



Theology Is for Everyone

by MICHAEL DELLAPERUTE

Joe is an average Christian. He is the first to admit he's not pastor or deacon material. He simply attends City Church with his family on a regular basis.

Joe was raised in a Christian home where these values were instilled at a young age. If someone were to challenge Joe about his salvation, he can describe a sincere childhood conversion. When his pastor draws attention to a need in the church, Joe is quick to write a check or volunteer to set up chairs. However, when questioned about the value of theology, Joe politely explains that this subject is best left to the professionals, like Pastor Bob. Sure, Joe has a favorite Bible story, and yes, he appreciates a well-prepared and delivered sermon. Joe just does not see the need for the average Christian to study theology. Theologians, in Joe's mind, are dusty academics who debate doctrinal nuances that have little value in the real world. To prove his theory and demonstrate the irrelevance of theology for average Christians like him, Joe has invited us to join him on a typical day. Upon conclusion of our time with Joe, we will report our findings to Pastor Bob. Finally, we will offer some recommendations, if necessary, to help the average Joe at City Church gain a greater appreciation for theology.

A Day with Average Joe

Theology fumbles in an average day

Theology fumble 1. A normal day for the average Joe

Christian begins with breakfast and the morning news. Although Joe occasionally reads the daily devotional provided by City Church, he never misses his favorite news programs and podcasts. Joe is convinced that current events provide relevant talking points for his coworkers and clients. As a result, like most of his City Church counterparts, Joe is highly informed. On this particular day, the news stories focus on global disasters. Graphic scenes quickly shift from disease-ravaged countries, to the ruins of a devastating earthquake, and finally to an ongoing military conflict in the Middle East. Joe is so engrossed with the events unfolding before his eyes that he hardly notices when his teenage son joins him at the table. "Dad," the young man asks, "I heard someone at school claim that all of these things are really signs that the world is going to end soon. Do you think that's true?"

Joe shrugs his shoulders, and the two finish their meal in silence.

Theology fumble 2. After breakfast, Joe heads to the office. Joe holds a mid-level management position in a large corporation. Although he is aware of only a handful of fellow believers at work, aside from inviting a few coworkers to a Christmas program and sporting a City Church bumper sticker on his car, Joe is not intentional about evangelism in the workplace. Nevertheless, Joe is a conscientious employee on the fast track for a promotion to upper management. When he finally arrives, Joe is surprised to discover that Patricia, his immediate supervisor, is waiting for him at his desk. "Good morning, Joe," she begins, "I stopped by to remind you that today is our LGBTQ sensitivity training seminar. You know how important this issue is for company policy and public perception.

Now, I understand you are a Christian. So I want to make sure this isn't going to be a concern for you."

After a brief pause Joe replies, "No problem, Pat. I'll see you there."

Theology fumble 3. At noon, Joe leaves the office to meet with his sister Sarah. Joe has made a point of having a weekly lunch date with Sarah since she finalized her divorce last year. Always the eccentric, Sarah informs her big brother that she is now in a relationship with her new yoga instructor. "I really want you to meet him, Joe. When he first asked me out, I was a little reluctant because, technically, he's not a Christian," she begins. "But he is such a nice guy, and he already treats me better than that hypocrite ex-husband of mine ever did. He's very spiritual too. He even says he believes in Jesus. That has to count for something, right Joe?"

Joe smiles and wishes Sarah well with her new romantic venture.

Theology fumble 4. When Joe arrives back home, his wife reminds him that he is in charge of dinner because, "It's ladies' night out." As he begins to bring a pot of water to boil, Joe asks his wife to share her evening plans. She explains that a friend from the gym is hosting a psychic party, complete with complimentary readings. When she senses a concerned look on her husband's face, she quickly reassures him, "It's nothing serious, Joe. This is just something they do for fun. I won't be too late."

Joe instructs her to have a good time.

Theology fumble 5. After dinner, Joe decides to call his uncle to check on his ailing aunt. Joe recently learned that, along with suffering the slow decline of dementia, his aunt has been diagnosed with advanced breast cancer. During their conversation, Joe's uncle informs him that her prognosis is worse than expected. "At this point, Joe, I think the most Christian thing I can do is to help my wife end her suffering," his uncle confesses. "As medical power of attorney, I'll be discussing this option with the doctor in the morning."

When Joe asks if there is anything he can do, his uncle replies, "I wish there was, Joe! Your aunt was the kindest woman I've ever known. Why would God let something like this happen to her?"

After a brief pause, Joe attempts to console his grieving uncle by reminding him, "All things work together for good."

Theology fumble 6. At nine o'clock, Joe begins the nightly routine of putting his youngest daughter to bed. Once the brushing of teeth and the reading of a book is complete, Joe informs his daughter that the time has arrived for the final formality of the evening. To his surprise, Joe's daughter is reluctant to participate in their bedtime prayer ritual. When Joe asks why, his daughter replies, "Dad, if God already knows everything, then why do I need to pray?"

Joe confidently informs his daughter that Christians are supposed to pray.

Theology fumble 7. Later that evening, as Joe climbs into bed and begins to drift off into an uneasy sleep, he can be heard mumbling, as if to an invisible audience, "Another day in the books, and no need to bring up any theology."

The Average Pastor's Average Fears

Bob has been lead pastor since Joe and his family began attending City Church. Until our theological reconnaissance mission, Pastor Bob always considered Joe a model believer. "Sure, he may not be an expert in theology," Bob would argue, "but Joe is a family man. He's financially successful; he faithfully attends City Church; and he has a good reputation in the community. Besides, there is more to being a Christian than just possessing the ability to name the twelve tribes of Israel or rattle off ten categories of systematic theology." However, when we disclose our observations to Pastor Bob, he quickly changes his tune. Bob immediately recognizes that the average Joe in his congregation is in danger of being carried away by every wind of doctrine, from end-times hysteria to pluralistic apostasy. Furthermore, the attitude of the average Joe toward theology reflects Pastor Bob's own mindset. To correct this situation, Bob realizes that he must begin by addressing his own approach toward theology.

The thought of emphasizing the need for theology to the average Joe initially touches on three of Pastor Bob's fears.

Fear 1: the average Joe will stop listening

Pastor Bob's initial concern is that a sudden, renewed focus on theology will cause him to lose the attention of the average Joe in his audience. Pastor Bob acknowledges that there are several ways to achieve this undesirable effect. First, when addressing culturally contentious issues like marriage and LGBTQ ideology, Bob realizes he may very well offend the average Joe. This fear has driven him to avoid these controversial subjects in the past whenever possible. However, there is more than one way to disengage the average Joe from theology. Second, as Bob reflects on his days in seminary, he has to admit, rather than filling him with awe and wonder, his theology professors tended to leave him bored or intimidated. Considering the monumental task before him, Pastor Bob wonders, "How can I stress the importance of theology without driving away the average Joe or lulling him to sleep in the process?"

Fear 2: theology may sound like politics

The next fear to materialize in Pastor Bob's mind occurs at the intersection of theology and politics. Bob struggles with the fact that many theological issues have morphed into political platforms that presently divide a nation, such as abortion and euthanasia. Traditionally, Pastor Bob has maintained a neutral political position for the sake of church unity. He now faces the dilemma, How do I address theological issues without politicizing City Church in the process?

Fear 3: theology includes difficult subjects

Finally, Pastor Bob reluctantly acknowledges that he is apprehensive to teach theology because he will be confronted with subjects he does not fully understand. His formal theological training concluded decades ago. At this point in his ministry career, Pastor Bob admits that he is rusty on the

finer points of theology. He originally entered the ministry to work with people. Like many other professionals, Pastor Bob considers himself blessed with the gift of evangelism and skilled in the area of counseling. The thought of explaining the ontological argument for God's existence to the average Joe, or dedicating a sermon to resolving the problem of evil, or preparing a series on eschatology causes Pastor Bob anxiety. He questions, How am I going to teach theology when I struggle with the subject myself?

Our Recommendations

For Joe to appreciate the value of theology, we will need to recommend some changes concerning the attitude and approach of both Pastor Bob and the average Joe.

Demonstrate the relevance of theology

First, Pastor Bob must be willing to demonstrate that theology is incredibly relevant to the average Joe. Theology is not an arcane discipline whose practitioners perpetually debate the number of angels that can dance on the head of a pin. It is a matter of life and death. Literally. Theology provides the lens for a Biblical worldview. Without sound theology, the average Joe in City Church will never recognize that matters like abortion and euthanasia are actually theological issues in disguise. At their core lies the Biblical understanding that all human beings are created in the image of God. If this theological perspective is missing, Joe will continue to live under the assumption that these issues are simply subjective matters of personal preference or church tradition.

Since the average Joe in City Church is highly informed, Pastor Bob can illustrate the importance of theology in his teaching ministry by intentionally making theological applications to current events. However, Bob recognizes that this commitment will require a great deal of effort on his part. Over the years, Bob has grown accustomed to relying on anecdotes about his past, his children, and his grandchildren to illustrate his points, and his audience seems to appreciate the personal touch. To stress the value of theology to the average Joe, Pastor Bob must be willing to exegete both Scripture and culture. In the process, Bob recognizes that this approach will push his church dangerously close to contemporary political issues.

Recognize the issues that were theological before they were political

Next, with regard to politics, Pastor Bob and the average Joe both need to be reminded that subjects like marriage, gender, sexuality, crime and punishment, money, war, abortion, euthanasia, and a host of others were theological issues long before they were commandeered by contemporary politics. While church leaders do need to be careful about making public endorsements, they should not shy away from addressing these topics for fear of reprisal or government intervention. The apostle Paul modeled a believer's dual citizenship shortly after the church's inception. Furthermore, throughout history, the testimonies of Christians like Martin Luther, William

Wilberforce, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer not only demonstrate that a careful distinction is possible, but also how good theology can be a blessing to any nation.

Stress concepts over words

A third way that Pastor Bob can communicate the importance of theology to the average Joe in City Church is to stress concepts over words. Bob must understand that it is more important for the average Joe to recognize how the fine-tuning of the universe provides evidence of a Creator than it is for him to differentiate the teleological argument from the cosmological argument. While theological vocabulary does require precision, it can also pose a stumbling block to the uninitiated. If Pastor Bob's endgame is to demonstrate his intellectual superiority, then theological terminology can provide him ample munitions. However, if Bob recognizes that his role is not to present simple concepts in a complex format, but rather to take complex theological principles and make them understandable and applicable to the average Joe Christian, then Joe will stop viewing theology as a discipline solely for the elite.

Value the study of Scripture


Fourth, the average Joe must recognize that theology is more than the ability to recite historical creeds or apply proof texts to given situations. Theology begins with Scripture. Therefore, while daily devotionals can serve a purpose, they cannot replace the study of Scripture as the foundation for theology. If Bob and Joe desire to develop their theological acumen, the starting point must be a renewed commitment to read the Word of God. The technical term for this discipline is Biblical theology. While the exact meaning of Biblical theology is debated among scholars, Bob and Joe can both agree that God's special revelation of Scripture is where theology rightly begins. Unfortunately, for both men, this is also where theology typically ends.

The 'Queen of the Sciences'

There is more to theology than the ability to supply Biblical proof texts. To complicate matters, some ethical scenarios that the average Joe will encounter in a pluralistic and technologically advanced society—like transgenderism, cloning, or the legalization of controlled substances—lack explicit proof texts. Therefore, while Scripture provides the foundation for theology, history reinforces its walls. Historical theology includes the orthodox doctrines of the church through the ages. From Augustine to Anselm, from Calvin to contemporary theologians, the church stands tall on the shoulders of spiritual giants who studied and applied the sacred text to their historical context. While the works of theologians should not be placed on par with Scripture, they should not be disregarded either. Examining the valuable contributions of scholars, martyrs, and theologians through the ages can both provide clarity and create a hunger for things of God in pastors and church members alike.

While historical theology can be a valuable resource to both Pastor Bob and the average Joe, it too is not an end in itself. The walls of historical theology serve to support the roof of systematic theology. This theological system provides a shelter for all academic disciplines and life settings under one comprehensive worldview. While some scholars would limit systematic theology to the arrangement of Biblical material into a set number of categories, this definition is unduly restrictive. Systematic theology is better viewed in its traditional role as the "Queen of the Sciences." In this manner, systematic theology is not one of many disciplines, but rather the governing principle for determining truth in all areas of life, including philosophy, religion, counseling, marriage, the spiritual realm, and so on. A correct approach to systematic theology will prevent the average Joe from compartmentalizing the various aspects of his life. Instead, all of the issues Joe encountered during his typical day will fit under the roof of systematic theology. This change in attitude will transform theology from an archaic discipline to the rule that governs every facet of Joe's life. Approaching theology as the queen of the sciences will equip Joe to stand against immorality in his culture. It will also help Joe lead his family in love and enable him to teach his children to walk in truth. And it will motivate Joe to increase in his knowledge of God.

A Final Warning

Before we leave Pastor Bob and the average Joe to contemplate whether they should maintain the status quo or change their attitude and approach to theology, we must offer one last warning: Theology is a process that requires effort. Church members and ministry professionals alike must adopt the attitude of lifelong learners if they wish to develop sound theology. Sadly, the average Joe does not own a theology book. And, as with many of his colleagues, nothing has collected as much dust after his formal training than Pastor Bob's theology texts (with the possible exception of his Hebrew and Greek grammars). Theology will require effort, training, and perseverance. It is a wonderful fruit born of hard labor. However, if Pastor Bob is not willing to make the effort to focus on the value of theology and develop it in his own life, then why should the average Joe care about theology? 

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