

DON'T BE A "CHRISTIAN"

Being a Theologian: How Does This Work?

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Jeremiah 31:31-34

31 The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. 32 It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. 33 But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. 34 No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, 'Know the LORD', for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

Susan grew up in the church. She was baptized as an infant. She attended Sunday School and Vacation Bible School as a child. She got involved with youth group as a teenager and rarely missed a meeting, always gathering and having a great time with her friends. Nearly every time she had the opportunity to do so she went on retreats and mission trips with the youth group.

As she grew up she was almost always present in worship. On Sunday mornings she would stand and sing at the appropriate times, she would bow her head reverently when it was time to pray, and she would sit silently and listen as the sermon was preached.

Susan left home and went to college several hours away from where she grew up. When she first started school she intended to find a church, but she never connected with a community and it wasn't long before church began to slip from her routine. She still considered herself a Christian, but was no longer active in a community. She often thought that she should get up and go to church, but when Sunday morning rolled around

she either had to wake up and begin tackling homework or else sleeping in just seemed too tempting.

During her senior year of college Susan's mom was diagnosed with Cancer, quickly took a turn for the worse, and died very suddenly. Susan, who had always been very close to her mom was devastated began to blame God for her mom's death. In Sunday School as a kid she had been told that God loved her, that God was good, and that God was powerful. If all of these things were true, she couldn't believe in a God that would take her mom away from her so suddenly. After her mom's funeral, Susan never went to church again and doubted whether God even existed. Susan grew up in the church, spent all of her childhood there and considered herself to be a "Christian." But she never fully connected herself to God's story.

Last week Steve began a sermon series we're calling Don't Be a "Christian." Challenging people to move beyond the negative stereotypes of Christians that are held by so many in culture. Last week Steve challenged us all to move away from a consumer mindset where we simply go to church and to begin truly being the church. This week we begin to talk about and look at some of what that means. Specifically this morning we're going to talk about what it means that all of us as Christians are supposed to be theologians.

Let's start with a good working definition. When I talk about being a theologian – what am I talking about? What is a theologian?... Those are all good answers! The English word theologian has at its root two Greek words – theos and logos. The word theos means God and the word logos means words – theology is literally Godwords and so most simply, a theologian is anyone who talks about God. I also found a dictionary

definition this week that I found to be quite helpful and that can guide our time together this morning a bit more. The dictionary defines a theologian as “*A person who is well versed in the study of the nature of God and inquires into religious questions.*”

As we talk this morning about our call to be theologians, to talk about and wrestle with God’s action in the world, let’s take a minute and look at our biblical call to do so. The prophet Jeremiah lived during a time of great turmoil and conflict. Over the course of approximately 70 years Judah was conquered several times and control of the land shifted between Babylon and Egypt. In the midst of this constant change in leadership and allegiance, people began to stray from God. As people strayed from God the prophet Jeremiah received a call to proclaim God’s word to a disobedient people. Hear these words from the book of Jeremiah (31:31-34):

31 The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. 32 It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. 33 But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. 34 No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, ‘Know the LORD’, for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

The prophet Jeremiah speaks of a time that is to come, a time when all people – from the least to the greatest – will know God. When this time comes, when all people know God and have God’s law written upon our hearts, it will be according to Jeremiah, the fulfillment of a new covenant.

And today we find ourselves in a similar place to the one in which Jeremiah found himself. We are not conquered by outside nation-states, but we live in a time and place where there is much competition for our loyalties. During the week there are activities

and entertainment that fill our calendars and keep us from having time for study, from having time to get to really know God. On Sunday morning there are sports games to be played or watched and there are sales to be shopped that can keep us from gathering together to worship as we seek to learn more about God and what God is doing in the world. And in the midst of these competing loyalties, God calls us to return to God, to renew covenants with God and God seeks to write God's law upon our hearts.

Stephen Prothero, the chair of Religion at Boston University opens his 2007 book *Religious Literacy* with the following words:

A few years ago I was standing around the photocopier in Boston University's Department of Religion when a visiting professor from Austria offered a passing observation about American undergraduates. They are very religious, he told me, but they know next to nothing about religion. Thanks to compulsory religious education (which in Austria begins in elementary schools), European students can name the twelve apostles and the Seven Deadly Sins, but they wouldn't be caught dead going to church or synagogue themselves. American students are just the opposite. Here faith without understanding is the standard; here religious ignorance is bliss.

These were startling words for me to read. Is it possible that American Christians really don't know as much about the Bible and our faith as we should? I'm afraid maybe so.

Prothero points out that there is a huge gap for Americans between the reverence with which we treat the Bible and the degree to which we understand it. Essentially, Christians in American claim that God has spoken through the Bible, but we live as if we don't have the time to be bothered by hearing what God has to say. Many of us probably remember 4 years ago now when, during the Presidential Primary, Howard Dean was asked which New Testament book was his favorite and he said it was Job – a book found in the Old Testament.

The statistics are actually quite staggering according to recent polls. Prothero shares that most American adults cannot name one of the four Gospels and that many

high school students think that Sodom and Gomorrah were husband and wife. A few years ago now on Jay Leno's Tonight Show, no one in the audience could name any of Jesus' twelve apostles, but most everyone, it seemed, could name all four of the Beatles. Unfortunately, it seems that we are, as pollster George Gallup has called us, "a nation of biblical illiterates."

These statistics and stories that illustrate our biblical illiteracy are frightening to say the least. And in large part they are what they are because of the false understanding that many have about who theologians are. When people ask me a question about God, the Bible or faith, I often try to respond with another question. And quite frequently I can see people getting frustrated by this. Sometimes people even say things like, "well I don't know, I didn't go to seminary" or "well I don't know, I haven't read the Bible as much as you have" or "I don't know, I haven't read as much as you have" or "I don't know, I'm not as smart as you are" – ok I rarely hear that last one... But the misconception still seems to stand. People think that theologians are trained professionals off in ivory towers who do the work of thinking about God and then can just translate the data down to others. Friends, it is not this simple.

Think about Susan's story again for a minute if you would. As she grew up she listened to what others had to say about God, but never wrestled with it, never questioned it, never did the hard work to integrate it into becoming her own thoughts and beliefs. And so Susan, like so many of us, never owned her faith for herself and when she encountered difficult times in her life she wasn't able to lean on and rely on her faith, it came crumbling down around her.

There is an ancient proverb that I imagine many of you are familiar with that says, *“Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.”* Dan Kimball, pastor at Vintage Faith Church and author of *“The Like Jesus, but not the Church”* paraphrases this proverb to apply to the need for each of us to be theologians by saying, *“Give a person a sermon and you feed them for a day. Teach a person to study Scripture on their own and you feed them for a lifetime.”* Steve’s and my role as your pastors is not to tell you what and how to think. It is to give you the tools to learn to think and talk about God on your own, to be theologians.

If you’re tracking with me so far I hope that you’re in agreement, that it is important for all of us as people of faith to be theologians. I imagine that many of you might be saying to yourselves though, so what exactly does it mean to be a theologian? How do I go about doing this?

If you ever spend time talking about God, you are a theologian! If you’ve ever said to yourself or to others, “I saw the most amazing sunrise on the way to work this morning – God’s creation is so beautiful” – you’re a theologian. If you’ve ever said to yourself or others, “My kids or grandkids amaze me, they are growing so fast and their lives are such a miracle” – you’re a theologian. If you’re not even sure that you believe God exists, but you’ve ever said, “I feel like there must be something out there, there seems to be something speaking to me, calling me to be a better, more patient, more loving person” – you’re a theologian.

At its core being a theologian is to be one who talks about God. But, it is slightly more complex than to just simply say, “O God,” when facing a difficult situation. Remember the dictionary definition we talked about earlier? It defined a theologian in

two parts: 1) one who is well versed in the study of the nature of God and 2) one who inquires into religious questions.

First of all, we are to be well versed in the study and nature of God. This does not mean that we have to know it all or that we have to have all of the answers. Rather, it means that as we continue learning to be theologians we need to give ourselves opportunities to learn more about God and God's work in the world, we need to gather in groups for discussion and study, we need to read our bibles, we need to read other things that challenge us and inspire us. We need to think about and talk about God and God's work in the world on an ongoing basis. If we don't, we run the risk of ending up like Susan and so many others, feeling isolated from God without the tools to cope in a time of crisis.

Further, as we seek to become theologians, we are to inquire into religious questions. Again, it's not about having all of the answers, it's about engaging in the questions. It's about asking ourselves those classic questions like, If God created everything and God is good, where does evil come from? When we ask and begin to wrestle with questions like this we are becoming the theologians we are called to be.

I want to close this morning with a great example of what it can look like when we begin to be theologians. Last Sunday while Heather and I were still in Kansas the Ridge Youth watched a movie at youth group and the time was facilitated by several parents and other adults. The movie they watched was "Facing the Giants" a film put out a couple of years ago by a church. It tells the story of a football coach struggling at work, struggling at home, and struggling to have faith in the midst of it all. One of the subplots of the film is he and his wife's desire to get pregnant.

I got an email this week from one of the parents who had been present Sunday night that said something to the effect of, “I thought it was a pretty good movie, and there were a lot of good points to it. However, I was troubled with the way they addressed the fertility issue. It was as if in the end they became pregnant because they were faithful enough and I’m not sure I think God works that way. What if they had never been able to get pregnant, would that imply that they weren’t faithful enough? Or what about all of the people who live plenty faithful lives, but still never get the things that they want, what does this movie say to them? I would have appreciated the film more if they had maybe never been able to get pregnant, but rather through their increased faith, they came to rely on God’s presence more and to be at peace with their reality.”

This simple response to a film was a great act of theology. This parent was thinking about what they believe about God and seeking to sink it up with the experiences of the characters in the film. We all have opportunities to do this every day, to look at the stories of the world around us and to incorporate them into the story of God’s work in the world. And as we seek to do this, to be theologians, I believe we will be becoming the people, the Christians, and the Church that God would have us be.

Our world is full of Susan’s, people who have spent their life associated with the church, but who have never fully connected their story to God’s story, who have never done the work of being a theologian. And so it is my hope, that you might all continue become the theologians that God calls you to be, that you might study, that you might learn, that you might wrestle, that you might come to know always, that God loves you deeply and wants you to be a part of God’s story.