**THEOLOGICAL PRETZELS**

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Romans 8:26-39; Matthew 13: 31-33; 44-52

I have always liked pretzels, as many people do. They don’t really taste like much, but the twisted shape sure is cool. Plus, you can eat a bunch of them and not feel too guilty. Oddly enough, Christian theology is a lot like a gnarly twisted pretzel. In fact, our readings this morning serve up four pretzels for us to munch on. We’re heading into theological waters.

Yikes, theology, what’s that? Allegedly, it’s all about interpreting the Bible to present a clear picture of God and his dealings with people. So what is a theologian then?

They’re the ones who try to do the interpreting. Their super-hero challenge is to accurately interpret Bible verses that aren’t clear and thus are open to different interpretations. Unfortunately, throughout Christian history, some theologians have interpreted the Bible to mean what they want it to mean.

And then they start arguing about the Bible, sometimes causing real damage within the church. But theology poses a bigger problem than just stirring up people. The purpose of the Bible isn’t to interpret it, but to guide our lives.

Anyone with plain common sense and a little experience in life can use the Bible for spiritual growth and guidance. We don’t need to be a theologian, but occasionally we do have to clear off the fog theologians leave on our spiritual windshield.

So why didn’t God see to it that everything in the Bible is crystal clear? Because he wants us to exercise our faith more than our intellect. Because he wants us to follow his son, Jesus, not a book of black and white rules and regulations, one size fits all. The Jews already tried that, and it didn’t work out so well. God wants us to worship him, not the Bible.

Still, through the centuries, theologians have made it their job to tell us what the Bible means. Some have offered helpful insights that do increase our understanding, while others, with a religious agenda, have tried to brainwash us. They are the pretzel dough twisters.

And once a pretzel is baked, you can’t

un-twist it.

So a long time ago pretzel Christianity arrived with religious wars; feuding denominations; competing translations of the Bible; church splits; and political sermons.

Pretzel theology explains why churches have never seen eye-to-eye on much of anything, be it worship style; baptism; communion; hymns and music; appropriate lifestyles; or even agreeing on what is sin.

No wonder there are so many churches: it seems there’s a different church for every Bible interpretation point of view. Thank goodness, the holy Trinity isn’t pretzel-shaped. God-the-Father,

Jesus-the son, and the Holy Spirit don’t need no theology. Like the Bible, theology is only a guide to God, not a substitute for Him.

Let’s begin nibbling on the four theological pretzels scattered throughout today’s lessons.

Our first theological pretzel is the concept of the Trinity, mentioned in our readings today by the apostle Paul in Romans chapter 8. The Spirit is referred to in verse 26; God in verse 27; and the Son in 29.

Based on the New Testament’s mention of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the so-called fathers of the early church coined the theological term of Trinity as a quick way to refer to the three manifestations of God mentioned in the Bible. And by the way, the specific word Trinity doesn’t actually appear in the Bible--it’s strictly a theological word.

All sorts of theological arguments immediately broke out in the early Christian church once an attempt was made to pin down the Trinity in exact theological jargon.

Church authorities couldn’t or wouldn’t agree on the exact character and roles of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, so they locked theological horns, such as: Were all three members of the Holy Trinity equal in power? Should all three be worshipped in the same way? Does the Father come before the son, and the son before the Holy Spirit? Are all three present during communion? Blah, blah, blah.

Notice that even though the Bible itself doesn’t fine-tune the concept of the Trinity, early theologians permanently separated Eastern and Western Christianity in arguing about it--as if there were just one right answer and point of view for something as complex as the Holy Trinity.

Soon a hornet’s nest of other theological disputes spread like wildfire throughout early Christendom. That’s why denominational creeds like the Apostles Creed came into existence.

Theological pretzel number two from our lessons deals with characterizing the somewhat mysterious Holy Spirit member of the Trinity.

Paul says the Spirit helps pray for us by sighing too deep for words. Other parts of the Bible refer to the Holy Spirit as the Word of God; the Logos; the comforter; the creator of spiritual growth in believers; the source of spiritual gifts bestowed on Christians; the soul of the sacraments; the Inner Light; the baptism of the Holy Spirit; and speaking in tongues. Some theologians and preachers view the Holy Spirit as the feminine side of God, even though this issue ain’t even in the Bible!

Predictably, theologians and church authorities have never reached an intellectual accord about the Holy Spirit. Did it never occur to them that the Holy Spirit is beyond human understanding and description?

I keep my concept of the Holy Spirit simple: it’s what creates the eternal glow in our hearts for loving and serving God. Oops, now I’m trying to be a theologian! Never mind.

Theological pretzel number three concerns spiritual beliefs some theologians proclaim are true even though they aren’t directly or clearly discussed in scripture.

Verses 29 and 30 we read today in chapter 8 of Paul’s letter to the Romans is a classic example of scripture that is hard-to-understand and swallow. These two short verses briefly touch on perhaps the most controversial theological issue of Christianity--predestination: does God choose who is, and who is not, going to heaven even before they’re born? In short, has it already been decided if we’re going to heaven or hell?

Paul wrote: For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified. Oh!

Many Christians, including myself, find the meaning of these two verses a tough pretzel to chew on. What exactly is meant by those very abstract theological words: foreknew, called, justified, and glorified?

What is Paul really saying in these two short verses? It’s Greek to me. Perhaps in the ancient Greek language that Paul, or his assistant, wrote in, the meaning of these words are clearer than they are in English.

But theologians have never been shy about telling us exactly what they think these verses mean, and boy are there a lot of conflicting opinions out there!

Twisted pretzel concepts such as predestination can be dynamite. One of the most revered and influential early church fathers and theologians, Augustine, interpreted Paul’s passage to mean that God does indeed choose in advance who is going to heaven and who is not.

But later in his life, Augustine began to change his mind. Unfortunately it was too late--the divisive theological war about predestination had already hit the fan.

Now, fast forward to 16th century Switzerland, where Protestant theologian and church founder John Calvin vociferously championed the concept of predestination based on the way he interpreted the writings of Paul and Augustine.

Calvin flat practiced what he preached by proclaiming predestination to be the official theology of the theocracy he created in Geneva. A theocracy is a nation or nation state that follows biblical law instead of man-made law.

Several people in Calvin’s Swiss theocracy were even executed for not accepting the concept of predestination. Mark Twain declared in his autobiography that the Calvinist church he attended growing up in Missouri caused him to completely give up on organized religion.

So is predestination true? Maybe, maybe not. How can we possibly know? Paul’s brief two verses about it clearly are unclear in any language.

Hoorah that Martin Luther made room in his theology for what he called God’s mysteries: things in the Bible that are simply beyond human understanding, such as predestination. Wisely, Luther kept his pen still in many theological debates.

Remember, Christian faith is based on just that: faith. Our faith must be in God, not our intellect or translations of centuries-old languages. God doesn’t expect us to understand, or even accept, everything in the Bible.

God knows everything, but I don’t think he expects us to. He just wants us to build our lives around His son Jesus Christ, not around Bible theories.

Let’s now turn to the fourth, and last, theology pretzel from today’s readings, also from Paul’s letter to the Romans--this time, verse 28 in chapter 8.

Here Paul assures us that: We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. This is rightfully one of the most beloved verses of the Bible, because of its comforting optimism for facing hard times in life.

But sometimes people twist scripture to suit themselves. I’ve heard many people seriously mis-interpret this verse by reading only the first half of it: We know that all things work together for good. PERIOD. Woah there pardner, keep on a-readin’; you left out the critical second half of the verse: “for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.” Paul is telling us that life usually works out better for those who walk with God than for those who don’t. So please read the whole verse, so your life don’t get worse!

#### Well, what to think about Bible verses versus theology? It seems awfully complicated and dreadfully intellectual. Not to worry--just remind yourself that Christ is a savior, not a theologian.

#### To avoid pretzel theology, just read the gospel of [John: chapter 14, verse 6](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John+14%3A6&version=NRSV), where Jesus declares: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life.” He didn’t say that the Bible or theology is the wayA person--God’s own beloved son who died for us--is the truth. Theologians and church authorities didn’t die for us.

#### Theology does indeed play a valuable role in Christ-ianity, but only up to a point. God doesn’t ask us to stake our souls on words, verses, and Bible interpreters. We are to trust in our risen Lord. Christ uncomplicates the Bible by dealing with our hearts. Getting a seminary degree in theology is strictly optional.

Speaking of Jesus uncomplicating the Bible, let’s close with a brisk/whisk through the five parables of Jesus featured in Matthew’s gospel reading today. Jesus straightened out complex theological pretzels by telling simple parables that his true followers could understand without theologians getting involved.

The parable of the mustard seed reveals that we don’t need fine schooling, wealth, and status to serve God--just patience watering the spiritual seeds God plants in us.

The yeast parable shows that patiently living a godly life, instead of a self-centered one, gradually, slowly-but-surely, permeates and sweetens our relationship with God.

The hidden treasure parable reminds us to pass-up the flashy, superficial, things of life, so we can discover God’s invisible spiritual treasures of unconditional love, service to others, and forgiveness.

The pearl parable symbolizes the beauty of living a godly life instead of polluting our life with fame, fortune, and frivolity.

The parable of the baskets of good and spoiled fish reminds us that empty, purposeless lives quickly spoil, becoming good for nothing.

Simple parables for a simple faith. God’s children can live out these parables regardless of their education or intellect. Like the Bible itself, parables are merely helps for living a godly life. The better we know Jesus, the better we understand his parables, because we have put them into practice.

Our relationship with Christ comes from love, humility, and service, not from studious Bible study. It’s about how we treat people, not how we interpret the Bible for them.

We are to serve Christ, not study him. Jesus is our way to heaven; our truth about how to live; and our eternal life. AMEN!