

FOREWORD

Lost Among Words

Is the study of theology best avoided? This book is for those who study theology, and for those who having studied it now ‘use’ it on a ‘professional’ basis. Are they in danger?

‘There is perhaps hardly a theological student,’ wrote Helmut Thielicke, ‘who has not been earnestly and emphatically warned by some pious soul against the dubious undertaking’ called theological study. We can tend to dismiss such warnings as somehow uninformed. ‘If the theologian, however, does not take more seriously the objections of the washerwoman and the simple hourly-wage earner’ then ‘surely something is not right with theology’.¹ These warnings come from somewhere and alert us to something real.

I first seriously studied theology in the early 1990s. I was in my late twenties at the time, and the experience was completely life-changing. Questions I had often asked about Jesus, God and the Bible were answered. The interconnections between biblical language and history, theological reflection, and my relationship with God were forged, reformed, strengthened and renewed. My world was revolutionised.

1. Helmut Thielicke, *A Little Exercise for Young Theologians*, tr. Charles L. Taylor (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), pp. 3, 4.

But there were some odd moments. Old doubts would disappear, but new worries replaced them, and weeks would pass when I felt quite at sea. I vividly remember one very strange experience, when all the theological words became detached from their meaning, and the entire body of this knowledge began to take on an air of unreality. This experience was not doubt as such, because I still knew and trusted Jesus as risen Lord. But I stopped being able to ‘attach’ theological and biblical words to whatever they were supposed to describe, a bit like when you repeat some word too much and it just becomes a sound. I was lost among words. The whole body of my theological knowledge seemed as if it were in danger of toppling under its own weight or as if it might somehow come adrift from me and sail off on its own into the blue.

That strange experience vanished as mysteriously as it came. I was very aware of it at the time. But meanwhile, I remained obtusely unaware of the foolishness I sometimes inflicted upon others. Before entering theological college, my friends and I would laugh at those who had what we mockingly called ‘curates’ disease’; but then I caught it. I harangued people with my knowledge. I grew impatient when they didn’t know what I now found obvious. I assaulted groups with theological jargon that made no sense within their discourse. I sneered derisively at theological opponents. In my most extravagant detachments of thought from reality, I would give ‘magnificent’ sermons which others simply endured with steely determination and unbelievable grace. Perhaps these occupational hazards never quite leave us: there remain some days when the only real change is that I do them as an older fool.

My experience is a glimpse of the way theology can be a dangerous business, both for the one who studies it and for

those who have to put up with them. Thankfully though, it turns out that others have known its dangers before us. C.S. Lewis, although not a theologian himself, once addressed some theology students about his role as a Christian apologist. This activity enabled him to warn them of some dangerous moments they should expect for themselves:

I have found that there is nothing more dangerous to one's own faith than the work of an apologist. No doctrine of that Faith seems to me so spectral, so unreal as one that I have just successfully defended in a public debate. For a moment, you see, it has seemed to rest on oneself: as a result, when you go away from that debate, it seems no stronger than that weak pillar.²

In Lewis's moment of unreality, the whole business of faith seemed just to be ensconced inside his head. He was lost among words. It reminded me a little of that experience of unreality I once had and that many others have when introducing others to Christ. The experience is magnified by the modern atheist's argument that theology *in toto* is an imaginary human construct, and that in such moments we are glimpsing 'reality'. (In fact such moments are not unique to theological study. We can temporarily 'lose our grip' on anything we look at closely enough, like the medical student who believes she is on the brink of death simply because she now knows how her body works; or like the budding quantum physicist who begins to doubt whether he can really be the discrete entity we call a 'person'; or like the philosophy student who begins to doubt where anything can actually be *known*.) But Lewis goes on to report another reality:

2. C.S. Lewis, 'Christian Apologetics' in *Undeceptions*, ed. Walter Hooper (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1971), p. 76.

That is why we apologists take our lives in our hands and can be saved only by falling back continually from the web of our own arguments, as from our intellectual counters, into the Reality – from Christian apologetics into Christ Himself. That also is why we need one another’s continual help – *oremus pro invincem*. (‘Let us pray for each other.’)³

Lewis’s dual-pronged counterattack on theology’s dangers forms two major themes of this book – firstly, that we must observe and protect our affectionate attachment to Christ; and secondly, that our participation in a loving community of others is integral to the project. I will focus on just one of these for a moment: the matter of affectionate attachment to Christ.

The nineteenth-century Danish philosopher and Christian, Søren Kierkegaard, has a moment of wonderful satire against the theologians of his day. He pictures a coastal road running north from Copenhagen, called Strandvej (and pronounced ‘Strath-vie’), which passes through Dyrehaven (pronounced ‘Durhahn’), a large wood with many deer. This is the main route to Bakken, where there was a large amusement park. It was a popular Sunday destination for the citizens of Copenhagen.

To me the learned theological world seems like the Strandvej on a Sunday afternoon in the season when everybody goes to Bakken in Dyrehaven: they tear past each other, yell and scream, laugh and make fun of each other, drive their horses to death, overturn, and are run over. Finally, when they reach Bakken covered with dust and out of breath – well, they look at each other – and go home.⁴

3. Ibid. p. 76.

4. Kierkegaard, *Letters*, Letter 3; in Søren Kierkegaard, *Either-Or (Part I)*, tr. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, *Kierkegaard's Writings*, vol. III (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), p. 458.

That is, they have no idea of how, finally, to enjoy the park. By ‘enjoying the park’ Kierkegaard wants us to see that we have completely missed the point of theology if we are not ‘attached’ to Jesus in a complex of obedience and loving affection. In a variety of guises, the burden of Kierkegaard’s point will be made and remade by the theologians in this volume. ‘There is no mistake more terrible than to suppose that activity in Christian work can take the place of depth of Christian affections’, says B.B. Warfield.⁵

However some students of theology, having read this far, will already be alarmed. For in our more lucid moments of honesty, we realise that ‘affectionate attachment’ cannot simply be switched on when it seems to be absent. For frail and wayward beings such as ourselves, the task is beyond us. The wrong kind of talk about ‘proper Christian affections’ can drift into the heresy of Pelagius, as if we can simply buck ourselves up into the right kind of love for Jesus, and empower ourselves for faithful ministry by the force of a committed will.

We might be reminded of 2 Timothy 2:15, which some translations render as ‘do your best to present yourself to God as one approved’ [ESV]. ‘Doing my best’, ‘presenting myself’ and ‘being approved’ are usually associated with performance-based recognition – and if *that* is the task of the ambassador of God’s grace, then the future for the theological student or worker is only sad. The news of God’s grace is now for others only; for us, only merit and measurable performance is left as we toil to ‘do our best’. After all, who can ever really ‘do their best’? We so regularly fall short of it; and if that performance must *also* include switching on an absent love by will-power, then we shall surely be lost in despair.

5. Benjamin B. Warfield, ‘The Religious Life of Theological Students’, in *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield – I*, ed. John E. Meeter (Nutley, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1970), p. 424.

But according to the logic of Scripture, people in ministry are as reliant upon the grace of God as anyone else. Charles Spurgeon describes a striking moment when he recognised this reliance:

I was riding home, very weary with a long week's work, when there came to my mind this text: 'My grace is sufficient for thee' [2 Cor. 12:9 KJV]: but it came with the emphasis laid upon two words: 'My grace is sufficient for thee.' My soul said, 'Doubtless it is. Surely the grace of the infinite God is more than sufficient for such a mere insect as I am', and I laughed, and laughed again, to think how far the supply exceeded all my needs. It seemed to me as though I were a little fish in the sea, and in my thirst I said, 'Alas, I shall drink up the ocean'. Then the Father of the waters lifted up his head sublime, and smilingly replied, 'Little fish, the boundless main is sufficient for thee.'⁶

In fact, the same logic is at work in 2 Timothy 2:15, for as Paul says elsewhere 'it is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends' [2 Cor. 10:17–18]. The 'workman' remains saved only 'in Christ Jesus' [2 Tim. 2:10], and the sense in which he is 'approved' (or better, 'proven') is the result of having navigated various trials [cf. 2 Cor. 13:7].

Every Christian experiences times when it is harder to trust and love Christ, and so also do theological students, scholars and ministers. The translators of the New Jerusalem Bible are in this case closer to the mark: 'Make every effort to present yourself before God as a proven worker who has no need to be ashamed, but who keeps the message of truth on

6. Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *Lectures to my Students: Second Series* (New York: Robert Carter and Sons, 1889), pp. 29–30; online: <http://www.archive.org/details/lecturestomystud1889spur> (accessed 28th May, 2009).

a straight path.’ There are active verbs here, but they are not merely the verbs of a strong, determined will. They describe an active *response* made by the *already-saved* as they meet the enemies of that salvation. Safe ‘in Christ’, we gradually discover new ‘in Christ’ reactions to such enemies.

The people in this volume have undergone the trials of theological study before us. They have gradually discovered how to avoid getting lost among words, while studying the Word. We have included both contemporary scholars (‘Voices Present’), and respected figures from previous generations (‘Voices Past’).

That all are men deserves some comment. We simply selected those who have helped us to study theology well. Our selection could be read as an artefact of the majority leadership by men in theology past and present, but I would press further and suggest that the book serendipitously celebrates the work of Jesus Christ among its flawed and limited male authors. Jesus has enabled in them the kinds of humility, care, and love that starkly contrast the regular perversions of masculinity seen elsewhere. We want the book to benefit everyone, for the human and divine themes raised by these men affect everyone. The genius of being ‘in Christ’ together is that our fellowship can extend across difference; and may some sisters one day showcase whatever has gone unmentioned in the experience and outlook of these men.

Not everything said by these older theologians is without flaw. They sometimes overstress the responsibilities of the theological student, and could have pointed again to the loving kindness of God and the work of his Spirit in frail flesh. Sometimes they need to note that making mistakes and blundering along false trails can be made safe by the enormity of God’s redeeming work in Christ, and then repaired by the Holy Spirit who resurrects the dead.

But they will point us to many helps given under the providence of God. They will show how experiences of testing, opposition and even alarm are normal and necessary for the growth of a theologian (Augustine, Luther). We will see how moments of organised community worship of Christ are integral to a proper experience of theology (Augustine, Warfield), just as disordered and corrupted ‘community’ can divert us from Christ (Lewis). They will guide us in remembering how to do what ‘normal’ Christians do, in prayer, praise and humble dependence upon God (Warfield). They will sound the alarm against those moments when we want to take shelter in the niceties and nuances of theology, while real evils need to be named and boldly denounced (Bonhoeffer). They will remind us that we remain very, very human, and always rely completely upon the grace of God (Augustine, Spurgeon).

We are also greatly indebted to the contemporary theologians who have kindly contributed to this volume. Each knows and loves the Lord Jesus. Each has been tried by theology. They have experienced its dangerous business.

John Woodhouse surveys the ‘realities’ of theological college – not the regular daily realities of elective choices, scheduling and amenities – but a vision of what we *really* do in that place, and who we *really* are. Our purpose at such a college is *to know and love God*, and to do so as a loving community. Any lesser view of this time in our lives can only diminish it.

Don Carson observes the manifold risks of studying the Bible. This unparalleled holy collection draws many into theological study. Yet next to its radiance, self-deceptions lurk in shadows unseen. So Carson shows us how to study it with humility. We are alerted to the dangers of Scriptural manipulation and of pride; we consider what level of work is

appropriate to its study; we learn how to know its integrity, and how it shapes our own integrity. Carson also includes some useful ‘tips’ for those who will have a ministry of writing.

Carl Trueman wryly observes – in stark contrast to the high-stakes business of biblical and theological study – that church history does not seem very ‘dangerous’ at all, largely because most consider it irrelevant. But as he unfolds the risks of simplistic hagiography, and of the extreme historicism that has emerged in reaction to it, we also begin to learn the proper purposes and practices of this discipline.

Gerald Bray dives into the difficulties of studying systematic theology. He alerts us to the dangers of abstraction: that we can simply become lost in its ideas. He alerts us to the danger of apostasy: that many theologians invent something they call ‘theology’, but which has nothing to do with God. But despite these problems we begin to see that systematic theology has its roots in God, that pastors cannot afford to avoid it even when it is hard, and that it is possible to integrate systematic theology’s ‘abstractness’ with a very personal knowledge and love of God.

Dennis Hollinger points to the way the study of ethics can raise a spectre of moral relativism, or the siren call and burden of legalism, and the disorientation of having our practices and our very identity confronted at our core. But he goes on to show how knowing the Triune God and the Christian worldview leads us out of this maze.

These friends shed some light on our psychology as we engage in theological study; but they do not stop there. In each case, they also give a bird’s-eye overview of the deeper logic of their discipline, and of how much it will enable a pastor. They know what it is to experience the dangerous

trials of theology, finally to emerge by the loving kindness of God as ‘a proven worker who has no need to be ashamed, but who keeps the message of truth on a straight path.’ For students struggling blindly through curricula set by others, this news from those a little further down the road gives hope that the road is worth travelling.

We do get lost among theology’s words. But Brian Rosner’s *Afterword* shows where the Bible’s theology leaves us: lost for words, in praise of God.

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