

Importance of theology?

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I'm nearing the end of my time as an M.Div. student at Perkins, and I've been thinking about my the experience of taking seminary classes. Part of my own reflection process has involved reading the essays I wrote for admissions and scholarship applications from four years ago. In these documents, I almost always brought in my passion to develop my theology—I remember writing something along the lines of “our worldview shapes how we live.” I would then tie this into how admission into Perkins would equip me to accomplish this through a well-rounded, liberal education. I'm sure the admissions committee ate this up.

This assumption—that our worldview shapes how we live—is really quite common. Consider the following examples from a few Christian writers and preachers:

- [Jeff Hood writes about his experience of shame in a Southern Baptist context.](#) He argues that this kind of theology is incredibly damaging and leads many to suicide, all because SB theology is “devoid of the love of Jesus.”
- In one of the best sermons I've heard in a while, [Greg Boyd talks about the “Twilight Zone God” and how our mental image of God shapes our life.](#)
- [Rachel Held Evans has often critiqued the Calvinism of folks like John Piper,](#) arguing that the theology itself is abusive.
- [Tony Jones has argued that the primary problem with Mark Driscoll is his misguided theology.](#) I think it's a fair reading of Jones to say that he thinks Driscoll would be perfectly fine if he were to become less “right wing.”

As strange as it may sound, I'm a little hesitant now about what I wrote for Perkins—that theology and worldview are somehow the golden egg for Christian living. Don't get me wrong, having a nasty picture of God can help you turn into a very nasty person. A low-hanging-fruit case-in-point of this phenomenon would be Westboro Baptist Church.

But can every problem in the world be boiled down to *problematic theology*? As I read and encounter more material from so many modern voices in the church, it seems like a good portion of them think *Yes, the problem is with theology*. I'd certainly agree with some of the above posts, but isn't it odd how often the *theology* card is played?

In so many cases, we think that we must get our theological ducks in a row in order to then live out faithful lives. In this sense, we are still quite rooted in the dualisms of the Enlightenment—treating our inner, mental life as superior to all else. Regardless of what one makes of postmodernism, I think its clear that all of us still feel the aftereffects of Descartes, Kant, and Co.

Too often we encounter a profound disconnect between theology and daily living. Recent events indicate this. A bishop from a major mainline denomination will likely face ten years in prison for intoxicated manslaughter. Emergent church leaders continually silence the abused ex-wife of a major leader. A well-known evangelical conservative lobbyist had an Ashley Madison account. You know how all these stories go.

Situations often play out in random and inconsistent ways, with little to no causality between “theology” and vice. It doesn't matter if you speak up for the rights of LGBT persons—you might still abuse a spouse spiritually, emotionally, and physically and turn an entire community against her. It doesn't matter if you proclaim “family values” while holding a Bible in hand—you could be throwing your own covenant of marriage out the window through an affair.

Theology could make for some compelling arguments, but I think it's clear that this does not necessarily lead to righteous living. I firmly believe that we really do tend to give theology a lot more credit and importance than it deserves.

One of my favorite passages of the Old Testament is Ezekiel 36:26–28. This text has really spoken to me, especially as I examine my own heart:

A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances. Then you shall live in the land that I gave to your ancestors; and you shall be my people, and I will be your

God.

If God was only concerned about theology, I think the text would have read “I will remove from your body the mind of crookedness and give you a good picture of me.” But God seems to be all about transforming hearts, not just heads.

I think I could make a lot of money if being a Christian simply consisted of having good theology. It would be easy to teach or promote your material. I usually think I’m a good speaker, so people could listen to me and then they’d go live out in the world, empowered by perfect internal beliefs. Being a pastor could be a lucrative profession and ministry transformation could happen with as little as just fine-tuning a sermon.

But that’s not how God interacts with us, much less desires in a true relationship. Perhaps most striking about contemporary discussion on “good theology” is that we fail to bring in spiritual discipline or talk of virtues. These two alternatives seem like better ways to experience God’s transformation than reading a think piece on theology. When I think of my own life, I’ve arguably been most formed by the Christlike example of others and experiencing God’s love among those in need.

Of course theology is important. But it’s definitely not the only important thing to work out in order to follow Christ.

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