

Comfort Theology

by Lynn Andrew

There is an aesthetic advantage in simplicity over complexity. The simplest framework for knowledge is the most satisfying, especially when it touches things beyond our senses that are knowable only indirectly. The advantage is so strong that a framework which ignores anomalies is sometimes considered superior to a more complex alternative that fits the data better.

In everyday life, frameworks made of pragmatism and folklore answer the need for simplicity. For example, the Old Farmer's Almanac serves us better for knowing the weather next month than does the meteorologist with his probabilities of pressures and conditions for ocean currents. But when there is great advantage in having accurate forecasts, farmers hire weather specialists who bring to bear the best science for their particular location.

God speaks in divers ways, not all of them easy to understand. Religion answers the need for simplicity with traditional doctrines from divers sources, which if not always comforting are at least comfortable because they are, well, traditional. Dispensational theology is more scientific in the sense that it fits the Word of God well and adds literal detail to eschatology. Writers and movie makers once took up dispensational doctrine as if it were a scientific breakthrough, spurring thereby interest in Bible study. But after the books were read and movie themes were exhausted, popular interest waned and the discomfort caused by opposing tradition drew professional teachers home to the comfort of simplicity.

Like the sincere flat-earth advocate who never grasped spherical geometry, theologians condescendingly favor a flat, two-dimensional framework befitting the minds of ancient writers for whom the horizon was the end of the world. If things do not quite add up, that's even an advantage because 1) it leaves room for interpretation without consequence; 2) there are fewer particulars about which rivals might disagree; and 3) elements that are unwelcome in the future are relegated to the past—especially Israel.

Also there is the frightening aspect of clashing with material reality if biblical data are aired outside the sacred terms of tradition. Preachers have been known to take pride in their ignorance of math and science, perhaps for that very reason: better to plead ignorance than face the impossible task of adjusting the traditional two-dimensional view of the Bible to reconcile it with what is being taught at the university. For example, physics knows that without mass there is no space or time, which presents an opportunity to make peace with biblical records of "time slip." But theology favors ignoring time complexity and treating the Creator of the heavens and earth simply as though he depends on earth time.

At what cost is the theological framework kept simple and free of unwelcome biblical elements? The impact overall is minimal, considering that comfort in the pews might be compromised by complexity. The important issues of salvation and Christian living are explained and understood in simple ways, so the standard course taught in the church begins and ends there.

There is just one problem: God's Word is more than that.

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