

THEOLOGY FROM BELOW

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Isaiah declares that a wayfaring fool need not err in the way of the Lord (35:8). We, being evil, know how to give good gifts to our children (Matthew 7:11 = Luke 11:13). Jesus' comment is a cue and clue that the way of the Lord is not that hard. At least the basics of revelation we ought to catch onto from personal experience as we "*feel after God to find him*" because "*he is not far from every one of us*" (Acts 17:27).

So much of what our creator is interested in has to do with proper personal relationship to him and other people. Though interpersonal relationships are the most complex realities we know of, we understand how they work because we are involved in them all the time. It is most likely the capacity referred to when scripture says we are created in God's image, the interpersonal capacity. If we have a problem in such matters, it is not so much in understanding what is appropriate to do but in doing it.

Working upward from our own nature and circumstance, we ought to understand how God operates and what he expects of us. We read off of his image created into us what interpersonal deity is like.

Derivative implications relate even to such matters as how we present doctrinal matters—that we do so in behavioral garb. It is not just a matter of wholeness (vs. bifurcation), but of direction. Not only do we mix the conceptual and the experiential, we go from the experiential to the conceptual. Learner can see the pattern in the experience. All they need to do is extract the pattern and apply it in like situations. That process is akin to "theological interpretation," where what is said in one connection in scripture is lifted from its original setting and applied to other like situations. That procedure is evidently one reason Jesus taught in parables.

Theology from below corresponds with the educational concept of readiness—starting with where "students" are and leading them to where they need to be. Jesus applied that principle when he told his disciples, "*You cannot bear them now*" (John 16:12).

Theology from below is the reason the Golden Rule (*a la* The Second Great Commandment) works so well in guiding positive social interaction. It assumes the fundamental unity of mankind so that "I" can project my consciousness over behind the eyes of "you" and, for the most part, understand what "I" should do. It gives us a "rule of thumb" to operate by. (We can do the Golden Rule because of the *imago dei*.) We need to look at it from the "you" perspective because of the difference between "I" and "you," either in the circumstances the other person is in or the difference of understanding in him.

The warning is that we, being evil, need to take heed that our viewpoint of consciousness not degenerate into self-centeredness. We can be tempted to do that by (1) forgetting that God knows our hearts (Luke 16:15; 1 Samuel 16:7; Proverbs 21:2; Romans 8:26). We cannot hide our motives and attitudes from him. There are no short-cuts by way of ritual or external behavior when our "hearts are not in it." We cannot manipulate God or use manipulative techniques on other people, because over time even people will catch on. We cannot get by substituting something else, something easier, for the naturally required thing.