

Miscellaneous Systematic Theology Discussion Posts 1

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A Reason to Worship God

My concept of a reason to worship God is that it’s right and appropriate, to do so. It’s not to ‘fan God’s ego.’ Men are not worthy of worship, and it’s not appropriate to worship men, because we have nothing that we haven’t received, and God is altogether alone and apart. It’s been said that God knows who he is and doesn’t need our acclamation, but he wants us to worship him for our benefit. I know he wants us to do what’s right and have eternal fruit thereby. But perhaps he is equally or more concerned that he be worshipped because it is right and appropriate, and he always wants what is right to occur. “That thou mightest be justified,” Rom. 3:4. I confess I know pretty little about worship. It is said that God, the cause, knows the future within himself, and every free act flowing from one moment of eternity. But if as has been said, the purpose of our prayer is to change us, and our acts of free will flow from his cause, why doesn’t he change us by our prayer faster?

How might reflecting on the nature of God affect your prayer life?

God’s omniscience means He knows what is good for us; his omnipotence means he can give it to us; his love means he wants to give it to us; his impassibility means he will make a good choice about whether or not to give it to us (regardless

of how much we whine), and his immutability means he won't stop loving us and change his mind about giving it to us. However, it's been said that God can't base predestination on foreknowledge because that would be dependent knowledge (middle knowledge), yet it also wouldn't be loving to force anyone against their free will. A more straightforward approach as to how God can respond and base some of his decisions (like answering prayer) on the free will decisions of his creatures; and the anthropomorphic descriptions like, "I led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love, I lifted the yoke from their neck, and bent down to feed them," (Hosea 3:1) seems more encouraging to prayer than God's impassibility, immutability, and pure actuality.

God caused everything in the sense that nothing happens He does not at least permit; He is ultimately responsible in that sense, but by creating men and angels with free will, he is not directly responsible for any evil action. I believe God knew everything from the beginning, but I don't believe foreknowledge causes things to happen, any more than Peter's providing foreknowledge to the church that false teachers will enter in caused it to happen. "There were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you. ...Ye therefore, beloved, seeing ye know these things before [proegno], beware lest ye also, being led away with the error of the wicked, fall from your own steadfastness," 2 Peter 2:1-3:17. I know we are predestinated "to be conformed to the image of his Son," but I don't believe He predestinates every detail that occurs. Many things are amoral rather than moral or immoral. Perhaps He left it up to Elijah to ask for drought or some other judgment on the nation. "Elias was a man subject to like passions as we are, and he prayed earnestly that it might not rain: and it rained not on the earth by the space of three years and six months." I know that God's character doesn't change in the sense of his being righteous, and gracious, and loving; but the terminology that orthodox theology proper uses (or emphasizes) seems to imply that prayer is 'only' to change the prayer, and God allows no margin of what can and can't happen to originate from the points of free will He created (so how is free will then different from all other things?), and that we have no 'real'

contribution to the details of how everyone gets to the ultimate goal that God will accomplish without fail.

For example, I believe everyone who has been justified is also being sanctified, and that our walk and arrival at the targeted destination (including glorification) is guaranteed; but not that each step is guaranteed (though "the steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord"). And I believe that receiving the indwelling Holy Spirit as a result of justification guarantees that all believers will be fruitful, but that each believer's free will determines how much fruit, "good ground ... brought forth fruit, some an hundredfold, some sixtyfold, some thirtyfold."

I also think the Lord's prayer is a great model and outline of prayer. "Hallowed be thy name." You are great and holy. May your name be revered and praised, etc. "Thy will be done." Not our will, since you know best. What should we be doing to get on board with your plan, not ours? "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." Protect us from temptation, and don't test us; we don't want to fail you or others. "For," because, "yours is the kingdom." Do these things to bring glory to yourself because all authority, and the glory of your glorious (coming Messianic) kingdom is yours forever. "Amen." So be it.

Have you ever discussed the doctrine of the Trinity with an unbeliever or non-Christian like a Mormon?

First, I realize many Bible teachers interpret 2 John 1:10-11, "If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither bid him God speed: For he that biddeth him God speed is partaker of his evil deeds," as meaning don't offer to house or let false teachers teach in your house church or something, but I am cowardly enough to not let them in my house or say hello or goodbye to them (in case that's what the verses mean) in hopes that it will help them and my neighbors realize the severity of their error. How many people have actually converted any missionary who came to their house? I believe if you really want to win someone to the Lord, then when a false teacher comes to your house, walk next door to your neighbor's and witness to them:

you'll have a better use of your time and chance of success than converting a missionary while he's on his mission.

Second, I don't believe in getting digressed from the main problem that all unsaved people have, which is self-righteousness, trusting in their own works instead of in God's promise of justification through faith in Jesus. The only time to allow a digression is when it's to answer a genuine question/obstacle of someone who wants to believe, rather than someone who wants to argue or promote his own view. Someone's salvation is too important to engage in debate. 'Debate' is to be done in love among believers, not unbelievers, for our learning and edification.

Third, I do believe it's essential to not not believe (double negative intended) Jesus is the Son of God for salvation, but I don't believe it's a genuine obstacle to belief for most people.

Fourth, I had an experience where a Jewish friend was invited to visit a Christian church, and the pastor covered every item a Jewish person would disagree with, including how Jesus is God, which I would not do, but I trusted (and trust) that God had it in his plan for my friend to hear even that at that time. However, it did scandalize my friend, at least temporarily.

Fifth, I did recently answer the question, "Is Jesus God," from a person who I believe was asking a genuine question, not arguing, and simply referred to John 1. I think the Biblical proofs of the deity of Christ is useful to teach other believers and ground them in the doctrine of the Trinity, but I don't think that's what trying to win unbelievers is about. Although, it may be a special question Jewish people must often deal with before salvation. I'm not sure, so I don't bring it up unless they do for now. "These are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name," John 20:31.

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Hi Wayne, thanks for your post. By way of response, I hope I'm not reading too much into what you've said, but I have found the distinction between what evangelism is ("the main problem that all unsaved people have") and the reasons for

belief ("engage in debate") in Jesus Christ as "the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6) is a false dichotomy. We are called to a commission (Matt. 28:16-20) which look like, amongst other things, always being "prepared to give an apologia" /reasoned defence (1 Pet. 3:15) and "destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ" (2 Cor. 10:5). Both of these gospel imperatives unavoidably constitute "debate." Of course we must go about it within the Scriptural guidelines (i.e., speaking "truth in love" Eph. 4:15; not throwing pearls to pig who aren't interested in the truth of the debate Matt. 7:6, etc.), and if that your intent above, then I'm with you! But I cannot see any Scriptural basis for the notion that "Debate is to be done in love among believers, not unbelievers, for our learning and edification". Jesus validated "debate" with non believers (Matt. 22:1-46). The apostles employed "debate" with non believers (Acts 17:16-34) You and I are called to follow suit (1 Pet. 3:15; 2 Cor. 10:5). In sum, "Someone's salvation is too important [not] to engage in debate."

Response. Thanks for taking the time to reference those verses for me. You were not reading too much into my post. We all agree that we should speak the truth in love, in gentleness persuading those who oppose themselves, and not rebuke a fool when he is unreceptive and in the mood to trample pearls.

I don't think Jesus was trying to evangelize in Matthew 28. He was being attacked, and as the Messiah he silenced his adversaries' attacks, and even the parables he spoke in was a judgment on the hearers, "And the disciples came, and said unto him, Why speakest thou unto them in parables? He answered and said unto them, Because it is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given. For whosoever hath, to him shall be given, and he shall have more abundance: but whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken away even that he hath. Therefore speak I to them in parables: because they seeing see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand," Matt. 13:10 ff.

As for Acts 17:16-34, Paul may have attributed his relative lack of success in Athens to his use of Greek philosophy there, and

so when he went to Corinth next “I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified. ... And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom,” 1 Cor. 2:2 ff, and the Corinth ministry was very successful. (A letter to any church about its problems will sound pretty bad in comparison to letters about the gospel, like Romans, or the mystery of the church, like Ephesians.)

2 Corinthians 10 sounds to me like it's within the church that we are “bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ; and having in a readiness to revenge all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled.”

1 Peter 3:15 ff, “Be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear: having a good conscience; that, whereas they speak evil of you, as of evildoers, they may be ashamed that falsely accuse your good conversation in Christ,” may refer to explaining why you follow Christ more than disputing about doctrinal issues with unbelievers.

However, thanks to your comment I noticed the many other verses about disputing and reasoning for evangelistic purposes (Acts 17:2, 17:17, 18:4, 18:19, 19:8-9, etc.), so I will keep alert to watching for this concept in the New Testament. Perhaps the disputing and reasoning is great if it's about evangelistic issues, like “Is Jesus the Messiah promised in the OT?” but maybe not if it's to dispute church doctrine with an unbeliever who can't understand church doctrine anyway. I'm still thinking there may be some dichotomy between evangelizing and engaging in debate, but I'll keep in mind it may be a false dichotomy. Maybe it just has to do with remembering what you're trying to accomplish. I don't want to get into theological disputes about transubstantiation, or the marriage of priests, etc. with Catholics I'm trying to bring to faith (unless it's a genuine difficulty for the person), but rather their salvation problem of trusting in good works and their church's doctrine of having to actually 'be' righteous, versus being 'counted' righteous through faith, while still actually being unrighteous in deeds. I really appreciate your response, and will give this topic more attention and thought over time!

How can we reconcile Hosea 11:8-9 with God's impassibility and immutability?

"How can I give you up, O Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim? My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my burning anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and not a man, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath,"
Hosea 11:8-9

Impassibility does not mean God doesn't feel emotion, because in this passage his heart recoils, his compassion grows warm and tender, and his anger burns; but it means his emotions are not arbitrary or changing and are not caused from outside himself. Admah and Zeboiim were two less prominent cities of the five cities of the plain of the Dead Sea area. Sodom and Gomorrah were more prominent; and Zoar, which survived the fire and brimstone judgment, was smaller. God unchangeably continues to have burning anger towards sinful nations, and unchangeably continues to have grace and compassion in spite of their sin towards his covenanted people has made unbreakable promises to. Unlike Admah and Zeboiim, Israel's judgment is never complete and permanent, but partial and temporary.

God's wrath is unchangeably wrathful and his compassion unchangeably compassionate, but changeable men may move from being under his wrath or compassion. Today, individuals can move from being under the wrath of God to being at peace with God via the propitiation of his wrath by their faith in the substitutionary death of Christ who judicially bore our wrath in our place and thereby frees the fullness of God's love to be poured out upon us by his gift of the indwelling Holy Spirit to those who are in Christ.

However, does it make no change in God when he does something different? Was he always experiencing the emotion of indignation and anger even before Adam sinned and there was not yet anyone to express it towards? Would he always have been experiencing that emotional anger even if Adam had chosen not to sin?

Response to an objection quoted in excerpts. "The NATURE of God does not change." Probably emotions don't even change the 'nature' of men. "The issue isn't whether or not God relates to time or emotions in some way - Scripture and the logic of a Creator-creature distinction most assuredly informs us that He does - but HOW." This sounds perfectly correct. "THAT God relates to time or experiences emotion is answered clearly by the contents of Scripture, specifically those passages relating God's immutability." I was referring more to impassibility, and there don't seem to be many scriptures about God not being affected emotionally by anything men do. Job 22:3 seems to be a good one, "Is it any pleasure to the Almighty, that thou art righteous." But others quoted in the impassibility section of the textbook like, "If I were hungry I would not tell you," (Ps. 50:10) don't seem to be as strong. And verses like 1 Chron. 29:17, "I know also, my God, that thou triest the heart, and hast pleasure in uprightness," seems like it might say the opposite. "As the Bible is overwhelmingly silent on the HOW, we should once again take care to avoid the anthropological pit-falls of univocalization or equivocalization." I wish there were more scriptural and less philosophical basis for some of these attributes and characteristics. But since we're supposed to think about them in systematic theology, we probably have to consider the how also. If God feels passionate anger and passionate love for all timeless eternity towards men that move from being under one aspect of God to being under the other, it may mean God is forever and/or timelessly angry even though all has come to completion in the Messianic Kingdom and the eternal state. And is the quantity of that anger determined by how many men he is angry at, even though some moved from being under that anger; probably it would be said there's no quantity in God. But it sounds a bit emotionally painful for God to stay angry forever and/or timelessly.

How does Isaiah 57:15 affect your study of theology?

"For thus says the One [holiness, i.e. set apart] who is high and lifted up [holiness from transcendence], who inhabits eternity [eternality], whose name is Holy [holiness and jealousy for his

name, righteousness, and perfection]: "I dwell in the high and holy place [holiness and transcendence], and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly, and to revive the heart of the contrite [goodness/love, mercy, propitiation of wrath, provision of righteousness, immanence, revelation of truth, and sharing of perfection]," Is. 57:15.

At first this verse might make us think of God's omnipresence, since He is in both the highest heavens and the earth. But it's not about how God is everywhere, but about how He especially and specifically dwells both in the highest and also with the humble. Like Yeshua, I thank God He "resists the proud, but giveth grace to the humble," James 4:6, Mat. 11:25. This verse shows that though God is transcendent, He is also immanent. Though we can never attain to knowledge of God by "blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man;" yet God can make himself known to man through the "grace and truth," (John 1:13) in Christ, since He "created man in his own image," Gen. 1:27. Some things about God will be different than man because of his deity and infinity, and some things will be partially communicable to man like his perfection. But nothing of theology is of purely philosophical or theoretical purpose or value. All proper study of theology will have vital and critical, practical significance to the acknowledgement of God's glory and to the welfare or misery of the creatures God made and loves.