

Dan Hames works for UCCF: The Christian Unions, where his job is to look after Theology Network.

The chances are that when you hear the phrase 'theology of everything' you have one of two reactions. Either you are cynical- it must be a bunch of theology geeks who are convinced that their subject is the most important one, and that it alone has the key to understanding everything in the world. First it's the mathematicians, then it's the physicists, and now it's the theologians. They all reckon theirs is the Queen of the Sciences! The other reaction you might feel is excitement. You've started to see that the gospel and your relationship with God must have some sort of effect on the way you look at your whole life. Surely the good news about being brought into communion with the Lord of the universe means that you see reality in a new and improved way! There's a chance that you feel a bit of both. Whether you're raring to go, or a cool cynic, I hope that after reading this quick introduction you will be ready to look at the world with new spectacles on, ready to see the theology that is in absolutely everything.

Everything is theological

To suggest that it is even possible to do a theology of everything is to assume that everything is theological; that is to assume that everything, in some sense at least, helps us along in our understanding of God. We're very used to the idea that Scripture is our source of information about God (and rightly so), so it sometimes seems strange to us to imagine that we can find theological lessons in other places. But if we listen to Scripture, we find that we're pointed to the rest of God's creation too. A famous example you'll be familiar with is Psalm 19, where David writes,

The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours out speech and night to night reveals knowledge.¹

That first part of Psalm 19 is dedicated to listening to creation's voice to hear about its Creator. David tells us that the sky speaks a language that everyone can understand: beautiful night skies with shimmering stars, the blazing sun in the daytime filling our days with light. These created things speak profoundly of the glory of God, reminding us that the Creator has formed them in love.

A similarly well-known passage in Romans 1 tells us that God's 'eternal power' and 'divine nature' have been easy to see since the creation of the world, because the created world makes it so obvious to us². But Paul goes on to explain that because of human sinfulness we refuse to honour God for His creation or give Him thanks for it. This causes our hearts to become 'darkened', our thinking to become 'foolish' and soon we are exchanging the glory of the Creator God for a lie; beginning to worship His creation instead of Him. In effect, we stop listening to creation's sermons about its Creator: instead we look up at the stars in awe, and wonder if they might be our ancestors. We look at the sea, amazed at its power and crashing waves- and

we assume that there must be a god of the sea lurking beneath the waters. The famous theologian John Calvin wrote,

...with regard to the most beautiful structure and order of the universe, how many of us are there who, when we lift up our eyes to heaven or cast them about through the various regions of earth, recall our minds to a remembrance of the Creator, and do not rather, disregarding their Author, sit idly in contemplation of his works?³

Calvin thinks the answer is 'not many'. All too often we're far more interested in what God has made for us than in God Himself. With sin-dulled minds, we ungratefully and shamefully refuse to acknowledge that creation has a Creator. Creation's sermon to us about the Lord is in vain.

Since our sinful minds refuse to listen and suppress the truth about God, we stay foolish and are incapable of truly knowing anything about God or reality. It is clear that we need a different sermon- one that will penetrate our unbelief and blindness. The Lord is far kinder to us than we deserve, and this special sermon comes to us in God's direct revelation of Himself in His Word. Calvin speaks about Scripture being spectacles that God gives us to look at creation in order to make sense of its sermon; a special gift from the Lord Himself who speaks to us from His own lips so that we see and hear directly from the Creator Himself.⁴

Once we put on the spectacles of Scripture, we are confronted with a completely different view of reality. The way we look at the world must change- it could never possibly be the same! If you need to wear glasses for reading, driving, or watching the television, you'll know what a difference they make. Likewise, when we look at creation with the right spectacles on, we will find that things are much clearer: they appear in sharper focus, and they become a delight to look at. And the delight we feel draws us to gaze not at the beauty of the stars or the power of the sea in and of themselves, but at the beauty and power of the one who stands behind them.

Once we are wearing the spectacles of Scripture- once God has revealed Himself to us and shown us the truth about Himself, us, and the world what difference does it actually make? How does the world look different as we walk around peering at everyday things with our new eyes? There are a few things to get in place from Scripture as we start exploring.

The first thing to notice is that even though we're looking at the same reality we always have looked at (the same people, trees, and sky; the same subjects to study; the same hobbies and interests, etc) the spectacles of Scripture are now helping us make sense of creation's sermon. What once was a murky and incomprehensible sight is suddenly bright and clear. We begin to see something quite amazing: that the Lord has ordered creation to teach us about Him. The way things work in creation is no accident, nor just an outworking of the laws of physics; rather the Creator has ordered it all with pinpoint accuracy to preach to us a sermon about a greater reality. It is as if

creation were a school of the gospel: always teaching us truths about God and reality.

Trying it out on the sun

Recently, a friend pointed out to me that in the Genesis account of the creation, God creates light and darkness, day and night on the first day, but that the sun only comes along on day four. She wondered where the light was coming from on the first day! Whatever your views on the interpretation of Genesis 1-3, everyone agrees that Moses is trying to say something about the nature of creation by writing these chapters. So what is happening with the sun in Genesis 1? Exploring this a little bit with the spectacles of Scripture means we can do a theology of the sun. The sun might not seem all that theological to you- perhaps you assume it's more scientific. You see it every day and probably don't think about very much, but we're about to see that it has been created to exist and work as it does for very important reasons. So... what does the sun say to us about the greater reality of God in the universe?

Genesis shows us that there is light shining before the sun is created on day 4- and it makes that point for a reason. The reason lies in the way the creation account is structured. It is quite clever and even poetic (even if you don't think it's only poetry). At the heart of the six days is a fascinating pattern of creating and filling, which you can detect if you put the days side by side like this.

Day	Creating	Day	Filling
1	Light and dark, night and day	4	Stars created; sun and moon to govern night and day
2	Heaven (i.e. the sky) separated from water	5	Water filled with fish etc, sky filled with birds
3	Earth (i.e. land) created, vegetation created	6	Earth filled with animals, man created and told to fill the earth

So on day 1 God created light and darkness, dividing them into day and night; then on day 4, he created the stars, the sun and the moon to fill, light and govern the day and night. On day 2, God created the sky, separating it from the water; then on day 5 he filled them both- the water with sea creatures, and the sky with birds. On day three God created land, separating it from the water and made vegetation grow on it; then on day 6, He filled the earth with animals, and finally created man, commanding Adam and Eve to 'fill the earth'. So God created on the first three days, and filled on the last three days before he had his day of rest.

What we should take note of as we think about the sun is that fourth day- the filling of the day and night with the lights. We are faced with the fact that light existed before the sun; there was separation of light and darkness before the sun was ever born. Remember: the Lord has so structured creation that it reflects spiritual realities. By filling the day and night with lights God is making a spiritual point- a sermon about reality embedded in creation. It is that the real and true light in the universe is not the sun; it is the Lord, and the sun is a picture to us of it. The sun shines brightly in the sky, giving light, giving warmth, sustaining life- exactly as the Lord Himself does⁵. Of course, the idea of God as light is huge in the Bible. Supremely, Jesus is the Light of the world- the true sun!⁶ The sons of Korah say in Psalm 84v11 that the Lord is a sun. So the point of the sun is not primarily to be the source of light and sustaining life, but a big sign to point us to the source of light and sustaining life: the Lord Jesus Himself. That's why the sun only arrives on day 4- it's not the real deal. There is a light on day one that shines first, and the sun is but a twinkling, slightly sparkly sign of Him.

Also, of course the darkness of night is always a picture of evil or distress in the Bible⁷; yet according to the creation account, even in the night there are stars created to bring light: little versions of the sun that see us through the darkness until morning comes. And there are no little darkneses in the daytime! The sun rules during the daytime! Notice as well the way Genesis records the passage of the days. We usually tend to think in terms of the day fading into night- working from light to darkness, but Genesis 1v5 records 'there was evening and morning'; the Bible suggests that reality is really about moving from darkness into light. Far from our assumption about starting the day in light and giving way to darkness, the Bible holds-up each of our days as a little model of all reality- a reality where light conquers darkness. As 1 John 2v8 says, 'the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining'. So sunrise every morning is structured to make us remember that the shape of reality is that darkness and evil are temporary afflictions for us. Creation shows us the truth that light will finally conquer darkness and the seventh day of God's promised rest will come to us at long last.

John Bradford, who wrote in 1555 recognised this and wrote little prayers and meditations for each stage of the day (when you wake-up, when you go outside, when you eat, when you get undressed, etc). He definitely saw that everything was theological and that all of creation preached to us something about the Lord. Here's what he suggests we should pray when we first open our eyes in the morning and see the light of the sun shining through our window:

So soon as you behold the Daylight, Pray:

O Lord, thou greatest and most true Light, whence this light of the day and of the sun does spring! O Light, which does lighten every man that comes into this world! O Light, which knows no night nor evening, but are always a midday, most clear and fair, without whom all is most dark darkness, by whom all are most resplendent! O thou Wisdom of the eternal Father of mercies! Enlighten my mind, that I may only see those things that please thee and may be blinded to all other things. Grant that I may walk in thy ways, and that

nothing else may be light and pleasant unto me. Lighten mine eyes, O Lord! That I sleep not in death, lest mine enemies say, "I have prevailed against him."

Occasions to meditate:

Muse a little how much the light and eye of the mind and soul are better than those of the body; also that we care more for the soul's seeing well, than for the body. Think that beasts have bodily eyes, and therewith see, but men have eyes of the mind, and therewith should see.⁸

Do you see what Bradford is doing? He's developed a little theology of the sun for us! He says, as soon as you wake-up and your eyes are filled with the light of the sun, your mind ought to go straight to the Lord in heaven who is the true sun. He is the source of the sun, and He is better than the sun for his light never goes down at night- He always shines. With the light of the Lord shining in our eyes, we should be blinded to all other things- never imagining that they are more shiny and warm and attractive than Him. He even gets us thinking about the way the sun wakes us up to another day from sleep, which is a bit like death, knowing that even the 'big sleep' to come will one day be ended by the most glorious of sunrises. Doesn't that make you think about the sun in a whole different way? Suddenly, the sun isn't a merely functional part of creation that's pretty useful for our every day lives- it's a sign that God has deliberately set-up in the sky to model for us spiritual realities of light and life.

That's where John Bradford goes next. He encourages us to think about how the 'eyes' of our minds and souls are far more important than our physical eyes. We look and enjoy all we see thanks to the sun's light, but how much more important that we have plenty of light from the true sun to shine on the eyes of our minds and souls! The sun is schooling us in living with the gospel at the very heart of our understanding. It shows us that the gospel should be our constant point of reference in interpreting reality, for God is the fundamental truth and his relationship with us shapes everything we think and do.

Wearing your new spectacles for life

Now we've done a mini theology of the sun, you could go and look-up some more references to the sun in Scripture and see what is said there and think about what it might mean. Try, for example, Joshua 10, Isaiah 60, or Revelation 21v23-25. Now you have an idea of where we're going, you could think about theologies of other things- the wilder and wackier the better! Try doing a theology of eating. Or a theology of music. How about a theology of flower arranging? You will find that with the spectacles of Scripture firmly in place, and with a little bit of thought, you will get some really quite exciting results. Having begun to think theologically about the sun, it's fairly obvious to see that there is nothing in all of creation that can't be milked for a little theological insight. As unlikely as your subject may seem, you will find that there is nothing that does not point you back to the Lord with all of its energy. As the Dutch Prime Minister Abraham Kuyper once said,

'Oh, no single piece of our mental world is to be hermetically sealed off from the rest, and there is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry: 'Mine!'⁹

Far from being a sort of polytheistic belief that there is a 'divine spark' in everything, or that everything is god, the Christian view of creation and indeed all of reality is that it bears the fingerprints of the one who formed it. He owns it, speaks through it, and using it calls His people to Himself. It is a beautiful thing to explore, and listening for His voice in creation's sermon is an exciting prospect!

One of the most important things about this take on reality is that we suddenly see that the gospel is never far away from us. We so often go about our lives without thinking of God or His good news; we sometimes go from Sunday to Sunday without remembering the grace and goodness of the Lord. But when we begin to look at everything through the spectacles of Scripture- seeing that all of reality is theological, we are reminded of the gospel every time we look at the sun or eat our food, wash our hands or go to sleep. Often we create a really unhelpful divide in our lives between those things that appear to us to be 'spiritual' or of eternal consequence and those that are temporary or unimportant- but thinking theologically about everything opens-up to us a world where nothing is pointless, lost, or unspiritual. As Kuyper said, there is nothing we do, touch, see, experience, or know of which the Lord Jesus does not say 'That is mine!'.

So there's the challenge: think theologically about everything. Take careful note of creation's sermon as you wear the spectacles of Scripture. Think about what it means to live every part of your life consciously confessing that Jesus is Lord of it all. I hope that if you started out as a cynic, you're beginning to feel that perhaps it's worth thinking carefully about the theology of everything. And I hope that if you were already interested in the idea before you started reading, you won't let the sun go down before you open up your Bible and apply what you read inside to the reality that surrounds you. Go for it! Be a theologian, and do your theology on everything. Not only does creation invite you, but Jesus Himself commands you.

[1] Psalm 19v1-2

[2] Romans 1v18-25

[3] Institutes of the Christian Religion I.v.xi

[4] Institutes of the Christian Religion I.vi.i

[5] Psalm 27v1, Psalm 50v2, Psalm 3v5, Hebrews 1v3

[6] John 1v4, 8v12

[7] See, for example, Job 10v22, Romans 13v12, 1 Thessalonians 5v5

[8] Daily Meditations and Prayers by John Bradford, Prebendary of St Pauls, and martyr, 1555

[9] Kuyper, Abraham (1998), "Sphere Sovereignty", in Bratt, James D., Abraham Kuyper, A Centennial Reader, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, pp. 488