

PART 1: PRINCIPLES

Chapter 3

Girding the loins

*The being and doing of
theological studies*

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THE DISCIPLINE OF STUDYING THEOLOGY

Most of the students I meet want to be *good* students – they want to do well in their studies. For the student of theology there is often added motivation: the desire to serve the world and human flourishing, the formal recognition, approval (even, ordination) for ministry in the student's Church and the desire to reflect the character of the God being studied: a *good* God. There are additional pressures. Some students are studying theology part-time while juggling work, church, family and other commitments. Other students are in rural and remote locations disconnected

from libraries, classmates, lecturers and other resources. A number of students will struggle through periods of ill health or family loss and grief during their studies. At this point you may well be wondering if theological study can be ‘good for you’? I believe it is. For theology to be good for you – and those in your circle – you will need to be a good student. This chapter explores what it means to be a good theological student. To be a *good* student of theology requires certain habits or disciplines – particularly in light of the kind of challenges and pressures you will encounter during your studies.

NAVIGATING: STUDYING THEOLOGY AS DISCIPLESHIP

Naming theological study a form of discipleship is a controversial claim. Am I proposing that only people of faith can study theology? No, I am not. Each year teaching the core subject *Introduction to Christian Theology* I am reminded that people study theology for all sorts of reasons. For many students it is their first foray into theological study. A majority of students have some connection with the church. Of those some have grown weary, frustrated or bored with Christianity. Each year there are a few students new to the Church or Christian faith. Knowing that a broad cross section of people study theology, why would I claim it is a form of discipleship?

First, the meaning of the original word translated *discipleship* is simply someone who learns. The first discipline of studying theology is that you are prepared to learn. This may be stating the obvious but it is not always easy for people of faith who begin to study the God they love and serve. Studying theology involves a slow process of revising, re-assessing and re-imagining who God is and what it means to serve God. There are urban myths circulating that some people lose their faith studying theology. In my experience this has not happened to any students but studying theology does mean holding some convictions loosely for a period of time. This facilitates learning: from texts read, from discussions and forums with other students, and from the lecturers. Becoming a *disciple* means learning what is really on offer in the deep pool called ‘theology’, not jumping to conclusions, and striving to find out how it all holds together. Good theology requires faithful teachers and faithful learners. The student of theology will learn from some famous theologians (ancient and contemporary). A primary discipline of the contemporary ‘learner’ is to read as deeply and widely

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as possible. Don't be content with the minimal 'set readings' assigned for your subjects. Many subjects will suggest additional resources and almost every lecturer I know will gladly point you towards additional reading resources. This discipline is most critical at assessment time when you are usually required to undertake some research of your own. Read widely. Find reputable journals in the multiple electronic databases through the library. Borrow, buy or beg-to-borrow books. Don't leave it until the last minute thinking you can find what you need on the internet the night before. Most important of all, reading is on the person (and work) of Jesus Christ. The gospels, interpreted by all Scripture, are central to a theology properly called Christian. The student of theology is learning Jesus so reading the Bible is a core activity for the theological student.

For your own research

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Second, discipleship involves a *way of life* and not just a body of knowledge. The first disciples were followers of Jesus and the gospels often describe them as 'on the way'. In Mark's gospel the story of Blind Bartimaeus receiving sight is paradigmatic for Christian discipleship and – I am proposing – studying theology. It succinctly describes not only what it means to be a follower of Jesus, but what it means to *really* see:

Jesus said to him, 'Go; your faith has made you well.' Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way. (Mark 10:52)

'On the way' can be translated 'inside the way' meaning 'inhabiting the right way' and not just believing the right truths (it is akin to our colloquial expression 'being on the right track'). Mark's gospel specifically chose the phrase to articulate discipleship as adopting a certain way of life. Mark used 'on the way' seven times between 8:27 ('and on the way he asked his

disciples, “Who do people say that I am?”) and the Bartimaeus story at 10:52. Mark’s discussion of discipleship and his use of ‘on the way’ in the context of an actual journey reinforces the fact that being his disciple literally means following Jesus. Scholar Ernest Best considered this usage so significant that he called Mark’s gospel the ‘gospel of the Way’.¹ A theological education does not begin or end with a degree in theology. Alongside the curriculum of the formal program of theological study most students will also participate in workshops, seminars, conferences, and retreats that together form a sort of ‘floating theological college’ or what some educators call the ‘hidden curriculum.’ These opportunities will be even

more critical to your theological education if you are part-time or not regularly on campus. Many aspects of theology can’t be learned *properly* if isolated from the way of life theology promotes. Know your own learning style and ensure you find or make opportunities to learn in your preferred way. One of the advantages of online education is the variety of ways to engage subjects in theology: including electronic journals, blogs, podcasts, webcasts, iTunesU and much more.

Properly conceived theology is both ‘knowing God’ and ‘human flourishing.’ Consequently the very habits that nurture human flourishing should not be neglected: family relationships, friendships, regular exercise, a healthy diet, enough sleep. These are the very habits, however, that are usually sacrificed when time becomes short. Each semester the student of theology should plan an approach that incorporates adequate time for study, work *and* those things you need to thrive. Caffeine-fuelled ‘all-nighters’ might be the stuff of legend in the movies or when you are ‘young and foolish.’ Most students, however, will find the daily habits noted below essential to good ‘brain health.’

A leading educational specialist on student motivation – Andrew Martin, the Professor of Education at Sydney University – has identified three factors relating to student mindset: mufflers, guzzlers and boosters. ‘Mufflers’ are those habits that restrict progress such as pessimism (e.g. the expectation of failure) and a lack of endurance (e.g. giving up when things get difficult). ‘Guzzlers’ are those habits that are obstacles to success. Surprisingly, many obstacles are not ‘extenuating circumstances’ but

1 Ernest Best. *Following Jesus: Discipleship in the Gospel of Mark*. (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1981), 15–16.

include everyday habits such as procrastination and leaving too little time to complete assessment tasks. Martin's research has shown that guzzlers are employed by students who fear failure but need to create an excuse (e.g. 'the dog ate my homework'). 'Boosters' are the mental and practical habits that assist our study and help us to grow. I'll outline some boosters at the end of this chapter.

Daily habits that nurture human flourishing must be maintained

- family relationships
- friendships
- regular exercise
- a healthy diet
- enough sleep
- Plan a semester routine with adequate time for study, work, and those things you need to thrive.
- Avoid caffeine-fuelled 'all-nighters'!!

Third, discipleship prizes *faithfulness* over excellence. When academics and practitioners began to consciously focus on the concept of 'leadership' a couple of decades ago, one of the key books was *In Search of Excellence* by Tom Peters and Robert Waterman. In many respects it remains an important book. One Christian leader, William E. Diehl, decided to write his own version of the book for *Christian* leaders and called his book *In Search of Faithfulness*². His intention – nicely captured in the reworked title – was to emphasise the priority of faithfulness over excellence for Christians who lead. His reminder is apt for those who study theology. One of the purposes of this short book is to help you excel in your theological studies. Neither teachers nor students aim to fail or appreciate poor grades. Excellence in your studies is a worthy goal. If – as I am contending in this chapter – studying theology is also a form of discipleship, then *faithfulness* is a higher goal than mere excellence. A simple example of this is demonstrated by the academic form of copying someone else's work, called plagiarism (yes, students of theology can and do cheat!). Not only does plagiarism fail every standard of academic conduct and ethical behaviour, it is a profound malfunction of discipleship. You can

2 William F Diehl, in *Search of Faithfulness* (Philadelphia Fortress Press, 1987)

read more about how to avoid plagiarism in chapter 9. Ultimately you cannot excel properly in your study of theology without faithfulness. The good news you can be faithful in your studies, not excel in the way you might hope, and still be considered *a good and faithful servant* by Jesus Christ (Matthew 25:21).

NURTURING: 'EVERYDAY' DISCIPLINES

If studying theology is a form of discipleship – of being a learner 'on the way' – then I've shown theological studies necessarily require more than reading books, attending lectures and writing essays. Good theology nurtures the discipline of seeing God in the everyday aspects of life. To avoid theology becoming an abstraction from the 'real world', the discipline to study is nurtured in and around the more informal settings of home, school yard and other places where we gather. Jesus – the greatest teacher – understood the value of these informal 'learning moments' and seized them with the Twelve. Robert Banks notes Jesus' teaching style, where

Almost anything could become grist to Jesus' mill – personal or group failure, inappropriate ambition and conflict among his followers, the presence or appearance of small children, a prostitute or sick person; everyday objects and activities in the home, fields or countryside ... Jesus relied mostly on dialogue, not presentation ... He also encouraged nonformal learning (Mark 9:33–37), often when he was eating and drinking with his companions (Mark 14:17–21).³

Nurturing the 'classroom of the everyday circumstances of life' enables the student of theology to see God at work in unlikely moments and unlikely places of the world: a blind, homeless man; a woman with a blood-borne disease. This discipline will keep your studies grounded in lived experience: a great gift to both church and world.

The discipline of the everyday is also the discipline of community. Christian theology is best learnt and studied within a living and worshipping community because theology shapes how we live and not just what we believe. This can be a challenge for those who study in regional and remote places. Good communication – whether it is by phone and email – or

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3 Robert Banks, *Re-envisioning Theological Education: Exploring a Missional Alternative to Current Models*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 106.

forums, live streaming classes or Skype – can create the community we need to live well and enrich our theological studies.

NUANCING: FINDING THE RIGHT VOICE

Many great theologians through Christian history integrate the ‘methodological’ concerns of theology with the ‘doxological’. In other words the ‘how we study theology’ cannot be neatly separated from the ‘Who we study in theology’. One theologian, Helmut Thielicke, describes the ‘task’ of theological method as answering God by first taking into account what God has spoken, then knowing that what God has spoken is to be understood and answered. Thielicke suggests the ‘task’

of doxological method is the integration of theological study with prayer because ‘a theological thought can breathe only in the atmosphere of dialogue with God.’⁴

This does not mean praying for good grades or special inspiration when writing an assessment – although

I’m sure many theological students have prayed for these

things in the past. Here I am highlighting the right ‘voice’ for thinking and writing theology. For many students, it requires the awkward transition from the 2nd person to the 3rd person: from talking *to* God (a devotional voice) to talking *about* God (a theological voice). Moving from devotional to theological language again runs the risk of theology becoming abstract and philosophical musings on the divine. Note the nuance in Thielicke’s wisdom: theology ‘breathes’ (stays alive!) in the atmosphere of listening and talking with God. Students of theology must ensure they do not cease praying! But neither can ‘praying’ ever substitute for the rigours of hard work and academic inquiry. Most students are surprised to discover their own ‘voice’ as they think and write more theology. Most lecturers’ hearts beat a little faster when a student of theology discovers they have something worthwhile to say. The discipline of discipleship and the discipline of everyday habits proposed in this chapter have the goal of developing the student’s unique voice in theology.

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4 Helmut Thielicke, *A Little Exercise for Young Theologians*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 34.

CONCLUSION

Andrew Martin argues that students need ‘boosters’ as antidotes to ‘mufflers’ and ‘guzzlers’ which provide ‘academic buoyancy’: resilience, persistence and determination. As well as persistence and commitment, the kinds of disciplines advocated in this chapter provide such buoyancy. For example: good planning creates momentum throughout the semester; self-discipline sets specific periods of time in the diary each week; and engaging positively with failure or disappointment reminds the student of theology that ‘faithfulness’ is a higher goal than mere ‘excellence’.

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What does it mean to be a good student in theology? Like many pursuits in life, it requires the right habits and periods of plain, hard work. Studying theology is discipleship. Nurturing everyday disciplines and finding your theological voice enables the student to know God more fully, follow Jesus more faithfully and serve the church and world so that all people may flourish. And *that* is good – not just for theological students – but for everyone.

SUMMARY

- The original word translated *discipleship* simply means someone who learns.
- Good disciples practice good disciplines: academic, everyday, community.
- Good disciplines make good disciples (students).

Discover where and when you write best then make sufficient time in that set place to compose your essay. Few writers – if any – are good enough to get it right the first time. So allow time for several drafts – particularly for longer essays.



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