

Episode One: Theological Method

Discussion Questions:

- Compare and contrast the following three definitions of Christian theology from three different theologians. What similarities and differences do you notice? How might the differences between these definitions affect the theological work produced?
 - “Theology is the science of faith. It is the conscious and methodical explanation and explication of the divine revelation received and grasped in faith.” –Karl Rahner (1904–84, Roman Catholic)
 - “Theology may be defined as the study which, through participation in and reflection upon a religious faith, seeks to express the content of this faith in the clearest and most coherent language available.” –John Macquarrie (1919–2007, Anglican)
 - “Theology is science seeking the knowledge of the Word of God spoken in God’s work—science learning in the school of the Holy Scripture, which witnesses to the Word of God; science laboring in the quest for truth, which is inescapably required of the community that is called by the Word of God.” –Karl Barth (1886–1968, Reformed Protestant)
- Dr. Lawson explained the principle of *lex orandi, lex credendi*. Discuss how the prayers, readings, and songs used in Christian worship have informed your own understanding of the Christian faith.
- How has your understanding of the Christian faith been affected by the four sources of theology Dr. Lawson discussed?
- What topics of theology provoke the most questions in your mind?
- What do you look forward to learning about in this course?

Recommended Readings:

- Beth Felker Jones, *Practicing Christian Doctrine* (Baker Academic, 2014), chapter one.
- John Behr, “What Are We Doing, Talking about God?” (PDF)
- Robert Jenson, “What Is Theology?” (PDF)
- Robin Darling Young, “*Theologia* in the Early Church” (PDF)
- Mark McIntosh, *Divine Teaching: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, chapter one.

Episode Two: God

Discussion Questions:

- Dr. Lawson suggested that many people, including many Christian believers, have a problematic conception of God. Explain what he means by this. Have you noticed this in your own experience? What examples can you think of?
- The 14th-century theologian Gregory Palamas wrote that, “[God] is not a being, if others are beings, and if he is a being, the others are not beings.” Discuss what he meant by this.

- Dr. Lawson argued that God is not an explanation for *how* the universe exists, but is an explanation for *why* the universe exists. Discuss the implications of this.
- What is the “God of the gaps” that Dr. Lawson mentioned? What are the problems with this idea, according to Dr. Lawson?
- Dr. Lawson listed some of the most important classical attributes of God: one, simple, incomprehensible, infinite, source of existence, eternal, omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent, impassible, uncreated, uncaused, transcendent, and immanent. Discuss what each of these terms mean. What questions arise when considering these attributes?

Recommended readings:

- David Bentley Hart, “God is Not a Proper Name” (PDF)
- Rupert Shortt, *God is No Thing: Coherent Christianity* (Hurst, 2016)

Episode Three: Analogy

Discussion Questions:

- What is the problem of language for theology?
- What are the problems with using language univocally or equivocally when speaking about God?
- What is analogy and how does it work in theology?
- What biblical analogies for God are most formative for your own understanding of God?
- Dr. Lawson concluded the lecture by noting the Christological limit of analogical language. What do you think he meant by this?

Recommended Readings:

- Beth Felker Jones, *Practicing Christian Doctrine* (Baker Academic, 2014), chapter one.
- Mark McIntosh, *Divine Teaching: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, chapter two.

Episode 4: Revelation

Discussion Questions:

- How does Dr. Lawson understand revelation?
- What does the Emmaus story in Luke 24 say about how Christians should interpret Scripture?
- Pick one of your favorite passages of Scripture and discuss what it would mean to interpret it according to each one of the three lenses that Dr. Lawson discussed.

Recommended Readings:

- Beth Felker Jones, *Practicing Christian Doctrine* (Baker Academic, 2014), chapter two.
- Joseph Gordon, “The Bible Isn’t Primarily a History Book”
<https://churchlifejournal.nd.edu/articles/the-bible-isnt-primarily-a-history-book/>

Episode Five: Jesus Christ

Discussion Questions:

- Dr. Lawson shared an extended quote from Gregory of Nyssa. Review and discuss this quotation:
“But this, His descent to the humility of man, is a kind of superabundant exercise of power, which thus finds no check even in directions which contravene nature. It is the peculiar property of the essence of fire to tend upwards; no one therefore, deems it wonderful in the case of flame to see that natural operation. But should the flame be seen to stream downwards, like heavy bodies, such a fact would be regarded as a miracle; namely, how fire still remains fire, and yet, by this change of direction in its motion, passes out of its nature by being borne downward. In like manner, it is not the vastness of the heavens, and the bright shining of its constellations, and the order of the universe and the unbroken administration over all existence that so manifestly displays the transcendent power of the Deity, as this condescension to the weakness of our nature; the way, in fact, in which sublimity, existing in lowliness, is actually seen in lowliness, and yet descends not from its height, and in which Deity, entwined as it is with the nature of man, becomes this, and yet still is that. For since it was not in the nature of the opposing power [death] to come in contact with the undiluted presence of God, and to undergo His unclouded manifestation, therefore, in order to secure that the ransom in our behalf might be easily accepted by him who required it, the Deity was hidden under the veil of our nature, that so, as with ravenous fish, the hook of the Deity might be gulped down along with the bait of flesh, and thus, life being introduced into the house of death, and light shining in darkness, that which is diametrically opposed to light and life might vanish; for it is not in the nature of darkness to remain when light is present, or of death to exist when life is active.”
- Arius rejected the full divinity of Jesus Christ. What of the Christian faith is lost if the full divinity of Jesus is rejected?
- What biblical and theological arguments affirm the full divinity of Jesus Christ?
- Leonard Hodgson wrote: “Christianity began as a trinitarian religion with a unitarian theology. The question at issue in the age of the Fathers was whether the religion should transform the theology or the theology stifle the religion.” What did he mean by this?

Recommended Readings:

- Beth Felker Jones, *Practicing Christian Doctrine* (Baker Academic, 2014), chapter six.
- Herbert McCabe, “The Involvement of God” (PDF)

Episode Six: Trinity

Discussion Questions:

- Dr. Lawson argued that much of the debate about Jesus during the early centuries of Christianity suffered from overcorrections: from pendulum swings from one extreme to another. Based upon the video, can you give examples of this?
- What is lost for the Christian faith if Jesus’ divinity is denied?
- What is lost for the Christian faith if Jesus’ humanity is denied?

- Discuss the debate over the term “Mother of God” (Theotokos) for Mary. What was at stake in this debate?
- What does it mean that we worship a God who is a Trinity of three persons?
- How do the teachings discussed in this video affect your own understanding and practice of the Christian faith?

Recommended Readings:

- Beth Felker Jones, *Practicing Christian Doctrine* (Baker Academic, 2014), chapter three.
- Robert Jenson, “Jesus in the Trinity” (PDF)
- Herbert McCabe, “The Trinity and Prayer” (PDF)
- Khaled Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea: The Development and Meaning of Trinitarian Doctrine* (Baker Academic, 2011)

Episode Seven: Salvation

- How do you understand the Gospel? If you were asked to summarize the Gospel in one brief sentence what would you say? What biblical images or metaphors are most central to your own understanding of the Gospel?
- What does it mean to be saved? How is this salvation actualized in a person’s life?
- How do we participate in salvation?
- In what way are Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection salvific?
- In your own understanding, how do different Christian confessions answer these questions differently? What do they have in common?
- What language does our hymnody use to refer to salvation? Think over songs that are frequently used in worship, how do they refer to salvation? Do they prioritize certain metaphors over others? If so, what does this imply?

Recommended Readings:

- Beth Felker Jones, *Practicing Christian Doctrine* (Baker Academic, 2014), chapter seven.
- Mark McIntosh, *Divine Teaching: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, chapters four and five.

Episode Eight: Creation

Discussion Questions

- Dr. Lawson argued that the doctrine of creation is not about how the universe “got started” at some point in the past, but is an ongoing reality. Can you think of biblical passages that support this understanding of creation?
- Dr. Lawson was critical of equating the doctrine of creation with *creationism*, the belief in a literalistic interpretation of the early chapters of Genesis. Discuss the differences between the doctrine of creation and creationism as defined by Dr. Lawson.
- Dr. Lawson mentioned the theologian Johann Baptist Metz, who wrote that the problem of evil is *the* problem for theology: “What is really at stake is the question of how one is to speak about God at all in the face of the abysmal histories of suffering in the world, in *his* world. In my view this is *the* question for theology; theology must not eliminate it or overrespond to it. It is *the* eschatological question, the question before which theology does not develop its answers reconciling everything, but rather directs its questioning

incessantly back toward God.” How do you think Christians should speak of and to God in light of the suffering of so many in history and today? How does the Gospel respond to the problem of evil?

Recommended Readings:

- Beth Felker Jones, *Practicing Christian Doctrine* (Baker Academic, 2014), chapter four.
- John Polkinghorne, “So Finely Tuned a Universe” (PDF)
- David Bentley Hart, “Tsunami and Theodicy” (PDF)
- Ian Macfarland, ed. *Creation and Humanity: The Sources of Christian Theology* (Westminster John Knox, 2009).

Episode Nine: Humanity

Discussion Questions:

- Dr. Lawson discussed three views of the *imago Dei* (Image of God): substantive, functional, and relational. What biblical passages can you think of that would support each of these understandings of the *imago Dei*? Which one do you most closely identify with and why?
- Does our relationship with the natural world look different than those who, knowing nothing of the Gospel, see the created order as nothing more than inert matter waiting to be extracted for profit? Should Christians be marked by a different posture toward the natural world than others?
- There is a tendency in some Christian spirituality to overly denigrate the physical embodiment of human persons. Sometimes we treat the body as a needless and bulky accouterment to the thing that really matters: our soul. After listening to this lecture, discuss the importance of embodiment for the Christian faith.

Recommended Readings:

- Beth Felker Jones, *Practicing Christian Doctrine* (Baker Academic, 2014), chapter four.
- Steven D. Cone, *An Ocean Vast of Blessing: A Theology of Grace* (Cascade, 2014)

Episode Ten: Church

Discussion Questions:

- The earliest Christians did not call themselves a trade guild, a mystery cult, a religion, or a spiritual gathering: they pulled from the political vocabulary of their day and called themselves an *ekklesia*: a gathering of people belonging to a polis that have been selected for a particular purpose. Why do you think they chose this word rather than any other term for human communities?
- The French biblical scholar Alfred Loisy wrote, “Jesus proclaimed the Kingdom and what came was the church.” Discuss the relationship between Jesus’ proclamation of the Kingdom and the reality of the church.
- Dr. Lawson argued that ecclesiology is one area of theology where there is significant disagreement among different Christian traditions. In your own view what are the greatest obstacles to greater unity on ecclesiological matters? What are the areas of common agreement?

- The four marks of the church are: one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. How do you understand each of these terms? How might someone from a different Christian tradition understand these marks differently?
- Discuss the concept of sacramentality. What did Dr. Lawson say about it and how does that connect with your own understanding of Scripture and Christian teaching?

Recommended Readings:

- Phillip Kenneson, “Gathering: Worship, Imagination, and Formation” (PDF)
- Beth Felker Jones, *Practicing Christian Doctrine* (Baker Academic, 2014), chapter nine.
- Keith Stanglin, “Visible Signs of Invisible Grace” (PDF)

Episode Eleven: Last Things

- How often do you think about your own death? How might your devotional practices change if you made an intentional effort to “keep death daily before your eyes”?
- Carefully read 1 Corinthians 15 as a group. Discuss the resurrection and the nature of the resurrected body in light of Paul’s writing in this chapter.
- Discuss the three different interpretations of hell that Dr. Lawson presented. What biblical and theological arguments can you find in support of each position?
- Dr. Lawson argued that the whole Christian faith should be shaped by eschatology. What are the implications for this?

Recommended Readings:

- Beth Felker Jones, *Practicing Christian Doctrine* (Baker Academic, 2014), chapter ten.
- Stephen Lawson “Will They Know We are Christians by Our Deaths?” (PDF)
- Taylor Ross “The Severity of Universalism”
<https://churchlifejournal.nd.edu/articles/the-severity-of-universal-salvation/>
- George MacDonald, “The Consuming Fire” (PDF)
- Jonathan Edwards, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” (PDF)