

A Biblical Model for a Doctrine of the Christian Life

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For twenty years I have been teaching systematic theology and it is my increasing conviction that we need a separate area of doctrine to deal with the collective aspects which I will call the Christian Life (cf. Clinton, 1981). Up to the present many of these are dealt with under anthropology, soteriology, sanctification or ecclesiology. The sheer volume of biblical materials dealing with this area is staggering. One must include all the practical teachings of Christ as well as much of the epistles and the relevant parts of the Old Testament. But, before we can get into the biblical text or the details of the theology, preliminary matters must be studied.

We shall look first at the issue of a name for this area. The usual term which the New Testament uses to refer to the various aspects referred to above is 'walking'. Observe the usages:

walk by faith

walk by the Spirit

walk in newness of life

walk worthy of the calling

walk in the light

There are a total of 43 usages of the verb 'peripateo' in the New Testament: 31 in Paul, 11 in John's writings, and one in Hebrews. Due to the widespread use of this term, based on examination of many alternatives, I suggest (along with Ted Martin, 1987) that the name of this new area be called 'Peripatology', or 'the study of the walk' or 'the Christian Life'.

In suggesting the formation of a new area of doctrine I do not think one can simply make up an outline of the biblical doctrinal material. There are other concepts which make up any full treatment of a major doctrine. We shall look at the major conceptual areas of developing a new doctrine and then at an outline of the doctrinal model.

I. Role of Models

The rationale for a theological model has been elaborated by many authors. Perhaps the most comprehensive attempt was by John Montgomery in his "The Theologian's Craft" (1967). Other writers include Ian Ramsey (1957), Robert Voelkel (1968), Gordon Kaufman (1979), T. F. Torrance (1980), and John Jefferson Davis (1984), as well as a great deal of journal literature.

The conclusion one can draw from the literature is that a good model of a theological area may be constructed from examination of present theologians' writings in major systematic theologies. Examples would include Barth's doctrines of Creation or Redemption (1958); Henry's doctrine of God, Revelation and Authority (1983); or Rahner's doctrine of Foundations [Prolegomena] (1978).

In another frame of reference one can use the multi-volume systematic theologies of various writers: Arminius, Berkouwer, Bloesch, Buswell, Calvin, Chafer, Erickson, Hodge, Shedd, Thielicke, Warfield, and Wiley. Newer approaches to doing systematic theology include Pannenberg (1985) and Carter (1983).

Without trying to review all of these, we shall discuss the major elements of a theological model which can be derived from these and other sources.

II. Elements of a Theological Model

In researching the above mentioned authors I found the following elements to be central to most systems. The first element which occurs in a theological system is prolegomena. This study of introductory matters lays the philosophical and foundational materials which undergirds the entire system. Items include a definition of the cosmos or reality as defined by the system, the means and scope of human knowledge (metaphysical and epistemological issues), philosophical and literary hermeneutics, theological methodology (the nature and procedures of the method to be employed), and the issue of a theological center (which item(s), if any, is the focal point of the doctrinal development). I would also add to this list a discussion of the level of discrimination at which one will take appropriate action (ie. when is it appropriate to separate fellowship, when is it appropriate to label a view heretical, etc.) [cf. Alan Scholes, 1986].

The second element in a theological system is usually biblical doctrine. Here the author investigates the text of the Bible from the framework developed in the prolegomena section. The identification of the issues is taken from the Bible itself and from the concerns of contemporary life. The goal is to develop a comprehensive understanding of the major biblical teachings on various issues.

The third element is an arrangement of the results of the biblical theology into a topical format, setting forth the major doctrines of the system, thus forming the final step in a systematic theology. This includes the central teaching or theme of the doctrine being studied, the biblical major developments of the doctrine (arranged logically, not issue oriented), historical and contemporary issues being discussed within this doctrine, and practical application of the doctrine (practical theology).

In the area of developing practical theology, Schreier (1985) addresses "the question of how Christians in some particular cultural context are to express their religious experience in a way that is faithful both to that experience itself and to a received Christian tradition." If Christian tradition is a series of local theologies, how does there come to be a shared core? Schreier suggested that "the cross-cultural ground of Christian identity is finally a matter not of distinctive conceptual or even symbolic content but rather of distinctive operational procedures." (Vertin, 1986, p. 136) It would be interesting to explore this focus on operational procedures which are devoid of conceptual distinctiveness, but we cannot do so here.

Fourth, the systematic theology forms the basis, both procedurally and conceptually, for integration of all truth and for approaching all life issues. In one sense this fourth element is present more systematically when the

development of a systematic theology leads directly to a world view and to Christian education and discipleship as part of the practical theology. In this sense, systematic theology is not an academic option; it is vital to the life and experience of every believer. It is more typical (and a stereotype) to think of theology as a dry, dusty, overly academic approach to discussing terms no one will ever use in real life anyway.

What a tragedy! What is needed is a form of development which will transmit God's truth in a systematic way to be used by the believer in his or her life and ministry every day. Every decision and every action should be informed by God's Word. We are told that every act will be brought into judgment. Furthermore, if teachers are to be judged strictly as to how they have helped equip the people of God, and they will be so judged (James 3:1), then theology must serve the people of God in the way we have discussed.

These four elements, taken together, constitute a system of theology. Many single or double volume 'systematic theology' books include only the second of the major doctrinal elements; that is, a brief discussion of the biblical major developments of the doctrine. These are sometimes, and more properly, labeled 'doctrine surveys'.

Thus, systematic theology is the final product of an inductive, logical, comprehensive study of biblical and theological truths and of historical and contemporary situations. Exegesis, logic, hermeneutics, history, philosophy and social analyses all have a role in the development of a full systematic theology. Let me apply this discussion to the doctrine of the Christian Life.

III. The Issue of a Theological Central Teaching

In the doctrinal area of the Christian Life there is no one central theme which clearly stands out as the central teaching. There are, of course, many important features: developing the relationship with God which began at salvation, living out the covenant requirements of the present age, living out God's distinctive plan for this dispensation, living in the fullness and power of the Holy Spirit, obeying the Great Commandment, focusing on the Great Commission, living out positional truths, 'deeper life' theology, etc.

Criteria

How can we possibly tell if one of these is central to the biblical text? I suggest that there are two approaches which will be fruitful. First, does any one of the major claimants seem to be comprehensive of the others, or of many of them? If any one is significantly more comprehensive than the others, it may be the best logical pick for a central theme.

Second, if there is any one of these themes which is taught or highlighted by Jesus as a central truth, then we need to look at it carefully. Since our commitment as Christians is first of all to Him as Savior and Lord, we must allow His emphases to guide us.

Jesus' Teaching

In fact, there are two passages in the gospels in which Jesus focuses on two aspects of the Christian life and points the disciples to these as central.

In Mark 12:29-31 Jesus says, "The foremost (commandment) is `Hear O Israel! The Lord our God is one Lord; And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, `You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." Jesus' concluding statement in this text is very strong: `There is no other commandment greater than these.' This has to be taken into careful consideration by every Christian. A deeper look at this Great Commandment is in order.

If we chart the three synoptic references and the Old Testament source verses it may be put as follows:

The Great Commandment

Mark 12:30 kardia psyche dianoia ischuos

Matt. 22:37 " " "

Luke 10:27 " " " "

Deut. 6:5 l'ebab nephesh m'e'od

The first element refers to the heart, or the seat of humankind's' affections and direction. In technical educational terms it is the affective center of man's being (today we might call it `right brain').

The second element (second in Hebrew, the same as soul and mind in Greek) includes what Kaiser (Harris, 1980) calls the "whole self," that is, the personality or the whole of the spiritual, social and psychological makeup of the individual.

Often, this is summarized as the mind, will and emotions or as the mind and spirit. But both of these summary phrases are too abbreviated to be much good in a theological discussion. The emotions are far too complex to be adequately captured by a single term. The mind is so complex that educators and psychologists have subdivided it into 120 elements and developed test for 26 of these elements (J. P. Guilford, 1979; Mary Meeker, 1969). Thus, `soul and mind' are shorthand references to the whole of the non-physical makeup of human beings.

The third element, strength, refers to the intensity which we are to bring to the love of God. `Ischuos' is largely co-extensive with `dunamis' but there is emphasis "on the actual power implied in ability or capacity" (Kittel, 1965, III, p. 397). `Ischuos' is the most common word for power in the LXX. In our present context then, `ischuos' connotes the actual intensity with which we love God. Our total being (affection, cognition, spirit) is to be intensely devoted to the love of God.

The second command is like this in that we are to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. The Bible assumes that a person loves himself. In fact this almost universally is human experience, and certainly would be termed `normal.' To love our neighbor is to place ourselves and our resources at God's command to use to help other humans as He directs.

These two commands summarize all that God requires of us. Jesus says that on these two commands depend all the Law and the Prophets (Matthew 22:40). In the Mark passage Jesus adds, "There is no other commandment greater than these." As far as the Old Testament is concerned in Jesus' teaching, these are the foremost and the summary of the whole.

Another passage parallel to this occurs on Jesus' last night with the disciples. He gave them a new commandment--to love one another (John 13:34). This was not a new commandment, except for the qualifier Jesus adds: as I have loved you. The special way in which Jesus has manifested His love for these men is to be the model for them as they express, in a new way, love for one another. But this is still an application of the general commandment to love your neighbor. Thus, it falls within the scope of the preceding discussion on the Great Commandment.

The Great Commission

The other major command comes after the resurrection. As Jesus prepares to leave the disciples He says to them:

All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth. Go ye therefore and make disciples of all nations; baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit; teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I will be with you always, even to the end of the age. (Matthew 28:18-20)

All four elements of this passage have great importance for us. First, Jesus bases the commandment on the fact of His having been given all authority in heaven and on earth. This means that He is putting the coming commandment in the context of His ultimate lordship. It will be at the heart of what He expects His men and women to do.

Second, the central element of the passage is the only one which is in the imperative mood. They are to make disciples. No matter what else we do as the church or as individual members of the body of Christ, we must be in the process of making disciples or we will be in disobedience to the Lord.

Third, the two participles following the command to make disciples should be taken as instrumental verbs. By bringing people to be baptized, that is to identify with Jesus Christ, and by teaching them what He has commanded His followers, we are bringing people into discipleship.

The final element of the passage is His promise to be with us always. As others have pointed out, this is reminiscent of the Old Testament promise, 'I will dwell in your midst' (fourteen passages between Exodus and Zechariah, and a score of references as part of the tripartite formula; cf. Kaiser, 1972, pp. 13-14 and 1978, pp. 34-35). The implication of this promise is that in the process of making disciples, wherever we are in the world and when ever we are in history, Jesus will be there in His full presence to give us whatever we need to carry on the task.

Summary

The Great Commandment and the Great Commission are non exclusive of each other. As an expression of our love for the Lord, we love the brethren and we reach out in love to the unbeliever. These two commandments stand at the peak of the life of the Church. This is so because of the scriptural and historical context and the theological importance which Jesus gave them.

Therefore, we must give these commands proper emphasis in our teaching and preaching and mold our own lives as well as the lives of our disciples (students) in light of these central aspects of Jesus' teaching.

These two commands certainly fulfill the second criterion which was listed above. They are central in Jesus' teaching. But do they fulfill the first criterion? Are they inclusive of many of the other claimants to the role of center piece in a doctrine of the Christian Life?

I think they are. In Covenantal and Dispensational circles (from Berkhof and Chafer to Davis and Radmacher), in pentacostal and deeper life circles, in parachurch and missions organizations, there is no disagreement that these two are very important commands for the church today. Most of the teachings which are based on the development of holier or deeper Christian living begin by saying that we are to be about the work of reaching the world, at the command of Jesus Christ, and that this teaching is to help prepare us to reach that goal.

Therefore, I suggest that the two commandments discussed above be taken as the center point of the doctrine of the Christian Life. As we entered into our relationship with God by faith, so now we are to grow, both in our walk with Jesus Christ (and in the love of God through Him) and in our love for our fellow men.

IV. Major Developments

If the development of our relationship with God, embodied in the Great Commandment and the Great Commission, is taken for the center piece of this doctrinal system, what are the major developments of this in the New Testament? And what will be the implications for our present understanding of the many doctrines connected to the concept of the Christian Life but which have been developed without conscious connection to the central elements? Will many of these have to be rethought? Haddon Robinson has said:

Evangelism without sound doctrine decays into ignorant fanaticism. Theology without the goal of making converts degenerates into cold intellectualism. The result of this separation is a faith that is neither intellectually or biblically sound nor spiritually satisfying. (1986, p. 15)

Too many of our areas of theology would have this judgment. I believe that in reformulating this doctrine major shifts of emphasis, though not primarily of content, will be needed.

This is not a new suggestion. People from the third world countries have looked at the present Western situation and made comments much like the following one by Orlando Costas:

For all its missionary passion and experience, mainstream Evangelical theology in North America has yet to learn from its missionary heritage how to ask more central questions to the destiny of humankind, the future of the world, even the central concerns of the Scriptures. (1985, p. 75)

By the grace of God, we still have time to take theological action which can impact our expression of our walk with God.

A sample of the direction these theological actions might take follows.

A. The New Testament emphasis on worship, often a minor point in a theology of the Christian Life, takes on new meaning with the Great Commandment as a central theme. Prayer, meditation, public worship, and ceremonial life in general become a *primary* means of expressing the centrality of our faith and our relationship with God. Private devotions, another means of expressing our love for God with heart, mind, and intensity, becomes a daily focal point of life, not a occasional afterthought. We commune with the Lord and are refreshed and prepared by Him for service. Public and private worship are thus both means of personal growth and also steps of obedience. They serve as a claim on our lives and as testimony to others of our relation to God and our new life in Him.

B. Study, of any truth, takes on new meaning as well. If we love God with our minds, then study of the Bible, doctrine, devotional literature, philosophy, science, and sociology all become means of worship as well as new launching pads of faith. The point of integration of all truth is the experiential knowledge of God (Carnell, 1967) and the expression of faith toward Him.

C. All life, both ministry and `secular' work, become a means of expressing our love to our fellow man, through providing physical and spiritual means of life to them. No calling is seen apart from its source in God or apart from its end in love to God and to others. This is very much like the message of Ecclesiastes: There is nothing better than to rejoice and to do good in one's lifetime; moreover, that every man who eats and drinks sees good in all his labor--it is the gift of God. (3:12-13) All of life become holy and a calling before God for which we will be judged.

D. This will also be true of our human relationships. Each person God brings into our life is a disciple, in that I am to love all people and bring them all to Christ and to completion in Christ, as the Lord leads us to be involved together. No aspect of life, no relationship escapes this holy calling: family, friends, neighbors, co-workers, fellow members of local assemblies, brief acquaintances, co-members of community groups, and all others.

E. This will also effect our concepts of the means of growth in the Christian Life. Positional truth and the Christ life are sources of spiritual truth which we draw upon in faith to live the Christian Life. All the methods of Bible study, prayer, witness, and spiritual discipline are for our growth in faith and the enriching of our walk with Jesus. Fruit-bearing and holiness, are the results of spiritual growth, not of hours of ministry involvement or intensity of spiritual practices apart from the proper heart relationship.

F. The growth of the Kingdom of God, the development of the Church, the edification of the saints, the witness of salt and light to the world, all these are goals of the church and also results of our walk with Jesus Christ. Surely we will not see these corporate efforts succeed apart from the walk of faith. Bockmuel has said something very much like this as well:

Theology has this task of teaching and maintaining God's creational ordinances and commandments and so helping to fulfill God's cultural commission to sustain human life. Without this ongoing work, nations will sink into Godlessness, anarchy, and self-destruction. At the same time, this means setting up the presupposition for the

fulfillment of Christ's Great Commission. The third contribution of theology towards the preservation of culture and human existence lies in the practical presentation of regenerate men and women who have a distinct and regenerating effect on the life of society also. (1986, p. 8)

G. The means to this walk is simply stated: Walk by faith. Faith, or belief, is mentioned more than 500 times in the New Testament. We cannot go into any exhaustive discussion here. But Romans, written as an introductory letter to a church Paul had not visited, focuses on faith (chapter 3 and 4) as the means to salvation, and on walking by faith (chapters 6, 8 and 12; synonymous in practice with walking in the Spirit) as the means to growth and obedience.

This is certainly not an exhaustive list of the major elements of a doctrine of the Christian Life. But it points in the direction of refocusing many of our major teachings which have often been developed without a theological connection to a system of theology.

The task of re-examining the history of theology regarding any and all aspects of the Christian Life and restating the conclusions in light of a biblical center and a new direction is staggering to the imagination. But I do not see that we have any option, other than holding on to the present, inadequate, state of the theological development.

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