

Session 4: Approaching Critical Issues

For this session it would be helpful to have someone in the room with some more expertise and experience studying theology as a Christian. One or two reliable PhD students would be helpful to be able to begin offering insight into some of the specific issues that people might raise during this session.

DISCUSSION: Taking issues slow

READ:

The life of the theology student is full of encountering difficult issues and trying to process them and reconcile them with confidence in Scripture and faith in Jesus. It can sometimes feel like an onslaught that never stops, with little to no time to adequately process everything that comes our way.

As we study, we don't want to ignore these issues, nor do we want to keep faith and study completely separate. And in the process of trying to reconcile the critical issues with our faith, we don't want to end up with a purely intellectual faith that is more shaped by academic trends than by a living relationship with Jesus. So how can we approach handling these issues well?

The first thing to do is remember to breathe. It is not dishonest or like burying your head in the sand to take things slow and play the long game with the questions you face. In some ways you have lots of time on your course to think things through, but in the grand scheme of things three years is pretty short for sorting out some of the trickier issues.

Talk to people who can handle the questions you have. And try not to panic as the unresolved questions build up. You will have many by the end of the year. Some you will start to resolve well now, some will take longer. It's okay to shelve issues for later. It's best to deal with each issue one or two at a time rather than being crushed by the vague weight of mounting questions.

- How do you feel at this point in the term/year? Are there any questions that are niggling away at the back of your mind (or right there at the front of your mind)?
- Do you resonate with the experience of a never ending onslaught of questions?
- How do you find the advice to slow down, breathe, maybe even put some issues on the backburner to deal with at later point when you're more able to do so with clarity?

DISCUSSION: Getting clarity on the foundations of our faith

READ:

When facing question after question which all appear to be undermining our faith, it is helpful to get clarity on what is actually foundational for faith in Jesus. Questions of the 'historical reliability' of the bible or its resonance with the moral sensibilities of the modern West, important as they are, are not the grounds for your faith in Jesus, or even your trust in the bible.

We believe the gospel because, in its truth and goodness we are convinced of the beauty and truth of Jesus through the work of the Holy Spirit in us. It is not the Ancient Near Eastern context of the Old Testament, or postcolonial readings of the New Testament that leads us to the truth of Jesus, nor is it the authorship and dating of certain books that secures the bible's trustworthiness for us.

Michael Williams writes,

“Your faith doesn’t ultimately depend on your answers to critical issues. Your faith may (ought to) shape your academic convictions towards certain positions, but it ought not to rise and fall on whether you can hold a certain view of authorship at a given moment. It must be more robust than that!

At the ‘academic’ level the Christian hope is grounded in the historical event of the resurrection.[4] But your faith is much more than taking a position on an academic proposal. If you are a follower of Jesus, you were called by God to the faith you now have when you responded to the gospel proclaimed to you. You have been given His Spirit to bring you from death into new life as you are united to Christ in His death and resurrection. Your experience of the reality of the gospel is as important as your intellectual assent to it.”

(As this relates to the bible, it is worth pointing people to this article by David Gibson:

<https://theologynetwork.uk/speak/for-the-bible-tells-me-so>)

- What do you make of this basis for faith? Does that align well or badly with your experience of first coming to believe in Jesus?
- How can this approach to the foundations of faith both help secure your faith *and* encourage honest engagement with the critical issues of your course?

DISCUSSION: Engaging well with scholarship

READ:

From the starting point of taking things slowly and gaining a confidence in the basics of your faith in Jesus, it is then important to engage with the troubling issues you face honestly and to the best of your ability. You will have most confidence in moving past the critical issues that you have most honestly engaged with.

This looks like taking the time to read the scholarship in that area, both from evangelical perspectives and from the main-stream perspectives in that field. Reflect honestly on the arguments that are being presented and consider how you might respond in a way that remains faithful to the truth of the gospel without shying away from critical thought.

Honest engagement does not mean that you have to side with the majority of scholars, but it does mean taking the time to form opinions that are based on more than simply gut instinct or what fits best with what you grew up thinking.

It’s also okay to come away from engaging with challenging issues thinking “I don’t know for sure on this issue, but I think this is the most plausible option.”

- Do you feel confident weighing up the different positions presented in scholarly works on challenging issues?
- How do you think the gospel makes a difference to the way that you engage with scholarship, both scholarship that you agree with and that you disagree with?
- What sources for evangelical scholarship have you found helpful?

PRAY:

Pray for peace and clarity for one another as you face critical issues over the course of your study of theology. Pray that the Spirit would lead you into all truth.

Share any other prayer requests that you might have and spend time praying for each other.