THEOLOGIES THAT WOUND: An Introduction

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This is an introduction to the article series “Theologies That Wound,” (see cccd.org/shop for a list of completed articles) which will highlight some mainstream theological thoughts and beliefs incongruent with Scripture, and that can harm Christian’s relationships with God and others.

WORDS, BELIEFS AND SORROW

The Bible is God’s revealed word, and is given to all humanity for knowledge and wisdom, forgiveness and reconciliation, correction and conviction, comfort and affliction, and faith and fear. Words have the capacity to heal and wound. Paul says in II Corinthians 7:8-10 that words and their accompanying beliefs can wound in two ways. One is a worldly sorrow that produces a kind of death; the other is a godly sorrow that leads to repentance through confrontation. The latter sorrow is good. It wounds us at first, but is the forerunner of potential growth and healing. Discernment (the ability to judge) is required to determine what kind of sorrow we experience, which in turn will influence our acceptance or rejection of it.

LACK OF DISCERNMENT BEGINS OUR TORMENT

A considerable amount of human sorrow and torment results from not developing or exercising discernment. When we fail to discern, false information can be deposited in our faith or theology banks that greatly influences our everyday decisions. For example, many Christians believe they should always love others unconditionally. Their definition of unconditional love leads them to:

- never say anything to hurt another,
- avoid all immature arguing and
- cover all the sins of offenders.

They may conclude it is right to avoid problems and confrontations, especially if the other is easily hurt. However, thoughtful Christians won’t allow themselves to exclude other Bible passages on the same topic, such as Matthew 18:15 (the responsibility of talking to an offender) and Proverbs 27:6a (“Faithful are the wounds of a friend.”) Reconciling seemingly contradictory thoughts and verses requires the skills of discernment.

Without careful thought and judgment, people suffer consequences of their wrong beliefs. In
the example above, the likely result would be an inability to work through relational problems and denying or repressing anger, hurt, guilt and/or shame. According to recent research, these unresolved feelings lead to coronary heart disease, depression and anxiety. Other significant effects of false beliefs and accompanying unresolved emotions could include:

- Shortened lifespan.
- Premature decline in physical health.
- The inability to find peace.
- The illusiveness of a sense of God’s presence.
- A slow disconnect from one’s faith.
- A shift in priorities from spiritual thoughts to the external world.
- An unmet desire for spiritual renewal.
- Spiritual doubt and disappointment.

These largely unnecessary sorrows and torments can result from the failure to develop and exercise discernment, which allows false beliefs to be deposited in one’s theological bank. In turn, these beliefs exercise considerable influence over future decision-making. Some people’s discernment skills are highly developed. We can think of our beliefs like a bank account. Those who are less discerning, or sloppy in what they accept, can put worthless and even harmful “counterfeit” currency into their faith account. Over time, the counterfeit will harm the value of the account—the validity and strength of the person’s beliefs. Maintaining a healthy faith “balance” requires repeated and regular examination of the deposits we’ve made in our bank of beliefs, and a willingness to weed out those without merit or that can cause harm. A mark of maturity is to revisit, test and rework our theology as our understanding increases and our discernment recognizes and rejects “bad currency.”

MOTIVATING THEOLOGICAL EXAMINATION

Continual examination of one’s theology is critical. By so doing we remove falsehood and purify truth. We also contribute to our sanctification (change), perfect our image of God and grow our faith—all of which will protect us in times of temptations and trials.

Love of truth can be a powerful motivator for theological examination. A person who desires truth more than retaining and validating current beliefs has the chance to discover deeper truths that can resonate “in the innermost being and in the hidden part” of our soul (Psalm 51:6).

Our love for God should compel us to be the best person we can be for Him. He calls us to examine our minds and hearts. In the parable of two debtors (Luke 7), the one who was forgiven much, loved much because of it. Our desire to be our best can be enhanced by dwelling on what God has forgiven us for, what He has done and will do for us, and His impartial love for us.

Our image of God is incomplete and faulty; we can honor God by being thoughtful in developing
The desire to find relief from pain and resolve problems can drive us to analyze potential false beliefs...

UNDERSTANDING THEOLOGY AND ITS DEVELOPMENT

The literal Greek meaning of the word theology is “the words or sayings of God.” Our study of those words (plus historical evidence, etc.) leads us to ponder and form conclusions. The conclusions we reach become the foundational beliefs, faith, or theology that greatly influence our perceptions, experiences and feelings for the remainder of our lives. No one gets it right the first time; our beliefs grow and develop as we do. Therefore, it is essential to periodically reevaluate our faith, and especially the thoughts, verses, or ideas we do not entirely understand or which appear contrary to our beliefs.

Theology is not the Word of God and theological beliefs are not sacred cows. It is a personal and fallible collection of thoughts that aim to understand God and His creation. As Christians, our primary information is gathered through His revelation—Scripture. Human beings use logic and spiritual reason to consider Scripture and form conclusions, which becomes our theology. An image of God is developed from these thoughts.

Yet an image is a representation, not the real thing, like a painting, which is only a likeness of something. No words or forms could completely describe God; He is beyond human expression. Man’s best theology is composed of limited and imperfect mental constructs to make up an image of God and His creation. Because of this, our image of Him must not be static, but continually reworked throughout our lives.

Each of us creates his or her own unique image of God. It is often our best representation of Him, sometimes formed not from objective study, but from our need and personal woundedness. For example, one who has been sorely and repeatedly rejected may desire to be soothed by an image of God that focuses on His unconditional acceptance. This accounts for some of the reason we have different views and emphases of God. One person may relate more to the idea of a policeman ready to pounce and give a ticket when we violate the law (producing a guilt-ridden person). For another person, a protective and nurturing mother who loves unconditionally is more appealing (producing the belief God will forgive everyone and all are heaven-bound). We all skew the truth about who God is; focusing too much on one of His traits is one way to do so.

Theology is a manmade discipline. It has many similarities with the
development of human science disciplines, like psychology. Theological development begins with God’s revelation, however, not from scratch as other disciplines. Fallible humans use an estimated five percent of their brain, live only seventy-five years or so, forget about ninety percent of what they learn and possess a dual, contradictory and partly unconscious nature. Yet, these are the very people God entrusts with the awesome task of piecing together the unfathomable, unending character of a Spirit not of our world.

This is a completely humbling and gargantuan task. Knowing this should keep us from becoming dogmatic and rigid about our theology, and open to modifying or giving up an incomplete or poor representation of God for a better image of Him when new truths are discovered.

Some interpretations of Scripture can be held as secure, unchanging truths. For example, Christians believe Jesus Christ is the Son of God and the Savior of those who put their trust in Him. Those beliefs are foundational, and are not going to change. What does change over time is the meaning, purpose and impact of bedrock truths. We clarify what essential faith doctrines mean in our lives by asking questions. For instance:

- How can I better understand the intended role of Savior and Son of God?
- What things are true of Him in these roles?
- What are the ramifications of Jesus calling me His brother in light of other verses describing Him as Son of God and describing me as a son of God?
- What does it mean to be a son of God or a god, as we are called in the Bible?
- How does that influence my self-esteem and my self-image?

Unfortunately, many people cease refining and expanding beliefs once they have thoroughly developed them. Often, they are enshrined and protected from change. However, the tragic result is suspending growth in becoming like Jesus. Unchanging beliefs may provide a sense of stability, security and peace, but at what price?

Next we consider some reasons why discernment is so hard to practice, and how to develop the skill needed to use it effectively.

THE TROUBLE WITH DISCERNING TRUTH

There is one Bible, one truth and one intent of God for His words. However there are thousands of different (sometimes opposing) interpretations. Why does God allow it, and why can’t people agree on biblical truth? It appears there is no limit to the number of possible approaches to interpretation (biblical, systematic, constructive, etc.), all of which have preconceived rules for determining the Bible’s meaning.

Many factors influence Christians to follow or resist the Holy Spirit, including their past, present situation, teachings, experiences, needs, wants, core pain, biology, spirit, sin nature and chosen beliefs. The result is that no two of us are or ever will be
alike. We are uniquely created and distinctively developed human beings. Consequently, it is profoundly impossible for two independent thinking people to come to complete theological agreement. Sometimes we even argue with ourselves.

Some of the influences that affect developing a coherent and universally acceptable theology are:

- God and the universe are infinite.
- People find security and simplicity in a black and white theology.
- There is considerable gray in almost every subject the Bible speaks about.
- Abstract thinking is required to understand the Bible.
- Flexible thinking is necessary to grow one’s theology.

God and the Universe are Infinite

If God wrote down every bit of truth for us, we would not have enough time to read it all, or ability to contain but a tiny portion of it. Since our knowledge, language and understanding will never be perfect, God and the universe will be largely unknowable in our lifetimes. Therefore, our scriptural interpretation and the development of a philosophy and our system used to comprehend Him will change as we grow and mature. The goal is to progress in truth until Jesus’ return. We can realistically attain degrees of confidence in what we believe, rather than a rigid dogmatism. “For now we see in a mirror dimly... now I know in part, but then I will know fully...” (I Corinthians 13:12, NASB)

Security and Simplicity in a Black And White Theology

Many people find a sense of security and welcome the simplicity of a theology that is black and white, concrete and fixed. To varying degrees, we all need the structure of a system of beliefs. It gives us some order, control and stability in a world torn between good and evil, right and wrong, and predictable and erratic, where pain is a frequent consequence. The structure gives us a sense of understanding and peace, even if what we believe is false. For example, a popular statement says, “Nothing happens in this world without God’s approval.” However, this statement is not theologically accurate. Sin in our world never has God’s approval, yet it happens all around us. The statement persists, however, because it provides comfort to those who feel there is no other way to understand or perhaps even cope with a chaotic world or the unknown. To remove the belief
leaves people feeling more vulnerable and less secure. Something that yields an emotional benefit can be difficult to give up, even when the belief is false.

Relying on a simple, concrete and fixed theology can be a temptation, but it leads to harm. Our security should rest in the truth and not in rigidly holding on to an inflexible and unalterable system of beliefs.

**The Gray in the Bible**

God has revealed Himself and the laws governing his people just as He intended. Yet, an ocean of gray exists in most any subject in the Bible. The gray comes to light when our unanswered questions reveal the limited scope of the Bible and when we attempt to apply general principles to complex situations. God chose to leave out a significant amount of detail. An obvious reason for this is if scripture were to cover all the underlying principles and exceptions to every law and their applications in everyday life, the Bible would be too long to read in a person’s lifetime.

The Bible contains about 1600 pages. Compare its length to the 15,487 pages that comprise the 1928 edition of the *The Oxford English Dictionary*, which only defines words in one language, and doesn’t attempt to define the universe, the vastness of God or the intricacies of humanity.

The Bible does address some issues we struggle with even today, but without direct and definitive direction on every possible situation. For instance, Moses, other prophets and later rabbis wrote specific rules about permissible divorce, based on their interpretation of God’s law. They were given great liberty to define and clarify the general laws of God, to shed light on the gray areas. Pharisaical laws became the standard for Jewish behavior and were upheld by Jesus, who said, “...all they tell you, do and observe, but do not do according to their deeds...” (Matthew 23:3)

When Jesus discussed divorce with religious leaders who questioned Him, He didn’t give an exhaustive treatise on the subject, but focused on the most salient points (Matthew 19). He did not elaborate on all the specifics of separation, divorce and remarriage (see I Corinthians 7). For a more accurate theology on divorce we must scour scripture, collect the bits of information and connect the dots by discerning God’s intent, the best we can. The church has the power and authority, as do individuals to a limited degree, to cautiously move beyond the dots to shed light on the gray areas, as did the prophets and rabbis. We must look for and understand the underlying principles of what God has revealed in order to make application to everyday life situations not spelled out in Scripture.

**Abstract Thinking**

A person needs to have some ability to think abstractly to understand Scripture. Theology, moral reasoning, personality and the existence of God are abstractions, and things we can’t touch, sense or readily define. They are ideas, conceptualizations and symbolic representations we may not be able to prove, but by faith we believe in their existence.
Jesus’ parables are stories with a central truth wrapped in everyday situations to make them easier to understand. We can’t get the meaning He intends if we read them literally. In the same way, eschatology (study of end things) can’t be understood or appreciated if someone doesn’t think abstractly about a dragon (a crafty and evil being) with seven heads (kingdoms) and ten horns (kings) (Revelation 12:3). Each person must move beyond concrete thinking (literal, unimaginative and logical) to abstraction. Let me illustrate with another example. I am a patriotic person (concrete) who willingly served my country in Vietnam, but my patriotism (abstract) is separate from my role as a patriotic person. I am also a recovering perfectionist (perfection is an abstract idea—we believe it exists). To some degree, abstract thinking can be learned, but it is extremely challenging to teach because the cognitive process is not well understood. Abstract thinking requires considerable effort, but it offers great rewards. God is glorified when we search out His abstract and concretely presented truths, and in the process we acquire knowledge and a faith not easily shaken.

Flexible, Not Rigid Thinking

Our thinking process must be free flowing so the Spirit, who moves like the unknowable winds, can lead us. If we are free from a single-approach system of interpretation we can engage in a more eclectic or free-borrowing model. Just as no person has been able to formulate a single, coherent model of Jesus’ counseling because of His incredible flexibility, so too, a single, fixed model of interpretation will likely skew our beliefs. Mental flexibility makes it possible for scripture to tell us its truth even when it appears to contradict other references because of our fixed, flawed beliefs. We can then retain and not ignore or reject confusing verses or principles.

Psychologically, we all attempt to make sense of what we see, hear, feel and think by associating something similar in our memory banks to what is being presented to us.

For example, what do you see inside the box to the right? Most people say they see a square or box. In reality there are only disconnected short lines and dashes. It is common to finish connecting the lines to form a shape that is familiar to the observer. Making sense of the image by completing the connections is called assimilation. Think of it as a negative process of distorting incoming information to fit preconceived ideas. We all do this to varying degrees when we interpret Scripture. We assign interpretations to verses that make sense to us, but may be far from God’s meaning.

To illustrate, the phrase, “Be anxious for nothing” (Philippians 4:6) will be interpreted by a person’s usual patterns of thought and belief. Someone may think God is being critical when they read the verse, even though commands can be given in love with a soft voice. We fill in the blank spaces with our worldview. It is easy to assume that God is referring to the feeling of anxiety. However, though the feeling may be the consequence of our action, God is telling us not to give ourselves to over-thinking, which is
a mental process. The interpretation that God is being critical of us in this verse would lead people to feeling guilty over any feeling of anxiety. A better translation might be, “Do not give yourself to over-thinking anything.”

There is great benefit in being flexible in our thinking and avoiding rigidity by being open to new ideas. We need to be steadfast in our beliefs until we discover through study new truths that require reforming our beliefs.

**TAKING THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED—FINAL THOUGHTS**

We all would likely agree, none of us have yet arrived or become perfect or complete, but are continuing in a lifelong process of growing spiritually—becoming more like Jesus. Given this reality, it is apparent that the majority of our theological beliefs should be held in a state of perpetual change.

Every discipline goes through endless revisions. No field of study is ever complete. Theories of business, science, ethics, law, etc. evolve over time as we mature and increase our knowledge. We challenge present beliefs so that we can make improvement.

Theology is not a closed-end or fixed system of beliefs. In our lifetimes we will not come close to understanding the complexities of Scripture, God, nature or the spiritual world. Therefore, the only sensible position a thoughtful Christian can defensibly take is to be open-minded, flexible, continually learning and always redefining theology. For me, this is an exciting, never-ending, fascinating adventure. With each new understanding of God my soul is more profoundly knitted to His. It strengthens my faith in and increases my admiration for Him. I have always found it somewhat painful to shed an old image of God, people or the universe in light of newfound clarity and truth. But the pleasure of the new dulls the loss of the old. Accepting that life is a series of deaths and rebirths makes this journey easier.

To help ensure your growth, commit to do the following:

- Do not permit anything to keep you from being open to altering or growing your theology, such as theological pride—“I’ve got my beliefs together. I’ve got the truth, and that’s that.”
- Do not become a slave to your theology or refuse to reconsider points of it for fear of what others might think.
- Challenge yourself to thoroughly investigate verses that trouble you or seemingly contradict your beliefs.
- Dare to ask questions, and “Study to show yourself approved...” (II Timothy 2:15a)
A strong and intelligent person asks hard questions and pursues difficult answers. Consider there is an answer for every question—it may not be perfect or complete, but it is a beginning. In Proverbs, God implores us to search out knowledge, wisdom and understanding. We are to bind them around our necks—a place between our logical minds and our feeling hearts—to guide us throughout our lives. By doing this, we will avoid some wounds that result from a poorly developed or rigid theology.