

How Incurable God-Lovers Should Discuss Theology

An incurable God-lover is that rare and supernaturally changed person we call a Christian. He is someone whom God called out of the darkness of unbelief and self-centeredness into the light of knowing God and living for Him. An incurable God-lover has come to understand that he has rebelled against the God of heaven and earth and that he deserves God's unending wrath. He recognizes that when he sins against God, it is not simply breaking a rule in God's book, but it is a personal offense against God Himself. He understands "in his bones" that sin grieves God. He is not only remorseful over sin, but he desires never to do it again. An incurable God-lover lives and breathes grace. This person feasts on the fact that God showered His love on an undeserving sinner and rebel. He delights in the truth that Jesus Christ bore the wrath of God in his place. When he commits a sin, this grace of God is that which causes him to repent of his sin and redouble his efforts to live for Christ. An incurable God-lover has the Spirit of God in his life pushing him on to continue to love God more than sin until he dies.

How to Go About Discussing Theology

Over the years we at In-Depth Studies have been involved in more than our fair share of controversial theological discussion and we have received more than our fair share of black eyes and uncharitable responses. I am not writing this to tell you how awful those who disagree with me have behaved. My involvement in discussing theology has brought to light something far more disturbing than that. I have perceived my own motives for discussing theology turning more and more sinful as I have received both negative and positive responses to my writing and speaking. I find myself wanting to belittle my opponents rather than putting their interests above my own. In addition, I find that I desire people's praise far too much. In short, I find myself discussing theology for the wrong reasons and, at times, in the wrong manner. So this leads to the question: How should incurable God-lovers discuss theology?

Theology is not a hobby or a game. It is not about getting every point right, although it is important to have correct theology. Theology is about knowing God through the Scriptures. The stakes are high because theology not only affects how we live now, but the theology we embrace is directly related to where we spend eternity. Theology is the most important field of study that exists because God is the most important person that exists. When someone has wrong theology they not only dishonor God by misrepresenting Him, but their lack of understanding can lead other people astray. In short, wrong theology can smear God's good name and can hurt His people.

I am not for blind ecumenicalism in which you are limited to small talk about sports because you disagree violently about everything else. I believe it is necessary to divide over important theological issues and to create different local church bodies that clearly teach and live out what they believe Scripture says. But neither am I for churches that are hermetically sealed off so that we have no exposure to those who differ from us. I believe it is of vital importance that we talk about, laugh, discuss, and wrestle through our differing theologies. If you are a Preterist, a Covenant Theologian, a Premillennialist, a Pentecostal, a Charismatic, an Arminian, or a Calvinist, you should strive to be talking with those who differ with you. But you should also strive to be talking with those who differ with you *in a way that honors God and displays His wonderful grace and mercy*.

It seems as if many times the theology most people embrace is wrong. I say this not because their *stated* theology always differs from mine, but rather because the way they go about discussing this most important of subjects reveals their *unstated* theology. The normal fare in theological dialogue can range from an unwillingness to listen to the point of view of others, to name calling and harshness, and sadly, arrogance. It is not at all unusual that our actions and our stated theology can be in conflict because of the way we discuss theology. But if this happens,

God is being dishonored by the manner in which we try to defend His truth. The goal is that our stated theology and our actions so harmonize that we give evidence that what we understand about God, we actually believe! As basic as this may sound, a great need in Christian circles is that we actually live out our theology when we are speaking about the things of God with other people. This will revolutionize the way we discuss theology with those with whom we disagree and even the way we divide from others.

I must admit that it is frustrating to talk to someone who I am sure holds the wrong view about something. It is even more frustrating to talk to someone that I know is wrong when he thinks that he is right and is unwilling to listen. It is tempting to think that I know what I am talking about and the person I am discussing theology with is “ignorant”. But such thinking is sinful and wrong. Perhaps I have the knowledge and the intellect to run rings around someone. Perhaps I have the theological weight with which to squash him like a bug. Now, what do I owe this “ignorant” person with whom I am discussing theology? This is a theological question that should be answered before I ever begin to have a theological discussion.

If I am a believer (that is, if I am an incurable God-lover), then I have been saved by grace. I was so helplessly and hopelessly locked up in my own self-centered God-hating little world that I didn’t realize or didn’t care that the God of the universe was my enemy. My whole life was an offense to our perfect Creator. He sees and knows every sinful and shameful thing I have ever thought or done. He is always right in all of his judgments and action and, well, I’m not. If you were to call me an ignorant twit in comparison to God, it would be the highest compliment you could pay me and it would far overestimate my abilities and virtues. God is not only able to squash me like a bug, but I deserve to be squashed. I deserve to be in hell forever and ever because I have rebelled against God. But God, “who is rich in mercy,” decided not to squash me like a bug. While I was still insulting God and living as His enemy, God decided to give me mercy. He decided to satisfy His wrath, which He was storing up for me, on His innocent Son so that I might live for Him and enjoy Him forever. I received grace—the undeserved, unearned and inexhaustible love of God. As we stand basking in the love and mercy shown us through the cross of Christ, let me ask the question again: What do I owe someone with whom I am discussing theology? If the answer hasn’t leapt to your mind just yet, let’s consider some Scripture that might help us grasp just what we owe everyone with whom we interact:

¹If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, ²then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. ³Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. ⁴Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. ⁵Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: ⁶Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, ⁷but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. ⁸And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross! ⁹Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:1-11).

³⁴A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. ³⁵By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another (John 13:34-35).

²⁹Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.

³⁰And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. ³¹Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. ³²Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you (Ephesians 4:29-32).

⁷Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. ⁸Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. ⁹This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. ¹⁰This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

¹¹Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. ¹²No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us (1 John 4:7-12)

Listening to Understand: The First Step in Theological Discussion

It seems rather obvious, but since it is violated so often (as I write this I am cringing at the memory of my own sin in this area) it is worth making some remarks about. How can I put the needs of the person I am talking with above my own if I am not willing to actually listen, understand, and consider his point of view? How can I claim to love my brother and yet not be willing to let him fully explain himself? If I am actually going to seek to love the person with whom I am discussing theology, I need to understand his point of view thoroughly. I may disagree with every part of his theological position, but I need to understand his point of view so well that I am able to explain it to him in such a way that he can honestly say, “I couldn’t have represented my view better myself.”

For those of us who are theological veterans, there is a danger in dismissing this point. There are few theological positions that we have not been exposed to and do not thoroughly understand. If someone tells me he does not believe in limited atonement, I can be fairly certain that I know all of the texts that the person will go to in order to prove his point of view and I am also pretty sure how he will attempt to explain away all those texts that seem to point in the other direction. Why should I bother listening to him explain a point of view I already understand perhaps better than he does? The reason I need to bother listening to him is because God has commanded me to love him self-sacrificially. Even if I have heard his theological position stated a thousand times before by other people, there is no excuse for me not to listen to him state his point of view with the patience and attention that I owe him (always keeping in mind how God is so patient and attentive to me).

But we can’t stop simply at listening in order to understand someone’s theological position. In order to truly love this person, I need to do more than simply understand his point of view academically. I need to understand *how he understands* his point of view. I need to draw out of him *why* he believes it and what he thinks *the implications* of his view are. If I am actually striving to love this person (which, as a Christian is my obligation to everyone, even to my enemies) then I desire to serve him in some way in our discussion about the things of God. This means that I need to get to know what makes him tick.

A person’s theology is not formed in an academic vacuum. Our lives actually inform our theology just as our theology informs our lives. For example, some time ago I had a discussion with a very bright man who is an able interpreter of Scripture about the biblical basis for the doctrine commonly called “the age of accountability,” wherein some believe that Scripture teaches that young children automatically go to heaven up to a certain age. They believe that when children reach an age when they have a clear understanding of right and wrong, only then does God hold children accountable for sin (their own sin *and* the imputed sin of Adam). We

examined several passages of Scripture and I was shocked at what I believed were flimsy and irrational arguments. It made little sense to me how such a bright and knowledgeable person could hold what was a theological position seemingly without biblical warrant. Then we began to chat about his family and he told me about how his wife had one miscarriage and his first child died soon after birth. Suddenly I understood that his theological conviction was most likely not grounded in Scripture but in a traumatic experience. I was then able to point him away from the “age of accountability” and toward the hope that Scripture gives us in the midst of such a tragedy like losing a child. The point is simply this: theological discussion is not only about the text but about the person as well. It is not only about winning a point but also about showing love and concern for one of God’s servants. It is about listening to understand the point of view *and* the person.

Honoring God With Our Intentions

The way we speak to one another is as important as the truth of our theological point of view. We have already established that Christ has commanded us to love one another. We are not only to love fellow believers, but our enemies as well. We have also established that in order to live out the command to love one another, we need to strive to understand the point of view of the person with whom we are discussing theology. Understanding usually involves listening and a bit of speaking in order to clarify what is being said. Now we need to consider those situations when we have to open our big mouths to present our point of view, to point out errors, and to defend what we believe the Scriptures teach.

Are we going to choose “adjectives” to the glory of God, or are we going to allow our tongues to wreak havoc and dishonor God? That is the simple choice we need to make. Are we going to put our love for God, our love for our brothers, and even our love for our enemies as our first priority, or are we going to choose to live for ourselves by feeding our pride and dishonoring our Lord? The book of Proverbs and the book of James are full of admonitions to be very careful about how we speak to others. Jesus says that the words that we speak reveal what is in our hearts. The things that we say reveal who our Lord really is:

No good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. Each tree is recognized by its own fruit. People do not pick figs from thornbushes, or grapes from briars. The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks (Luke 6:43-45).

Most of us who engage in theological discussion know this, but sadly I see this truth applied far too infrequently. It wasn’t that we intended to be prideful or hurtful, we just wanted to win the argument. Of course, we don’t want to admit that winning the argument was our motive. We might refer to our prideful and arrogant way of interacting as, “defending the truth.” But notice that even this stated intention in discussing theology doesn’t mention that we should love whom we speak to and help him to understand God better. Our intention wasn’t to lay down our lives for our enemies, taking insults quietly and humbly attempting to show a more excellent way to think about the God of heaven and earth. It is a wonderful thing to “defend the truth” of the specific doctrine you are discussing, just so long as you remember that you simultaneously have to obey the other truths of Scripture like loving your brothers and loving your enemies, just as God has loved you. Without love and concern for the person you are talking to being a primary intention, there is no way you will consistently choose “adjectives” to the glory of God.

No Hotline to Heaven

Take a deep breath and repeat after me: “I could be wrong.” In the light of day it sounds crazy that we even need to discuss the fact that when we talk about theological issues we must be

mindful that we are not infallible. But as crazy as it sounds, when most people enter into theological discussion, the light of day dims. We speak as if *our understanding* of Scripture was itself divinely inspired. There is much today that is taught about “the preacher’s authority” as he gives his holy message. Some even argue that the pastor is the modern day prophet bringing the Word of God to the people. I would love it if that were truly biblical because then I would not have to be concerned about misleading people when I teach. I could simply be faithful to repeat God’s message verbatim and I would be sure that everything I said was 100% correct. But you and I do not have a hotline to heaven giving us God’s confirmation that our well-studied interpretations of Scripture are correct. When you and I teach the Word of God in a church gathering, in a Sunday school class, or in small-group setting, we are giving everyone our “best guess” as to what Scripture means by what it says. It may be a highly educated, a well thought out, and a beautifully sculpted guess, but it is still a guess. This is also true whenever we discuss theology with someone. Here are some common “I have a hotline to heaven” statements:

“No, you are wrong about that.”

“That is Scripture means X, and your interpretation is simply incorrect”

“Doctrine A is obviously proven by Scripture B and if you don’t see it you are simply blind.”

There is a time and place for absolute statements, but these should not be the common fare in theological discussion. The fact that we do not have a hotline to heaven but that we are all growing in our understanding of God’s Word should be evident in the words we use. Below I have reworded the absolute statements in such a way that take into account the fact that I am a fallible man striving to represent my Lord:

“It seems to me that your interpretation does not take into account Scriptures A and B. How do these Scriptures fit with your viewpoint?”

“From my perspective it appears that Scripture X means Y because of context Z, but I could be wrong about the context, what do you think?”

“That does not seem correct given Scriptures A, B, and C, but perhaps I am missing something. Do you see something that I have missed?”

Now it is certainly possible that you can go overboard using these qualifiers, but especially on points of contention it would seem that such careful and qualified language should be the norm.

A Word of Encouragement

Watch some television and consider how they portray people having disagreements. Go out into your community and listen to people as they have disagreements. Disagreement in the world can be harsh and it can be quiet. Unbelievers can argue and they can be sarcastic and they can also, on occasion, remain at peace with one another. The one thing they cannot do is lay down their lives for one another as they disagree. They do not have the God of heaven and earth at work in them causing them to love God and love others. If we as Christians love one another as we talk about the things of God, the way that we disagree will be stamped with the supernatural love and power of God. The world will take notice of us, not because we are divisive and always fighting, but because we are following in the footsteps of our Lord by loving one another more than life itself. Then, perhaps, we will have an opportunity to talk about the gospel and the world will have a reason to listen to us.