

7 Ways to Discern Subtle False Theologies

One of the most important lessons I have learned, from years as a pastor and leader who works with other leaders, is to have a robust, full-orbed theological foundation that is practical enough to meet the challenges of ministry, cultural engagement and life.

By “theology” I am referring to the study of God, the Scriptures and their application to every aspect of life.

Jesus tells us in John 8:31-32 that we need to continue in His word in order to know the truth. Thus in this passage Jesus connects obedience, action, and doing to epistemology. Or, to say it simpler, Jesus connects doing and practical experience with the ability to understand and discern the truth. James says that faith without works is dead (James 2). Hence, there is an inescapable connection between theology and practical experience!

The following are things I base my theological grid upon, based upon my own opinion, research and experience:

1. The Bible is the Primary Reference for Theology

Unfortunately, many pastors and leaders read more books about the Bible than the Bible itself! Every leader needs to have a practice of reading through the Bible every year and focusing more of their time and attention on the Bible.

In reading the Bible as it relates to serious theological study, we need to focus on understanding the author’s original intent rather than superimposing our own subjective, moralistic messages upon biblical passages. After we properly exegete a passage, we have a green light to determine other secondary meanings and applications to our lives and churches.

Thus, we as pastors and marketplace leaders have to both do serious inductive study as well as reading whole books of the Bible quickly for the proper context, resulting in a comprehensive understanding of the metanarrative of Scripture so we can properly interpret the Bible as the foundation for practical theology.

2. Christocentric/Trinitarian Theology

Jesus teaches us in Luke 24:27 and 44-45 that much of the Old Testament Scriptures point to Him. We need to have a Christocentric approach to both testaments in order to fully grasp their meaning. It helps to read the gospels, especially the gospel of Matthew, to see how the apostles interpreted Old Testament passages in light of the coming Messiah. Of course, we cannot fully understand any of the epistles or the book of Revelation unless we understand major parts of the Old Testament, which teaches that its complete fulfillment is only understood in the person and work of the Messiah.

Furthermore, we also see the Trinitarian Godhead manifest in so many Old Testament passages that it would be too numerous to attempt to cite them all in this paper. Having an understanding of the Godhead revealed in Scripture will enable us to interpret hard-to-understand passages such as Genesis 1:26, where God said let “us” make man in “our” image, as well as in Genesis 18:1-3 where it seems three persons are referred to as Lord, and Genesis 19:24 where it says the Lord rained down fire from the Lord out of heaven (one Lord seemed to be on the earth and the other in heaven). Suffice it to say, there is much more to be said about this particular point, but we will go on to the next point for the sake of space.

3. Theology and Personal Spirituality

Although I strongly believe there is a proper historical-grammatical way to exegete Scripture to understand the original intent of the authors, Scripture also teaches us that

only spiritual men and women can understand the full import of Scripture and have the mind of God; the natural man does not understand the things of the spirit of God because they are foolishness to him (1 Corinthians 2:14).

Before I gave my heart to Christ I intellectually understood the Bible but had no real personal connection to the Lord who inspired the prophetic and apostolic writers. Thus, I had no real personal experience to fully comprehend what was written.

For example, how can an unconverted person understand the groanings of the Spirit (Romans 8:26), the witness of the Spirit for salvation (Romans 8:16), the leading of the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:14), answers to prayer, faith to move mountains (Mark 11:23), intimate fellowship with God in the Most Holy Place (Hebrews 10:19), taking up our cross (Mark 8:34), or walking in the Spirit (Galatians 5:16-17)? An unbeliever may be able to intellectually understand some of these concepts but would be unable to know the unknowable, which is only by faith and experiential knowledge of Christ.

Thus, as we grow in grace and (experiential) knowledge of our Lord Jesus (2 Peter 3:18) we will also grow in our understanding of Scripture which will inform our theology in the manner God wants us to know it. We cannot separate hermeneutics (the science of interpreting the Word) from spirituality and maturity in Christ.

4. Theology and Community

Many pastors and interpreters of the Word have made the mistake of relying solely upon their own individual studies to determine their theology. But the Word of God teaches us in 1 Corinthians 12 that we are all part of the Body of Christ, and in Revelation chapters 2 and 3 Jesus says to hear what the Spirit is saying to the church. Thus, there are some things God will not teach us or speak to us unless we are in community with other believers.

Sound biblical theology is molded by being immersed in the local church and also by having honest dialogue with peers who are also serving in leadership roles in the context of the kingdom of God. I strongly believe we need to establish hermeneutical communities in order to properly interpret the Scriptures.

I thank God He made me pastor of a church for almost 30 years because when I travel and teach networks of leaders internationally and when I go to local churches to preach, I am able to preach practical things I would have never learned if I had not been a senior pastor for so many years. My prophetic bent actually could have done great harm to local churches if it wasn't tempered with all the trials and tears of establishing a local church! Now I am very careful and not quick to shoot off my mouth and give opinions when preaching in other churches.

Not only that, but my theology has also been tempered by dealing with real people, challenges and situations; many passages in the Bible would not even make sense to me if I were not serving in a local body and serving other pastors and leaders in our networks.

It is essential that every pastor and leader have a community of people in which they discuss and interpret Scripture. This will also protect us from going off into left field with outlandish impractical theological beliefs. It is also helpful to peruse some of the writings of the major theological magazines and bloggers (*Christianity Today*, *First Things*, *Charisma*) to keep up with what others around the world are saying about the church, culture and the Scriptures.

5. Theology and History

Hebrews 12:1 teaches us that we are surrounded by a cloud of many witnesses. The context of this passage is chapter 11 of Hebrews, in which the author is speaking about the heroes of

the faith in the Old Testament. Thus, the Bible teaches us the church on earth is the same as the church in heaven. Ephesians 4:12-16 and Matthew 16:17-19 teach us that Christ is the one who is building His church (for the past 2,000 years). It behooves us to know the councils and creeds of the first six centuries of the church, to try to read some of the writings of the great church fathers (for example, St. Augustine, St. Athanasius and others). We could also benefit from reading the works of some of the great Protestant reformers such as Calvin and Luther as well as the evangelical revivalists such as Wesley, Edwards and Finney.

Having knowledge of church history enables us to understand some of the major theological battles that have been fought in the church (like the Arian battle during the Council of Nicaea in the fourth century) so that we in the contemporary church are not as vulnerable to satanic deception. Satan continually recycles past heretical arguments that demean the person, work and divinity of Christ. He also tries to get believers focused on tangents that divert us from our primary call to evangelize and disciple the nations.

It would be helpful to understand and read some of the great theologians arising out of the Global South, Latin America and Asia so that we hear what the Spirit is saying to those without the same American cultural baggage we have here in the USA. This cultural influence colors our lens of interpretation based on a more Hellenistic philosophical, individualistic mindset.

6. Kingdom Theology and Cultural Engagement

As leaders, another important thing to inform our theology is to be students of contemporary culture. Every day, I spend about one to two hours reading various newspapers and online articles so I can keep in touch with the political, social and economic landscape of the nation and the world. This is done not so much as to mold my theology but to understand how I can

apply theology to my work as a cultural practitioner and mentor to cultural leaders. This also makes my lectures and my international consultations with networks of leaders more informative and practical.

I believe every leader should have a Bible in their right hand and a newspaper in their left hand! Truly, my understanding and knowledge of current events will keep me in in the current or flow of contemporary culture, which is changing drastically from one day to the next!

7. Eschatology and Theology

Truly, our eschatology will determine our protology; that is, our understanding of the future will determine how we act in the present. For example, when I formerly espoused a hyper-dispensational pre-millennial concept of eschatology (from 1978 to 1994), I didn't take seriously the cultural mandate of Genesis 1:28, which obligates Christians to influence the created order, not just the church.

This was because my eschatology didn't give me permission to reform nations or holistically serve my community because I was focused on the rapture, the imminent return of Christ and the coming Antichrist. Thus, understanding politics, policy and economics was deemed a waste of my time because it was all going to end soon anyway! Reforming society seemed like rearranging the chairs on the Titanic because society was already sinking! My former eschatology left this present earth to the devil; my only focus was rescuing individual souls and preparing them to make it to heaven.

In 1995, when I jettisoned hyper-dispensational eschatology (even though I was still essentially pre-millennial) I embraced the cultural mandate and began an intensive study of what the Scriptures taught regarding policy, economics, politics, law, philosophy, family, science, history, education and the arts. I worked hard to have a biblical worldview

instead of a dualistic worldview in which only spiritual things were important and physical things were doomed, unspiritual and unimportant.

This has resulted in a radical change in my personal life as well as our local church because with a change of eschatology came a change in our approach to ministry. Thus, we began doing holistic outreach resulting in enlarging the vision of our children's organization, Children of the City, so that it also includes a strong emphasis on education, which has incredibly blessed the Sunset Park community and beyond! In our church, we began an Ekklesia Institute, which met monthly with a view of nurturing world-class leaders who would work in every realm of society. This resulted in many high-level leaders being trained and sent into the world with a biblical worldview.

It also resulted in me finally discovering my life message (the generational kingdom) and writing four theological books unpacking practical kingdom principles.

In conclusion, when I hear pastors and leaders downplay the study of doctrine, theology or the Bible, I see leaders who may have practical and organizational skills with the ability to manage and grow large churches or organizations, but have no real depth or substance to teach, train and equip mature disciples who will change the world for Jesus!

I also see leaders who don't have what it takes for intellectual, apologetical and cultural sustainability to make it in the complex urban societies that most global cities have become. Truly, we need to take heed to the admonishment of Paul to Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:15 to "study to show yourself approved by God, a workman who need not be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth."