

House Group Notes

20th June 2017



Ichthus Values, Characteristics & Distinctives Session 16:

Distinctives: What Makes Ichthus Unique

Part 1 of 7: Relational Theology Part 2 of 2

Introduction

Last time we introduced this series within a series of Ichthus' "Distinctives: What makes Ichthus unique", we also started to look at the first topic Relational Theology. Relational Theology is a term Roger Forster uses to name his particular take on the theology of God's reign, control, knowledge of the future and our freewill. Other churches do hold a similar viewpoint, but they may not give it the same name! Equally, some churches strongly disagree with Roger!! That's ok they are still Christians!!!

This week we are going to recap the summaries of Calvinism and Arminianism. We will then read a couple of paragraphs from Roger's book on this subject, followed by looking at a few bible passages where Relational Theology is evident or where Calvinism and Arminianism fail.

The mainstream views of God's authority and knowledge of the future:

Just to recap and summarise from last week.

1. **Calvinism:**

Calvinists believe that God foreknows the future by sovereignly ordaining/causing everything to happen. He causes absolutely everything that happens across all of creation and in essence controls our actions.

Reservations:

Although it may be comforting to some people that God is absolutely controlling everything, it causes many issues to do with free will, suffering and love. Additionally, this theological belief that God is in total control and causes everything is not found in church history until Augustine 354-430AD. It's simply not what the disciples and early church believed!

2. **Arminianism:**

Arminians believe that God foreknows all future free choices and actions. Because He is outside time He knows what we will do as He has seen it, but He isn't causing us to do it as we have freewill.

Reservations:

Although a much better interpretation than Calvinism, surely if God knows the future perfectly He would act accordingly to get His will done. It gives an illusion of freewill that doesn't really exist. It also potentially portrays a God that isn't involved with His creation.

Read the following excerpts taken from God's Strategy (Roger's book)

1. Taken from page 19 of God's Strategy in Human History – Volume 1: God's Path to Victory

“...This is a version of an ‘inside time’ view of God, a view today sometimes referred to as ‘Openness Theology’. God’s omniscience (all knowing) is to know all that there is to be known, but this doesn’t include aspects of the future concerning moral choices of individuals – those individuals have not made those decisions yet, and there may also be effects of the moral choices of others!

Our own view (Roger Forster & Paul Marston), which could be called ‘Relational Theology’ has similarities to this, though we would want to say that on issues in which there is no moral choice involved God may well overrule human decisions. The key is that relationship is a fundamental property of God himself in the Trinity, and his desire to have relationship with humans made in his image means that he interacts with them according to their own moral choices. This is what God says in Jeremiah 19, as we will explore in chapter 10. (refer people to the book for this!)

The God of Job is a personal God with emotions and reactions, as shown throughout the Bible. He is not the immutable (unchallengeable/absolute), impassive (unemotional) God of abstract theology adopted later by many Christian traditions. God had confidence in Job as he had confidence in Abraham, but it was only after Abraham actually showed that he really did trust God enough to sacrifice Isaac that God said:

*Now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.
(Genesis 22:12)*

So God allows Job to be tested...”

2. Taken from Page 143 of God’s Strategy in Human History – Volume 1: God’s Path to Victory

“The limits of our human minds and the lack of clear Scriptural indication make it unlikely that we will be able to clearly see how God relates to time. But two things are quite explicit in Scripture:

- 1) God does not always get what he wants*
- 2) If God says he will treat people in a particular way and they change their behaviour, then God will change his mind.*

For this reason both Open and Relational Theologians hold that God has voluntarily entered into the time he created. He is omniscient (all knowing) and knows everything that can be known, but not all the future is yet determined. He knows that there will be a New Heaven and a New Earth because he knows that is what he is going to do – but does not know which future individuals will accept and which will reject his plan for them (Luke 7:30), which is to accept the undeserved forgiveness offered through the cross. Like a myriad-dimensional chess grandmaster God can work out all the possible moves all his creatures may make and is prepared for all of them, even though he may not know in advance how they will exercise their moral choices. In one place God even expresses surprise at the people’s unrepentance:

*I said, ‘Surely you will fear me, You will receive instruction’ – so that her dwelling would not be cut off, despite everything for which I punished her. But they rose early and corrupted their deeds.
(Zephaniah 3:7)*

But God is never unprepared. Whatever happens he wants to be there to bring good out of the situation by working with those who love him and are called according to his purpose (Rom 8:28).”

Ask if anything is unclear and clarify where possible

Discuss Love:

- Can you have love without freewill or choice?

God is love (1 John 4:8) and love requires free will by its very nature and definition. There needs to be a choice and freedom to reciprocate/respond/return that love. You can't be forced to love something or someone, as that simply isn't love; we would just be pre-programmed robots. If God knows everything throughout all eternity and is directly causing everything in eternity, then there is no room for free will, and therefore there is no room for love. This doesn't match up with the God of the bible, a God of relationship, submission and love. That's why we have a relational theology, where sometimes, we, the object of God's love, don't love him back despite all he has done.

Read Luke 8:22-25 Jesus calming the storm

Discuss:

- Who or what is Jesus rebuking when he calms the storm? (Surely not God!)
- What does this mean for the Calvinists?

Jesus would not be rebuking the storm if the Father caused it. He only ever did what he saw the Father do. Therefore God was not directly causing the storm and we see that things don't perhaps always go according to God's will. After all, we pray "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is heaven". The very implication and nature of this statement and prayer is that things aren't always being done on earth as God wants it!

Read Jeremiah 18:1-12 The potter and the clay

Discuss:

- Who is the potter and who is the clay?
- What happens to the clay and why?

Here we see the clay damaged in the potter's hand and then being reshaped into something different. We are the clay in God's hand and sometimes things don't go according to plan. We fight back and refuse to do His will, perhaps we plan evil and the Lord no longer wants to use us. In this passage we see a relational God that is working with us to mould and shape us, but like the nations in the passages, we can sometimes plan evil or sometimes repent and return to the Lord. These things perhaps change our destiny and the final form of the clay! However, there is always hope and disaster can be averted if the nation/we turn from our evil.

Read 1 Samuel 15:35 God Regrets!

Discuss:

- How can God regret something he did if things always go according to His plan, or if he knows the future perfectly?
- Can you regret something you knew would happen?

Read Exodus 32:11-14 Moses Intercedes For Israel

- What do you think of Moses and God's relationship?
- What happens after Moses has spoken to God?

Here we have an example of relational theology in action. Verse 14 says the Lord changed his mind. God's mind is changed by his conversation with Moses! Isn't it incredible to think that our prayers/conversations with God can change His mind and have impact on what happens? This is how God made us, to be relational beings in His image, to be a part of his creation and working with Him to bring about His purposes.

Pray to finish

Further reading suggestions for anyone who is interested in the topic:

If you wish to look at this in more detail, we'd recommend the following books:

- For a summary of the different theological views (not including Roger's Relational Theology): Chapter 3 of *Across the Spectrum* by Gregory A Boyd and Paul R Eddy
- For a look at how Relational Theology actually effects all of God's interactions with humans: *God's Strategy In Human History Part 1 & Part 2* by Roger Forster and Paul Marston
- For a relatively accessible look at Open Theology: *God of the Possible* and *Is God to Blame?* both by Gregory A Boyd
- For the academics with time on their hands: *Satan and the Problem of Evil* and *God at War* both by Gregory A Boyd