

Session 3: Devotional Life and Theology

DISCUSSION: Talking about our devotional lives

READ:

David Cupples in his chapter in *Keeping Your Balance: Approaching theological and religious studies* writes, “Faith does not make us better scholars: we will not pass our exams on it; but it gives us the experimental knowledge of God which is eternal life.”

Faith may not necessarily make us better at biblical languages, or give us a bigger capacity for reading for long periods of time, or help us get our head around difficult vocabulary or complex concepts. These things are important for theological scholarship, but there is more to being a good theologian than just being a good scholar. Faith, a growing relationship with Jesus, is crucial for theology to be anything more than just an academic curiosity.

On the flip side, there is a real danger as theology students of growing in academic learning about things of faith, but not growing in our actual walk with Jesus. Learning in-itself is not harmful for faith, but it can become harmful if we make our faith *purely* intellectual. There is the danger of becoming like the Pharisees whom Jesus critiqued as diligently searching the Scriptures and yet oblique to the messiah standing before them.

- What do we think about this? Can we see the importance of our faith for theology?
- How do we feel about our devotional lives at the moment?
- How do we think our faith and study *should* relate?

DISCUSSION: Challenges for maintaining a healthy devotional life

READ:

David Cupples writes, “Almost everyone who comes to the study of theology with a living faith and who gets seriously involved with the subject faces problems. If theological study has led you into what is sometimes called ‘the dark night of the soul’, take heart immediately. You are not alone: and help is at hand. Quite apart from anything else, your spiritual anxiety is evidence that your faith is important and real enough to you to worry about when it is threatened. Your very struggle is the sign that you are alive.”

You may be working through questions and doubts about aspects of your faith, or about parts of the bible, that make it difficult to sit down, read the bible and pray. It’s hard not to feel disingenuous when, at an academic level, the very core aspects of your faith are being challenged. You may start to find that reading the bible devotionally feels like work, merely more of what you’re doing in class every day. You may even be studying the same book of the bible in class that you are currently reading in your devotional reading plan. Or, it may be that, having encountered some of the great historic works of theology, you’re finding devotional practices which used to excite and sustain you now feel shallow and un-nourishing.

- What have you found challenging about maintaining a devotional life since you started studying theology?
- (For those who’ve been studying longer) How have you found ways of overcoming these challenges to your devotional life?

DISCUSSION: Towards an integrated devotional life

- What do you think it would look like for you to be wholly engaged with your theology course AND be thriving in your faith?

READ

We may be tempted to set up a mental wall between our study and devotional life to help us deal with the challenges that we face. In some ways separation of the two may help us survive in the short term, but we should aim for more – that we have integrity in both the way that we study and the way that we relate personally to God in faith and obedience.

How can we not just survive the challenges to our devotional life that our theology courses throw up, but cultivate practices that help us grow in our relationship with Jesus?

One thing that we can do is take steps towards ‘preparing’ our studies and devotional lives to meet. This involves adopting an approach to study that can accommodate faith in Jesus and contribute to our whole-life worship of Him, and adopting robust devotional practices that help us express and grow in faith in a way that won’t be threatened by times of wrestling with significant theological issues.

How could we bring worship into our studies? Praying before lectures, study sessions, essays, exams? Offering God prayers or songs of praise when we read or hear something in our study that points to His goodness and glory? Sharing little edifying thoughts from our course with other believers? Practices like these will help us gradually relate to our course as an arena for faith and worship.

How can we grow in robust faith? Something as simple as making a daily ‘quiet-time’ of some kind an unmissable part of our day is significant. This might also look like reading longer passages of Scripture than we are accustomed to, moving towards reading the whole bible several times over the duration of our courses (it is harder to be shaken by biblical scholarship when we have a good grasp of what is in the whole of Scripture). We might also consider using historical devotional works which are theologically rich as well as devotionally warm.

- What are some things that have led you to worship in your study? What’s one thing that you’ve learned on your course that you can turn to praise right now?
- What do you think of the suggestions for devotional practices that can help you thrive while studying theology? (e.g. reading through the whole bible regularly, using historic devotional works)
- What are some devotional practices that you have found fruitful?

PRAY:

Pray for each other to grow in your devotional lives and worship as you study theology. Pray that you would see God’s glory, the beauty of Jesus, in what you study and have opportunities to give him praise.

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