

## Session 2: Christian Theology and the Academic Discipline

### DISCUSSION: What is Theology?

Try and dig into something more substantial than just 'studying God' or 'thoughts about God'. What's the aim of theology? What's involved in 'doing' it?

- How would you describe theology in your own words?

#### READ:

*"The word 'theology' includes the idea of the Logos, for theology is a logia, a logic or language about the theos (God) who determines it. Theology can be the study of any number of gods; but Christian theology is about knowing the true and living God as he reveals himself through his Logos, his Word, Jesus Christ. Since knowing God through his Word is the definition of being a Christian, we can see that all Christians are therefore Christian theologians. As for us, we can see that we are Christian theologians simply because we are Christians, not because we are enrolled on some particular course of study. It is therefore a complete misunderstanding of what theology is when you hear someone cheerfully (and perhaps also a bit scornfully) affirm: "I am not a theologian!" As if theology could be left behind once the exam had been sat. All too often what that will mean is simply that they are a bad theologian, failing to test everything in the fire of God's truth.*

*The question to ask any Christian is not, "Are you a theologian?" We know they are. The question is whether the person is a good theologian or a bad theologian. We don't mean whether they can remember the Chalcedonian definition or parse a word. Being a good theologian is not about intellectual ability. Christian theology is, as Anselm famously put it, faith seeking understanding, and therefore the only qualification for being a good theologian is faith in Jesus Christ, the revealing Word. To be a good theologian is to seek to know and rely upon the Word of God better. It is to be a faithful Christian."*

- What do you make of this description of Christian theology?
- How do you think this 'faith seeking understanding' can relate to formal (academic) theological study?

### DISCUSSION: Tension between 'ordinary' Christian theology and academic study.

#### READ:

Christian theology is rooted in what God has to say about Himself and about the whole of reality in light of Him. Some tensions can arise between this 'simple' vision for theology and the actual practice of academic study.

This challenge is partly a good thing. The academic task is a much more focussed and intense version of 'ordinary' theology which can make us uncomfortable as we question our childhood ways of thinking about God, or are forced to read a high proportion of scholarly writings about the bible compared to how much we're studying the Bible directly.

In 'Pursuing the Illogical Studies,' Mike Reeves writes, *"The first thing to realise is that not everything that is alien or uncomfortable is bad. The problem with us evangelicals is that we can be like the fussy child who will not dare to try any new food, simply because he doesn't know what it tastes like.*

*...We will see that there are dark powers to be wary of in studying theology, but before that we need to know that it is of the essence of theology to be shocking, disturbing and confrontational.*

*...We should not automatically dismiss a strange practice, or whatever we find to be unsettling, and that challenges how we have been taught and how we think. The true test of good theology is not our level of comfort with it, but Scripture."*

- What are the good aspects of being uncomfortable with some of the things we hear in class?
- How can we embrace the challenge of being stretched theologically this year?

### **DISCUSSION: Handling Negative Challenges**

#### **READ:**

Not every challenge is stretching us in a good way, and not every new idea we encounter ought to be embraced. Academic theology sometimes seems at odds with our faith in the gospel because it is!

- How do you think we can recognise when something is challenging because it is at odds with the gospel rather than simply new to us?

Mike Reeves goes on to write, "*[I]n theology, error and false teaching distort reality itself, and can thus, as Irenaeus put it, be homicidal. ...for whatever reason we enrolled on our course, we have now been saddled with a duty that forbids us to be lazy in our studies. For the health of the Church and the world, we must confront error and false teaching with the saving truth of the word of God.*

*And so, before swallowing any theology, new or old, we must ensure it is edible and nutritious by passing it through the proving fire of scripture. As Paul puts it so many times: 'Test everything' (1 Thess. 5:21); 'Do not go beyond what is written' (1 Cor. 4:6); 'Let God be true, and every man a liar' (Rom. 3:4). When we do this, actively rejecting what scripture proves to be false and (full of prayer and praise) embracing what we find to be true, then studying theology will no longer be a time of spiritual stagnation or backsliding, but of wonderful growth."*

- What are the common areas of error that you have come across in class or in conversations with other theology students?
- How do you think you should respond?
- How do you feel about passing everything you hear in class through "the proving fire of Scripture"?
- How can we make all our study of theology a time of 'wonderful growth'?

#### **PRAY:**

*Pray for clarity as you are stretched in your thinking by your theology course, that you would be faithful to the gospel, but not cling to childhood errors or over-simplifications.*

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