

# Theology, Culture, and the Gospel:

## *Encouraging Signs, Cautionary Comments, Some Suggestions*

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### **I. Introduction: “theology,” “contextualization,” gospel & culture**

### **II. Theology: an increasingly prominent resource**

*I observe a rising tide of interest in theology: in the classroom, the church, and in the literature.*

Compare Keller’s observations in *Center Church* (Intro., Kindle loc 175-198):

- Church growth movement, 70’s, 80’s (eg. Peter Wagner)
- Megachurch experience and examples, 90’s, 2000’s (eg. Bill Hybels, Rick Warren)
- Reactions to megachurch, 2000’s ff (eg. Eddie Gibbs, Reggie McNeal)
- Keller essentially positions his book as an extension of a trajectory toward theology-driven ministry

Illustrated in the rise of popular movements like The Gospel Coalition.

In sum ...

North American Evangelicalism has had a strong theological heritage.

But in its culture and practice, it has not always been a strongly theological movement.

In the later 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries Evangelicalism went through a period where theology (beyond the “essentials”) was widely devalued.

More recently the tide seems to be shifting toward greater appreciation for, and emphasis on theological engagement as a framework for effective ministry.

*This is a healthy trend. Strong theological engagement ...*

1. Increases transferability
2. Promotes continuity and durability
3. Fuels Bible study
4. Encourages integration
5. Provides an essential framework for healthy contextualization

### **III. Theology: a double-edged resource**

*Friendly cautions - a strong emphasis on theology brings with it some potential pitfalls:*

**1. Pursuit of endless detail**

Theology is about answering questions ...

*Opposite to the “lowest-common-denominator gospel” problem*

**2. Loss of proportionality**

*Opposite to the “I can’t take a stand” problem*

**3. Unreflective extrapolation**

Logic is extremely well-suited to determining whether a conclusion follows from a particular set of tightly-defined premises. But it is much slipperier when used to extrapolate, because we do not have all the data.

*Opposite to the “everyone’s interpretation is equally valid” problem*

**4. Either/Or Oversimplification**

*Opposite to “the dividing lines are all blurry” problem.*

**5. Naïve, Isolationist Biblicism**

*Opposite to the “all sources have an equal voice” problem*

**6. Priestly domination**

*Opposite to the “traditional leadership has no special role” problem*

*Illustrations?*

Evangelicals can be especially vulnerable to these pitfalls because, historically, we have not been especially diligent about theological method.

## **IV. Theology in the church: some practical advice**

### **1. Allow exploration, but keep re-centering**

One of the roles of church leaders (especially teachers and preachers) is to keep bringing us back to the main things.

### **2. Practice analysis; engage perspectives**

Listing and eliminating popular options is a useful presentation technique, but it's a poor method for arriving at theological conclusions.

### **3. Anchor and align all theology to "biblical theology"**

Good theology doesn't flow out of Bible verses. It flows out of a broad and deep understanding of the Bible's teaching. And it pays attention to the questions the biblical authors seek to answer—and the fit of their questions to ours.

### **4. Develop and apply exegetical weighing criteria**

For the Evangelical theologian, the Bible is our primary form of "data."

Biblical data is broad, diverse, complex, and sometimes marked by tensions and apparent counter-evidence. If we don't establish criteria to "weigh" lines of evidence on the front end, we will find ourselves disagreeing about doctrinal conclusions on the back end.

If we are serious about biblical authority, our criteria should be *exegetical*.

### **5. Affirm a fully developed concept of revelation; engage with godly professionals**

We regularly say "All truth is God's truth." We need to show that we mean it by the way we do theology.

### **6. Design and practice community study**

Christ promised that the Spirit would lead us (plural!) into all truth. Theological conclusions need to be developed by the Body, not developed by individuals and then proclaimed to the Body.

- We need theological method that can be applied by groups and communities.
- We need to build corporate theological thinking into our ministry plans and routines.
- We need teach our people how to engage in theological reflection, just like we teach them how to read their Bibles.

## **V. Conclusion: a life-long project**