

From the August 4, 2010 Issue

Who-ology?

Go to any evangelical seminary and sign up for the Hermeneutics class, and you will probably be taught that studying the Bible has to do with determining the author's message to his original audience, and then applying that message to your life today.

This is fine as far as it goes, but there's something missing. It implies that the object of our study is the author's mind. That when we have the author's thoughts, we have the primary data required for our theological endeavor.

This is entirely appropriate if we are engaging in Paul-ology, John-ism, or Peter-onomy. But it is inadequate if we are attempting Theo-logy. In theology, the object of our study is God (Theos), not the biblical authors. In theology our encounter is not with Peter, James and John, but with Father, Son and Spirit.

Few would disagree with this, but the difficulty arises when we ask how this works out in our actual process of studying the scriptures. In what way does my engagement with Paul (or any other biblical author) become an encounter with the Father, through the Son, in the Spirit?

I have spent the last couple years seeking to DO this, and as I've muddled through, I've tried to pay attention to HOW I'm doing it. And one thing I notice is that I have begun to engage with the author in two distinct phases, each quite different from the other.

In Phase 1, I am doing what my Hermeneutics teacher taught me to do; I am trying to get inside the author's mind, to hear what he has to say. For example, when I study an epistle of Paul, my first task is to study at Paul's feet, to be taught what he knows. As Master Yoda is wise in the ways of The Force, the apostle Paul is wise in the ways of the Great Dance. He is a master of the art of submitting to the mind of Christ, and he is worth learning from. Even more than that, Paul is an apostle who has special authority for teaching us about the Dance. As such, we are his students.

But just as Master Yoda is not The Force, Master Paul is not the Great Dance. Rather, he is guiding me toward participation in the Dance that is greater than both of us.

So as I enter Phase 2, I continue being Paul's student, but I begin to function also as his colleague. I recognize that his mind is wrestling with Someone, and that he has trained me to join him in wrestling. It is here where my encounter with Paul becomes an encounter with the Triune One. It is here where, through the Spirit, both Paul and I become apprentices to Jesus himself in his life with Father.

We see clearly in Paul's epistles how he wrestled with what would later be called the Trinitarian nature of God. And as the early church joined him in wrestling, they were able to articulate the doctrine of the Trinity. Paul did not articulate this doctrine himself; rather, the reality of the Trinity was what his mind wrestled with. And today we recognize the Trinity as the invisible reality that makes all of Paul's thinking make sense.

This same dynamic occurs in other areas of thinking and living:

Children study at the feet of their parents, so that they will eventually become fully-functioning adults who join their parents in the shared quest of living wisely and well.

Abraham Lincoln studied at the feet of the Founding Fathers, many of whom embraced slavery. But as he joined them in their quest, he began to apply the principle of Liberty in ways they never could have imagined. By moving beyond Jeffersonian-ism, Adams-onomy and Madison-ianism, he moved the U.S. closer to the ideals grappled with in the Constitution. In so doing, he made his country MORE Constitutional, not less.

William Wilberforce studied at the feet of theologians who used the Bible to justify slavery. But as he joined them in submitting to the mind of Christ, he saw things they had not.

Einstein studied at the feet of Newton, and later when he became Newton's "colleague," he became able to see things even Newton couldn't.

It is right and good for us to apprentice ourselves to the masters—Peter, Paul, John, etc. And also to learn from the masters who came later—Justin, Gregory, Athanasius, Cyril, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Wesley, Barth, and Torrance. But how sad for us if we stop there!

The true theologian does not settle for being a Athanas-ian, Luther-ite, Barth-ian, or even a John-ist or a Paul-ologian. The writings of the masters (even the apostolic masters) are the means to an end, not an end in themselves. We apprentice our minds to theirs, but only for the purpose of our shared pursuit—the mind of Theos Himself.

~ John Stonecypher