RESPONSE TO GRENZ AND OLSON, “WHO NEEDS THEOLOGY?”

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The purpose of this writing is to provide a personal response to the content presented in the book “Who Needs Theology” by Stanley Grenz and Roger Olson. We will examine the content from an objective perspective, a critical perspective, and a personal perspective.

Introduction

Good theologians discuss intellectual questions and concern themselves with academic debate because their chief concern is life. They want to know the truth not merely so that they might think properly, but so that they might live properly. They engage in theology not merely to amass knowledge, but also to gain wisdom. Good theology, therefore, brings the theoretical, academic intellectual aspect of Christian faith into Christian living. In so doing, theology becomes immensely practical – perhaps the most practical endeavor one ever engages in!

- Stanley Grenz and Roger Olson

Support for the Definition of Theology

After the sun set on a beautiful autumn evening in Florida, a Cessna 172 aircraft lept off the runway into the cool night sky. The pilot gently pointed the nose of the aircraft toward the north horizon and settled in for a long flight into the mountains of north Georgia.

Undoubtedly, many young men and women have dreamed of doing such a thing and leaving the surly bonds of earth for adventure in the open skies. Most though, do not care for the intense amount of study that goes into such an endeavor. What is not told in the sentence above is that the pilot did hours of preparation work in order to safely pilot the aircraft to the destination; the pilot studied charts and maps to find emergency fuel stops, the pilot called weather briefers, the pilot read about potential dangers and warnings along the way. Further still, behind all of those hours of preflight preparation, the pilot had years of training both in the air and pouring over books and taking tests.
About halfway through the flight, the engine suddenly sputtered to a halt and the cockpit was suddenly shrouded in darkness and an eerie silence, save the sound of the wind slipping over the wings – a peaceful sound that was sure to cease within minutes, only to be replaced by the mashing of steel and the eruption of fuel vapors into a fiery inferno.

The pilot knows that he has not been going to church, and doesn’t know anything about the bible. In fact, he has spent his days mocking Christians for their faith. Suddenly, it doesn’t seem so funny…without being able to see a clear landing place in the darkness, what will happen to his soul once the sound of the wind over the wings ceases?

In such an emergency, the pilot needs to synthesize all of his years of studying and practice about aviation into an immediate plan of action. This plan of action will necessarily take into account his environment, the dark night, the loss of power in the cockpit, where he is geographically etc. He must execute his training well, or he will be lost for all eternity, because he didn’t prepare at all for the worst of worst case scenarios.

This story describes the main point of Grenz and Olson well. First, in that every individual everywhere is a theologian, whether they know it or not. Theology is defined by this book as “any reflection on the ultimate questions of life that point toward God”; therefore, all peoples have some worldview concerning that ultimate reality, and are acting (likely) unwittingly on these presuppositions. Someone once said, “the most important theologian in your life is you”; in this pilot’s life, he himself was the most influential theologian he had ever met. Second, as stated in the quote at the beginning of this section, theology is an imminently practical discipline. Just as the pilot took years of training and boiled it down into a safe and comprehensive flight plan, theologians synthesize their years of study into actionable ideas every minute of their lives.
Chapter Summaries

Chapter 1 – Everyone is a Theologian

Chapter 1 describes the supposed tension between those that would suggest that theology is adverse to a “real” relationship with God. Often, theology is pitted against prayer. The authors make the point that everyone does theology, and that there are two types of theologies – worldviewish theology (the kind everyone does – the thoughts about who am I where did I come from etc) and Christian Theology (the theology that is common to all Christians).

Response to Chapter 1

Over the years, my (the author’s) main opinion on the tension between “Theology” and a real Christian life is primarily a tension between “systematic theology” and “biblical theology”. Grenz and Olson make the point that the “biblical theology” is actually the bridge that connects worldviewish theology with Christian theology, in that the bridge is the history that the Bible narrates. This is certainly understandable, but my major personal concern with “Theology” is that the reading of scripture (a supernatural activity when the Holy Spirit is involved) is often superceded by reading systematic theology (a man-made construction) and then reading the theology back into the text. While I feel the author dealt with this topic in a later chapter, it was not directly articulated at this stage of the book, which left me wanting clarification at this point in the reading.

Chapter 2 – Not All Theologies are Equal

Chapter 2 asserts that not all theologies are equal, and that there are multiple graduations of theological practice; these practices are a) folk theology, b) lay theology, c) ministerial theology, d) professional theology, and e) academic theology. An interesting point is that lay theologians will drift into folk theology when isolated from ministerial and professional
theologians and that professional theologians will drift into academic theology in isolation from ministerial and lay theologians.

Response to Chapter 2

The book makes the case that a) folk theology and e) academic theology are undesirable practices. I am in agreement with the premise that folk theology should always be abandoned as soon as possible, although, as the author himself points out, it is not altogether without use. However, academic theology is indeed useful, as where would we be without in depth study of manuscripts and verb forms of Hebrew and Greek. This study is immensely dry and without much life in and of itself, but is very useful to theologians all the way down the chain. What is critical is that the academic theologian doesn’t rest in his great amount of knowledge and critical thinking, but in a deep relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ.

Having said this, the graduations of theological thought presented in this chapter were very useful to me in understanding the roles that we all play in the body of Christ.

Chapter 3 – Defining Theology

This chapter pulls together the idea of theology; instead of spending much time technically defining theology, the author moves theology into the slot of the practical outworking of thoughts about God. Makes statements such as theology “[keeps Christians] from being swept along by the ever changing currents that blow across the landscape”. They also use the example of how the understanding of the Trinity fuels a Christians understanding of the love of God.

Response to Chapter 3

This chapter was very insightful in terms of redefining theology in a very practical light. The author also made a statement that resonated with me, in that “The biblical story always comes with meaning/interpretation of the events it narrates”; by saying this the author satisfied my need for clarification on this point, by effectively communicating that theology flows from the biblical story.
Chapter 4 – Defending Theology

Here the author uses an interesting example of how Bethany College wrote in their charter to never have a theology department. This point illustrates the intense bad rapport that theology has had with Christians over the years. Again, the author repeats the now familiar refrain of “it is not a question of whether or not we will do theology, it is a question of whether we will do good theology”. Here the author notes the most frequent objections to theologians: the killjoy objection, the divisiveness charge, the speculation accusation, and the stalemate indictment.

Response to Chapter 4

I found the stalemate indictment very relevant to me, as I had briefly engaged a colleague on this topic, where he was making the assertion that no new theological concepts can be discovered. While I agree with this to a certain extent, I found the discussion about the suffering of God to be very interesting on how this theological idea has developed over the centuries.

Chapter 5 – Theology’s Tasks and Traditions

Here, the author defines two tasks for theology – the critical task and the constructive task. The critical task “examines beliefs and teachings about God, ourselves and the world in light of Christian Sources, especially the primary norm of the biblical message.” The constructive tasks develop a greater unity in the biblical texts/model and then studies the culture and the times in order to accurately communicate them. The author also makes a distinction between dogma, doctrine, and beliefs. Liberalism tends to ignore the dogma and the doctrine and focus on beliefs, whereas conservatism tends to move as much as possible into the dogma and doctrine categories.
Response to Chapter 5

Continuing the discussion on whether or not theology discovers new things at any point in time, the author nearly read my mind here – he noted that the task of critical theology is not to invent new ideas, but to examine existing ideas and tests them whereas the task of constructive theology is to discover more and more unity in the scriptures. These ideas are very important distinctions, as it is dangerous to not examine existing beliefs of ourselves and others, and it is unfruitful to not push ahead with the belief that greater levels of understanding and coherence cannot be achieved.

Chapter 6 – The Theologian’s Tools

In this chapter, the author discusses the sources of the theology – Scripture, History, Culture. Scripture is presented as the primary tool, History is presented as a safeguard against doctrinal mistakes, and Culture is defined as the context by which the theology must be communicated.

Response to Chapter 6

I came away from this chapter with two major responses. First, I realized that the complexity and richness of the literary biblical text is more highly valuable than if we had been given a detached book on theology; the resounding depth of the scriptures speaks of the infinite character of God. Second, I recognized that the infusion of culture into sound biblical teaching is often neglected in my weekly practice as a college-age teacher at my church. Just as God spoke the biblical text into the contemporary culture, so must I be sensitive to the context of the culture as I communicate the biblical text into my culture. I had never before seen this as an outworking of theology, but since I have learned through this course that theology incorporates multiple sources, this idea has been focused in my mind, and constructively so.
Chapter 7 – Constructing Theology in Context

Chapter 7 is an extended discussion into the contextualization of the biblical message. The author also discusses integrated motifs, and suggests that community is one such motif, and a good one at that. The author also asserts that the integrated motif is the “system” of “systematic theology”.

Response to Chapter 7

While the idea of the integrative motif in connection with systematic theology is new to me, I do not have any particular objections with it. My main objection came when the author used “Let the Lower Lights be Burning” as an example of bad contextualization in this culture. I believe that over emphasis on cultural relevance is often employed – people are not allergic to reading classical poetry that involves lighthouses and ships, and so many people love to visit old lighthouses. Abandoning such classical literature in text and in music is, in my opinion an unhealthy overreaction to the often ungodly whims of the culture, which was noted in chapter 5 as being dangerous. Overall though, this chapter reinforced my personal need to be more contextualized, particularly when speaking to college students.

Chapter 8 – Bringing Theology into Life

The thesis of this chapter is that “theology is the pursuit of wisdom. A central crucial goal of our theologizing is right thinking.” Also, the author noted that “theology and life are interdependent”.

Response to Chapter 8

I found this chapter again to be interesting, and I particularly enjoyed the author’s analogy with the traffic light. The themes of Proverbs were also running through my head, as I thought about how the Woman Wisdom propels the reader to godly action in every part of their lives, by the pouring out of her spirit (chapter 1).
Chapter 9 – An Invitation to Engage in Theology

Here the reader is invited into a deeper level of theological thought, or perhaps a more intentional level of theological thought, and is given suggested methods of accomplishing this. The reader is also warned of the dangers of “substitution”, which is substituting a relationship with God for simply collecting knowledge.

Response to Chapter 9

As this is my first semester at seminary, I have never been so immersed in readings and writings about theology. I have also observed that there is still no substitute for my daily time with the Creator, because when I spend time with him, my soul is refreshed in a unique way, even though I am saturated with theological studies – indeed my times with him have been enhanced as a result. Because these lessons were fresh on my mind, I was struck by the statement “Being a Christian theologian at any level requires that a person be more interested in knowing God than amassing ideas about God”. I appreciate this message of the book very much.

Final Thoughts

The primary responsibility of the pilot in the airplane was to be a theologian, but he was unaware of this responsibility until it was too late. Similarly, how much time do we waste in life because of bad theology? How many needless sleepless nights do we spend because we have found ourselves in a place where the theological answers that we have are not enough to give us the faith that we need to persevere. How we wished we would have studied more when we find ourselves in these fixes. This book makes a compelling case for all of us to renew our pursuit of God through a relentless search for the truth. May we learn to skillfully communicate his words with historical accuracy into a culture that is dying for a drink of water with their eternities at stake.