

WEEK 1

IDENTITY

YOUR STORY & THEOLOGY



LESSON 1 - INTRODUCTION

Your Story and Theology

“Our wisdom, in so far as it ought to be deemed true and solid Wisdom, consists almost entirely of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves.” - John Calvin

Spring 2023

Overview

The primary goal for this lesson is to learn more about you and to briefly talk about what theology is and why its important.

Each section will begin with some passages from scripture, some questions to encourage reflection, some prayer exercises, and some relevant spiritual disciplines

PRACTICE

- 1) If you consider yourself a Christian, what makes you one? If not, how would you describe your religious view and why?

- 2) What brought you to our church and why are you taking this class?

- 3) What is faith?

- 4) What questions about God, Jesus Christ, the Christian faith, or the church in general, do you wrestle with? Any specific questions or concerns?

SCRIPTURE

Read the following passages: Luke 15:11-32 & Colossians 3:1-17

REFLECTIONS

- 1) In the story of the two brothers, which brother do you recognize within yourself or your story (Luke 15)?

- 2) What vices do you fight against and which virtues do you desire more of (Col. 3)?

- 3) What significant events in your life impacted who you are?

- 4) What are some people, events, ideas or churches that have influenced your understanding of Christianity?

- 5) How would you describe the current state of your faith in Jesus Christ? Are you sailing (the wind is in your sails and God is alive and active), rowing (its more of a duty than a delight right now), drifting along (your a Christian but maybe feel aimless or indifferent), or sinking (its on the brink of falling apart, maybe deconstructing)?

PRAYER

Spend some time in prayer meditating on Colossians 3:1-17 and then answer the following questions.

- What does it mean to set your mind on things above (v. 2)? How does your life hidden with Christ shed light on what that means (v. 3)?

- Is there anything that may be weighing you down or get in the way of you “putting on Christ? Among the virtues Paul lists in vv. 9-17, what do you aspire to have more of?

What is Theology?

Theology is simply the study of God, coming from a combination of two Greek words, God, (*theos*) and word, (*logos*), so *theos + logos* = words about God. Everyone, and most certainly every Christian is a theologian. Everyone has thoughts about God and the significance for our lives. Theology is not just something that we *know* but something that we *do*. We are studying God, the world he has made, and ourselves and the deepest questions in life. But not all theology is *Christian* theology. Our aim is to do Christian Theology, to take every thought captive to Christ (2 Cor. 10:5).

We will cover many great doctrines of Christianity and today people tend to think of this as boring, irrelevant, abstract or divisive. Yet in a secular society such as ours we are not accustomed to thinking clearly about God and all that scripture has to say about what we believe about family, friends, work, finances, the future, our hopes, dreams and fears. The Bible says that the *feared of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom* (Prov. 1:7). Theology is very practical when it is done well. It is the knowing, being, and doing of the Christian life. *Theological study is simply reflecting on God and his ways to more deeply love God, ourselves, and our neighbor.*

Before we really begin, here are a few things to keep in mind as we progress about what we are doing.

- 1) **Biblically, theology should be enjoyable, livable and worshipful (1 Pet. 1:10-12; Jam. 2:14-17; Rom. 11:33-36).** Dorothy Sayers once said, “The dogma is the drama.” We will cover many doctrines of the Christian faith but theology done well should be thrilling and life giving. Studying God is an act of worship and ought to be something that we can integrate into our daily life.
- 2) **It won’t all make sense right away.** Some of it will require stretching yourself mentally, emotionally, and practically before it makes sense. Some things will require prolonged meditation before the importance comes to light. Meditation on the nature of God and his word is critical for a maturing life of prayer.
- 3) **Technical words are intended to summarize and for clarity.** The goal is to help you understand some things and to summarize a lot of teaching in the Bible (i.e. Trinity or Incarnation). Please ask about words you don’t understand no matter how obvious or common they may seem. In addition, we all learn technical words for many other areas of life and their importance is obvious to you. It is helpful to learn new terminology only in as much as it helps you to better understand and articulate your faith.
- 4) **Theological understanding enables you to better interact with the diversity of beliefs and circumstances that come up in life.** It is foolish for me to try to handle

all of the of religions and worldviews that exist in the Bay Area alone (though many try in a Pluralistic society). It is better to ground you in the faith and thus enable you to communicate it and apply it to your life and to the lives of your neighbors.

Theological Unity and Diversity

During the Protestant Reformation Rupertus Meldenius said, “In essential things unity, in non-essential things liberty, and in all things charity.”

There are foundational things of the Christian faith that are true for all Christians regardless of their comprehension because without it, you do no longer have Christianity. There are some things that we believe as a church but not necessarily all Christians would agree (contra Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist, etc). There are other things that we as individuals may believe but others in our church may respectfully disagree. This is all good and healthy and a part of practicing unity in diversity.

Throughout the course I will try to make plan what is essential for salvation, necessary for our church unity, and what you are free to ponder. Feel free to ask questions. A longer list of distinguishing factors in theological discernment is as follows in order of importance:²

1. Essential for nature of Christianity and salvation, i.e. Trinity, Incarnation, the atoning death and resurrection of Christ.
2. Essential for historic Christian orthodoxy, i.e. Virgin Birth, the Bible.
3. Essential for traditional orthodoxy, i.e. justification, heaven and hell.
4. Essential for denominational orthodoxy, i.e. Lord’s Supper, infant vs. adult baptism.
5. Important but not essential, i.e. “age of creation,” the particulars of Christ’s return, Calvinism vs. Arminianism, gender roles.
6. Not important, i.e. the exact date of Christ’s birth, style of music, real wine or grape juice.
7. Pure speculation, i.e. did Adam have a belly button, will your dog go to heaven, will there be meat in heaven, will there be sex, etc.

The Four Sources of Theology

The last thing to discuss is how theology is done. What follows is a description of various factors in what is often referred to as the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. It is never this neat but it is useful in understanding what drives a particular viewpoint.

SCRIPTURE

Scripture, i.e. the Bible consisted in the 66 books of the Old and New Testament, is the controlling authority for theological reflection in all aspects of a person's life or a church's life. Scripture is the *norma normans*, i.e. "the rule that rules." The Reformers reflected this in their famed doctrine of *sola scriptura*, i.e. "scripture alone." Scripture is the ruling authority for all matters pertaining to what God has revealed about himself and salvation. What the Protestant Reformers did not mean is *solo scriptura* or what some call "biblicism", that we can *only* use the Bible and its language which would forbid terms like Trinity, providence, exposition, discipleship, evangelism, and so on. It begs the question if we must speak ancient Greek and Hebrew to truly know the meaning of scripture and calls into question any manner of explaining scripture in the everyday language of ordinary people or knowledge outside of the Bible such as philosophy or carpentry (cf. Neh. 8:8; 1 Cor. 14:9-11, 24-25).

- Scripture references: Deuteronomy 4:1-8; Matthew 4:1-11; 2 Timothy 3:16; 1 Peter 1:19-21
- Constitution of Dwell Christian Church, Article III:A states "The Bible... has supreme authority in all matters of faith and conduct."

TRADITION

Tradition refers to the historic practices and beliefs of the church. It is a *norma normata*, i.e. "rule that is ruled." It is reflected in the creeds and catechisms written throughout the history of the church. Every church has a tradition it embodies, a culture filled with explicit and implicit commitments to how it should approach scripture and its ministry. Tradition is a source for theology in that it helps us see what is truly essential, what the boundaries are, and gives us insight to engage the culture effectively and faithfully. As protestants, we do believe the church can make mistakes and that it can be reformed so tradition is not infallible. But it is incredibly unwise to disregard 2000 years of Christian teaching and heritage across various cultures and massive changes in history. We have immense resources in the past to help us navigate our uncertain times.

- Scripture references: Numbers 21:9; 2 Kings 18:4; Colossians 2:8; 1 Corinthians 11:2, 23; Ephesians 2:19-22
- The Constitution of Dwell Christian Church does not address the matter of tradition directly, though it reflects baptist tradition and the freedom of each individual believer and local church (Article III:J).

REASON

Reason is the discipline of the mind to apprehend truth. It is a source for theology in helping us make sense of our beliefs and our practices. Reason is also a *norma normata*. It is used in the area of apologetics to persuade for the rationality of Christian faith and defend against attacks from the world. Reason is not an ultimate authority in that we cannot gain access to God through reason alone, but by faith (*sola fide*, by faith alone). Reason is a servant of theology and ultimately, we aim for a Christian rationality, which is neither modern rationalism (that we can know everything through reason alone) or post-modern skepticism (that we cannot know anything for certain).

- Scripture references: Colossians 2:8-9; 2 Corinthians 10:5; Jude 3; 1 Peter 3:15-17; 1 John 4:1-4
- The subject of reason ought to be understood in relationship to our call to Christ-like character as Christians, (Article III:H).

EXPERIENCE

Experience is a source for theology in the sense that one's personal experiences or the experiences of a community need explanation. Experience is a *norma normata*. It must be interpreted. Scripture, tradition and reason help us understand our experience. Scripture provides us a guide to interpret our experiences in light of Christ and our life in Christ, to see our story within the story of God's work to redeem us. The Christian faith is not about mere information but invites us to taste and see the Lord is God, to experience even via our senses the work of his Spirit in our lives. We do not merely believe what scripture teaches is true we also experience the great and mighty work of God by salvation through Jesus Christ, through scripture, prayer, corporate worship, or extraordinary works of the Spirit.

Experience is also valuable in the context of a church in that other people's experiences can help refine or correct our own misunderstandings of God and the Bible. Contrary to our day and age, the meaning of one's experience is not for the individual to determine alone. We all interpret our experiences in concert with others. We as a church should learn from other churches and people, both locally and globally. Christians in other parts of the world who live in cultures more similar to those in the Bible than our own may provide us with helpful correctives to various parts of the Bible and God's ways.

- Scripture references: Exodus 19:3-6; John 20:24-29; 1 John 1:1-3; 1 Peter 5:1; Acts 11:1-18
- The subject of experience ought to be understood in relationship to our call to Christ-like character as Christians, (Article III:H).

FURTHER RESOURCES

John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*

A classic allegory of the Christian life, full of allusions to the Bible.

C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*

A modern classic on the basics of the Christian faith by perhaps the 20th century's most popular Christian apologist.

J.I. Packer, *Concise Theology*

A good introduction from a Reformed perspective. Very short.

Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*

A Baptist introductory systematic theology (1000+ pages).

Michel Bird, *Evangelical Theology*

An Australian Anglican scholar who tries to organize his entire work around the gospel itself and attempts to reflect what is believed by global evangelicals not necessarily just American evangelicals.

¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 1:1:1 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997).

² This list is taken from an article by C. Michael Patton, *Essentials and Non-Essentials in a Nutshell*, [PDF on-line] www.credoahouse.org.