

# napkin theology

a simple way to share sacred truth

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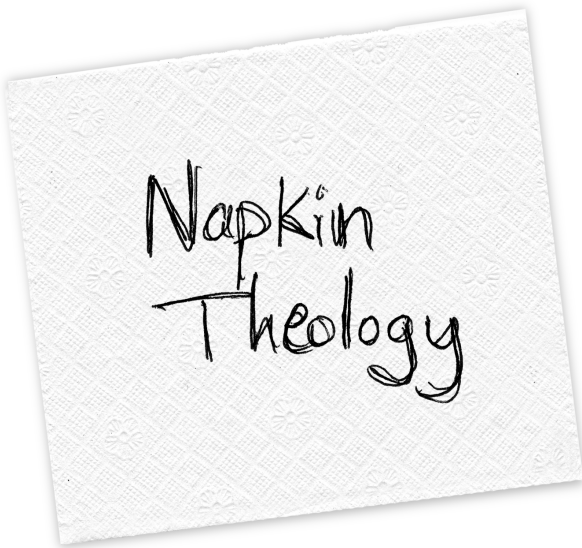
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# Introduction



## **Making the Complex Simple**

The work of a theologian is to use the full extent of his or her intellect to explain the simple love of God for mankind with whatever degree of complexity is necessary to do the job. The work of a pastor is to explain the complex theologies of God in simple ways. The work of each is important, but the audiences are very different.

The theologian melds his or her study of God into every conceivable philosophical and rational construct so that every question can be dealt with to some predetermined point of satisfaction. In doing so, the theologian speaks to the intellects and elites, gaining entry for the science of knowing God into the academic discussion.

The pastor presents the truth of God's good news to a world in need of a Savior. His or her words are chosen to reach the widest audience possible. While theologically sound, the pastor's communication of the gospel must be easily received, since its purpose is to make the gospel of Christ available to all mankind.

Both tasks are formidable. The pastor still aims to speak the truth in a way that has intellectual integrity. The theologian seeks to speak in a way that can be comprehended by many. In other words, it is the goal of both to speak to the world in understandable and acceptable terms. The purpose of this book is to use simple analogy as an introduction to complex theology. In doing this, we will equip those who disciple others to deal with one of the difficult realities of proclaiming biblical truth today.

During the twenty-plus years that I have been in ministry, one of the questions haunting me, and so many others like me, is how to teach complex theology to people who often will only give you a few minutes of their time. Unfortunately, some have simply given up on teaching theology because they are convinced that people are not interested. That is an incorrect conclusion. Many

people have an interest in learning more about the theology of Christ, though they consider themselves too busy to take the time for serious study, and at times are turned off by Christians who don't know or live what they believe. People are *not* interested in wasting time listening to uninformed believers.

This leads to the reality that a Christian will often have little more than a lunch meeting in which to explain his or her belief in God or some other aspect of Christian theology. Often a person will be caught with nothing more than a pen and napkin with which to do the eternal work of the kingdom. So the great question becomes, "How does the person who disciples others teach these deep, meaningful concepts in a way that is both understandable and repeatable?" If theology on a napkin in five minutes or less is what today's culture is demanding, let's consider how we can do that. While it is not going to be a full explanation or a sufficient argument, it will be a starting point, and if that is all we have to work with at the moment, we had better be ready.

## **Dogma, Doctrine, and Opinion**

Christianity has existed for more than two thousand years. Over that time, the thought and belief systems of Christians have become well developed through scholarly conversation and debate. A variety of ideas or theologies

have arisen about the proper understanding of God, Jesus, salvation, and Scripture. These ideas or theologies have often been hotly debated, and some are still debated to this day. Some ideas have been rejected as heresy (contrary to proper biblical teaching), and others have been separated into doctrinal categories as debates that cannot be definitively resolved.

However, some ideas have risen above the debate to form the core of Christian faith. These ideas transcend denominational lines and even the deep fissures between Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestant Christianity. These ideas have become the central theologies of Christianity. They are universally accepted beliefs that define the word *Christian*. To reject these beliefs is to stray from the faith of the Bible. To reject these beliefs is to reject Christianity and the good news of biblical truth.

The best way to describe what we will study is to understand the difference between three terms:

- *Dogma*—Written in Blood: Items of biblical faith that are universally accepted as true and necessary to the faith.
- *Doctrine*—Written in Ink: Items of biblical faith that are honestly contested among well-meaning, biblically centered believers in Jesus Christ.
- *Opinion*—Written in Pencil: Items of biblical faith that are not firmly based in the teaching of Scripture or the tradition of the church.

Understanding the roots of our faith and the reasons why we embrace certain truths strengthens our faith. We gain courage in the knowledge that ours is a historic faith and that our understanding of God is part of a pattern of thought that has been tested and tried for nearly twenty-one centuries. We learn of a God who is loving and capable, holy and forgiving, demanding and empowering, one and three. We learn of a forgiveness that is neither deserved nor earned, but rather is freely given by the loving God of heaven. We learn of a word of truth given to us through the Holy Scripture that is able to encourage, teach, comfort, and sustain us in our life journey. We learn of a body of believers known as the church that is God's instrument for reaching a world in need of his love, power, forgiveness, and truth.

## Using This Book

Using this book is simple. Each chapter addresses a single point of theology and approaches it from a variety of perspectives.

### The Conversation

Each chapter begins with a sample conversation that illustrates a teachable moment, a situation in which the truths explored in the chapter are particularly relevant.



Usually, these are based on actual conversations I've had with people learning about the Christian faith.

## **Teachable Questions**

Each sample conversation is followed by a set of teachable questions. These are questions that indicate an open door to teachable moments on the point of theology to be covered in the chapter.

Please be aware that many Christians over the years have been content to offer prepackaged slogans in response to people's genuine questions about the faith; much damage to people's faith has resulted from Christians who memorize and recite such slogans. That is not the purpose of suggesting teachable questions. Instead, they are examples of the kinds of questions people ask that might be an invitation into an honest conversation. The goal is to get you thinking about situations in which you might share the information that is presented and specific ways you might introduce the topic and have a real conversation with a friend.

## **The Napkin**

After the sample conversation and questions, you will find a simple image that can easily be reproduced with a pen or pencil on a napkin (or whatever is handy). Each image is accompanied by a short explanation of the theological principle that it portrays.

## The Truth

These images are then followed by a deeper, more detailed explanation of the principle, one that is easy to understand and communicate. This explanation offers a scriptural, historical, and theological basis for the theological truth illustrated by the image. It provides further background information that might be useful for your conversations. This section is written with the person being discipled in mind.

## The Exercise

Each chapter concludes with a brief exercise to help you practice or further search out the truth represented by the image.

To communicate our theology well, we need to have a thorough understanding of the doctrine and its intellectual basis. For this reason, each chapter includes more information than could probably be shared in a five-minute discussion over lunch with a pen and napkin. The study in each chapter is not a script to be used verbatim, but a resource for understanding and communicating the truth. The better you come to understanding each principle, the more effectively you will be able to explain them in a short time frame.

Also, keep in mind that this book is not designed to provide new ammunition for your next “battle” with

unbelieving friends. These are truths for believers to understand and internalize. As we embrace the truth, it changes our life. And that life change can open the door for discussions with others about the God we serve. We don't argue our way to the salvation of others; we win the right to speak by being what our theology says we are.

One last note: Please remember that these quick, easy images are not meant to be complete or perfect in their ability to explain these vast ideas about God and our relationship with him. Hopefully, they will provide good starting points. And with the help of the Holy Spirit, they will form the basis for many open, honest conversations with others about the truth of the good news of the Bible.