

I watched the debate Thursday night with my family. **Times aren't too good in our country right now, and we know that because the politicians are no longer concerning themselves with religion.** I don't believe I heard the word *God* mentioned even once. This probably was a vast relief to God, who often gets talked about, but is seldom given ninety seconds to respond.

The inference, of course, is that theology is a luxury, the first thing to be tossed overboard when the ship of state starts taking on water. **I was in Delaware last month speaking at a Methodist church, when someone asked me what I thought about the current situation in our country and I overheard someone else mutter, "He's a minister, for crying out loud. What does he know?"**

"Not much," my teenage sons would say.

But this is the perception, that theology—the effort to discern the nature of God and ultimate reality—is a luxury, something to indulge in when times are good, but not something we have time to dwell on when times are difficult.

I certainly understand the temptation to jettison theology when other matters seem more pressing. **Personally, I would prefer our next President be well-grounded in, oh, let's say, economics.** I do admit I look forward to the day when America has so few problems we can return to arguing about Jeremiah Wright and John Hagee.

But while theology can sometimes feel like an indulgence, I think it does matter. I think it especially matters in difficult times. **Many of the problems we face today have their roots in inadequate understandings of spiritual issues.** The Bible has much to say about greed, about human cooperation and goodwill, about our ethical and moral priorities, about governance, about our responsibilities to the next generation, about how people ought to live together so that the few don't prosper at the expense of the many.

Bad theology always give rise to bad policy. I don't think anyone could look at present-day Iran and argue that Islamic fundamentalism has served that nation well. **Bad ideas about God never exist in isolation.** They become bad ideas about governance, bad ideas about education, bad ideas about human nature and relationships, bad ideas about the economy, and bad ideas about international relations. **What we think about God matters, and it matters because our beliefs have very real consequences which affect ourselves and others.**

What we believe about God matters.

I was at a funeral once, visiting a woman whose child had passed away. It was very sad, as these things are, and I told her how sorry I was for her loss.

She said, “God does everything for a reason.”

Now I realize that was her way of coping with her grief, but just think about that. She believes God killed her son.

She’s a very religious woman, goes to church every Sunday, where she is exhorted by the preacher to praise God.

I couldn’t do it. Could you? Could you sit in church and praise a God you believed killed your child?

You know the saddest thing? **If she really believes God does such things, how in the world can she expect that same God to comfort or console her?** How can she come to church hoping to find some peace of mind or serenity? Who will she turn to? She has nowhere else to turn.

I was talking with a woman whose husband left her. She was devastated. She loved him deeply. They had little children at home. She said, “I just keep telling myself this is part of God’s plan.”

I said, “Oh, friend, don’t tell yourself that.”

As if God goes around planning these things. “Ok, today, I’m going to kill that child, then tomorrow I’m going to break up that marriage. That’s my plan.”

Our culture is theologically unsophisticated. We attribute all sorts of things to God, without ever stopping to think about it. Good or bad, God caused it to happen. **Often, when we talk about God, we talk as if all beliefs have equal merit, as if all theologies are equally healthy and helpful and true.** We’ll hear someone talk about religion and they’ll say, “It doesn’t matter what you believe, just that you believe.”

I don’t buy that for a minute. Beliefs matter. Our ideas about God matter. **Not in the way we’ve been taught—that if we believe the right things we’ll go to heaven when we die.** We don’t know that to be the case at all. That’s a matter of conjecture, of speculation, of faith. Beliefs matter, because they effect the quality of our lives today. **Right now.** What we believe about God makes a difference in our lives now.

In the upcoming weeks, I’m going to be talking about some basic theological principles. I’m calling it Theology 101. **Not that you all are beginners.** You’re pretty sophisticated. But I’m going to be talking about the kind of basic things I wished my pastors had talked about when I was sitting in the pew.

Who is God?

Who is Jesus?

Who are we?

Who, or what, is the church? What is its purpose?

What is sin?

Why does evil exist?

Why do people suffer?

What does it mean to be saved? What is salvation?

What is our destiny?

These are age-old questions, which have confounded humans for thousands of years. **But if you show up the next eight weeks, they will all be answered to your satisfaction.** Well, that might be promising a bit much. But we'll be thinking about them anyway. Hopefully, you'll find this process helpful. You might not come to the same conclusions I have. **Ten years from now, I might answer these questions differently than I do now.** People change. People grow. Still, it behooves us to regularly reflect on these questions. I'm looking forward to it. I hope that as a consequence of this process, I learn and grow, and that my relationship with God deepens. I hope that for you also.