

CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

HOW TO STUDY THEOLOGY

THE SPIRITUAL ASPECT:

There is one vital requirement in order to be able to study theology successfully - you must be born-again! Unless one begins with surrendering one's life to Jesus Christ as one's personal Lord and Saviour, one cannot hope to understand spiritual things with any depth of meaning. This is exactly the problem with so-called rationalists, liberal theologians and fanatical cults - they have substituted Godly spirituality with human intellectualism with the result that they lack understanding of spiritual things. Jesus made this point to Nicodemus in John chapter 3, for example, in verse 3 He said, "...*Except a man be born again, he cannot see (perceive) the kingdom of God.*" If you are unsure of your spiritual standing before God then this would be a good time and place to prayerfully invite Jesus Christ into your life as your Lord and Saviour.

Having taken that first all-important step one then needs to submit to the authority and power of God's Word, the Bible, in a spirit of humility. Only then will one become teachable and be able to receive God's Word with understanding.

THE ACADEMIC ASPECT:

The study of theology is not just spiritual but also academic. This is because we live in a sinful imperfect world and not in a holy perfect heaven. Consequently, our understanding of many things is limited as I Cor. 13: 12 says, "*For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face...*". Because we live in the world we have to interact with it and this means that our theology and our spirituality must be able to relate to those around us. Hence, there is an academic side to our theology which enables us to convey our spiritual understanding of God and His Word in terms which the world can understand sufficiently to enable those who are non-believers to come to faith in Jesus. The Christian believer does not despise academic achievement but recognizes it as a useful tool to be used in Christ's service. Christian students of theology therefore need to realise that there has to be an academic component to their studies besides the spiritual component.

HOW DOES ONE COMBINE THE SPIRITUAL AND ACADEMIC ASPECTS?

It has been well said that theology is a subject that "grows" on one. Jesus said in John 16: 12, "*I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now.*" The disciples were simply not ready at that time to receive the deeper things that Jesus wished to impart to them. They were going through a process of growth and spiritual development and so it is the same with us. Some lectures may not make much sense now but later on they

become extremely enlightening as our understanding expands and we are able to receive things we formerly considered out of our depth. Thus, one should not be disappointed if a particular paper seems difficult or mysterious. The secret is to GO SLOWLY. Put it aside for a while and come back to it later and usually it will make more sense. Sometimes this takes a while, perhaps even a whole year or more, but eventually God rewards the faithful. Persistence is the key, even if the language of instruction is difficult. It is better to study with a dictionary at one's side than to gloss over difficult words or phrases and never learn what they mean. Even the world's greatest scholars have dictionaries in their libraries to assist them when necessary. And, of course, we need to balance our studies with devotion. Prayer and worship and the fellowship of believers is vital to a healthy Christian life. It is for this reason that we do not place any stress on our students with regard to deadlines or large numbers of written assignments. The Christian life and ministry is not about proving one's mental ability but about service. Hence, when you answer questions at the end of a paper they may be long or short or in-between depending on your interest in the subject. Remember, the purpose of studying is to *"...show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth."* (II Tim.2: 15). The study of theology should be a joy, not a chore, because it is the greatest thing in the world to know the true and living God and His wonderful plans for us.

INSPIRING SCRIPTURES:

Whenever you are tempted to stop your studies or to put them aside for whatever reason, it is a good idea to read the following Scriptures and then renew your endeavours:

1. If you feel you are not intelligent enough - James 1: 5, *"If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him."*
2. If you feel that you are spiritually weak - Phil.4: 13, *"I can do everything through him (Christ) who gives me strength."*
3. When the pressures of life distract you from your studies - Matt.6: 33, *"But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."*
4. When you feel like giving up - Matt.10: 22, *"...he who stands firm to the end will be saved."*
5. When people say that book-studying is not necessary for a Christian - II Tim.4: 13, *"...bring with you, and the books, but especially the parchments."* (The words of Paul to Timothy).
6. When you feel that you're too tired to study - Heb.12: 3, *"Consider him (Jesus) who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart."*
7. When you feel that it's not necessary to study - Matt. 4: 4, *"...Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God."*

All scripture quotations in this course are from the New International Version (NIV) except where noted as KJV in which case they are from the King James Authorized Version.