

Today we're going to talk about what I call the "coyote" choice. But first a word about that word: *coyote!* Where I was raised in the American West, there were lots of wild dogs known as coyotes. But, frankly, everyone in that region of the world pronounced the word coyote—with the "e" silent. But I'm going to use the pronunciation from here on as coyote, with the "e" pronounced. Why? Because I am using the word "coyote" here as an acronym. And the "e" in our COYOTE acronym in this episode is important, so I'm not going to keep the "e" silent!

Now, a word here about where I'm headed. Having taught college students and adults on numerous topics for decades, I've become convinced that one principle is essential for Christians to know, embrace, and deploy to both live and die well in Christ and Him crucified—and that's the COYOTE choice. So here it is!

The COYOTE choice is to *Carefully Own Your Own Theology Early!* Yes, Carefully Own Your Own Theology Early—COYOTE! Now I most certainly don't mean that you should *create* your own theology—quite the opposite! But that's actually been done by many folks who claim to be Christians. In fact, such folks often claim their particular doctrines as Christians to be more accurate than those of most everyone else! Paul addressed this to the Galatian church, writing, "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ." (Galatians 1:6-7 ESV)

So...*just who or what is your true authority?* For example, atheists claim their own autonomous authority—sadly, won't they be dismayed when they meet God! But for Christians, this centrality can get very tricky. Sure, we can easily dismiss religions and obvious cults that claim silly things. But it gets much trickier when distorters do claim the Word of God—the Bible—as authoritative and have studied for years, sometimes earning advanced degrees. Yes, those whose traditions and interpretations are off-base often still claim the Bible is their authority and often seem very knowledgeable about Scripture. But the overall issue is this: *just who or what authority about God's truths are you to rightly submit to?*

When Paul wrote to Timothy, he documented a wonderful revelation: "For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus." (1 Timothy 2:5) Sadly, lots of folks seem to want to be mediators of *their particular truths* between humanity and God—instead of pointing clearly and straightforwardly to Christ, the Word of God, as the core of their teaching. They often write words labeled "theology," and sometimes those words appear as confessions or creeds or the like. The real problem is that virtually *all* such folks disagree with each other on one or more key issues. Thus—by their own lights—they think those who disagree with them are wrong! *That* warns us there's a problem!

But all this is nothing new! That's why Paul wrote the instruction to the Galatians we just talked about, where he called particular theological constructs as "distorting the gospel." You see, there was plenty of serious contention in the early church as recorded in the Bible—documented in the Book of Acts as well as several of the Epistles. Now we've been given the Word of God, the Bible, for each of us to learn directly from—with the guidance of the Holy Spirit who *will teach all things* to His disciples! *All things!* (John 14:26)

Now the Apostle Paul had the humility to write this: 1 Corinthians 3:3-4 says, "For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way? For when one says, 'I follow Paul,' and another, 'I follow Apollos,' are you not being merely human?" Frankly, much of what passes for supposed Christianity nowadays reenacts a recurring version of the Galatians—distortions and fleshly dissensions, with each claiming *their* constructs and *their* emphases are the correct ones! Yes, most every faction *won't see* that their constructs, ideas or emphases might be apart from clear, core Scripture!

This self-perception of holding godly, rightly-domineering views of God's ways is true of many persons—*always has been*. But they *are* fallible...yes, we *all* are! *Still, some folks are far more accurate than others*. But you be careful this very moment as to your own vanity: like Carly Simon, the singer, wrote in her song: "*you're so vain, you probably think this song is about you...*" Yeah, everyone likes to think *they're* the correct one. Again, just look at the early church in the Scriptures. *But God reveals His truth and will judge!*

Look, if you're following what's identified as a particular *systematic theology*—often one that identifies in categories that end in “-ism” or “-ist”—*you are risking not conforming to Christ!* Here's the thing: you will be facing judgment *alone* before Christ, it's *there* where your lived-out theology will be judged as your own! If you are before Him as an atheist, you will not successfully call upon famous atheists as your grounding for truth! And some who say they're Christians will hear Christ say “I never knew you”—often because they bought into the false constructs of others. And for folks who responded to the Gospel—yes, they are saved, and Christ will reward them for what they built on His foundation—but also burn up the rest! (1 Corinthians 3:9-16) At judgment, your favorite theologian or pastor will not be at your side...your church elders will not be at your side...the “confession” of your church will not be at hand. *At judgment, you will own your own “lived-out” theology for Christ to judge! So, carefully own your own theology early!*

Why did I just say “lived-out” theology? Because that's *belief* culminating in *real life*. Look, there are all kinds of theology that folks devote their life to studying: Systematic...Biblical...Historical...Christology...Pneumatology...Ecclesiology...Eschatology...and so on. And we do need learned teachers in each of these areas. But a word about what's sometimes called Dogmatic Theology—that's when a group essentially works to create an -ism, a mediator that you supposedly must follow in order to grasp the “real” truth—then, books and podcasts abound! Don't get me wrong: I profit greatly from some great theologians, but I profit from many poor ones, too—by contrasting their wrong beliefs with the Bible!

But the fact remains that, *every person* honestly, *foundationally*, doesn't need more than the Word of God and the Holy Spirit *to be substantially on track for living rightly in Christ and for Christ!* Any theologian or teacher who implies you desperately need their complex -ism constructs of the Bible itself is exalting a mediator replacing Christ between you and God! Yes, you must receive Christ as your foundation and the Holy Spirit as your teacher! *Not convinced yet?* Paul wrote this...

“Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth. But avoid irreverent babble, for it will lead people into more and more ungodliness, and their talk will spread like gangrene.” (2 Timothy 2:15-17) Wait, in that passage, where's the 4th-century philosopher Augustine? The Roman Catholic Magisterium? The Reformers' writings? *Poor Timothy—he couldn't possibly “present an approved life” without their constructs and theologies...right?*

You will be alone before Christ at your judgment—there, you will own your own lived-out theology. So, you must do that living *carefully*. And I recommend you do that *early*—with the foundation of Christ and the unmatched teaching of the Holy Spirit. That's all about *COYOTE—carefully owning your own theology early*. Then live out truly core truths with joy: *God desires all people to be saved. Each person can believe in Christ and Him Crucified...and have the gift of eternal life. Jesus's disciples obey Him by living out the Great Commission worldwide—and that's the ultimate fruit of those who love God and love their neighbors.* Jesus said, “Thus you will recognize them by their fruits. Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.” (Matthew 7:20-21)

Here's the thing. Many theological disputes foster endless debates, diverting sincere Christians from working to actually help foster billions of the unreached to embrace the Gospel. So how about taking a look at Titus 3:8-11? “The saying is trustworthy, and I want you to insist on these things, so that those who have believed in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works. These things are excellent and profitable for people. But avoid foolish controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels about the law, for they are unprofitable and worthless. As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him, knowing that such a person is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned.”

Look, believing and then following Christ is truly simple and straightforward—but not always easy! But, for truly good fruit, carefully own your own theology early! *...Listen, I think I just heard a coyote!*

A&A: Application & Action

1. Can you give an account of your life in Christ that's core to the simplicity, the power, and the eternal endurance of the Gospel? Or do you feel you have to look to a favorite theologian and limp into a "what he says" deference to disputed complexities? Discuss.

2. Do you believe that a full life in Christ is available to every believer through the Word of God and the teaching of the Holy Spirit, one that is able to "present an approved life," as per Paul's teaching to Timothy? Discuss.

3. Here's Paul to Titus again: "The saying is trustworthy, and I want you to insist on these things, so that those who have believed in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works. These things are excellent and profitable for people. But avoid foolish controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels about the law, for they are unprofitable and worthless. As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him, knowing that such a person is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned."

Do you find yourself tempted to engage in foolish dissensions and quarrels about God? Discuss.