



On Theological In-Laws

Robert A. Ratcliff

Quietly, the professor uttered a statement that silenced the raised voices, arrested everyone's attention, and changed my thinking about theology forever. We were arguing about something in a theology class; what it was has long since faded from memory. No doubt we were divided into our usual camps: the forward thinkers on one side, courageously pursuing the search for knowledge (actually, just engaging in a bit of post-adolescent rebellion); the traditionalists on the other, staunchly defending the faith once delivered to the saints (actually, just repeating what they'd always heard). There was one guy sitting behind me who always had to disagree with everything I said. Whenever he wanted to make it clear that he *really* didn't care for my ideas, he'd preface his remarks with, "Unlike my dear brother here . . ." (meaning, "unlike this idiot sitting in front of me . . ."). He and I and everyone else were going at it hot and heavy that day. Voices grew louder; splinters of irritation sounded in every remark. That's when the professor stepped in and said, "You know, when you take a theological position, you're not just marrying a spouse; you're getting a set of in-laws as well."

Huh?

He explained. "Theological ideas," he said, "have consequences. Every time you affirm something, you are implicitly denying other things. The more specific your position on a theological question, the more likely it is to carry baggage that you hadn't necessarily intended, but from which you can't escape.

Take something as simple as 'God is merciful.' To say that God is merciful—and leave it at that—is to deny justice, because if God is simply merciful to the oppressor, then the injustice done to the oppressed will go unanswered."

"O.k.," we said, "So you've got to say that God is both merciful *and* just."

"Ah, but that's an easy one," he said. "Here's another. How many of you believe that salvation depends solely on God's grace, that it is God's business, and God's alone?" Being good Protestants, we all nodded yes. "Now," he said, "how many of you believe in free will?" We all nodded at that, too. "So God comes along and offers you the gift of salvation in Jesus Christ. Some of you accept it, some of you reject it. In the end, what determines the outcome of that encounter between you and God?"

"Our choice," a class member said. "The exercise of our free will."

"And if your free will is what finally determines the outcome of the whole encounter between you and God, can you really say that salvation takes place solely at God's initiative, that it is God's business, and God's alone? Aren't you, through the exercise of your free will, contributing significantly—perhaps decisively—as well?"

"But the only alternative," someone objected, "would be to say that God doesn't just *offer* us salvation; God *makes* us accept it, whether we want to or not."

“Bingo!” he cried. “You’ve just seen how insisting either on the primacy of God’s grace in salvation, or the importance of human freedom—both solid, scriptural ideas, as it happens—leads you to affirm as well things you probably didn’t wish to say.” (John Wesley, by the way, understood this particular theological conundrum well. His doctrine of prevenient grace is arguably the best answer ever given to it.) “In taking a spouse, you’ve gained a set of in-laws, too

We sat, blinked, . . . and erupted into argument again.

In the years since that class, I’ve thought a great deal about the value of “theological in-laws.” It turns out to be the most effective guarantor of theological humility I’ve ever discovered. It is, in fact, far more fruitful than its better-known cousin, the appeal to personal fallibility. Oh, sure, we’re all ready to admit the possibility that we might be wrong, when we’re doing so in the abstract. But when an actual theological argument comes along, how willing are we to admit it then? When was the last time that, finding yourself in heated theological discussion with your version of the guy who sat behind me in that class, and having lined up Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience in support of your point, you said, “no, wait; I just remembered that I could be wrong?” Can’t recall? I didn’t think so.

Remembering the principle of “theological in-laws” helps because it doesn’t require us to admit that we’re wrong (although it wouldn’t be a bad idea every now and then). Regardless of how right we are, our theological beliefs are going to carry with them baggage that we hadn’t intended. To remember our theological in-laws is to admit what that baggage is and to recognize the limitations of our grasp and articulation of God’s truth.

Rarely are theological in-laws as onerous as they are with the issues raised in this edition of *Circuit Rider*: Interpreting John 14:6 confronts us with the question of the religious “other,” for whom Jesus is not the way to God and even “God” is not the designation for ultimate reality. As the articles in this issue demonstrate, there are any number of ways to approach the question of what this passage means. But for purposes of simplicity let’s boil the responses to John 14:6 down to two positions and ask, not “which is right and which wrong,” but rather “what are the theological in-laws of each?”

Start with the position that John 14:6 does not speak of the way to God in absolute, or exclusive terms. This position holds that, while relationship with Jesus is the way we Christians experience God, others journey to God by paths different than ours. The strengths of this position are two-fold. First, it makes room for our experience of virtuous, compassionate persons—the kinds of people we’d be happy to spend eternity with—who do not name Jesus as Lord. But more importantly, it takes seriously our experience of the loving forgiveness of God and insists that this kind of God would not, in the end, reject those who sought God by means other than ours.

The principal theological in-law with this position, it seems to me, has to do with the question of ultimacy. Those who hold to this idea are likely to say that, while Jesus is the final and ultimate way to God *for them*, they cannot say that this is or should be true

for everyone. Yet if I say that God became human in Jesus of Nazareth, in order to make it possible for me to live the fully loving, fully human life for which I was created, how can that be true for me (or my tribe) alone? To say that Jesus is of ultimate importance to me, but not necessarily to you, is to make him an idol, just another household god who belongs to me, not the other way around.

The other position, of course, recognizes that ultimacy well. This position insists that belief in Jesus Christ and acceptance of his lordship over one’s life is the only sufficient means to achieve reconciliation and unity with God. Clearly, this point of view succeeds in taking the redemption offered in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus seriously. God’s incarnation in Jesus, according to this view, has unavoidably universal consequence. It

confronts the world with its need to accept God’s offer of salvation in Christ. Moreover, it confronts God’s followers with the requirement that we live our lives in such a way that those who don’t know Jesus are drawn to him.

But this position has theological in-laws too, chief among them its compromise of the freedom of God. Just as surely as the Bible speaks of God’s covenant with Israel and the followers of Jesus, it reminds us

that God chooses to step outside that covenant to reach out to those whom we, the insiders, would just as gladly have written off. The book of Jonah is but the best example of God’s “strange work” of offering mercy and redemption to the religious “other.” Consistently, God exercises the divine freedom to call whomever God wills, by whatever means, into that loving embrace we so foolishly thought was meant for us alone.

So, where does this leave us? Does it mean that we just throw up our hands and declare that we can’t say anything about what this thorny passage means? Hardly. It does mean, however, that we ought to utter two prayers. First, a prayer for the *honesty* to seek out and understand the theological in-laws in our own notions about God, regardless of how much we cherish those notions. And second, a prayer of *gratitude* for anyone who, like the contributors to this issue, take the time and care to help us understand God’s truth. □

Regardless of how right we are, our theological beliefs are going to carry with them baggage that we hadn’t intended. To remember our theological in-laws is to admit what that baggage is and to recognize the limitations of our grasp and articulation of God’s truth.

Author of this article and co-guest editor of this issue of *Circuit Rider*, Robert A. Ratcliff (below, left) is Senior editor of Academic and Ministry Leadership Resources at Abingdon Press. Co-guest editor John F. Kutsko is Director of Academic and Ministry Leadership Resources at Abingdon Press, an imprint of The United Methodist Publishing House.

