

## Sound theology

By [Ryan Dueck](#)

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Over the last few weeks, I have been mulling over an interesting passage from Marilynne Robinson's fine novel, *Lila*. The Reverend John Ames, an elderly Midwestern Methodist preacher is in conversation with his much-younger new wife, Lila, who has come to find rest, shelter, and love after a brutally hard life full of abuse and neglect. The conversation is about hell and the final judgment. Lila knows little of theology and metaphysics, but she has questions. Hard questions. How, she wonders, could the many people she has known who struggled and suffered so terribly on earth be made to suffer further in eternity because they didn't become Christians? Who could believe this? She asks her husband how any of it could be true.

[Rev. Ames] came into the kitchen and sat down at the table. "I must seem like a fool to you," he said. "You must think I've never given a moment's thought to anything."

She was always surprised when he spoke to her that way, answering to her, when she had never read more than a child's schoolbook. "I'd never think you were a fool," she said.

"Well," he said, "maybe. But I do want to say one more thing. Thinking about hell doesn't help me live the way I should. I believe this is true for most people. And thinking that other people might go to hell just feels evil to me, like a very grave sin. So I don't want to encourage anyone else to think that way. Even if you don't assume that you can know in individual cases, it's still a problem to think about people in general as if they might go to hell. You can't see the world the way you ought if you let yourself do that. Any judgment of any kind is a great presumption. And presumption is a very grave sin. I believe this is sound theology, in its way."

What I have been wondering is whether or not the Rev. Ames is right. Is rejecting or accepting a belief because it helps or doesn't help us live the way we should a valid litmus test? Is this "sound theology?"

Many, of course, would protest quite quickly that this reduces theology to personal preference. "How convenient," they would say. "Anything that you don't like or doesn't make you comfortable can be jettisoned because it "doesn't help you live the way you should." *Don't like traditional Christian teaching on x? Doesn't do much for you? No problem, just set it aside! Whatever helps **you** live the way that **you** think **you** should!* Far from being "sound theology," some would say, Rev. Ames' sentiments here barely represent sound *psychology*. Theology becomes a tenuous fragile thing, blown about by the ever-changing and unreliable winds of individual tastes, unable to ever *challenge* or stand over what we prefer or find palatable.

Human beings have been expertly making and bowing down to gods of their own making and preferring for quite some time, after all.

I feel the force of this argument. I regularly grow weary of how easily theology can be reduced to the smallness of ourselves and our inclinations. And yet, something within me also resonates deeply with the Rev. Ames's response to Lila. Part of it is because I believe that questions like Lila's—questions that emerge out of the deep pain and struggle of the world—have more weight than the intellectual abstractions that some of us occupy our time and our minds with. But even beyond that, I am convinced that our core convictions about who God is, how God works, what God wants, and the nature of the future God is shaping really *should help* and not *hinder* us from living the lives we should.

And some beliefs simply don't help us do this. It's extremely difficult, in my view, to believe that God is as harsh and severe as some of his most enthusiastic spokespeople insist he is and live a life of self-giving love, compassion and mercy, as I feel I ought to. It's extremely difficult to believe that God will consign a vast swath of humanity to eternal punishment for having the wrong content in their heads, as some insist, and at the same time cultivate a life characterized by the fruit of the Spirit. It's extremely difficult to love God and neighbor as myself when I have deep reservations about just how loving this God that I am called to love really is.

It's extremely difficult—*impossible*, actually!—to be "imitators of God" ([Eph. 5:1-2](#)) when you secretly think that God isn't really worth imitating.

If we don't at least in some sense believe that there is a necessary and indissoluble connection between the lives that our best selves long for, the mode of being in the world that we most admire, and the very character and purposes of God, our lives can become permanent exercises in coping with the cognitive dissonance that comes from the felt need to believe in a God who is less than the lives we are convinced we were made to live.

This is, of course, not an airtight argument. It's not meant to be. I am well aware that there are problems lurking around every corner of responses like the one the Rev. Ames gives to young Lila. In a sense, though, all "sound theology" requires us to choose what and how we will prioritize. I have yet to come across any theological system that crosses every "t" and dots every "i" and systematizes all relevant factors (scripture, reason, tradition, experience) into a wonderfully coherent and comprehensive package that accounts for any and all complexity and removes all thorny issues. And I don't expect to. That's not how theology works.

And so, perhaps, "Thinking about \_\_\_\_ doesn't help me live the way I should" isn't such a terrible test to fall back on, or at least *consider* as we ponder how we speak about and live into the things of God. Perhaps it really is "sound theology, in its way."

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