at me in disbelief that Jesus would ever have taught such a thing. When he said, "Then no one would make the cut!" I replied by saying, "That's kind of the whole point." For too many years, evangelical communication with the world has been hostile. We've portrayed ourselves as saints and told the world they were sinners. If we are to avoid becoming modern day Pharisees, we must rid ourselves of this distinction between ourselves and the "sinners out there in the world." We must recover once again the biblical concept of total depravity; we are all sinners. The only difference between us and the "unregenerate" is that we wear Christ's righteousness as a robe, and that we are being sanctified. But in terms of our own standing with God, we are just as morally repugnant as any pornographer, adulterer, murderer or homosexual (Isaiah 64:6). As my friend Michael Horton likes to say, "My heart has done things my hands haven't gotten around to yet!" When all is said and done, the Christian must view himself in accordance with God's word, as is summarized well by the psalmist, "No one living is righteous before you" (Psalms 143:2).

We simply have to admit that we cannot truly sing John Newton's famous hymn, "Amazing Grace" until we really come to believe and understand the following lines "...that saved a wretch like me." A sober view of human potential always brings a high view of grace. Newton eloquently sums this all up for us in another hymn he wrote titled, "Cain and Abel": When Adam fell, he quickly lost

God's image which he once possess'd:

See all our nature since could boast

In Cain, his first-born son, express'd! The sacrifice the Lord ordain'd

In type of the Redeemer's blood,

Self-righteousness reas'ning Cain disdain'd

And thought his own first-fruits as good.  
Yet rage and envy fill'd his mind,  
When with a sullen downcast look  
He saw his brother favour find,  
Who God's appointed method took. By Cain's own hand good Abel died,  
Because the Lord approv'd his faith;  
And when his blood for vengeance cry'd  
He vainly thought to hide his death.  
Such was the wicked murd'rer Cain,  
And such by nature still are we,  
Until by grace we're born again,  
Malicious, blind, and proud as he.  
Like him, the way of grace we slight,  
And in our own devices trust;  
Call evil good, and darkness light,  
And hate and persecute the just. The saints in every age and place  
Have found his history fulfill'd  
The numbers all our thoughts surpass,  
Of Abel's, whom the Cain's have kill'd.  
Thus Jesus fell--but, oh! his blood  
Far better things than Abel's cries,  
Obtains his murd'ers peace with God,  
And gains them mansions in the skies.  
Mansions for murderers. Now that is grace!  
What About Free Will?

Many Christians will readily admit that they are still sinners. They realize that they have not lived up to God's perfection and continue to trust in Christ's blood and righteousness for their only hope. Such is the Christian confession. But still, many get confused about how the whole process of salvation was initiated, a confusion that can utterly destroy the doctrine of grace. Think about it for a moment. Why is it that you think you are on your way to heaven and many of your neighbors are not? Is it because you "decided" to trust Jesus? Now although this is much less blatant than an

outright salvation by works, it is nevertheless a works based, rather than a grace based theology. Why? Reflect for a moment about the lines from the apostle Paul in Romans 3:1-31, "There is no one righteous...there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God...there is no one who does good, not even one" (Romans 3:10-12). Now the question I have for you is this, Is choosing to trust in Christ a "good" thing? For the sake of argument I think all of us would readily admit that it is. But if sinful men and women have the power to do this admittedly good thing, then what do we do with Paul's stark words? Obviously this presents a problem. The simple truth is that no one has the power to do "good" in and of their own strength. Jesus himself was clear about this. He specifically taught that men would not have the ability to choose or trust in him apart from God's regenerative power, "Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed" (John 3:19-20). We must begin to understand that Jesus is referring to all of us here. All of us do evil, for "no one is good, not even one. Now, this is certainly pessimistic, but it is from the perspective of God's holiness, which none of us lives up to (see Proverbs 20:9, Proverbs 21:2, Ecclesiastes 7:20). But if Jesus left us with those words alone none of us would be Christians, for no one would "come into the light." But the text continues, "But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God" (John 3:21). In other words, when you see someone come to faith in Christ, just understand that they did not do this by their own power, but rather, it was done through the power of God. The above is not an isolated passage from the teachings of Jesus. In another example from John's gospel, folks were grumbling about Jesus' negative attitude concerning human nature. Our Lord responded by saying, "There are some of you who do not believe....This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless the Father has enabled him." (John 6:64-65). Elsewhere Jesus tells a group of unbelieving Pharisees, "He who belongs to God hears what God says. The reason you do not hear is that you do not belong to God" (John 8:47). Those God does not call his own to be regenerated through the power of the Holy Spirit can't even see the kingdom of God, or hear and understand the gospel message, much less choose to accept it (see John 3:3, John 6:63, 1 Corinthians 2:14, 2 Corinthians 4:4, Romans 8:5-9). But if there is no free will in the matter of salvation, doesn't that make us robots? Well again, we must consider the role of our first parents. Adam and Eve did have free will to choose to obey God, or to rebel against him. But because of their decision we are all born rebels (Isaiah 48:8, Ecclesiastes 7:29). Notice for example the following instructions Paul gives to Timothy regarding the proper disposition of Christian teachers and evangelists, The Lord's servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will (2 Timothy 2:24-26). Do we really believe this? Do we really believe, first of all, that God must "grant" us repentance? Secondly, do we really believe that before we were regenerated by the Holy Spirit that we were held captive by the devil "to do his will?" If we are to believe Paul's words here, then we must abandon this idea of a "free will" in the process of our salvation. The hard truth of the matter is that no one can move his or her will toward God because a) as children of Adam we are all rebelling from him (Isaiah 48:8, Isaiah 53:6, Isaiah 64:6-7), and b) our wills are held captive by a "dominion of darkness" (Colossians 1:13, Galatians 3:22, Titus 3:3, 1 John 5:19, 2 Timothy 2:26).

## Lazarus Come Forth!

Once a person gets a grasp of the gravity of the problem, the solution to the problem becomes all the more glorious. Yes, man in this view goes down in our estimation, but our view of God and his mercy to save us goes way up. If man is totally helpless and powerless to save himself, then clearly, if anything is to be done to save him, it must be done by God. Like Lazarus, we respond to Christ only after we have first been raised to new life. A good example of this is found in the book of Acts during one of Paul's presentations of the gospel message. "One of those listening was a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message" (Acts 16:14). In many Christian circles this emphasis is completely lost. We have become so used to the phrase, "Invite Jesus into your heart," and other similar sentimental expressions that we have forgotten the heart is the seat of human wickedness (Jeremiah 17:6) that must first be liberated by God before it can do anything of spiritual value.

One of the clearest passages in the New Testament on the role of faith in relation to grace is found in the second chapter of Paul's letter to the Ephesians. It is a familiar text to most, "it is by grace you have been saved through faith --and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God --not of works so that no one may boast." (Ephesians 2:8-9). Too often contemporary Christians misread this verse to mean that God's plan of salvation is that people accept his free gift of grace offered through faith in Christ. The analogy is often used that if you are given a gift from a friend, you still have to accept the gift before it becomes yours. The acceptance of God's gift is the means of salvation in this view, but this idea is simply found nowhere in the text. What we do find, however, is a completely sovereign description of the role of faith in relation to grace. Notice, for example, the comment made by the apostle, "...so that no one may boast." If I save myself by making the right choice (deciding for Christ), then surely I can boast about this choice, because, in effect, I have shown that I am wiser and smarter than many others, having acquired for myself eternal life by this decision. But if Paul is suggesting that the entire salvation process, from God's grace, to my personal faith in space and time, is the gift of God in which we do not cooperate ("--that not of yourselves"), then, and only then, has room for boasting been eliminated. The simple fact of the matter is this; we cannot boast about our own part in salvation because it is all of God's grace from start to finish. We cannot merit our acceptance before God by the things we do, or by the choices we make. We are all dead in sin, and must first be made alive before we can accept the grace of God. The Scriptures are clear on this. And what is also clear throughout the Scriptures is the fact that faith is a gift. It is not based on "human decision," or "desire" (John 1:13, Romans 9:6), but is the result of God's grace and mercy. The following texts are provided to make this point evident:

Matthew 16:15-17 "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven.

Luke 10:22 "All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows who the Son is except the Father, and no one knows who the Father is except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him."

Acts 2:47 praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

Acts 13:48 When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed.

Acts 18:27 When Apollos wanted to go to Achaia, the brothers encouraged him and wrote to the disciples there to welcome him. On arriving, he was a great help to those who by grace had believed.

Romans 10:20 And Isaiah boldly says, "I was found by those who did not seek me; I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me."

Romans 12:3 For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you.

Ephesians 1:9-14 And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment--to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ. In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession --to the praise of his glory.

Php 1:29 For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him...

Colossians 2:13 When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ.

## Conclusion

Unfortunately this is not the common teaching about grace in the church today. Often grace is presented as God's niceness or his benevolence; even more often it is simply never defined at all. But if we are to accept "unmerited favor" as an appropriate definition for grace, then we must abandon any concept of meriting our salvation by our works, by our choices, or by anything we do at all. Indeed, if by our choice or faith or decision, we acquire God's favor, we would have in effect merited unmerited favor.

One final note. Much could have been said about the important historical figures and debates throughout church history on this topic, but in this essay I have limited my focus to the biblical material, keeping both the audience and the length of the article in mind. However, I do think two terms should be briefly mentioned. Christian theology has a term for those who believe they can earn salvation outright by their works: Pelagianism (a term derived from the monk "Pelagius" who taught this doctrine). Another term that is important to understand is Arminianism, especially due to its popularity in modern American Christianity. Arminianism (or the teachings of Jacob Arminius) asserts that though man cannot "earn" his way to heaven by good works, his will is still nevertheless free to "choose" whether or not to accept the message of salvation. One's acceptance or rejection of the gospel in this view is then the determining factor in a person's

eternal destiny. The main point of this article has been to show that this "Arminian" emphasis on the liberty of the will essentially undermines the doctrine of grace. Now, although I usually don't recommend reading Encyclopedias for theology, I recently came across a very good explanation of this whole discussion in the 1961 edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica which stated that the earlier Protestant views of grace "were greatly modified by the Arminian controversy." The article went on to say that "The Arminian insistence on human liberty...brought large sections of Protestantism to a view of grace not far removed from Pelagianism, namely, to a belief in the unaided power of human nature to attain complete perfection and ultimate happiness." I agree wholeheartedly with this conclusion. I believe that American Protestant Christianity, to the extent that it is influenced by Arminianism, has adopted a "view of grace not far removed from Pelagianism." In other words, because of our emphasis on "free will," we have really begun to believe that salvation is of us; we make it happen. But according to the Scriptures, "It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God--that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. Therefore, as it is written: "Let him who boasts boast in the Lord" (1 Corinthians 1:30-31).

## S. Why Study Theology?

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Why Study Theology? by Shane Rosenthal

American culture is arguably heading more and more in an entertainment oriented and anti-intellectual direction, and this approach is not without its effects on American Christianity. Too often Christians are put-off by theology and the deep reflection of the Bible's rich doctrines, yet these are the things that make up the most exciting and rewarding parts of the Christian life. In his struggle against religious liberalism in the 1920's, J. Gresham Machen summarized the liberal approach to Christianity: "Theology, or the knowledge of God, it is said, is the death of religion; we should not seek to know God, but should merely feel his presence." With this approach, the Princeton apologist could not bring himself to agree; "it ought to be observed that if religion consists merely in feeling the presence of God, it is devoid of any moral quality whatsoever. . . . Certainly it does make the greatest possible difference what we think about God; the knowledge of God is the very basis of religion." In other words, if feeling and experience is the essence of religion, then perhaps one could justify murder, theft, or even dabbling with the occult, simply because "it feels right." The founder of Christianity, however, had a different approach: "You are really my disciples if you hold to my teaching" (John 8:31).

There is undeniably a doctrinal core to the Christian faith. We confess not merely the fact of Christ's death, but that his death was an atonement for sin. True faith, therefore, rests on the foundation of certain doctrinal claims: "I believe that Jesus died for my sins," etc. However, today it is common once again to hear Christians say for example: "I don't get into that theology stuff. I let my pastor handle all that because he went to seminary." Unfortunately, this is not true faith. True Christian faith rests in the finished work of Christ, whereas the person who makes this kind of statement is actually trusting in his or her pastor's faith. If you trust in your pastor's faith, what happens if your pastor runs off with the church secretary? If you leave theology to the so-called experts, how will you know if your church begins to teach false doctrine? (Ephesians 4:14). How will you share your faith with others? (1 Peter 3:15). What will keep you from joining a cult or a non-Christian religion? By acquiring an understanding of what you believe and why you believe it, you will be able deal with questions such as these. The command to love God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength is a serious charge, and it suggests that our whole bodies are to be involved in the worship of God; yes, even our minds. Unfortunately contemporary American culture does not encourage us to use our minds. Often in the church this masquerades as spiritual superiority. "Why split hairs over theological subtleties, isn't the real important thing that we love and serve Jesus?" Whenever I hear questions like these, I usually respond with a few questions of my own: "Who is Jesus? Is He just a nice guy, a great teacher, or is He God in human flesh? What was significant about His death? Did it merely show us how much He loved us or did He satisfy God's wrath toward us? What does it mean to serve Him? Do we serve Him by taking drugs and having mystical experiences, by throwing young virgins into volcanoes, or by attempting to love our neighbors as ourselves?" You see, if theology is really irrelevant, it would make no difference whatsoever who Christ is or even how we are saved. As novelist Dorothy Sayers argued in her

book *Creed or Chaos*, "It is the dogma that is the drama!" Christ is worth honoring and serving because of who he is and what he has accomplished, and that is what theology is all about!

Another phrase I hear often these days is this: "Well, my idea of God is. . . ." The problem is that your idea of God just might be idolatry if it is not based squarely upon the Word of God. Theology defines the boundaries of our thoughts concerning God; it takes into consideration all of the Scriptural data on a given subject, such as the attributes of God, the work of Christ, or the ramifications of sin. Theology attempts to give an account of how God has revealed Himself to His people in history. This is why theology is ultimately the most practical thing a Christian can be involved with, for what could be more practical than to know who God is, what He is like, what the basic message of the Bible is, etc. Ignoring God's own self revelation, and focusing on what Christ can do for us now (either in terms of experiences, or changed lives, etc.) is to lose the essence of Christianity which is centered on the historic gospel of Christ's death and resurrection. Again from Machen, "If the saving work of Christ were confined to what He does now for every Christian, there would be no such thing as a Christian gospel--an account of an event which put a new face on life. What we should have left would be simply mysticism, and mysticism is quite different from Christianity."

One of Paul's many prayers to the young and developing churches throughout the ancient world was that Christians would grow in wisdom and understanding of who God is: "I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better" (Ephesians 1:17). While Christians today do express interest in knowing God, they usually do so apart from any deep reflection about God. Yet Paul here clearly teaches that growth in wisdom, knowledge, and depth of insight about God will help us to know Him better. What's more, this was not just passing advice; this was something Paul often and earnestly prayed for. But, you might say, Paul also says that "knowledge puffs up" (1 Corinthians 8:1). Yes, it is true, there is a danger of conceit when sinners acquire virtue, and thus when compared with love, which is what Paul is doing in 1 Corinthians 14:1-40 it is a lesser virtue. However, Paul is not thereby suggesting that we pursue or remain in ignorance, but continually urges us to "let the the Word of Christ dwell in [us] richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom... (Colossians 3:16).

Similarly, the Apostle Peter wrote, "His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him..." It is our knowledge of God, Peter is saying, that is the primary fuel for godliness. To avoid theology therefore, is to be "ungodly." It was this very apostle who was asked by Jesus himself, "Who do you say that I am?" (Matthew 16:15). Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven" (Matthew 16:16-17). Here Peter's view of Christ (theologically speaking--his "Christology") wins God's approval. But later on as Jesus was explaining that he must "go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed," Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!" Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men" (Matthew 16:21-23). Here, Peter had an ungodly theology. In fact, it was so ungodly that it was as if Satan himself were talking to Jesus. But what was so bad about what Peter said? Well, briefly stated, he was focused on "the things of

men" rather than Christ's mission of the cross. This is one of the biggest problems in the church today. In many pulpits across this country, you will hear passionate and exciting things, even very religious things. But many of them are ultimately focused on the things of men rather than on the centrality of the cross. If Peter could get sidetracked, so can your pastor, and so can you. This is the heart of the matter for us today. Because we think that theology is irrelevant, we have been "conformed" to the world's way of thinking rather than being "transformed by the renewing of our minds" (Romans 12:2). Only if we resist the emphasis on personal experience, self indulgence, and the anti-intellectualism of our day, and begin to mine the rich resources of our Christian faith and heritage, then will we "no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming" (Ephesians 4:14).

#### Relevant Bible Passages For Further Study:

Job 38:1-2 Then the LORD answered Job out of the storm. He said: "Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge?"

Proverbs 2:1-6 My son, if you accept my words and store up my commands within you, turning your ear to wisdom and applying your heart to understanding, and if you call out for insight and cry aloud for understanding, and if you look for it as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure, then you will understand the fear of the LORD and find the knowledge of God. For the LORD gives wisdom, and from his mouth come knowledge and understanding.

Isaiah 56:10 Israel's watchmen are blind, they all lack knowledge; they are all mute dogs, they cannot bark; they lie around and dream, they love to sleep.

Jeremiah 4:22 "My people are fools; they do not know me. They are senseless children; they have no understanding. They are skilled in doing evil; they know not how to do good."

Hosea 4:6 my people are destroyed from lack of knowledge. "Because you have rejected knowledge, I also reject you as my priests; because you have ignored the law of your God, I also will ignore your children. Hosea 4:14 -- a people without understanding will come to ruin!

Malachi 2:7 "For the lips of a priest ought to preserve knowledge, and from his mouth men should seek instruction --because he is the messenger of the LORD Almighty.

John 6:56-69 Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him. Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven. Your forefathers ate manna and died, but he who feeds on this bread will live forever." He said this while teaching in the synagogue in Capernaum. On hearing it, many of his disciples said, "This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?" Aware that his disciples were grumbling about this, Jesus said to them, "Does this offend you? What if you see the Son of Man ascend to where he was before! The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life. Yet there are some of you who do not believe." For Jesus had known from the beginning which of them did not believe and who would betray him. He went on to say, "This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless the Father has enabled him." From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him. "You do not want to leave too, do you?" Jesus asked the Twelve. Simon

Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God." Machen: ...The evil consists in the existence of the errors which cause the divisions and not at all in the recognition of those errors when once they exist.

John 8:31-32 To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

Acts 6:9-10 Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called) --Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia. These men began to argue with Stephen, but they could not stand up against his wisdom or the Spirit by whom he spoke. (John 4:23-24)

Romans 1:18-28 The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities --his eternal power and divine nature--have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse. For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles. Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator --who is forever praised. Amen. Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion. Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done.

Romans 10:2-3 For I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge. Since they did not know the righteousness that comes from God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness.

Romans 12:2 Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is --his good, pleasing and perfect will.

Romans 16:18 For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people.

1 Corinthians 1:10 I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought.

1 Corinthians 14:20 Brothers, stop thinking like children. In regard to evil be infants, but in your thinking be adults.

2 Corinthians 4:6 For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.

2 Corinthians 10:5 We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.

Ephesians 4:11-15 It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ.

Php 3:8-10 What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ --the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death...

Php 4:8 Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable --if anything is excellent or praiseworthy --think about such things.

Colossians 1:6 All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and understood God's grace in all its truth.

Colossians 1:28 We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ.

Colossians 2:2-3 My purpose is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

Colossians 3:16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.

Colossians 4:6 Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.

2 Thessalonians 2:13 But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers loved by the Lord, because from the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth.

1 Timothy 3:15 if I am delayed, you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God's household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth.

1 Timothy 4:6-7 If you point these things out to the brothers, you will be a good minister of Christ Jesus, brought up in the truths of the faith and of the good teaching that you have followed. Have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives' tales; rather, train yourself to be godly.

1 Timothy 4:16 Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.

1 Timothy 6:20 Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to your care. Turn away from godless chatter and the opposing ideas of what is falsely called knowledge...

2 Timothy 2:15 Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.

2 Timothy 2:23-25 Don't have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments, because you know they produce quarrels. And the Lord's servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth...

2 Timothy 4:2-5 Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage --with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry.

1 Peter 3:15 But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect...

2 Peter 3:15-18 Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him. He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction. Therefore, dear friends, since you already know this, be on your guard so that you may not be carried away by the error of lawless men and fall from your secure position. But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever! Amen.

1 John 5:20 We know also that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true. And we are in him who is true --even in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life. See also, Titus 1:1-16.

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