

Sample Chapter***Coffeehouse Theology: Reflecting on God in Everyday Life***

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Introduction**Contextual Theology: Understanding Ourselves, Understanding God**

When was the last time you mentioned God in a conversation, said a prayer, or read the Bible? Perhaps you were helping a friend through a rough time, asking God to protect a loved one, or studying about Jesus' ministry on earth.

God has a way of showing up in everyday life, and just about everyone believes something about God. For example, just try suggesting in a crowd of people that you think there's only one way to get to heaven. You'll hear a wide variety of opinions, often with a high degree of passion. In fact, we say all kinds of things about God, such as the Bible being God's Word or expressing godly views on moral issues such as poverty, war, and the protection of the unborn.

Some people believe that God acts frequently in this world, bringing peace and justice. Others see God as very angry, on the verge of raining down judgment. Still others think he set the world in motion and then walked away.

I want to know one thing: Where do these beliefs about God come from?

As a Christian, my beliefs come from the Bible—and I do believe it is God's inspired Word—as well as from traditions handed down from other Christians sharing the same background. Many Christians would agree with my list.

Even if we agree that the Bible and our traditions guide our beliefs about God, we still don't have a clear consensus about many of the particulars found in the Bible and within these traditions. Disagreements cover a range of issues such as the place of sacraments, the extent of God's control over the world, and how exactly salvation through Jesus happens. Even when we share the same sources regarding our beliefs, we have enough disagreements to drive us into thousands of different denominations.

What causes these deep divides when we try to understand God?

Maybe hidden influences change the way we read the Bible and talk about God. In fact, could our culture have a lot to do with our beliefs? People in the United States, just to name one instance, have much to learn from Latin American theologians (and vice versa).

For example, think about how Christians from the U.S. and Latin America tend to read the Beatitudes (Matthew 5; Luke 6). Most of us in the U.S. spend a lot of time reading the Matthew's Gospel, especially 5:3 where Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." When we read these words, we think Jesus' primary concern is humility, and so we think of the poverty mentioned here as a spiritual matter. This fits well with our experience of relative wealth, power, and prosperity. Because our culture focuses on image and pride, we read Matthew and think that Jesus wants to counter our culture, teaching humility and poverty in spirit as opposed to pride.

Something very different happens when Latin Americans read Luke's account of the Beatitudes. In Luke 6:20 Jesus said, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God." Here, Jesus speaks directly to the people, instead of *about* them as Matthew recorded. He also drops the words "in spirit." Latin American Christians, who

live amid poverty, injustice, and political turmoil, connect with these words. Here, he seems to say that blessing comes from being physically poor, which is very different from the spiritual poverty in Matthew. The wealthy see blessings for the humble, while the poor see blessings for the destitute.

In these two different readings, we gain a glimpse of what happens when we read the Bible: Our local settings and cultural values—in other words, our context—influence how we read the Bible. When we read the Bible, we can't help but see God through a unique local lens.

The Bible presents a deep and rich message about God's concern for both our spiritual and physical worlds. Both interpretations are rooted in Jesus' teachings and both are correct. However, when Christians in the United States focus solely on the spiritual message or when Latin Americans focus only on the physical part, Jesus' message loses some of its depth and richness.

Understanding Seekers of God

The lesson here is pretty simple. Beliefs about God change depending on context. So as we seek information about this God we want to know and to make known, we need to understand the often undetected influences of cultural context. The inescapable conclusion is that we're products of our times and locations, and these influences create a lens for our study of God.

All is not lost. In fact, culture is a good thing to understand. Christians in the U.S. do need to hear Jesus' teaching about humility, and Latin American Christians do need to hear the hope of Jesus' message about the blessings promised to the physically poor. In

this case, we can easily see how context becomes a valuable tool. And as we understand the values and challenges of our contexts, we can study the Bible with a greater willingness to hold our culture up to the scrutiny of God.

Of course, the danger occurs when we mistake our biblical interpretations from an isolated context as the definitive word. So we need to challenge ourselves to learn about God with an awareness of context—what we can call contextual theology—while at the same time making sure we value different insights from other cultures where Christians are learning about God in their own particular situations.

In brief, that's where we're headed together in this book. *Coffeehouse Theology* will help us form and live out contextual theology by understanding who we are and by including perspectives outside of our own in the midst of our study of Scripture.

Together, we'll explore where our beliefs about God come from: our context, the Bible, our traditions, and Christians from other cultures.

Concerns about Theology and Culture

We'll start with a long and hard look at who we are as theologians and the way our cultural contexts influence how we understand God. I'm not taking this approach because culture is more important than God. Rather our culture—who we are and our values—becomes both our greatest strength and largest obstacle in theology. Culture can be a strength because it serves as a tool when we use our understanding of culture to study God. Think back to the Beatitude's example: Christians in the U.S. tend to spiritualize the message of Jesus because we understand the pride so prevalent in today's culture. Yet, every culture has weaknesses, too. God is so much more than what we can

see by ourselves. So while addressing the pride of our culture in the Beatitudes, we can easily miss out on God's concern for the poor and the blessings he sets aside for them.

You might be concerned about the amount of time we'll spend exploring the interaction of culture and theology, especially in Chapters 5 and 6 on the influences of postmodernism on culture and on the church. You might already be asking, "Can't we just study the Bible and leave culture out of this? In fact, don't we just mess up the Bible by considering culture as a part of theology?" The truth is that whether we acknowledge it or not, we constantly deal with the influences of culture on theology.

Whatever philosophy dominates our culture, we can't afford to simply ignore it as we form our theology. If we do, we risk allowing the dominant philosophy and culture to covertly influence our thinking about God. At the same time, Christians should never embrace a culture or philosophy. Instead, we need to see our culture as a setting that we need to understand. Then we can either seek to overcome it or put it to use.

In fact, I want to make clear that I'm mostly ambivalent toward culture in that I don't believe one culture or philosophy is right or wrong. In Chapter 3, I'll outline a number of ways we can approach the mixing of culture and theology.

Of course, this is difficult and messy work that requires practice and the input of a Christian community. However, letting an undetected culture or philosophy infect our theology can be more dangerous. Here's the bottom line: If we truly want to study God, we must first understand the cultural lens that we view God through.

Theology: Reflecting on God

In light of the challenges posed by context, let's ask the question again, "Where do our beliefs about God come from?" We now understand that context plays a role, but we also need to consider specific ways we learn about God. If we want to understand where our beliefs come from, we need to understand theology (which literally means the study of God) and the role theology plays in our everyday lives.

I like to think of theology as reflecting on or thinking about God. "Reflecting" is a helpful word because it not only addresses the act of seeking an understanding of God, but it also implies the act of "reflecting" who God is as a result of seeking him out. In other words, theology—the act of reflecting on God—should change both how we think and how we live. We seek not to merely know *about* God, but to know God in a personal and life-changing way.

Further, if we take the mission of Jesus seriously, we also reflect him for the benefit of others. Jesus instructed his followers to complete his mission, to spread the good news that God isn't just present in our world, but that everyone has an opportunity to know him. In this way, reflecting on God is not only essential in our own relationships with God, but in our ministry to others around us and around the world. Understanding theology's place in our calling to know God and to make God known is a good place to start.

Theology in Everyday Life

Christians face tough questions about God all of the time. One morning I walked in to work and made my usual stop in the kitchen to start brewing coffee. With that essential piece in place, I walked upstairs to my office. On the way down the hall, two of

my co-workers were discussing a recent interview on a popular talk show. Joyce Meyers, a popular Christian writer and conference speaker, had said on this show that she believes God forgives her father for abusing her during childhood. If Jesus forgives this child abuser, then the way is clear for him to go to heaven. And that was the sticking point for my co-workers.

After sharing the main points of the interview, Stephanie asked me, “How could God forgive a child abuser but send a morally good atheist to hell?”

Grace is a curious thing. We love receiving it, but we really don’t like seeing it given out so lavishly to others.

“I don’t know if her father was sincere, but if he really did repent of his sins, change his ways, and ask God for forgiveness, then it is a very real possibility that God will save him,” I replied.

“But will God send good people to hell?” she persisted.

“It’s hard to say,” I said. “There’s a wide variety of perspectives on heaven, hell, and who goes where. Jesus did say that he is the way, but I can’t speak for what’s truly in another person’s heart and whether or not that person has chosen to receive God’s grace. God has clearly offered forgiveness to all who repent, but we can’t always figure out who’s has chosen to be with God and who has rejected God.”

“I just can’t believe that God will forgive such a creep.”

What a tough spot. I did my best to explain grace and the cross: “I agree that it’s hard to believe. But we’re all separated from God by our sinful choices, and that’s where Jesus came in to conquer sin and make new life possible.”

The conversation continued along similar lines. By the end of the conversation I believe that Stephanie had a clearer picture of God's grace and forgiveness, even though she kept it at a theoretical arms length.

I'm not bringing up this incident to show how to "win" a theological discussion, but rather to show how important theology is. When I least expected it, I walked in to a very important discussion about God and salvation. That's often how theology pops up in everyday life. One moment I was carefully measuring coffee, and the next I was explaining the finer points of grace and salvation to a skeptic.

Prior to this discussion, I spent time reading the Bible, studying theology books, and interacting with Christians and non-Christians. I've weighed and wrestled with issues such as sin, grace, and forgiveness many times before Stephanie mentioned the interview that morning. Exploring our beliefs and how we form them isn't just important for a personal relationship with God, but also for the way we explain God to others.

Sources of Theology

After we understand the influences we face in contextual theology and the place of theology in everyday life, we're ready to look at the sources providing our beliefs about God. While most Christians begin with the Bible, we need to remember what the Bible says about itself: namely that the Holy Spirit of God provides direction and insight as we study Scripture. While anyone can read or study the Bible, Scripture itself says we need a relationship with God and a dependence on the leading of the Holy Spirit to lead us into God's truth (John 14:26).

So, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and with an awareness of our cultural lens, we seek to understand God by studying the Bible, our primary and most authoritative source for understanding God. If we ask where our beliefs come from, the Bible usually lands at the top of the list because Christians believe God inspired its writers.

After studying the Bible, we'll arrive at some conclusions. But how reliable are they? We've already looked at how people from different cultures can read the same Bible and arrive at very different conclusions. So how do we overcome the shortcomings of our context?

Thankfully, we have two allies that can help us see God in more complete ways.

First, we have the traditions of the church. These traditions uncover the ways Christians understood God in various cultures and circumstances. If we find that certain beliefs stand the test of time and hold their place in Christian theology, we can be sure they're important. For example, the trinity—the doctrine stating that God is three persons in one substance—has withstood the scrutiny of Christians throughout history and has become a pillar of the Christian faith.

Christian tradition helps us determine what beliefs are most important, with those standing the test of time at the center of the Christianity. We can compare our beliefs today to Christian traditions and find points in history when someone took a different perspective or applied our doctrines of today in different ways. If we hold beliefs strictly unique to the present day, we should at least question why we differ from Christians before us. Perhaps we can give good reasons. However, if we're wise, we'll look to Christian tradition as a guide for what we believe today.

Second, interacting with global Christians provides another way to broaden our perspective about God and to fill in the weaknesses of our local context. As Christianity grows in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and other parts of the world, Christians in these places are all forming theology. Just as Latin American Christians broaden our understanding of Jesus' teachings about God's concern for the poor, the potential for additional insights only increases when we enter into dialogue with Christians in other contexts.

A Picture to Help Us

Since we're talking about several different influences on our theology today, I have arranged a "contextual theology web" that will illustrate how each part fits together. The web will appear at the end of each chapter in order to show how the topic in each chapter fits into contextual theology. Since we do theology within the context of our culture and God's mission to make himself known, culture and mission form circles around our web of theology—factors in theology that are always present and must be taken into account. At the end of each chapter this contextual theology web will provide a visual explanation of what we have just explored and where we're going next.

[**Art Department:** I think the web diagram should go in here, even though it will usually go at the end of each chapter. Everything should be in black font here.]

Stepping into Contextual Theology

As Christians, we can't undertake any greater quest than seeking an understanding of God. Imagine the outrage that would erupt if someone stated in a conservative church that the Bible is full of errors, or if someone suggested to a Catholic that Mary was not a virgin. Either would be as startling as replacing an opera singer at the last minute with Madonna! Our passion for our beliefs suggests that theology is a sacred and integral part of our lives, worthy of study and careful reflection.

Our understanding of God influences where we live, how we distribute our wealth, how we spend our time, who we marry, and innumerable other areas. Theology's far-reaching influence into our everyday lives calls us into a careful consideration of just where our beliefs come from. If you want to know God in deeper and richer ways than ever before, I encourage you to dig deeper into the world of contextual theology with me. As we look into who we are, who God is, and what historic and global Christians have to teach us, our conversations, prayers, Bible studies, and relationships with others will be far richer than we could ever imagine.

For Further Reading

At the end of each chapter I will provide a list of suggested books for further reading. The casual observer will notice that my recommendations reflect my Evangelical background and draw from many authors in the missional and emerging church conversations. While I acknowledge that there are many excellent books available beyond my list, I have chosen to limit my recommendations to books I have either read, browsed thoroughly, or know to be of high quality through the recommendations trusted Christians. Just as I would not recommend an unknown book to a friend, I would not dare to recommend an

unknown book to my readers. Keep in mind that I am particularly concerned with “contextual” theology, and so many theology standards have not been included because they do not speak to my particular focus here.

For additional resources and discussion, see my theology blog www.inamirrordimly.com.