



LESSON ONE

Why a big theological melon will not overcome a sinful, selfish heart

My Dumbness

I've had the privilege of going to good schools. Not Ivy League good, but "*U.S. News and World Report* top schools" good. To be honest, my entrance into Taylor University had nothing to do with my academic prowess. I got in because I could play football. While at Taylor, I met Paul House. Paul took an athlete with an aversion to academics and introduced him to the life of the mind. At Paul's suggestion, I did my M.Div. at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (SBTS). I enjoyed the work, and I enjoyed the camaraderie at SBTS in the mid to late 1990s. To top it all off, I met my wife Amy while at Southern, so I did more than OK.

Now, if you know nothing of Southern's story, a bit of background would be helpful. The Southern





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Baptist Theological Seminary (SBTS) is the flagship of the six denominational seminaries operated by the Southern Baptist Convention. Prior to 1993, SBTS was steeped in moderate or liberal theology (depending on your perspective). J, E, D, and P were running amuck, skipping hand in hand with Deutero-Isaiah across the Josephus Bowl on campus. SBTS underwent a seismic theological shift to the right when R. Albert Mohler was hired in 1993 as a thirty-three-year old President. I got on campus a semester after Dr. Mohler arrived. The theological battles that followed were epic – so much so that a documentary was made by the son of a student and aired on PBS. My undergraduate work was in Bible, and the faculty at Taylor made sure we knew both sides of the coin theologically. I took great pride in the fact that I could hold my own academically in the midst of such upheaval. There were sit-ins, votes of no confidence, and my friend Jimmy Scroggins and I were asked to leave class more than once for giving voice to an evangelical viewpoint.

That's where the trouble began.

I did not grow up Southern Baptist. I was more than willing, however, to put myself smack dab in the middle of a good scrum. It was a fight worth having – orthodoxy is always worth defending – but engaging in the fight left me proud. And goodness knows, the last thing I needed was something else to be cocky about. I came to welcome the conflict, to welcome the fact that I could walk into a classroom with both guns blazing. I loved the turmoil. One



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friend would later refer to me as a “theological bouncer.” God calls me to shepherd His people, and I’m the bouncer? You can see where this is headed. The purpose of theological education is to prepare you to serve the church, not to give you a theological arsenal to unleash upon unsuspecting congregants.

Southern Seminary is not, however, alone in this issue. What made Southern unique is that the theological conflicts were not about minutia, but about the doctrine of Scripture. There is a broader problem in most Western seminaries: theological education becomes about finding your theological niche. Are you an infralapsarian or a supralapsarian? Do you grasp the eschatological ramifications of the *parousia*? What’s worse, we think that our hissy fits about minutia should somehow transform people’s lives. Again, Paul Tripp presents us with great insight:

I personally experienced what can happen when the gospel of Jesus Christ gets reduced to a series of theological ideas coupled with all the skills necessary to access those ideas. Bad things happen when maturity is more defined by knowing than it is by being. Danger is afloat when you come to love the ideas more than the God whom they represent and the people they are meant to free.¹

I feel really bad for the good folks of the Cornerstone Baptist Church in Elgin, Texas. Most of them are really good people. They want to serve and honor the Lord. They got a hot-shot, preaching-award-winning

¹ *Dangerous Calling*, p. 42.





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dude with a cute wife right out of seminary. I could bring the theological thunder with the best of them. I was twenty-nine, had been married for four years, and did not have a single clue. Heaven help them.

What they needed was a pastor. They needed a shepherd. They needed a guy whose walk with Jesus was the life-blood of his ministry. Sadly, that's not what they got. They got a guy whose sermons sounded more like theological lectures than sermons. The basics of a confessional, Calvinistic, baptistic faith were hammered home to them. Three times a week, for forty-five minutes a pop, they were subjected to my cluelessness.

I can look back and tell you that part of the problem I faced in that first pastorate was making the move from the academy to the local church. In the academy, a question is often a call to arms. It's a chance to cross swords and engage in intellectual pugilism. I loved it (still do).² However, more often than not, when normal people ask a question, it's because they are genuinely struggling with whatever they asked. Now, there are always a few goofball outliers – but generally, questions are asked in good faith. So, when those questions presented an opportunity for me to *love* the people of God, I *lectured* them instead.

² I love 99 per cent of Jim Belcher's *Deep Church* (Downer's Grove, IL: IVP, 2009). However, his assessment that Carl F.H. Henry's epistemology is tied too closely to the rationalism of the enlightenment is, in my estimation, a misreading of Henry (48). I rejoice in my friend Gregory Alan (Thunder) Thornbury's *Recovering Classic Evangelicalism* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013). Greg has given a Bane-type knee to the spine to those who hold Belcher's view.





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Coming from Southern just made it worse. Classes in the early days at SBTS were a Battle Royale: the last man standing was declared the winner. Ask me a question and you got both guns. Challenge me and I'll crush you. Somehow, the dichotomy of defending the faith while acting like a jerk never came home to me.

Part of this tension can certainly be traced to the fact that I hold to Calvinist soteriology while serving in a denomination (Southern Baptist Convention) that was/is torn over that issue. I knew of guys getting fired for being Calvinists. It felt like a “guns up” issue. Having to defend, on a regular basis, the foundational truths by which sinful humans are reconciled to a holy, loving God gets wearisome. Still, you can win an argument, but lose the person. I got pretty good at that.

However, the real reason for my argumentative responses was much more simple and painful. I responded this way because I am an arrogant sinner. I perceive questions as a challenge to my “pastoral authority” because I am arrogant. I'll try to bury you because I really am a sinner. Since I'm not secure in the gospel, I'm trying to validate my ministry by my own strength and intellect. It's both a me *project*, and a me *problem*. It is an area for growth, and a sin issue that needs to be confessed.

How the Gospel Overrides My Dumbness

Preaching systematically through books of the Bible has saved my bacon on numerous occasions. I marvel at what God does through His Word – not



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only in the life of the congregation, but in my life as well. The reinstatement of Peter in John 21:15-19 is a passage I revisit on a regular basis. Let me play the role of redactor and rewrite the passage as I lived it out in my early years of ministry:

Jesus: *Kyle, son of Dave, are you more gifted than these?*

Kyle: *Yes, Lord; you know I'm a "five-talent" minister.*

Jesus: *Display your giftedness so that all can see it.*

Jesus: *Kyle, son of Dave, are you theologically well-read and orthodox?*

Kyle: *Yes, Lord; you know I'd argue theology with anyone.*

Jesus: *Make sure these intellectual slackers and liberals are shown the error of their ways.*

Jesus: *Kyle, son of Dave, are you called to preach?*

Kyle: *Lord, you know everything; you know you've called me to preach.*

Jesus: *Bring the thunder then!*

Thankfully, that's not how the passage unfolds. Instead, Jesus asks Peter three times if he loves Him. He does not enquire as to his giftedness, his orthodoxy, or his sense of calling. At the root of ministry that will not create havoc in the hearts of congregation and minister is this one thing: love for Jesus. It is in the context of loving Jesus that Peter is given his marching orders: feed/tend the flock of Christ. Calling/preparation/giftedness are not the issues here. Love for Jesus is.

Now, some uber-theological Poindexter or super nerdy guy may ask, "So – are you saying these things are not important? That calling, theological orthodoxy,





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sound preparation, and giftedness make no difference?” Of course they do! However, ministry must be an act of obedience to the one my soul loves more than anyone or anything else. If not, I will make a hash of what I’ve been called/prepared/gifted by God to do. It will be about me, and not about the Savior. My love of me will trump my love of Jesus every time. In time I realized, quite painfully, that my efforts in ministry were not an expression of my love for Christ. As I’ve thought further about this, I don’t think I was trying to *earn* Christ’s love by my work – but the work certainly was not an expression of love for my Savior.

This realization was only half the story, however. Once I realized the error of my ways, there remained the problem of addressing the issue. How do we cultivate this love for Christ?

In the introduction to his book, *Practical Religion*, J. C. Ryle says the following: “After forty years of Bible-reading and praying, meditation and theological study, I find myself clinging more than ever to ‘Evangelical’ religion, and more than ever satisfied with it. It wears well: it stands the fire.”³

Nothing flashy: read the Book (Bible reading). Talk to Him (prayer). Think about Him (meditation). Think about Him in a historically informed and logically consistent way (theological study). Approach my love for Jesus in much the same way I cultivate my love for my wife.

I’ve also realized that, much like my marriage and love for Amy, growing in my love for Jesus via

³ J.C. Ryle, *Practical Religion* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth, 1998), vi-vii.





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these means of grace is a lifelong endeavor. I enjoy hearing older ministers talk of the ways Christ has displayed His faithfulness to them. It's not all, "Back in my day ..." lamentations. Like a good marriage, they've labored in this love relationship for a number of years, and the fruit of that love is evident. I ought to be able to speak and write about this in a much fuller and deeper way ten years from now than I can today.

What about you? Are you cultivating your ability to beat the foolishness out of any who dare defy your intellectual or theological prowess?⁴ Or, are you using these means of grace, not to show you're the smartest kid in the class, but as a means to grow in your love for the Savior? For the sake of your soul, and the souls of those in your care, I pray it's the latter.

4 Confession time: I've watched *South Park* (twice, in fact). Some dudes come off sounding like Cartman, "Respect my authority!" Don't be that guy.

