

EXPERIENTIAL THEOLOGY WITH TOM NETTLES

I've been something of a theology geek since my conversion in 1990. Not growing up in church, and being seriously ignorant of the biblical story and Christian theology, I found myself very hungry for the truth. This interest in theology was at first focused on knowing the God who saved me. It was transformative and it cultivated piety. But somewhere along the way (in Bible College) my passion for theology became warped and I became more interested in the propositions themselves than the person of Christ. I was finding my identity in a system more than I was in my Savior. Before graduating from college God was gracious enough to expose my sin and remind me of the purpose of theology (worship) as well as the need to experience the truth I was working so hard to know. I'm still working on not just being a theology geek, but a lover of God who is passionate about knowing him and his ways. The way of theological geekdom is easy--it's just another subculture and discipline to learn. But to know the truth in order to know God and make him known is something else. This brings me to today's post and a series of short interviews that will be released weekly here on the blog. I'm talking to some true pastor-theologians of our day in order to hear from them on matters of experiential theology. I hope you find them worth reading and sharing, and most of all I hope they encourage you to be a better theologian. Kicking off the series is Dr. Tom Nettles who explains "experiential theology" while unpacking some of the issues surrounding it.

Dr. Tom Nettles, Professor of Historical Theology at [The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary](#) in Louisville, KY, is not only one of the foremost Baptist historians in America, he is also one of the greatest living Baptist theologians.

What is "experimental Calvinism" and "experiential theology"? Why the need for the adjective?

These terms point to the practice of godliness under the guidance of truth. The purpose of Scripture on the manward side is that the man of God may be perfect, prepared for good works [[2 Timothy 3:16](#)]. Grace is the application of divine favor ultimately for the glory of God effected through the production of good works in the redeemed [[Ephesians 2:10](#)]. Christ's covenantal arrangement with the Father was to make us perfect in every good work to do his will and to work in us that which is well-pleasing in his sight [[Hebrews 13:21](#)]. His divine power gives us everything that pertains to life and godliness as he has called us to glory and virtue [[2 Peter 1:3](#)]. An experiential theology, or experimental Calvinism, pursues the purposeful application of every doctrine to some area of life that needs further conformity to Christ's perfect humanity [[Romans 8:29](#); [Philippians 3:10-14](#).] The need for the adjective is not that there is actually another kind of theology, for in truth, there isn't. The need for the adjective arises from the division that too frequently is seen both in academia and in the church between experience and truth. The "theology" or "Calvinism" side reminds us that we cannot pursue experience unhinged from truth. The "experimental" side reminds us that doctrine as a pure intellectual or rational exercise has no meaning, is purely vacuous, words without substance, clouds without rain. Colossians 3 shows us how a focus on Christ and his work outside of us lifts our hearts and minds to the glorious benefits of covenant love, produces within us a spiritual imitation of those redemptive actions, and in this way puts to death the destructive manifestation of our intrinsic sinfulness and ungodliness.

Has this disappeared from the discipline of theology today?

I would hesitate to say that it has disappeared, for that would be like saying that God has disappeared from his own work as described in Philippians 1:6: “He who began the good work in you will bring it to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.” In addition, several pastors and teachers of theology are making earnest efforts to recapture the necessary unity between revealed truth, gospel faith, and progressive holiness. It is not as consciously prominent in most of our churches in the last several decades as it seems to have been in the nineteenth century and earlier. A more Pelagianized, decisionistic evangelism has tended to cut the moral nerve of evidences of regeneration, the concept that spiritual affections naturally flow from the sovereign regenerative work of the Holy Spirit. When Calvinist theology was normal fare, and the examination of life involved the discernment of the marks of an “effectual call” in order to determine if true faith existed, experimental theology was a more common practice, encouraged from the pulpit and a matter of spiritual necessity in the pew. It always involved two sides, the objective and the subjective. These must be kept together, properly integrated for an edifying self-examination to take place. One must see first of all the person and work of Christ and examine one’s affections and faith in light of his perfect righteousness and the logic of being “accepted in the Beloved.” Only in that light may one see clearly to discern fruits of holiness. Without a justification-driven, christocentric foundation all examination results either in self-righteousness or despair, legalism or antinomianism.

What advice would you give to pastors and church planters to develop themselves and their churches theologically?

The conviction that doctrine is a transformative power must be present from the beginning. It cannot be a subsequent development. If piety and doctrine are developed separately, it becomes extremely difficult to put them back together from a pastoral standpoint. The effort will seem artificial, contrived, and as optional for the Christian life. The “practical” will always seem more manageable for the supposedly ordinary Christian, while doctrinal issues and discussion will be seen as the province of a few heady folks. The fostering of this perception is fatal to the health of the body and to the robust faith of each individual Christian. Pastoral counseling suffers in difficult situations from shallow doctrinal development. A worshipping body, convinced to the person of the divine insistence on his own glory as a right, good, and glorious thing, and the consequent joyful approval of divine sovereignty in creation, providence, and redemption can be a strong and mighty outpost of kingdom labor and worship. “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven” will receive the sound and hearty “Amen” in the souls of the saints. Whining and perplexity over the difficulties of life will be minimized, courageous consistency in the face of sorrow and tragedy will grow as a witness that confounds the expectations of the world, and oneness develops in the entire congregation in genuine sympathy for each other as they experience together the multi-faceted grace of God. They will not think it strange at any fiery trial that comes to them but will consent that “this is the will of God concerning you.” Pastoral counseling builds naturally off the instruction, admonitions, exhortations of a proclamation ministry. A clear and forceful integration of the biblical doctrines of the Trinitarian existence of God, the intrinsic glory of the Godhead, Christ’s infinite condescension, humanity’s fall and consequent just condemnation and punitive corruption, divine sovereignty in election, reconciliation and redemption, calling,

resurrection, and eternal occupation—all of these and others constitute the pastoral task from the very beginning of establishing a worshipping congregation.

What danger would you caution them against in theology?

The errors that may attend to any single doctrine of the Bible are too numerous and nuanced to list. A substantial and continuously growing knowledge of historical theology can enhance one's exegetical wisdom and aid in avoiding the more common and glaring errors. Close attention to long texts of Scripture set within the framework of the biblical writer's argument can help avoid the tyranny of isolation—a hyper-textual approach to biblical understanding. Arminianism has developed a peculiarly partitioned approach to understanding certain texts in isolation from concentric circles of context. Constantly working at refining what one believes to be the driving plot of the biblical story continually reframes all the individual texts, chastens exegesis to fit into the particular facet of narrative that carries the big story along, and gives the meta-narrative drive that is necessary if Christians are to embrace a God-centered, heaven-centered, perspectively revolutionary grasp of their life in relation to the eternal counsels of God. In my view, this continued interaction does not create the insecurity of relativity, but offers the opportunity for progressive clarity in our understanding. This does not mean that confessionally articulated doctrine must constantly yield to new formulations, but that our grasp of the place of these sets of coherent truth in relation to each other, creates an intra-doctrinal teleology of increasingly profound and pleasing and God-honoring proportions. The biblical responsibility of the pastor consistently to place the believers in the context of this picture is at once both experimental and theological, practical and doctrinal. What we do and how we feel and how we respond to life's details flows out of who we believe we are in God's relentless push toward subduing all things to Christ, that in all things he might have the preeminence.