

Is Theology Your Idol?

Tim Conway | illbehonest.com

Question: This comes from Michael Kennedy. He says, "I've been studying theology an extensive amount lately. I believe in reformed theology. I believe repentance is essential to a Christian life. My question is, is it possible for theology, even if it's biblically accurate and true to become an idol or an addiction?"

Discussion:

Tim: Now, the Bible in one place, namely 1 Corinthians 8:1 talks about knowledge that puffs up. Have you guys ever read about that? And yet if you go somewhere else - I've already mentioned Phillipians 1:9 a couple times, so let's mention it again. "My prayer is that your love may abound more and more with knowledge and all discernment." Is all knowledge bad? Paul's praying that people would have knowledge and discernment. So, there is a knowledge that puffs up. There is a knowledge that increases our discernment. There is a knowledge that puffs up. There is a knowledge also that humbles, is there not? I mean, can't we learn some things that really humble us and make God greater in our estimation? Haven't you learned some things before that you found very humbling? That have made you just feel awful small before the great God? Not all knowledge is bad. But not all knowledge is good. There is a knowledge that puffs up.

And I would say this, theology can be a whole lot like Bible translations, right? I mean is the King James Bible good? Folks, it was an excellent translation. It stood the test for 400 years. Tremendous. God used that translation in mighty and tremendous ways. Are the doctrines of grace good? Well, certainly they are. But I'll tell you this, there are Calvinists in hell. And there are KJV only people in hell. And you know what? In my own estimation, I have found some professing Christian Calvinists, professing Christian King James only people... Look, I don't want to stereotype, and obviously there's a bazillion exceptions to this, but some of the most cantankerous professing Christian people can just be people that aren't so nice to be around sometimes.

Look, whatever Bible you have, it ought to be teaching you how to love Christians more and more. Whatever doctrine you have, whatever theology you have, it ought to be revealing Christ to you more and more, that you might adore Him more and more. So many want to learn these doctrines so that they can argue. So that they can debate. Have you guys ever heard of Charles Simeon? Simeon was an evangelical Calvinist. He lived back in the 1700's. Let me tell you about him. He had little sympathy for uncharitable Calvinists. In his sermon on Romans 9:16 Romans 9 He said, "many there are who cannot see these truths." The doctrines of God's sovereignty. He's acknowledging, there are many who can't see them the way he does and the way many in his church did. "...who are yet in a state truly pleasing to God. Yea, many, at whose feet the best of us may be glad to be found in heaven."

And he's right. There are Arminians you would be glad just to be close to in Heaven. He says it's a great evil when these doctrines are made a ground of separation from one another. And basically, I'm getting right at the heart of this. You can tell when your theology is becoming an idol. What's an idol? An idol is something that you give your affection to more than Christ. An idol is something that you give attention to more than Christ. An idol is something that you become consumed with more than Christ. More than the commands of Christ. More than obedience to Christ. And one of the chief things that He would have us to do is love one another.

And folks, if your doctrine makes you all the more a hard person to get along with, if it makes you difficult, if it makes you unbearable, if it makes you ungracious, if it makes you unloving, then you know what? You're doing wrong things. You're creating an idol out of it. And I'll say the same thing about Bible translations, about denominations, if your denomination or being a Baptist or clinging to a certain Bible translation makes you ugly towards other people, makes you bitter towards other people, you've made an idol out of it.

I'll tell you what, Charles Simeon is a guy we can learn from. Here he is, Charles Simeon, Calvinist. Comes face to face with John Wesley, Arminian. Can I read to you? Here's Simeon, "Sir, I understand that you are called an Arminian, and I have been sometimes called a Calvinist, and therefore I suppose we are to draw daggers. But, before I consent to begin the combat, with your permission, I'll ask you a few questions. Pray sir, do you feel yourself a depraved creature? So depraved that you would never have thought of turning to God if God had not first put it into your heart?' Wesley answered him, 'Yes, I do indeed.' 'And do you utterly despair of recommending yourself to God by anything you can do? And look for salvation solely through the blood and righteousness of Christ?' 'Yes,' he answered. 'Solely through Christ.' 'But sir,' Simeon says, 'Supposing you were first saved by Christ, are you not somehow or other to save yourself afterwards by your own works?' 'Nope. I must be saved by Christ from first to last.' Simeon says, 'allowing then that you were first turned by the grace of God, are you not in some way or other to keep yourself by your own power?' 'No.' 'What then? Are you to be upheld every hour and every moment by God as much as an infant in its mother's arms?' Wesley, 'Yes. Altogether.' 'And is all your hope in the grace and mercy of God to preserve you until His heavenly kingdom?' 'Yes. I have no hope but in Him.' 'Then, sir, with your leave, I will put up my dagger again. For this is all my Calvinism. This is my election, my justification by faith, my final perseverance. It is in substance all that I hold. And as I hold it, and therefore if you please, instead of searching out terms and phrases to be a ground of contention between us, we will cordially unite in those things wherein we agree.'"

And may God help us, because when that's not what's true, you have made your theology, you have made your doctrinal position into an idol. The doctrines of grace ought to humble us, not puff us up. And if it's puffing you up, you've made it into something God never intended it to be. The sovereignty of God ought to make us the humblest people on the face of the earth, if we really understand these things right. God help us be like Charles Simeon.

Father, we pray that You would, may You work that in us. We pray it for Christ's sake. May You work just such an attitude, just such a heart, just such a graciousness as our brother Charles Simeon possessed, and as also our brother John Wesley. We thank You for the truth of Your Word, for the doctrines You've revealed to us. We thank You in Christ's name, Amen.