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Jessica: Welcome to Tangible: Theology Learned and Lived. We're exploring the ways in which theology permeates all aspects of life. Through conversations with various faculty at Concordia Seminary St. Louis, we will challenge you to deepen your theology and live out your faith in Christ. I'm your producer and host, Jessica Bordeleau. I'll talk with a variety of professors on a variety of topics, something different every episode, but all pointing to that intersection between faith and daily life. It's Tangible: Theology Learned and Lived. This week, we're talking with Dr. Joel Okamoto and Dr. Charles Arand about good theology and the way it impacts our life. Dr. Joel Okamoto is a professor of systematic theology here at Concordia Seminary and he has been for 25 years. Before that, he served as a parish pastor and has authored multiple articles dealing with systematic theology. Here's a little-known fact about Dr. Okamoto, one that I think plays a role in our topic today, but he has a degree in materials science and engineering. Dr. Okamoto, welcome to the show.

Joel: Nice to be here.

Jessica: Dr. Okamoto requested Dr. Charles Arand as his conversation partner for today. Dr. Arand has been on the faculty here for over 30 years. He is currently one of our professors of systematic theology and the director of the Center for the Care of Creation. He has written multiple books with a focus on Lutheran confessions and his other research interest, the theology of creation. I was blessed to take a number of his classes when I was a student and he was one of my favorite professors. Dr. Arand, welcome to the show.

Charles: Thank you, Jessica.

Jessica: The topic for today came from something that I heard Dr. Okamoto say at our last theological symposium. This is what you said. You said, there's a difference between saying about someone he knows a lot of theology and saying about someone she has good theology. I remember writing that down when you said it and I thought about it all day. Tell me what it means.

Joel: Yeah, thanks.

Well first, let me say I often use it in introducing systematic theology in our courses, but the point is there's a difference between knowing a lot of things, which can be important, and be able to do something with all that. And the real aim is actually to be good at theology, not just to have answers to questions like, what are the communication of attributes or what is the distinction between two kinds of righteousness, but rather to be responsive, responsible, constructive about what it means to be Christian, about how we should think about things, lead our lives, talk about things. So as an example about good theology, I often use my wife. This is years ago, more than 20 years ago. One of our children, a three-year-old, asked her, Mom, how do you know there's just one God? And she answered, because there's just one universe. If there are many gods, there'd be many universes, and they wouldn't all fit together. I remember thinking, wow, that's a good answer. I asked her about this years later and she said, oh, I don't remember. And then she added, but it's obvious. After you say it, it is obvious. But it isn't like, oh, the Bible said this, which is true. It's what Christians believe, which is true. Rather, she gave an answer that actually corresponded to God as the Creator, to creation, to the universe. That's what a

God is. As Dr. Arand likes to say, you know, what's God's job description? Yeah, making everything. I bring that up in part two. My wife became a Christian. She was baptized when she was in college. If you ask about doctrines, topics, those kinds of things, she doesn't know. She doesn't have a formal theological education. But she has good theology.

Charles: So if I may ask Joel, because I really do like the way you frame good theology as something that does some work. And the example you gave with your wife demonstrates that. So if you could just unpack a little bit more. So it sounds like good theology obviously is not just about knowing a lot of stuff, knowing a lot of doctrines. But it also sounds like it's different from applying theology. I sense that there's a little bit of a distinction between the theology that does work versus applying individual doctrines to a person's life. Now there's going to be some overlap. I assume if it does good theology it's going to also be applicable. Is that a legitimate distinction though to make between good theology and something that does a lot of work versus good theology is theology that applies it to our lives.

Joel: Yes, you're right. That's a good distinction, a helpful one. You are right that there's an overlap. It doesn't mean that applying theology, applying a doctrine, a distinction, a theological concept is different. But it doesn't have to do the same kind of work. That's right. Let me say the contrast isn't so much good and bad theology. I mean there is that too. But a contrast between what we know and then what we aim for. Good theology has an aim that we very basically, it helps us to grow in our faith or make us more faithful, help us to appreciate, understand, grasp who God is, what He has done, what it means for us in some way. Some kind of concrete legitimate way as opposed to simply framing something in terms of our doctrine. That's where you gain it right? Okay. And I would agree with that.

Charles: Yeah. To pick up on your example of your wife's answer, one God, one universe. So when I think of theology that does a lot of work I'm partly thinking in terms of how it plays itself out within the Christian story or as you've framed it, the story of everything. So if I take the example of God is the creator of the universe, in theology we say that God created everything out of nothing which implies that God was not constrained by any any materials outside of himself. There was no internal necessity to create. He created because he wanted to. Because it pleased him. And it seems to me then that does play itself out in our understanding of God as the freedom of God means then that when God acts it's an act of graciousness. You might say that God created everything for the love of it. And that freedom of God as creator plays itself out in a variety of other ways all the way through choosing Israel, a nobody nation, Abraham sort of a nobody nomad, wanting to bring about redemption through his line. It also plays itself out in bringing us to faith. That the Spirit creates faith when and where he pleases. So it seems to me that then the our understanding of God as creator does a lot of work within the story in a way for example that affirming that Nimrod was a mighty hunter that does not do a true statement within the Bible.

Joel: Well you're right Chuck. What you just gave you're talking about God as creator and creation God's freedom God's love God's graciousness and how it gets worked out. That's a that's a really good example of

what I'm talking about good theology. It says something about us it says something about God in the way and then your distinction how about Nimrod is now how about just the definition of day in Genesis. That's to say it has no relevance but what you brought out has much more says much more about who God is who we are about God's love for us that he takes care of us in through Jesus Christ. It's much better connected with that.

Charles: You know there's a lot in scripture that is true given our understanding of Scripture as God's Word but not everything in Scripture is of would this be a fair statement. Not everything in Scripture is of equal importance and everything is in other words granting that it's inspired and inerrant there are some things that are more important than others which I assume kind of implies because they do a lot of work. Obviously the incarnation of Christ would be a great example. So what about something like the doctrine of the Trinity that's been a subject for the past couple decades theologians arguing about its relevance or irrelevance but maybe you know it's more on the one hand yeah we want to affirm three persons in one essence but on the other hand when you emphasize what we sometimes call here the economic Trinity deals with how God revealed himself in history in the arrangement of salvation. So you know Jesus appears on the scene and says yeah you remember the Old Testament yeah he's my Father and to actually shapes our prayer life because all of our prayers and within the church traditionally I shouldn't say all but the vast majority are prayed to the Father for Jesus sake in Jesus name or by the power of the Holy Spirit. So there's a sense where the arrangement or the relationship of the three persons within the history of salvation then does allow work not only with regard to the story but also ends up in such a way that our piety mirrors that arrangement.

Jessica: So Dr. Arand you just gave us a lot of theology right those were a lot of different points about...

Charles: Oh yeah I guess so.

Jessica: about who God is and the way the interaction within the Trinity right so there's a lot of theology so if that's a lot of theology Dr. Okamoto how is that good theology?

Joel: Well let me ask you what question do you want me to answer? Let me give you some options. So one would be we have a doctrine of the Trinity...

Charles: Okay .

Joel: but what's the point of the doctrine and it should lead to how God is preached working out all things through his Son in the power of the Spirit it should get worked out in how we pray praying to God through Jesus Christ it should play out in how we understand ourselves at that at His baptism God said that Jesus is His son and gave Him the Holy Spirit that's what happens in our baptism we speak about is that the kind of thing.

Charles: Yes.

Joel: the doctrines of the church are not the point the doctrine of the church like the doctrine of the Trinity or the doctrine of the Incarnation are meant to help us to read the scriptures properly to proclaim Christ properly to follow the story of everything to ascertain what it is and

to follow it properly to understand ourselves properly.

Jessica: You need to tell me what the story of everything is.

Joel: Yeah that's well a story of everything is you know a person's account of just everything.

Jessica: Like the meaning of life kind of a question?

Joel: You know life includes what life possibly could be whether there is any good or bad and we all have some kind of assumption about how things just fit together and then of course most of those are shaped by the people we know the communities we belong to religions what we call religions typically even that's notoriously difficult thing to define but Buddhism or Hinduism or Islam or Christianity they all have some account of everything. And so for Christians it's I believe in one God the Father Almighty maker of heaven and earth and of all things visible and invisible that's an account of everything. Now if you're asked a Christian what can you tell me more then Christians tell a story in the beginning God create the heavens and the earth right and then things go wrong with the fall but God resolves to he's gonna take it all back. And so you get Abraham and Israel and finally get to Jesus who you know preaches the time has come the reign of God the kingdom of God is at hand repent and believe the good news. And then he starts to bring it he gives sight to the blind he heals the sick he casts out demons cleanses lepers raised the dead forgives sins he's bringing God's rule and reign things are going to be new better than ever. Of course he gets rejected and he's crucified but God raises from the dead and although Jesus isn't ascending into the heavens he's going to come back and finish what he started and then kind of a nutshell is the how Christians account for everything. The universe was made by someone it was made by him because he felt like it and he wants it back and he wants he wants to invite no all human creatures to turn believe in him through a Son Jesus Christ and enjoy it when it's renewed restored when you know the life of the world to come actually comes. So that's the that's the kind of the nutshell of the story.

Jessica: That's the story of everything so when I've heard you talk about how you teach students to identify the story of everything and why that's like an essential thing to understand but is that a lot of theology or is that good theology?

Joel: Yes.

Jessica: Tell me more.

Joel: Well what I mean is because it's an account of everything it's a lot what we should do with it it's not just to have it's something you're supposed to follow we're supposed to embody it reflect it we're supposed to our Bible studies should somehow be consistent with it you don't have to bring it up all the time. I tell students you know in the last ten years apart from telling you students what it is I've only had a couple of occasions just kind of spun only two spontaneous occasions to actually tell someone this does that make sense? It's a lot to know in one sense that's right but before it to be good means it's something you you embody you embrace you you know assimilate you follow just kind of looks like you do that does that make sense?

Jessica: Well this is an interesting thing for two systematic professors to talk

about because doesn't that sound like practical theology isn't that what that department does is the application of all these of all the theology all these points right do I have a right understanding of this a lot of theology is all the content and then good theology is how that content is applied how you use it.

Joel: Well a distinction like that can be made but I think a distinction like that can be overblown. Theology has a it's for a purpose it's not just it's not an end to itself and so one thing I mean Chuck knows this but uh I think that a good way to conceive of theology in other words thinking talking about God and everything in view of God. A good way of explaining what we're up to is problem-solving people have questions there are confusions and opportunity arises here's a challenge what should we do and as a Christian. And so you think of here's a proposal some are good some are bad but you're trying to solve a problem. When he brought the doctrine of the Trinity before well if you're following this story you find out that Jesus really matters and it's important question to ask how is Jesus related to God? And then some you know would say well he was just a special human being who had the power of God. Some would say no he is God but just in a different way of being. Some would say well he was the first creature that God made and then God did everything else through Him. And they had to sort that out because they realized oh this is essential to our story this is essential to our identity this is essential to our life and a doctrine of the Trinity was developed out of that. How to think about how to talk about God and Jesus but that's up that was a problem it took a while to figure out sort out. And but it's not just now we have the answer to a question it's not like a test question that's rather all right that's meant to inform how we live we should speak about God and Jesus and in certain ways. We shouldn't identify them as the same person for instance but we shouldn't think about Jesus as a mere creature either he's he's fully God. So like the Nicene Creed says he's God of God light of light very God of very God begotten not made.

Charles: So what would you regard though coming back to your definition of theology is that it's problem-solving. What is the problem regarding the Bible the theology needs to address because I think most people would say well Bible is word of God there's no problem.

Joel: There well one one problem could be how do you know it's the Word of God? Then you have to give an answer now sometimes in our circles the answer is well he was inspired by the Holy Spirit which I completely agree was true but the next question is how do you know this book is inspired? In other words you take the Matthew and well then you're stuck there's no property it has that says it's inspired there's no mark that says it's inspired you have to actually go somewhere else. So why don't you start with a different answer about the Bible in the first place. I some some other kinds of answers to the question definitions for the Bible one would be the writings of the prophets and the Apostles these are you know the people whom God had set apart to speak and to write in the past and that the church is recognized this is for that reason it is the Word of the Lord. And to be followed but it gives you a sense of where it came from and what we should do about it how we how we might use it properly. It's what God had said then and it guides

what we should say now this takes care of you know everybody knows the Bible doesn't answer all of our questions. Well it wasn't meant to it was meant to deal with questions back then but we recognize it gives us absolute guidance assured guidance for how we might proceed today. Now questions we that are more distant from it are harder to figure out that's true maybe subject to more disagreement or figuring those kinds of things are just saying we have no idea this this is something about which God doesn't speak to. But at least it gives us that kind of sense another one would be this would be a Luther one it the Bible is that which drives Christ it promotes Christ it's way that Christ is given to us the Bible is the cradle Luther said.

Charles: Yeah.

Joel:

Of course that's true of those writings but which ones are authoritative it doesn't really answer that question. Another one would be a kind of a functional answer not what the Bible is as much as what it's for. It's it's the authoritative testimony concerning God and creation this is now you have to ask why we know and those kinds of things but those are some other kinds of definitions explanations answers to what is the Bible. And my point here is you know they answer they help to deal with different kinds of questions or problems or opportunities and we should we should think in those kinds of terms. You went back to you know practical it is. What are we trying to do? What is good for us? What is good for the opportunity or the situation? We have to keep always those things in in mind. We should be concerned about bad theology we should be concerned about bad works but my concern is a little bit different it's it was it's not just how much you know it's really what you what can you do. Or another one is it's not enough to be of course you want to be correct you don't want it to be false mistaken but not all correct answers are created equal as it were. That went back to the you know what's the best definition of the Bible kind of thing does that make sense?

Charles: And the definition you offered certainly fits within your story of everything because it is about how the prophets and the revelation how the church gathered their books into the Canon and so forth.

Joel: Yes.

Charles: You know so there's that larger side. So we've talked a little bit about how good theology does a lot of work you might say in driving the story of God as creation forward manifesting itself in Christ coming to the return of Christ. I assume it also has to do with helping us to see the world in a certain way. Well let me ask you this then. I was thinking about this on the way in actually because you know we play such a great store by faith you know and Christianity's defined is ultimately a religion that lives by a faith and a promise the promise of Christ return. But it also seems to me and maybe I don't know this is a relationship to the hiddenness of God and accepting those things that we either cannot control or that strike us as well obviously the question we've always one of them but strike us is really I gotta live with it.

Joel: Well what you're expressing Chuck is yeah the proper distinction of law and gospel. In other words God is the Creator taking from a certain perspective is definitely the law on the other hand the Creator being for you is absolutely the gospel. In other words if the God who made all things says I want you to be my child

it's like well nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus if he says so everything is set. Well this this highlights then even we're talking about faith faith comes by hearing it brings out then the central place for the the gospel as a word that makes a promise that has a promise attached to it. Whether it's something in the past that makes all the difference or something that's going to happen but it does highlight then the significance the absolute importance of promise that makes sense there Jessica?

Jessica: It still sounds to me like it comes down to good theology is the application of this knowledge. Which still sounds pretty great to me but I'm trying but I think I'm missing something because when I say is this just applied theology you both are like no not quite what am I missing?

Joel: I would pause about applying. Where do we get our theology from in the first place where do we get our doctrines from in the first place? And it comes from well baptism started first Christ commanded baptism and then the apostles go out and do it and they testified well that's why it's written in the New Testament. Questions about baptism though arise later and then you develop a doctrine concerning baptism, yeah. The scriptures don't give us something to apply they give us something to do. There's a saying you know this is an academic saying practice precedes theory. In other words we develop theories but we develop theories only because we're doing stuff we're thinking about stuff. So when I heard you talking about well you apply knowledge but where's this knowledge come from? What comes from having to wrestle with problems in the past questions in the past challenges and opportunities in the past. And some of them have risen to the point like oh this is really important we should write this down we should be teaching this the next generation. That's why I brought up about the Trinity that it is not that's not a concept that arises God did not give us a concept of the Trinity he revealed himself in a certain way he acted in a certain way now to keep that straight you had to figure out some things we need a few concepts we need a few distinctions. And you get like the Athanasian Creed very formal very you know formidable in that way but doesn't start there it starts with God made himself known in Jesus God gave the Holy Spirit in through Jesus. How do we how do we how do we faithfully live that out how do we pass that down to the next generation and the like? And that's where the knowledge comes from which then of course continues to be applied. And that's kind of my when you say about applying a lot well where does he a lot come from it doesn't it didn't just drop out of the heavens it's no it arose out of the context of actually being Christian leading our lives of faith and faithfulness. It's a little bit like how a lot of math is learned or you'll learn a concept like algebraic concepts and then you get some problems and then you then you then you are supposed to apply them. So I found that it turned out I found that really difficult I do have a degree in engineering degree but I realized that I did not really know any math and that's a problem when you're gonna be an engineer. I could do the math problems I did well in school those kinds of things but actually thinking mathematically that was a it turned out I realized beyond me because all I had was this knowledge. I knew these symbols and I applied them to the problems I was given but I couldn't look at the world and say think about it mathematically. And so we put too much emphasis on on the on the

formulas on the already known problems that can get in the way of actually thinking about applying them. Or you see that I didn't know if that's the right word engaging the world theologically.

Jessica: That's not application that's your goal?

Joel: Well that is the goal but it's talking about applying it's like applying a concept like a doctrine I'm not against that but that has to be said in the context a larger context. Where'd you get this in the first place why are we doing all these things in the first place?

Jessica: So it's an answer versus like a worldview in which you see everything.

Joel: Oh that'd be a way to put it yeah in other words yes, yes.

Jessica: As church leaders you want to help people see things through a theological lens through a Christian lens not just know the answers.

Joel: Yes.

Jessica: So they are tied together but but they're not the same thing.

Joel: That's right that's right.

Jessica: That is exactly the goal of this show to help people see how theology is tangible and everything that it's not just a set of facts but how do these true facts change everything for you. How is it real and tangible.

Joel: Good theology is not something you have something you practice. So I have conversations with you and sometimes you will say about something I said oh that was helpful like oh it's pretty good I had no idea I thought that do. I was talking to you and then sometimes like I know what you're talking about Joel.

Jessica: So then your goal as teachers of church leaders right is to help your students be a good theologian to different people who need it in a different ways. So it's ...

Joel: Yes.

Jessica: ...because it is subjective that's a harder job than teaching someone a bunch of facts. Why is it important that you teach students to think this way?

Charles: For me I think the reason is because the world is constantly changing we do not know what would be like in the next 20 or 30 years. The education they get here hopefully will provide them with a way of dealing with new situations new questions new problems and to do it in a theologically sound way. Or in the way of a you know so and so good theology will equip them for those changing contexts those changing questions and so forth because who knows what the questions will be facing in 20 years or 30 years.

Jessica: That was a great answer I think that helps me understand the goals.

Joel: If you do this if you're if you're proceeding from actually believing this then it's not about how right your answers are as much as how well you're trying to do by you know our Lord and how are you trying to do by the other person. And that means you can be in a position to you know to venture something and then be corrected. You could venture something change your mind. You can venture something and say well now we're a new situation. So what

Chuck was talking about how about 20 years down the line you're being a much better position to build it to want to do it as well as to be able to to do it in some kind of a way. Yesterday's answers you know are yesterday's answers are they today's answers I don't know. What kind of objective should we have you know what 20 years down the line it's gonna be different. And we have the situation that everybody acknowledges things are changing we don't know where they're going but they're definitely changing culturally they're changing in our churches. There is a temptation this is what one of the things that goes against good theology let's just say what we've always said that doesn't mean they're wrong but they aren't necessarily responsive they're reactionary.

Jessica: Last question what do you want our listeners to remember? I know what I want to remember from the conversation.

Charles: What would that be?

Jessica: I want to remember that instead of having an answer to the question I would rather teach my children how to think about the questions right. So instead of helping them know facts in the Bible which I'm still going to do because it's connected it's more important that I also help them learn how to think like a Christian. That wasn't very succinct.

I guess what I call good theology tries to do right both by our Lord and by the people you're somehow right now engaged in whether it's just a simple conversation a congregation. I don't know some kind of event that's happening in the world but try to do right by the Lord try to do right by by them and their future not so much the past but their future.

Charles: That's a good answer.

Jessica: That's all for today I'd like to thank our guests Dr. Okamoto thanks for being on the show.

Joel: You're welcome it was a pleasure.

Jessica: Dr. Arand thanks for coming.

Charles: Thanks Jessica.

Jessica: And thank you for listening you can find more episodes of Tangible and all the major hosting apps or on our website [ConcordiaTheology.org](http://ConcordiaTheology.org). We've got a lot more resources there check it out. If you'd like to see this show continue please subscribe share and leave a review it actually makes a pretty big difference. I'm your producer and host Jessica Bordeleau. Join me next time when we talk about the intersection of theology and daily life because it's Tangible: Theology Learned and Lived.