# HANDLING THEOLOGY

PART 1 WORKBOOK

***In essentials, unity.***
***In non-essentials, liberty.***
***In all things, charity.***

**Central question**
How can Christians remain united around the essential truths of the faith while allowing room for faithful interpretation, theological exploration, and difference?

Name: _____

Date: _____

A companion workbook for personal reflection, group discussion, and note-taking.

# 1. The starting point: unity in Christ

Read Ephesians 4:1–6. Paul calls the Church to live with humility, gentleness, patience, and love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit.

The handout begins with this reminder:

> **We are submitted to an authority higher than our personal opinions.**

## Reflect

**1. What does it look like to approach theological disagreement with humility and gentleness?**

**2. What is the difference between maintaining unity and pretending that all beliefs are equally true?**

**3. Where might personal opinion become more important to us than Scripture or the unity of the Church?**

## Key thought to carry forward

Christian unity is not built on everyone having identical opinions. It is rooted in our shared confession of the one Lord, one faith, and one God and Father (Ephesians 4:4–6).

# 2. Scripture: our final authority

**Working definition:** Scripture is God's inspired Word and the final authority for what we believe and how we live.

The handout recognizes that Christians interpret Scripture, and that interpretations can lead to different doctrines and denominations. The challenge is ensuring that interpretation remains accountable to Scripture and does not distort the truth it claims to explain.

**Picture to remember:** Interpretations are like a kite. They need to remain tethered to the final authority of Scripture and to foundational beliefs that guard against interpreting ourselves out of the faith.

## Reflect and discuss

**1. Why is saying "the Bible says" not always enough to settle a disagreement?**

**2. What helps keep an interpretation accountable to Scripture?**

**3. Can you think of an example where two Christians read the same passage but understand it differently?**

## My summary

**In my own words, what does it mean for Scripture to be the final authority?**

# 3. How we understand theology

The handout uses four connected concepts to describe the foundation and framework of Christian belief:

| CONCEPT | ROLE | WORKING DEFINITION |
|---|---|---|
| **Scripture** | Our final authority | God's inspired Word is the final authority for what we believe and how we live. |
| **Dogma** | Our foundational beliefs | The essential truths that define historic Christian faith. |
| **Doctrine** | Our biblical teachings and interpretations | The teachings and interpretations that explain what we believe about God and His truth. |
| **Theology** | Our study and understanding | The ongoing process of studying, understanding, and applying God's truth. |

## Check your understanding

**1. Which of the four is the final authority? Why does that matter?**

**2. How would you explain the difference between dogma and doctrine?**

**3. Why should theology be an ongoing process rather than a tool for division?**

## Complete the sentences

Scripture is _____.

Dogma is _____.

Doctrine is _____.

Theology is _____.

# 4. Creedal theology and dogma

**Creedal foundational theology (dogma):** The foundational confessions of faith, grounded in Scripture, that establish the boundaries of historic Christian orthodoxy.

The handout describes the creeds as historic confessions through which the Church expresses and defends foundational truths. In this sense, the creeds are a vehicle for dogma: they identify and affirm essential mysteries of the faith and set boundaries for faithful biblical interpretation and theological exploration.

## Three related terms

| TERM | MEANING |
|---|---|
| **Dogma** | Our foundational beliefs: the essential truths that define historic Christian faith. |
| **Creeds** | Historic confessions of faith: the Church's historic statements that express and defend those truths. |
| **Orthodoxy** | Faithful belief and practice: faithful adherence to the foundational truths of historic Christian faith in both belief and practice. |

## Think it through

**1. What is the difference between a foundational belief (dogma) and a historic confession (creed)?**

**2. Why might orthodoxy involve both what we believe and how we live?**

**3. How can Christians disagree about doctrine while remaining united in foundational dogma?**

# 5. Three historic Christian confessions

The handout introduces three important confessions. Each emerged in a particular historical setting and helped the Church articulate foundational beliefs.

| CONFESSION | DATE | HISTORICAL FOCUS | FOUNDATIONAL EMPHASIS |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Apostles' Creed** | Developed from 2nd century; familiar form developed over following centuries | Early baptismal statements of faith; summarizes apostolic teaching. | The Christian faith: Father, Son, Holy Spirit, Church, forgiveness, resurrection, and eternal life. |
| **Nicene Creed** | 325; expanded in 381 | Responded to Arian controversy and clarified the Church's confession of the Son and the Trinity. | The Triune God; the full divinity of the Son. |
| **Chalcedonian Definition** | 451 | Addressed disputes about how Christ's divinity and humanity relate. | The incarnation: Jesus Christ is fully God and fully human, one person in two natures. |

## Reflection

**1. Why did the early Church need shared confessions of faith?**

**2. What does the Nicene Creed clarify about Jesus Christ?**

**3. What does the Chalcedonian Definition protect us from saying about Jesus?**

**4. Which of these confessions would you like to understand more deeply? What questions do you have?**

# 6. The Chalcedonian Definition: four fences

The Chalcedonian Definition (AD 451) confesses one and the same Jesus Christ in two natures: fully divine and fully human. It describes the union using four careful phrases:

**Without confusion**
The divine and human natures are not mixed into a third kind of nature.

**Without change**
The divine nature does not become human, and the human nature does not become divine.

**Without division**
Christ is not split into two persons.

**Without separation**
The two natures are united in the one person of Christ.

## Why use boundaries?

The definition confesses who Christ is without claiming to explain exhaustively how the mystery of the incarnation works.

**In your own words, what do the four phrases protect?**

**How can a theological boundary protect faithful exploration rather than stop it?**

# 7. Mystery, interpretation, and the fence

The handout's central idea is that the creeds identify and affirm mystery while establishing biblical interpretive boundaries without restraining interpretation.

**The playground analogy**
The creeds function like a fence around a playground. Within the fence there is freedom to explore, question, interpret, and develop theological understanding. The fence does not restrict exploration; it protects the space in which faithful exploration can take place.

## Discuss

**1. What does the fence represent?**

**2. What kinds of theological exploration should be possible within the fence?**

**3. What might it look like to interpret Scripture in a way that steps outside the boundaries of historic Christian confession?**

**4. How can a church distinguish between a legitimate difference of interpretation and a departure from foundational Christian belief?**

**5. What is the difference between saying that a mystery is true and claiming to explain exactly how it works?**

# 8. Faith, reason, and theological exploration

The handout emphasizes that foundational confessions are statements of faith, not conclusions reached through human reason alone. Reason may explore and illuminate what faith confesses, but cannot fully comprehend every mystery of God.

It also includes a reflection from P. T. Forsyth distinguishing the fact confessed by faith from the manner in which theologians may continue to investigate it.

> A helpful distinction: Faith receives what is confessed; theology continues to explore and seek understanding. The work of explanation should not overturn the foundational confession.

## Reflect

**1. How would you explain the relationship between faith and reason?**

**2. Can a person ask honest questions about a mystery while still affirming it by faith? Explain.**

**3. What is the difference between exploring how something is understood and denying what the Church confesses?**

**4. What questions are you still carrying from this session?**

# 9. Putting the framework into practice

Use the framework below when you encounter a theological disagreement:

**1. Return to Scripture**
What does the biblical text say in context?

**2. Identify the issue**
Is the disagreement about a foundational confession, a doctrinal interpretation, or a theological question?

**3. Consider the historic confession**
Does the interpretation remain within the boundaries of the great Christian confessions?

**4. Practice charity**
How can we discuss the disagreement with humility, patience, and love?

## Case study

Two Christians agree that Scripture is authoritative and confess the historic Christian faith. They disagree about how to interpret a particular biblical passage and draw different doctrinal conclusions. What questions would help you discern whether this is a disagreement within Christian orthodoxy or a departure from a foundational confession?

**My response: what would humility, patience, and charity look like in this conversation?**

# 10. Personal response and next steps

Complete these statements in your own words.

**The final authority for Christian faith and life is…**

**Dogma matters because…**

**Creeds serve the Church by…**

**Orthodoxy involves both…**

**Faithful theological exploration means…**

**One idea I want to remember from this session:**

**One question I want to keep exploring:**

**One way I can practice unity, liberty, and charity in theological conversations:**

**Closing reminder**
In essentials, unity. In non-essentials, liberty. In all things, charity.

Source basis: Handling Theology Part 1 Handout. Questions and workbook activities have been added to support individual reflection and group discussion.

# 11. Theological classification: putting the framework together

This framework helps distinguish the importance of a belief, its relationship to historic Christian orthodoxy, its theological weight, and its interpretive position. These categories are related, but they answer different questions.

| Category | Classification | Theological weight | Interpretive position |
|---|---|---|---|
| Essential | Orthodoxy | Dogma | Creedal theology |
| Secondary | Sub-orthodoxy | Doctrine | Traditional interpretation |
| Distinctive | Heterodoxy | Theological opinion | Divergent interpretation |
| Contrary | Heresy | Doctrinal error | Creedal departure |

## Four questions to ask

1. Category — How significant or central is this belief to the Christian faith?

2. Classification — How does the belief relate to historic Christian orthodoxy?

3. Theological weight — What level of authority or significance is assigned to the teaching, and how strong and consistent is its scriptural support?

4. Interpretive position — How does this interpretation relate to established creedal and theological understanding?

## Scriptural support scale

| Term | Working description |
|---|---|
| Complete scriptural support | Entirely supported throughout Scripture. |
| Profound scriptural support | Significant biblical truths supported by Scripture. |
| Acceptable scriptural support | A legitimate biblical basis or interpretive rationale. |
| Unattached scriptural use | Use or interpretation of Scripture disconnected from the established theological boundaries of historic Christian orthodoxy. |

Note: This scale describes how scriptural support is being assessed within the framework. It does not mean that sincere Christians always agree about how much support a particular interpretation has.

# 12. The dangers of doctrinal silos — a closed lens

A theological silo is taking one part of a biblical truth and allowing it to shape how we understand everything else. A closed lens can shrink our understanding of God by making one theological emphasis the lens through which all other Scripture is read.

## The first danger: a restricted view of God

Consider atonement through a penal-substitution lens: Jesus takes the penalty of sin in our place. A closed lens can turn this model into the only way we understand the Father, potentially emphasizing the need for punishment while overlooking other biblical dimensions of God's character and the cross.

## Reflect

1. What is the difference between valuing a theological model and allowing it to become the only lens through which you view God?

2. How might one emphasis of a biblical truth unintentionally make our picture of God smaller?

## The second danger: interpreting contrary Scriptures through a closed lens

Once a lens becomes controlling, we may interpret passages that appear to challenge it in ways that protect the doctrine rather than allow Scripture to broaden or correct our understanding.

**Example — 1 John 4:9–10**: God's love is revealed by sending His Son. A closed lens may read the sending primarily as the Father needing a penalty paid before He can forgive, and overlook the text's emphasis on the sending as an expression of the Father's love.

3. How can we make room for passages that challenge or add nuance to our preferred theological explanation?

## The third danger: superiority, judgment, and division

Closed theological lenses can lead us to treat those who disagree as spiritually inferior, producing judgment, hostility, and division. The history of Christian conflict reminds us that theological disagreement must never give permission to abandon love.

4. Where have you seen theological certainty turn into superiority or division?

**Key thought: Healthy theology gives us a bigger picture of God, not a smaller one.**

## My response

What is one theological lens I need to hold alongside other biblical truths so that my understanding of God remains broad, faithful, and humble?

# 13. Two ways theological theories relate

Not every theological difference should be handled in the same way. Some theories complement one another by illuminating different aspects of the same biblical truth. Others genuinely compete by offering conflicting explanations or conclusions. Recognizing the difference helps us discern when perspectives enrich our understanding and when they require careful evaluation.

## Complementary theories

**Different views that help us understand different aspects of the same biblical truth.**

Example: Atonement

Christians agree that Jesus died for us, but ask what His death accomplished and how to describe it. Different models may highlight different biblical dimensions of the one work of Christ.

1. How might complementary perspectives provide a fuller picture of a biblical truth?

2. What care is needed to ensure a perspective does not redefine the truth established by orthodoxy?

## Competing theories

**Different views that offer conflicting explanations or conclusions to the same truth.**

Example: End-times theology

Christians agree that Jesus is returning, but may offer competing timelines or interpretations of the events surrounding His return. These conclusions cannot all be correct in the same way, so they require discernment and evaluation.

3. What makes a disagreement genuinely competing rather than complementary?

4. How can we disagree about competing interpretations while maintaining humility, patience, and charity?

## Compare the two

| Complementary | Competing |
|---|---|
| Different views illuminate different aspects of the same truth. | Different views offer conflicting explanations or conclusions about the same truth. |
| May be held together to enrich understanding. | Requires evaluating which interpretation is most faithful. |

## Final reflection

Think of a theological disagreement you have encountered. Is it complementary, competing, or perhaps a mixture? What would help you determine that—and how can you respond with conviction without abandoning charity?

## Closing reminder

The goal is not to make every theological view fit together. The goal is to recognize when different views enrich our understanding of Scripture and when we need to carefully discern what is true.

**In essentials, unity. In non-essentials, liberty. In all things, charity.**