

Do Full-Gospel Ministers Need Theology?

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Pascal, never known for his affection for the rationalism of his day, once said that faith "is captured by the heart."¹ He was referring to his belief that God must be experienced in ways the human mind cannot fully comprehend. Recently, a minister was heard encouraging his congregation to "let God speak your **heart** not to your **head**," as if to echo Pascal. As catchy as these words seemed, I could not help noting how they expressed but little appreciation for the mind, even **the mind transformed by God**. Instead of denouncing any particular philosophy or theological system, the minister seemed to imply that the mind is an enemy. It seems that the value of the reasoning process has been widely discounted within full-gospel ranks, and that theology has been overtly condemned as a hindrance to fidelity to God.

We may laud Pascal's condemnation of "modern rationalism," the exaltation of abstract reasoning as the source of truth. Reasoning however, is crucial to the formulation of sound Biblical ideas. The questions addressed in this article is: Do full-gospel ministers need to do theology which, by definition, requires intellectual inquiry into, and reasonable explication of, their beliefs? Our proposed solution may be found in the following propositions: (1) that full-gospel ministers have had misconceptions about the meaning and function of theology; and (2) that theology has a practical role in communication the teachings of Scripture to the church.

I. A Lesson From History

Anyone acquainted with the efforts of men like Augustine, John Wesley, Martin Luther, or Charles G. Finney knows that these were champions of the faith. They were also men of expert learning, skilled at wielding the sword of truth against the attack of agnostic or heretical contemporaries. These men never questioned the relationship between their faith and their capacity to reason, because they believed God embraces both. They were abreast of their times, educated and, most importantly, devout students of the Word. At critical junctures in church history, they successfully guided it along a steady course. On the other hand, other successful spiritual leaders were not known for being theologically lettered. Billy Sunday, for instance, and in the early years of the Pentecostal movement Charles Parham and William Seymour experienced tremendous evangelistic success with little emphasis upon the value of education or theology. Yet, in the founding years of the Pentecostal revival, a "full-gospel theology" was already emerging which would ultimately become a dividing factor, spawning the first Pentecostal denominations.² Paradoxically, it was theology which divided the movement but it was also theology which facilitated the effective organization of these factions, leading to further church growth in this country.

The independent bodies continued to develop their “revival doctrines,” teachings on the tabernacle, and the “mighty baptism of the Holy Spirit.” In this important aspect, all full-gospel bodies, whether denominations or independent churches, have clearly adopted particular “theologies.” For whenever there are explicit teachings on the nature of Jesus Christ, the gifts of the Holy Spirit, or the church and its government, **theology is present!**

The irony of full-gospel history in this country is that it produced a rich heritage of dialogue about the person and work of the Holy Spirit and proclaimed the uncompromising gospel of Jesus Christ, yet rejected in principle a **structured** elucidation of Biblical precepts. Doctrines were outlined and presented, of course, but research and analysis were neglected or avoided. In short, full-gospel churches inadvertently supplied theological **statements** without reference to theological **rationale**. Tragically, it became acceptable simply to claim, “We believe what the Bible believes!” It is always more convenient to claim that the Bible **supports our beliefs** than to explore the reasons why we believe the Bible **originates those beliefs**.

Consequently, much criticism has been leveled at the full-gospel movement by those who belong to other fundamental and evangelical bodies.³ The full-gospel leader often not only refused to provide a theological framework supporting his beliefs, but actually regarded such efforts as contrary to the authenticity and integrity of his spiritual experience. Some full-gospel ministers had come out of mainline denominational seminaries, and had leaned to associate theology with “the dead letter of the law.” While the believer could **experience** the fullness of life in Christ, he could never **explain** it. And if this line of thinking applied to the baptism of the Holy Spirit, it should also apply to everything we believe about the Scriptures! The ineffable character of the full-gospel Christian’s life led him to believe that there was nothing to study about it.

Such well-meaning attempts to preserve the sanctity of genuine spiritual experience resulted in religious gibberish. Full-gospel theology remained elusive; people began to entertain nonsensical statements such as, “I believe in the Bible because I believe in the Bible,” “Christ is God because He said He was,” or even, “I don’t need a church because the Bible says, ‘You have no need that someone teach you.’” Yet these are theological statements themselves; for fearful as it may seem, all theology becomes practical sooner or later.

If we could learn one valuable lesson in studying Pentecostal and charismatic history it should be this: full-gospel theology is inevitable, and even if we decide not to articulate our position, it will eventually be evident in our practice. For this reason it is important to define the core tenets of a full-gospel theology which have been the hallmarks of our presence within the larger evangelical community, applying to these tenets the disciplines of Biblical research and theological clarification.

II. Fearing the Conquest of Reason

Accompanying a general skepticism about the value of theology is a widespread phobia for higher learning. Some would insist that a formal Bible or seminary education is the first step of departure from the cross, and instills serious doubt in the mind of an unsuspecting believer. It is conceivable that exposure to problems of Bible criticism or a skeptical approach toward God’s miraculous activity today could leave a Christian student with a callused or confused view of the Scriptures and a weakened spirituality. This is what full-gospel ministers fear the most in their young and curious members, and why they fail to encourage people to pursue a theological education.

Admittedly, there is always the danger of exchanging the living, pulsating gospel inheritance for a mess of academic pottage. Some have even abandoned their full-gospel stance out of an appetite to “be somebody” theologically. In reality, they are like those characterized by the apostle Paul as “ever learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth” (2 Tim. 3:7), as though enchanted by the serpent disguised as “super-mind.” But theology devoid of the cross leaves us grossly self-centered; and theology which attempts to undermine the authority of Scripture becomes destitute of the richness of the Spirit, casting its lot with the popular quackeries of science and the impotent ideologies of the secular world.

Avoiding exposure to theological disciplines is no solution, however. For when a church or its leaders fail to take into account the wealth of theological history, or to recognize general rules applied to the

interpretation of Scripture, they fall prey to their own “dogmatic relativism.” When we deliberately and irresponsibly project to our listeners what we want the Scriptures to say, independent of careful research and honest reflection, we start to become paranoid authoritarians. If we cannot show others the reasons **why** we believe what we believe, we tend to assert our beliefs upon the basis of **who we are**.

The greater question, by far, is why we tend to polarize these equally crucial elements in the Christian faith, spiritual experience itself and the mental perception and reasoning process applied to our living relationship with the Lord. I agree with Josh McDowell when he says, “Becoming a Christian doesn’t mean that you kiss your brains goodbye.” We needn’t go far afield to find evidence of this principle. Those who have failed to unite spirituality with theology have sometimes found themselves in the throes of heresy and death. The story of Jim Jones is not merely a tale of someone whose twisted aspirations gained dominance, but also a story of a movement which employed **no framework for interpreting the Scripture** in judging one man’s personal revelations. Theology has a way of keeping us from going into such tragic extremes.

As full-gospel people, we have enjoyed a rich history of revival and church growth, largely because we have offered a living experience instead of serving dry-bones doctrine to the spiritually starved. Many former main-line church members have joined Pentecostal and charismatic churches in order to escape the empty traditions of their past denominations. But lest we become complacent about this, we need to be reminded that a significant number of people have left their full-gospel heritage and joined other evangelical churches. Though some surely departed out of suspect motives, others sought answers which took on a theological character, but their full-gospel leaders told them not to bother with such questions. The evangelical ministers had answers, even if they did not conform to the full-gospel message. Furthermore, non-charismatic evangelical churches learned to digest the main points of Christian theology into practical teachings by which their members could live.

Clearly, no movement or local body should be expected to have all the answers. But in some churches there has been a marked suspicion of people who have questions, leaving one to wonder whether the ministers are trying to veil their own ignorance. Nothing is wrong with not having the answers. It is when we attack the spiritual sojourner simply for his inquisitiveness that we miss the mark.

Within the mainstream evangelicalism, the full-gospel community is characterized by a distinctive standpoint, as well as a wealth of tradition. It has inscribed an indelible mark on the pages of church history, and promises to be a significantly greater movement in the future. But the time has arrived for the full-gospel community to identify its legacy and begin to fearlessly articulate its beliefs to a generation who want to know **why** it believes **what** it believes. The barriers falsely erected between the life of the Spirit and the world of the mind need to be abolished. The mind is irrefutably God’s property, as are the body and the soul, and we are obliged to exercise it as stewards of the grace of God. “Therefore, prepare your minds for action!” (1 Peter 1:13 NIV).

Before proceeding to a discussion of “good” and “bad” theologies, we need to distinguish three levels of theological investigation. **Professional theology** is conducted by trained scholars whose primary calling in life is to “search the Scriptures.” Their work is to provide interpretive and reflective material assisting the church in the contemporary application of Scripture. These individuals are rightly called “theologians.” A **pastor’s theology** (not to be confused with “pastoral theology,” a specific theological subdiscipline) includes the full range of Biblical and systematic ideas the pastor has derived from Bible study and the reading of supportive documents. What we shall call a **parishioner’s theology** consists of those ideas a worshipper has learned from others or from daily study and meditation, and the way he expresses those beliefs in conduct.

We are concerned here with the second level, a **pastor’s theology**. I believe it was in the spirit of encouraging a pastor’s theology that the Apostle Paul advised a young minister at Ephesus (Timothy), “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and one who **correctly handles the word of truth**” (2 Tim. 2:15). With an eye to truth Paul added, “Preach the word!” (4:2). Martin Luther put it another way: “Peace if possible, but truth at any rate.”

III. Clearing Up Misconceptions:

Good and Bad Theologies

Doubtless, a number of myths and misconceptions have circulated among ministers concerning the pitfalls of theological investigation. I would suggest, however, that **there are good and bad theologies**, just as there have always been good and bad leaders in the church.

History has proven emphatically that sound doctrines constructed on a solid Biblical and theological framework not only last, but generate life and fruit in the church. Conversely, when a solid framework is lacking, the very fabric of Christian belief becomes loosened, unraveling an endless thread of inflammatory and even heretical ideas. Invariably, those structures which have proven to be faulty have been developed independent of certain pre-suppositions which are basic to Christian theology.

Three of these crucial tenets concern us here. First, **God is wholly transcendent**, but may be known in **personal experience** through the media of prayer, the Scriptures, and certain subjective or “existential” encounters.⁴ The orthodox view of God depicts Him as high and lofty, above full self-disclosure. He is the great “I AM” (or “I will be what I will be,” Ex. 3:14). He cannot be fully comprehended because “no man has seen God” (Jn. 1:18). Second, **we can have accurate knowledge of God**. Though limited, our cognition is verifiable.⁵ Still, our ideas remain perennially incomplete, since **faith provides the warrant** in our search for the inscrutable mystery of the Godhead (1 Cor. 5:7; cf. 1 Cor 13:9-10). Third, insight into the mystery of God is contingent upon **the Creator’s willingness to disclose Himself** to His creatures. In short, God has to **speak** before man can hear. As Barth put it, “without the precedence of the creative Word, there can be not only no proper theology, but, in fact, no evangelical theology at all”⁶—which, of course, includes full-gospel theology.

Thus any steps toward a full-gospel theology must be firmly planted upon this triune foundation of Christian experience, faith, and God’s willingness to act in self-disclosure. Orthodoxy has referred to this latter as revelation, Jesus Christ being the supreme radiance of God’s self-disclosure (Heb. 1:1-3). He is the *Logos*, the divine word sent to the lost world (Jn. 1:1-3), who incarnates the message of *agape*, that God’s love has come into the world (Jn. 3:16). Christ is, therefore, at the center of Christian experience (Phil. 1:21), the object of sincere faith (Gal. 2:20), and the witness *par excellence* to God’s love and His will for man (2 Cor. 5:19). No other type of theology is adequate.

There are, indeed, several **types of theology we do not need**. For one, we must **avoid theologies which find their origin and locus in man**. Such theologies emerged with the work of Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), who defined the essence of religion as “the immediate feeling of the infinite and Eternal.” Schleiermacher’s emphasis on subjective “religious feeling,” coupled with an overconfidence in the analytical interpretation of religious experience, effectively replaced the authority of Scripture with that of man. Since his time, many imaginative but destructive theologies have arisen, all of them the logical result of placing man at the center as the epistemological (knowing) base for the interpretation of religious experience, rather than revelation.

The authentic gospel, however, is not anthropocentric but theocentric. It discredits any fantasy that man can ascend to God of himself. Evangelical theology understands that **it is God who condescended to man in Christ** (Phil. 2:6-7; cf. Jn. 4:9-10). Any theology which proposes man’s inherent ability to discover God ignores the obvious reality of sin which, in the evangelical view, obscures all spiritual insight.

A second type of theology we do not need consists of **theologies which become ends in themselves**. The “hinder side” of loving the truth is theological infatuation—the obsession to be omniscient, to know everything there is to know about God. When theology itself has replaced God as our greatest concern, we have violated the first commandment, erecting “another God” (Ex. 20:3). Even before the time of Plato and the Greek philosophers, men began to venerate knowledge for knowledge’s sake; it became a “thing in itself” (*das Ding an sich*, Kant), rather than a means of relating to a Person. The essence of Christianity consists not in propositions only but in **relationship with God**. Any attempt to reduce God to propositions must yield before God “manifest in the flesh,” the Christ who can be seen, heard, and handled (1 Jn. 1:1-3).

Thirdly, we do not need **theologies which become weapons against the church**. The history of Christendom is filled with examples of theologies erected as catapults and siege batteries for internal religious wars—conflicts in which Satan has been the principle victor. Like the Corinthians, given to a

party spirit (1 Cor. 1:11-12), we have not lost our propensity for dogmatism. The word “heresy” (Greek *hairesis*) denotes the act of lifting out a doctrine and calling it one’s own, to the exclusion of other ideas. Although it is a worthy trait to stand by one’s convictions, it is also possible to allow “destructive opinions” (2 Pet. 2:1) to ferment sectarianism. Someone has said that many churches know more about what they **do not believe** than what they **do believe**. We ought to fear the power of our own biases to take the place of a real theology.

IV. Reconstructing Theology for Full-Gospel Ministers

Historically, “theology” has meant thought or discourse concerning God. In a sense, every Christian has his own theology. The structured elucidation of theology, however, has been and remains the specific task of a class of scholars known as “theologians.” Christian theologians have based their theologies on Scripture as such (Protestant) or church tradition concerning Scripture (Catholic). But what has theology to do with the local church pastor? The answer to this question lies in a redefinition of “theology.” For the full-gospel minister, **theology is the apprehension of Biblical ideas and principles, and the communication of these truths to the church**. If the pastor succeeds in this task, he should expect people to become stimulated to enlarge their concepts of God and salvation, and to apply their *credo* (“I believe”) to their *conducere* (“bring together,” i.e., conduct). The specific theological task of the minister is to relate sound theology to his people in such a way that they come to live out that theology in practical principles.

Today, this is a serious need in the church. There is a growing concern among families and individuals to find **real answers to real problems**. In the sixties, frustrated young people threatened to dethrone every authoritative institution, because no one cared enough to provide direction or answers. In our decade, the church must not fail to heed its calling “to be prepared to give an answer (Greek *apologia*) to every one who asks. . .” (1 Pet. 3:15).

There is also the timeless principle that **we must protect the truth**. Never has this principle been more critical. No previous age has awarded such freedom to cults and occult sects to propagate their ideas in a developed nation. Many of these movements are formidable opponents of Christianity because they use the Bible as their primary text, twisting it to their own ends.⁸ In a nation where reason and education enjoy a high priority, these groups with their refined arguments and persuasive rhetoric have experienced widespread success. And unless the church also **knows what it believes, and is able clearly to articulate its beliefs**, our denunciation of cultic movements will appear unconvincing to all but our own “in-group.”

Moreover, theology has significant implications for spiritual growth and worship. Genuine worship requires serious inquiry into the nature and greatness of God. “We worship what we know” (Jn. 4:22). A Christian’s worship will never exceed his concept of God. Those with warped and paltry ideas of God soon become slack in their worship because they run out of reasons to praise the Lord. Inability to worship the God who is worth worshipping is frequently the result of a lack of “depth perception” into His being. In the words of J. B. Phillips, “your God is too small.”⁹ Sound theology, however, contributes to the development of wholesome concepts of God. Ministers dare not abdicate their theological responsibility to the worshipper, abandoning him to the formulation of his individual beliefs in an arena where popular, but inadequate or misconstrued, ideas germinate and flourish. If the pastor can assist his people in developing their comprehension of the greatness of our Lord and of His Christ, they will respond in spiritual growth and in their capacity to worship “in Spirit and in truth” (Jn. 4:24).

V. Theology Before the Pulpit

We have discussed the current need for theology and, especially, the need to redefine theology as a practical tool for communicating truth in the church. We now consider theology from the perspective of the minister, viz., what does it **mean** to him, and how does it **become practice**?

Theology must be first of all **a disposition of the pastor**. It would be senseless to challenge every full-gospel minister to return to school in pursuit of formal theological education. The church would not

necessarily be the stronger because its pastors became “lettered.” Instead, the ministerial task requires a “theological disposition,” an attitude baptized in discipline and burning with the desire to proclaim nothing but the truth.

As the expositor of God’s word, the pastor must weigh his ideas and interpretations carefully before bringing them to the pulpit. God’s servants of the word are not passive conduits transporting revelation from heaven to earth, from Book to brain. Any idea worth presenting should be arrested before it is made public and scrutinized in the light of time-honored orthodox theology. Any “new” doctrine should be tested by infallible Scripture and also, perhaps, by the response of a circle of mature and trusted colleagues.

More fundamental than vast knowledge of the relevant theological literature is **a disciplined and alert mind** with a passion for truth. The man with such a mind will have a powerful influence in communicating his ideas. Still, where we have access to books and materials which are helpful in interpreting the Scripture and enhancing our awareness of our contemporary environment, we should take advantage of them. When we respect and learn from a diversity of works on Christian theology, we admit to the belief that there are “teachers” in the body (1 Cor. 12:29; cf. Eph. 4:11).

Theology must in the second instance be **a matter of practical application**. A valid criticism of the church’s former handling of theology is that it never seemed to bring doctrine down to the believer. Church members came to associate theology with bushy-browed, pipe-smoking, withered little men sitting in musty libraries, laboring over the intricacies of irrelevant minutiae. Theology is practical, but one might not believe it listening to some clerical snobs who seem to delight in mystifying their parishioners with “things hard to understand.” How different was the early church, which saw its doctrine as intensely practical (cf. Phil. 2:4-11).¹⁰

The church has never suffered from a lack of controversial topics; what it needs in place of these is a theology which reaches into the homes and hearts of every Christian and follows him in his daily walk and into his workplace. We need a theology which addresses the common issues of our lives—a **“marketplace theology.”**

A theology for the twenty-first century must handle the hard questions of the times: what about racism? homosexuality? abortion? nuclear proliferation? singleness? single parenting? divorce? marriage? public education? These and other issues are what the churchman faces every day. He must know that the message of the kingdom of God relates to these issues with timeless principles and practical guidelines which offer hope and direction. Working out answers to these issues is tantamount to working out our theology.

We do not suggest that the more traditional theological categories are no longer relevant! God, man, sin, Jesus Christ, salvation, the church: all seriously impact modern man. But the minister will have to communicate these doctrines within a context that helps people see their relevance. Why is it still important to believe that Christ is God? What about the Trinity, or the personal, visible return of Christ? If these doctrines are still sacred tenets of the church, today’s believers need to know how they relate to his situation.

We need to recognize that we, as ministers, are no longer dealing with a “Christian society.” Many non-Christians, especially young people, have not grown up with the Sunday school or with an environment of Christian love and teaching. They don’t understand religious jargon, and it is questionable whether half the people who attend church regularly do, either. Loaded expressions such as “being saved,” “born again,” “Spirit baptism,” or even “God’s abiding presence,” are little more than foreign phrases to many who populate our congregations today. When a person encounters God in Christ and is subsequently transformed into a beautiful Christian, we cannot naively suppose he understands the basic terminology of the Church. Many will need to be led by the hand into the fundamentals of the faith. They will need sound Christian doctrine to guide them, and such theology must be vigorously practical.

In the third place, theology in our context must **a full-gospel endeavor**. It must be an exposition and clarification of those categories which distinguishes the full-gospel wind of the church. The **experience** of Pentecost is enhanced by the **explication** of Pentecost, conducted in humility and with a passion for truth. There is still a platform for those who will stand up in the midst and declare, “. . . this is that. . .”!

There are good reasons for believing that God continues to act in miraculous signs and wonders on earth. Such knowledge, of course, requires faith; but **faith can respond to rational explication** when it joins with hearts that are seeking straight answers (cf. Acts 17:2-4).

We should be able to demonstrate that some Christians practice glossolalia, prophetic utterance, and spontaneous worship **because they are theologically sound**. Isolated examples of Pentecostal heresy and charismatic nonsense do not preclude the authenticity of the full-gospel experience, less still that of the full-gospel church.

However, if our theology is intended to be truly a “full” gospel, we must not hesitate to explore the full range of Christian theology. The doctrine of the Holy Spirit must not be the only doctrine that concerns us. Instead of “borrowing” the rest of our theology from non-charismatic evangelicals or others, we can work out answers of our own to the problems posed to theology, taking into account the thorough and relevant work done by spokesmen for other traditions but allowing the distinctive stance of our full-gospel heritage to shape the final result.

As ministers, we should approach this challenge as a genuinely spiritual endeavor, responsibly researching and working out our ideas while, at the same time, “(fixing) our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith” (Heb. 12:2). Seeking answers, literally “doing theology,” is a means of **expressing our love for the Savior**. We show our fidelity to Him and to His Word by taking careful steps toward knowing the truth and relating it responsibly to others.

VI. Postscript and a Plea for New Balance

The history of the full-gospel movement has been observed by some to be a heritage of excesses. I trust that the reader may find my plea to be one characterized by balance. There is no need to advance any particular doctrinal “cause” except the “cause of Jesus Christ and him crucified.” No other issue, even the sincere conviction that full-gospel ministers need theology, should be viewed as unique or fresh revelation. As with all else, a danger lurks behind every extreme. Those who trust rational inquiry as the sole justification for their beliefs are in danger of substituting “dead precepts” for authentic Biblical faith. Those who neglect reason as a viable means for ascertaining truth, while clinging to their immediate spiritual institutions, are in peril of substituting “pet doctrines” for authentic Biblical sanity. The church will probably continue to march into the twenty-first century regardless of internal factionalism. One can hope, however, that in the process it will begin to recognize and correct two equally mischievous parties: the “intellectual snobs” with their textbook answers, and the “spiritual snobs” with their personal revelations. Let us, therefore, move above the battle by squarely admitting the need for balance. Let us develop **a theology of the whole man**—one which may, in fact, preserve us . . . “blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thess. 5:23).

1 Blaise Pascal, *Pensees*, translated by Martin Turnell (Harvard Press, 1962), p.163.

2 For more on the history of Pentecostalism, see, Vinson Synan, ed. *Aspects of Pentecostal-Charismatic Origins* (Plainfield, NJ: Logos International, 1975).

3 For examples of recent criticism of the full-gospel movement at this point, see John MacArthur, Jr., *Charismatic Chaos* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992).

4 By an “existential” encounter we mean an experience of subjective or inward awareness, one which affects our senses and makes God immediately real.

5 Unlike the modern empiricists, we are not using the term “verifiable” in the strict sense of empirical or linguistic verification. On this subject, see Anthony Flew and Alasdair Macintyre, eds., *New Essays in Philosophical Theology* (New York: Macmillan, 1955).

6 Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Wm . B. Eerdmans, 1979), p. 18.

7 Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*, translated by John Owen (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1958), p. 16.

8 On this subject, see the insightful book by James M. Sire, *Scripture Twisting: 20 Ways Cults Misread the Bible* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press, 1980).

9 J.B. Phillips, *Your God is Too Small* (New York: Macmillan, 1957).

10 Long before this passage raised questions about a so-called “kenotic theory” of Christology, Paul had written it to a group of believers as an example of how to live the Christian life.