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LESSON ONE

Why a big theological melon will not overcome a sinful, selfish heart

My Dumbness

I've had the privilege of going to good schools. Not Ivy League good, but "U.S. News and World Report top schools" good. To be honest, my entrance into Taylor University had nothing to do with my academic prowess. I got in because I could play football. While at Taylor, I met Paul House. Paul took an athlete with an aversion to academics and introduced him to the life of the mind. At Paul's suggestion, I did my M.Div. at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (SBTS). I enjoyed the work, and I enjoyed the camaraderie at SBTS in the mid to late 1990s. To top it all off, I met my wife Amy while at Southern, so I did more than OK.

Now, if you know nothing of Southern's story, a bit of background would be helpful. The Southern

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Baptist Theological Seminary (SBTS) is the flagship of the six denominational seminaries operated by the Southern Baptist Convention. Prior to 1993, SBTS was steeped in moderate or liberal theology (depending on your perspective). J, E, D, and P were running amuck, skipping hand in hand with Deutero-Isaiah across the Josephus Bowl on campus. SBTS underwent a seismic theological shift to the right when R. Albert Mohler was hired in 1993 as a thirty-three-year old President. I got on campus a semester after Dr. Mohler arrived. The theological battles that followed were epic – so much so that a documentary was made by the son of a student and aired on PBS. My undergraduate work was in Bible, and the faculty at Taylor made sure we knew both sides of the coin theologically. I took great pride in the fact that I could hold my own academically in the midst of such upheaval. There were sit-ins, votes of no confidence, and my friend Jimmy Scroggins and I were asked to leave class more than once for giving voice to an evangelical viewpoint.

That's where the trouble began.

I did not grow up Southern Baptist. I was more than willing, however, to put myself smack dab in the middle of a good scrum. It was a fight worth having – orthodoxy is always worth defending – but engaging in the fight left me proud. And goodness knows, the last thing I needed was something else to be cocky about. I came to welcome the conflict, to welcome the fact that I could walk into a classroom with both guns blazing. I loved the turmoil. One

dude with a cute wife right out of seminary. I could bring the theological thunder with the best of them. I was twenty-nine, had been married for four years, and did not have a single clue. Heaven help them.

What they needed was a pastor. They needed a shepherd. They needed a guy whose walk with Jesus was the life-blood of his ministry. Sadly, that's not what they got. They got a guy whose sermons sounded more like theological lectures than sermons. The basics of a confessional, Calvinistic, baptistic faith were hammered home to them. Three times a week, for forty-five minutes a pop, they were subjected to my cluelessness.

I can look back and tell you that part of the problem I faced in that first pastorate was making the move from the academy to the local church. In the academy, a question is often a call to arms. It's a chance to cross swords and engage in intellectual pugilism. I loved it (still do).² However, more often than not, when normal people ask a question, it's because they are genuinely struggling with whatever they asked. Now, there are always a few goofball outliers – but generally, questions are asked in good faith. So, when those questions presented an opportunity for me to love the people of God, I lectured them instead.

2 I love 99 per cent of Jim Belcher's *Deep Church* (Downer's Grove, IL: IVP, 2009). However, his assessment that Carl F.H. Henry's epistemology is tied too closely to the rationalism of the enlightenment is, in my estimation, a misreading of Henry (48). I rejoice in my friend Gregory Alan (Thunder) Thornbury's *Recovering Classic Evangelicalism* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013). Greg has given a Bane-type knee to the spine to those who hold Belcher's view.

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Lesson One: Why a big theological melon...

Coming from Southern just made it worse. Classes in the early days at SBTS were a Battle Royale: the last man standing was declared the winner. Ask me a question and you got both guns. Challenge me and I'll crush you. Somehow, the dichotomy of defending the faith while acting like a jerk never came home to me.

Part of this tension can certainly be traced to the fact that I hold to Calvinist soteriology while serving in a denomination (Southern Baptist Convention) that was/is torn over that issue. I knew of guys getting fired for being Calvinists. It felt like a "guns up" issue. Having to defend, on a regular basis, the foundational truths by which sinful humans are reconciled to a holy, loving God gets wearisome. Still, you can win an argument, but lose the person. I got pretty good at that.

However, the real reason for my argumentative responses was much more simple and painful. I responded this way because I am an arrogant sinner. I perceive questions as a challenge to my "pastoral authority" because I am arrogant. I'll try to bury you because I really am a sinner. Since I'm not secure in the gospel, I'm trying to validate my ministry by my own strength and intellect. It's both a me *project*, and a me *problem*. It is an area for growth, and a sin issue that needs to be confessed.

How the Gospel Overrides My Dumbness

Preaching systematically through books of the Bible has saved my bacon on numerous occasions. I marvel at what God does through His Word – not

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only in the life of the congregation, but in my life as well. The reinstatement of Peter in John 21:15-19 is a passage I revisit on a regular basis. Let me play the role of redactor and rewrite the passage as I lived it out in my early years of ministry:

Jesus: *Kyle, son of Dave, are you more gifted than these?*

Kyle: *Yes, Lord; you know I'm a "five-talent" minister.*

Jesus: *Display your giftedness so that all can see it.*

Jesus: *Kyle, son of Dave, are you theologically well-read and orthodox?*

Kyle: *Yes, Lord; you know I'd argue theology with anyone.*

Jesus: *Make sure these intellectual slackers and liberals are shown the error of their ways.*

Jesus: *Kyle, son of Dave, are you called to preach?*

Kyle: *Lord, you know everything; you know you've called me to preach.*

Jesus: *Bring the thunder then!*

Thankfully, that's not how the passage unfolds. Instead, Jesus asks Peter three times if he loves Him. He does not enquire as to his giftedness, his orthodoxy, or his sense of calling. At the root of ministry that will not create havoc in the hearts of congregation and minister is this one thing: love for Jesus. It is in the context of loving Jesus that Peter is given his marching orders: feed/tend the flock of Christ. Calling/preparation/giftedness are not the issues here. Love for Jesus is.

Now, some uber-theological Poindexter or super nerdy guy may ask, "So – are you saying these things are not important? That calling, theological orthodoxy,

FROM THE FOREWORD BY BRIAN CROFT

KYLE M^cCLELLAN went into a church with "guns blazing" and was quickly fired. He experienced the disappointment of unmet expectations and left because of it. He has pastored a destructive church that chewed him up and spat him out. He has felt the pull of the bigger and better church trying to woo him away. He has faced the burnout and fatigue that many pastors experience that causes them to bail. Some of you might be asking, "So, what makes Kyle unique to these experiences?" Kyle has kept serving in pastoral ministry when most would have quit long ago.

Read this book. Learn from him. Receive the essential lessons from a wise, broken man who has lived it, possesses the scars from it, owns the T-shirt and yet by the grace of God, still stands.

"Learn from Kyle's missteps, but even more, embrace the God of grace to whom he gives testimony."

Sean Michael Lucas

Senior Minister, First Presbyterian Church, Hattiesburg, Mississippi

"With a humorous tone, a humble posture, and a pastor's heart, Kyle shares where he got punched in the mouth so we'd know when to duck."

Gavin Johnson

Lead Pastor, City Light Church Omaha, Nebraska

"Mea Culpa' delivers a raw view of truth and through that truth, a pathway to contentment, peace and forgiveness through the power of God. Read it and then live it."

Ed Weaver

CEO, T4Global, Dallas, Texas

"... Young ministers ought to read the book as a warning and an opportunity. Older ministers need to read the book as a call to humble mentoring of the next generation."

Paul R House

Professor of Divinity,

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