

SOUND WORDS

HOLD FAST THE FORM OF SOUND WORDS—2 TIMOTHY 1:13

First Partaker

Theology Matters: Part II

John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* recounts Christian's visit to the instructive home of a good brother named Interpreter. This astute believer, charged by the Lord to prepare pilgrims for their journey, conducts Christian through the various rooms of his house. Each contains some parabolic lesson, but the first is especially significant. It contains a picture of a "very grave Person" with "eyes lifted up to Heaven, the best of books in his hand, the Law of Truth was written upon his lips, the World was behind his back; it stood as if it pleaded with men, and a Crown of Gold did hang over its head."

"Now," said Interpreter, "I have shewed thee this picture first because the man whose picture this is, is the only man whom the Lord of the place whither thou art going, hath authorized to be thy Guide in all difficult places thou may'st meet with in the Way."

Last issue this column argued that theology matters. Immensely. In the first place, because it's about God. Since nothing matters more than He does, it follows that theology matters infinitely. It also matters because it's about the whole Bible, all of which is God's thinking and therefore "theology." And theology matters, thirdly, because all people are ruled by their theology. They practice it. Not consistently, but inevitably nevertheless. Everyone goes, each his own twisted way, unless someone intervenes to be his Guide. And Bunyan got it Scripturally right when he posited the Preacher as the one Divinely authorized to be that Guide.

Preachers, by Christ's calling, are some of the Church's

theologians, not merely its pastors, its capable administrators, or even its spiritual examples. And given their weekly access to men's minds with the best of Books held in their hands, preachers must be some of the Church's finest theologians.

"The husbandman that laboreth must be first partaker of the fruits"
(2 Tim. 2:6)

Never has there been an age in which this was more critical. C. H. Spurgeon warned his readers that in their "age of progress, religious opinions move[d] at railway speed." How fast was that? Thirty . . . forty miles an hour maybe? But in ours they fly right around the globe at the speed of light. Anybody with a big idea, though half a world away, can unsettle our people with the click of a key.

So, assessing theology is vital. That was the discussion begun in the last column by explaining that any theology must be examined first of all, *categorically*. Does it fall into the category of strictly Biblical theology or the category of Systematics? The latter, by its very nature, branches out into both interpretation and logical deduction. Therefore it must be more vigorously scrutinized.

Definition

The next check must be definitional. Evaluate teaching *definitionally*. Let me explain the importance of this.

How often have you heard someone say, after hearing two preachers disagree over some doctrinal point, "It sounds to me like they're arguing over nothing but semantics"? *Nothing* but semantics? Wait a minute. Nobody can safely dismiss that. Words have meanings, and meanings matter. That's why we scrutinize contracts and double-check prescriptions. Words or numbers can be a matter of life or death. And words start wars. Sometimes they should.

Athanasius believed semantics counted and took on nearly the whole empire for the sake of a Greek *iota*. Luther believed semantics was critical and went to the mat for the one word "only." J. Gresham Machen believed

Inside

Bring . . . the Books—Key books for the pastor's study	5
Straight Cuts—An exegetical study	6
Windows—Themed sermon illustrations	7

semantics mattered and wrote a classic defending the single word “virgin.”

On a scale of 1–10, how highly would you rate the critical importance of the following italicized words? *Verbal, plenary* inspiration. There is *one* God in *three* persons. Or, there is one *God* in three *persons*. Creation *ex nihilo*. Six *literal* days of creation. Abraham *believed* in the Lord, and He counted it to him for righteousness. A *miraculous* parting of the Red Sea. The *impeccability* of Christ. *Fully* God and *fully* man. *Blood* atonement. *Three* days and nights. *Bodily* resurrection. *None* righteous, no, not *one*. *Sola fide*. *Sola gratia*. *Sola Deo Gloria*.

For instance, many years ago I sat on the ordination council of a good man who mistakenly defined justification as God’s “making us righteous” rather than God’s “declaring us righteous.” The difference, of course, is one of the continental divides between Biblical and Roman Catholic theology.

Are we prepared to give any semantic ground whatsoever on any of those words? Why not? Because words are critical. Especially theological words. Their technical specifications and precise clarifications stolidly safeguard the Faith from semantic revisionism.

We all agree with this. But for the sake of the Truth and the unity of the Spirit we must consistently apply it. How?

Semantic Conscience

First, by developing a semantic conscience about our own use of words. For example, the vast majority of the theological words we use have predetermined meanings. Either the Scripture itself or the consensus of God’s people fixed them long before we began preaching. A semantic conscience concerns itself with using those words according to their fixed meanings, especially when controversy erupts over some doctrinal issue that employs them. I heard a pastor relate his asking an unbelieving professor, who nevertheless taught in a conservative seminary, how he justified resubscribing to its orthodox creed every year. “That’s no problem,” the man replied. “I can make those words mean anything I want to.” That’s unconscionable.

Semantic conscience contends lawfully within a church’s, a denomination’s, a fellowship’s, or a school’s definitional parameters. It doesn’t stoop to sleight of hand, moving ancient landmarks for the sake of keeping a professional position or scoring points in a debate. If we frankly believe a term is being mistakenly defined or that a completely new term is needed for an old definition, so be

it. Let’s say so openly and propose it. Nobody should fault us for that. They may disagree with our reasoning, but they will at least appreciate our honesty. But we ought to feel the sharp prick of conscience if we’re knowingly redrawing the configuration of standard doctrinal terms.

One of Spurgeon’s complaints during the “Down-grade” controversy was that the officers of the Baptist Union were turning a blind eye to some of its members’ deliberate ambiguity about critical theological terms. To the editor of *The Baptist* newspaper he wrote, “I must . . . protest against anyone saying that he believes orthodox doctrines, *but not in Mr. Spurgeon’s sense*.” I believe these doctrines, so far as I know, in the common and usual sense attached to them by the general usage of Christendom. Theological terms ought to be understood and used only in their general and usual meaning. . . . Whatever the Council [of the Baptist Union] does, let it above all things avoid the use of language which could legitimately have two meanings contrary to each other. Let us be plain and outspoken. *There are grave differences—let them be avowed honestly*” (*The Sword and the Trowel*, March, 1888).

That’s my point exactly. Use words “honestly.”

Self-Education

This leads inevitably to a second necessary application of the importance of definitions. We show our seriousness about this by taking the trouble to learn what theological terms mean. In some cases the necessity for this is simply inestimable.

For instance, many years ago I sat on the ordination council of a good man who mistakenly defined justification as God’s “making us righteous” rather than God’s “declaring us righteous.” The difference, of course, is one of the continental divides between Biblical and Roman Catholic theology. But the misunderstanding was increased when one of the pastors on the council followed up by talking in general terms about the new birth. In other words, about something related but entirely different—regeneration. And when he finished, a second council member further compounded the confusion with more general comments about God’s saving us from our sins. After several minutes of this we all, myself included, let the mistaken definition and generalities stand and proceeded to the next question.

Hopefully, all of us who were on that council would be more exacting today. I use the illustration only to underscore how easily we can overlook or excuse the necessity of theological precision. Augustine made this same mistake of defining justification as “making” rather than “declaring” righteous, and it was a thousand years later until Luther set things right. Perhaps today’s apparent blindness to the errors of Roman Catholicism on the part of some Protestant leaders is due, in part, to a similar imprecision in their theological upbringing. I do know this, that some of the definitions and explanations in the new official *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997) are a carefully crafted confusion of Scriptural terms that the Bible itself uses in distinct ways to

differentiate various aspects of God's marvelous salvation. So much so, in fact, that I would expect that the average Christian, and probably an alarming number of pastors, would be taken in by the *Catechism's* use of scriptural terms in mistaken ways. Do you agree, for instance, with the following?

Justification: The gracious action of God which frees us from sin and communicates "the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ" (Rom 3:22).

You can see how easily a believer without sound theological training might be entirely disarmed by such a subtly crafted statement. He testifies to his Roman Catholic friend about salvation through Christ and the friend assures him that his local parish priest says the same things. "So, what's the need of evangelizing my friend when his priest teaches that? Sounds right to me."

But it's not. It's the faulty foundation for the superstructure of a works salvation. And it's all in what you mean by "frees." "Frees us from sin." No question about it, God frees us from sin. But that's not justification.

"You're just arguing over semantics," somebody protests. Exactly. It matters. To us, and to Rome. We need to take the effort of finding out why.

For quick reference to definitions I use several sources, a couple of which sit within arm's reach across the top of my desk. These include *A Student's Dictionary for Biblical & Theological Studies*, by F. B. Huey and Bruce Corley (Zondervan), *Concise Dictionary of Christian Theology*, by Millard J. Erickson (Baker), and Alan Cairns' *Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Ambassador Emerald International). My favorite theologian for accurate definitions, however, is Louis Berkhof. His *Systematic Theology* (Eerdmans) is almost unparalleled for its carefully stated explanations. And, of course, there's the *Westminster Confession of Faith* for being certain of what our Presbyterian brethren believe and, *The 1689 Confession of Faith* (Carey Publications) for the historical statements of what we Baptists have held. Samuel E. Waldron's *A Modern Exposition of the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith* (Evangelical Press) is an almost indispensable guide to the latter. For a helpfully organized and annotated collection of over fifty historic Baptist confessions and catechisms go to www.reformedreader.org.

Accurate Representation

Definitions may matter the most when we disagree, not with false teachers, but with brethren. Now the unity of the Body is threatened.

We dare not label something a "heresy," especially when many of the Lord's choicest servants have believed it, unless we're absolutely certain of the way in which they explain it. Are we calling a teaching "heresy" as that doctrine has been historically defined, or are we redefining, perhaps even unwittingly, and calling *that* the heresy? If we say that "such-and-such is a heresy," are we truly representing what "such-and-such" is? Or are we demonizing historical terms by indoctrinating our unsuspecting people

with exaggerated definitions of those words?

This kind of thing does no end of harm. Our people hear us caricature a teaching and then ever after recoil in undisguised loathing from the very mention of certain terms, when, in fact, they don't even understand them.

The real fact is, hardly anybody believes or teaches what we've attacked. But careless preaching cast the die and no amount of protest can seem to break the mold. So, like poor conscripts mustered to the trenches of a war they don't understand or want to have, the various churches' members dutifully shoot at each other from behind battle lines drawn ferociously but fallaciously by a well-meaning but really ignorant preacher. Initial definitional accuracy about our brother's real beliefs would have generated far less heat.

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Let's ask them if we don't know. Let's send them a written statement of what we understand them to teach. Send it with unfeigned respect. Send it with a genuine desire to find common ground, not a secret agenda to ensnare them in their own words. There's a lot at stake here: people's lives, families, friendships, happiness, and blessing in the Lord's work. Way beyond that, Christ's cause and name hang in the balance.

We simply *must* get our brother's positions straight and accurately represented if we have to disagree with him publicly. Even the fact that he may not be a Fundamentalist, but an Evangelical or Charismatic, gives no license for caricaturing him or his teaching.

Carelessness in this area is maddening. No wonder it makes people really angry. They vehemently *deny* (!) that they hold a certain position or define it in a particular way, yet the attacker blithely persists in misrepresenting them. This is despicable and must surely fall into the category of things God hates (Prov. 6:19). Charles Wesley was on one occasion so exasperated with this kind of deceit that he abruptly rose and concluded a confrontation with the solemn summons to his attacker to meet him at the Judgment Seat to answer for the wicked caricature of what he actually believed.

Proportion

A third important criterion by which to test our theology is *proportionality*. Within the grid of a rigorously applied Biblical and systematic theology we must define terms and positions conscientiously, and then measure our preaching of them proportionately.

In other words, something can be true definitionally but untrue proportionately. For example, over a period of several centuries the Church hammered out precise statements about the person of Jesus Christ. He is both fully God and fully man. Both propositions are true.

But what would be the effect on a church if “fully God” was conceded but seldom emphasized while at the same time “fully man” was constantly and emphatically preached? What if church members hear one week, “Let’s get this straight, Jesus is *fully* man. Don’t let anyone deceive you about this, He’s a *man!*” Then the next it’s, “Folks, I’m really burdened that we get hold of this. Jesus is human. Don’t get me wrong, I’m not saying that He isn’t God. He is, but, oh, the *blessing* of coming to realize that He was flesh of our flesh, bone of our bone—one with us—a real member of the human race!” Then again, a week later, “Jesus was, and is, and always will be a man! Why are we afraid of this teaching? It’s Biblical. It’s the teaching of the Church historically. It’s a truth we’ve got to get back to—the real, literal, undeniable *manhood* of Jesus Christ! He’s a man! He’s a man! He’s a man! Bless God, He’s a *man!*”

Clearly, there’s not a word of error in those statements. But they’re being preached all out of proportion to the Scripture’s own emphasis. Of course, if the Church has lost a truth like this or if it’s actually under attack, then there’s a need for a recurring insistence that it’s truly taught in the Word of God. But may the Lord preserve us from unduly massaging even a truth into a huge lump that turns ulcerous to the Body of Christ. John Calvin wrote perceptively, “When one [scholar] has gone astray, others, lacking judgement, follow in droves.”

Mutual Accountability

In 1986 American sociologist Robert Bellah authored *Habits of the Heart*, an assessment of individualism in America. He told of a woman named Sheila who told him, “I have my own religion. I call it Sheilism, just my own little voice.”

Anyone can slip into similar theological subjectivism. A Fundamental pastor doesn’t do it to Sheila’s extreme because he’s committed to putting everything to the test of inscripturated revelation. But on lesser points he can. Anyone of us may. It can happen with the best of intentions due to unfamiliarity with an issue about which one is called upon to give an off-the-cuff evaluation. We feel

like we have to say *something*, and the something may be nothing more than subjectivism. But what we said gets repeated, then gets preached by others who respect us, and before we know it our opinion becomes a position—not just our own, but that of who knows how many other churches.


On the other hand, we can slip into subjectivism for utterly inexcusable reasons—disinclination to study, self-serving motivation, unwillingness to listen to others, mindless parroting of tradition. We subsequently do more damage than a Sheila ever could. Sheila never divided brethren or split a church. Only well-respected Christian leaders have the influence to do that.

So there’s one more way of checking our theology to ensure that we’ve got it straight and don’t, even unwittingly, slip into subjectivism. That’s to take seriously the Scripture’s admonitions to be subject to one another. To be mutually accountable for our theology. “Submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of God” (Eph. 5:21). In the context, this is one of the sure evidences of Spirit-filling. “Yea, all of you be subject one to another” (1 Pet. 5:5). In the context, this is one of the sure evidences of humility.

We independents have no formal accountability structure. But we have ministerial friends and faithful church members who have proven their loyalty. They’re in our corner and have stuck up for us many times. They have a track record of consistently encouraging us and following our leadership. Can’t we accord to them a measure of liberty to call into question something we’ve preached that hits them wrong? Such a person probably fears that he’s risking the treasured relationship with his pastor just to come in and ever-so-respectfully express a concern. He probably prayed over the possibility for days or weeks or months before making an appointment. How should we receive him? “Faithful are the wounds of a friend” (Prov. 27:6).

But if there’s not just one—one individual, one couple, or one extended family—but several trusted individuals, or several trusted ministerial friends, who express concern about our emphasis, surely we ought to fine-comb our theology again to see if it’s objectively credible.

No one likes to admit that he’s wrong. Perhaps our biggest fear is that we will lose so much respect that people will ever after suspicion our preaching. I don’t think so. People like that don’t tend to hang around. They find somewhere else to attend.

But regardless, we ought to be so intensely Christ-centered that we jealously guard a precisely accurate theology about Him and all His ways and at the same time vigorously refute what is otherwise. If that means having to adjust our own statements from time to time, then we’re setting the very best possible example for our people. We’re showing them that more than anything else, including ourselves, theology matters. 



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