

Theology Matters – Begin with Theology

Posted by Bob Young

[thoughts excerpted and edited from recent readings]

I recently read some reflections from Mark Dever, coauthor of *How to Build a Healthy Church: A Practical Guide for Deliberate Leadership*. Dever challenges church leaders to ground their guidance of the church in theology. “Begin with theology; always stay true to theology.” This commitment ensures that the church’s activities and ministry are grounded in the gospel.

When Dever says that “theology drives method,” he means that “what’s most fundamental...is God and what God has said, not how I, you, or someone else think up how to do something.” Using theology as the underpinning of the local church and local church leadership means that one always begins with a commitment to understand God and hear God’s teachings and instruction. God’s leaders, above all else, are in tune with God’s Word and take their cues from God.

Four important theological matters must remain front and center in our planning and leadership. First, who is God? What is God like? What is his nature? What has God told us about himself? Second, who are we? What is the nature of the human creation and experience? How can we understand ourselves? Third, what was God doing in sending Jesus to dwell among us? Fourth, how are we to respond? What should our lives look like when we respond to God and his purpose in this world?

Beginning with theology, beginning with God, would change many dynamics in the average contemporary church. How often have well-meaning human beings reverse engineered the church, or ministry, or church programming? Too often, we begin by considering our preferences and the things we like, and then seek a way to fashion the ministry (and even the message we present) into a certain shape or mold based on the things we like. More than once, I have heard the comment, “The preacher is telling the church what the church wants to hear.” A Christian in tune with God may enjoy and rejoice in hearing the Bible preached, but the role of the preacher, at least at times, will be to tell the church what it needs to hear and not what it wants to hear.

Theology must precede practice. Even if we see ourselves as being called primarily to guide people in how to live as Christians, that guidance must be theologically informed. We must be willing to let theology guide our practice, instead of asking what will work best and then squeezing that practice into our theology.

When we begin with the big questions – God, humanity, Jesus, discipleship – and let the teachings of Scripture shape our understandings, everything we do is shaped by the fact that the gospel message is the core, always at the center of the church’s mission, message, and ministry.