



Class 1

What's the Use of Theology?

*"O Gracious and holy Father,
give us Wisdom to perceive thee,
diligence to seek thee,
patience to wait for thee,
a heart to meditate upon thee,
and a life to proclaim thee;
through the power of the Spirit of Jesus Christ our Lord."*

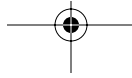
ST. BENEDICT (C. 480-C. 550)

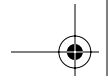


THE GERMAN LANGUAGE HAS A WORD THAT DESCRIBES THE MOOD OR ATTITUDE of an age—a *Zeitgeist*.¹ Literally translated “time-ghost,” we usually render it “spirit of the age” and assume that every age has its own. Our age certainly is no exception to the rule. But our *Zeitgeist* unhappily appears to be a bit more noisy than some others have been, a sort of *Polterzeitgeist*, a pot-clanging “spirit of the time,” a spirit that feeds on the fairly common view that the most important things in the world are the things that can be handled, grasped, bought, sold and used to make more things to be handled, grasped, bought and sold. In fact, if our *Zeitgeist* got a lead in a horror movie, the movie might be titled *The Revenge of the Empirical Vampires*.

This is probably the most striking feature of the world of higher education

¹This chapter is an extended version of an article previously published by *The (London) Times*: Michael Jenkins, “What’s the Use of Divinity: An Apologia for the Study of Theology in the University,” *The Times Higher Education Supplement*, June 2, 1989, pp. 13-15.





in the contemporary era; theology, as an area of academic study, is constantly trying to come to terms with the fact that it has the hot for questions that leave most of the academic community stone cold. When theology is considered at all in the general academic community, it is more likely than not considered impractical and out of touch and vaguely superstitious. The question often asked is this: “What is the *use* of theology?” But the question itself, however conscientiously it is raised, betrays some tricky assumptions in the minds of those who ask it. In order to address ourselves to the question of the value and importance of the study of theology, we must seriously look into the environment in which we study theology today.

Karl Barth once said that *we* (specifically we who do theology—and that includes all of us who have ever tried to talk about God) “always seem to be handling an intractable object with inadequate means.”² This statement may be a good deal less lofty sounding than St. Anselm’s motto that “faith seeks understanding,” but it’s basically on the same track. As Daniel Migliore explains, theology can be “defined broadly as thinking about important issues from the perspective of Christian faith.”³

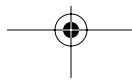
Theology, then, is fundamentally an attempt to make positive and constructive statements about *who* God is—and *who* we are in light of who God is. Theology is concerned with the ultimate questions. Or to put it more personally, as Shirley Guthrie observes, theology deals with the questions that are really the most interesting questions of life: sex, politics and God (though not necessarily in that order).⁴ Theology, in other words, concerns itself with all of life and with death and with love as “strong as death” (Song 8:6). Theology deals with a quality of trust that makes life endurable and with a hope that burdens us even as it also stretches the horizon of our human vision beyond all that can be dreamed or imagined. Theology seeks to understand reality, our limitations and our possibilities. It is the most important area of study in the world. And as such it continually makes tremendous demands on our feeble resources.

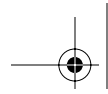
(Ah, but I’ve just tried to slip one past you, haven’t I? I zipped right past

²Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/1, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1936), p. 23.

³Daniel L. Migliore’s introduction to Christian theology takes as its title St. Anselm’s dictum: *Faith Seeking Understanding* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1991), p. 1.

⁴Shirley Guthrie Jr., *Christian Doctrine*, rev. ed. (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1994), p. 1.



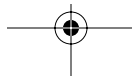


it so quickly that maybe no one noticed the huge assumption I just made, so maybe I should just shut up.) Theology is the most important area of study in the world *if* and *only if* we understand all of life as a spiritual issue, only if we believe that ordinary life, ordinary relationships, ordinary give and take, the day-to-day bumps and bruises of life, are shot through with eternal significance. We believe that theology is the most important discipline in the world *only if* we believe, to borrow John Calvin's phrase, that it is with God we are dealing in all of life. If we don't believe this, indeed, if we believe that "what you see is all you get," then theology may appear the silliest, most unnecessary, awkward and meaningless area of study imaginable. And there are certainly lots of folks around today who would see theology in just that way.

At one time theology was considered the "queen of the sciences," a title it held without much serious competition for a very long time. A couple of years ago on a visit to Oxford University's Bodleian Library, as I wandered through one of the oldest sections of the university, the divinity hall, I was struck by the way the university was once grounded in the divine sciences. The queen of the sciences ruled benevolently from the divinity school at the very heart of the university.

Even today the study of theology includes a vast kingdom of disciplines: constructive theology (a.k.a. dogmatic, confessional or systematic theology), historical theology, biblical and philosophical and pastoral theology, liturgical theology (the study of worship), Christian ethics, biblical studies, biblical languages, church history, evangelism, homiletics (the study of preaching), religious studies, philosophy of religion and comparative religion. And yet, while once this grand collection of disciplines was considered the queen, today it must satisfy itself with a much humbler station in life. To most people in our society, theology is (at best) a sort of a metaphysical housekeeper. In the upstairs-downstairs society of academics, theology has been forced to move into the smaller rooms in the attic, leaving the spacious ground-floor apartments (complete with their own in-suite bathrooms and fireplaces) to the modern sciences and technologies.

The shift in theology's accommodations parallels a shift in social attitudes. Theology clings to the idea that the most important things in life cannot be measured or merely put to use and that even the most ordinary activities are fraught with eternal meaning. These are not popular ideas in a society where the most valued academic disciplines are those that produce





and analyze quantifiable and marketable stuff. Theology is, for this reason (among others), often pictured as the discipline of dusty tomes (if not dusty tombs), the angels-dancing-on-pinheads school, the divine comedy of unscientific science.

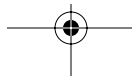
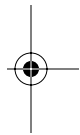
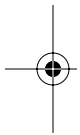
And we must admit there's a lot to be said for the disciplines of "stuff": medicine, engineering, chemistry, physics, biology, economics, sociology, psychology, computer sciences and so forth. These sciences (sciences both soft and hard) are of great value to contemporary society. However, theology stands among these other sciences to say clearly and with certainty that there is more to our humanity than the skull beneath the skin. There is more to life than the accumulation and protection of the things that give us a measure of control over this often-chaotic world. Theology, at its best, attempts to guard against our falling into the intellectual traps that abound in our world today. Theology has to be all the more vigilant because the traps of contemporary culture are such attractive traps that they hardly seem like traps at all.

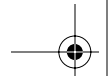
There are two basic traps into which we are likely to fall. The first is of very old construction. We fall into it when we judge the value of something by determining if it is sensible, material, quantifiable stuff. The second trap is like the first: we fall into it by judging the value of something on the basis of whether or not we find the thing useful. What I'd like for us to do for just a few moments is to reflect on both of these value tests to understand something about the value of Christian theology.

The Trap of Measurability

Once upon a time, long, long ago, in a land far, far away—though perhaps not so very far away as the philosophical crow flies—Greek thinkers made a rather far-reaching assumption that many people to this very day continue to make as though it expressed the most fundamental and obvious fact of common wisdom.

The assumption went like this: *There is an unbreachable boundary between the world of matter, the existential and "sensible" world (the world we can all see and touch and know through our senses), and the world of ideas, that is, the "intelligible" world.* This assumption drove a sharp wedge between the concrete and mutable (changeable) world and the absolute, perfect and immutable (unchanging) world of ideals. This split resulted eventually in an absolute dichotomy. It assumed that between these sepa-

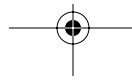




rate worlds was an enmity, a deadly opposition, a holy war, if you will. The world of spirit was seen to be opposed to the world of matter, the sensible world was understood as opposed to the intelligible world.

This philosophical assumption underlies many of the earliest and most threatening heresies in the early Christian church. But it also underlies the systematic statements of many of our most respected orthodox theologians. For example, the fourth-century heretic Arius (who taught that Jesus Christ is a creature and not of the same essential being as God) is widely interpreted as a sort of misguided protector of monotheism (the worship of one God). But that wasn't really his primary concern. Arius wasn't trying to guard the traditional monotheistic understanding of God from polytheism. He was trying to guard the concept of God from *mutability* (change). He believed that if we say that Jesus Christ is God and that Jesus Christ (as God) assumed human flesh and so crossed the boundary between the eternal realm of being and the realm of matter, then we must attribute to God the quality of changeability. And this, he maintained, is unthinkable. God is pure actuality (*actus purus*), in whom there is no shadow of change or possibility. Thus, according to Arius, God could not have become a creature. Jesus Christ, said Arius, was the highest of created beings. But Jesus Christ could not be God. His prior assumptions prohibit this possibility.

The thing that Athanasius, the champion of fourth-century orthodoxy and Arius's archenemy, understood was what the Arian view of God did to the biblical message, the message contained in the Gospels, the message that had within it the power to transform human creatures into children of God. Athanasius saw clearly that Arius's theology drove a wedge between the eternal realm (of God) and the mutable realm of matter (inhabited by humanity) and, in turn, claimed that God's being is unknown and unknowable to us, that God does not reveal his essential being in the person of Jesus Christ (in what theologians frequently call "the economy of salvation"). Arius, in his allegiance to Greek philosophy, threw out the biblical affirmation and the experience of early Christian communities that confessed: *When we have seen Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we have looked into the very heart of God.* Arius would have Christian faith dissolve into a pious agnosticism in which we never have any genuine knowledge of *who God is*. And of course, that is the point of the split between the eternal and the material worlds. Athanasius





took seriously God's intimacy with God's creation, the way God works through history, the way God assumed our humanity in all its contingency and frailty so that humanity might be healed from its sickness unto death.

There were also some important orthodox thinkers who bought into the radical split between the eternal and the material. We certainly see this tendency in Justin Martyr (the first apologist or philosophical defender of the Christian faith)⁵ and in Augustine (the greatest theologian of the early church).⁶ This split was also woven into the piety of the church in the Middle Ages by mystical writers, from the author we know as Pseudo-Dionysius onward. It is arguable that this split (variously labeled Platonic or Neo-Platonic) has proven to be the most potent and tenacious philosophical assumption ever.

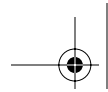
The idea comes into the contemporary era because it received a new breath of life in the age of rationalism. Many, if not most, philosophers in the age of reason took up the ancient idea that the eternal realm is split apart from the material. Some in time went even a bit further than the ancients, saying that because we cannot see the invisible realm of eternal ideals, we can reasonably talk about only the visible world. In other words, the age of reason tended to enshrine and build on the implications of a view of knowledge similar to the one that Arius assumed: the eternal is separate from and unknowable to the material.

Other philosophers went even further to conclude that the invisible world, which (according to their assumptions) could not be spoken of rationally, is not very important anyway, and so we might as well get on with the really significant stuff of life (which "we can all see"). As Leslie Newbigin and others have noted in recent years, this provided the necessary framework within which theology and morality were cordoned off into a sort of private ghetto of opinion, while leaving the so-called scientific disciplines to work in the world of empirical knowl-

⁵See Gerald Bray, "Explaining Christianity to Pagans: The Second-Century Apologists," in *The Trinity in a Pluralistic Age: Theological Essays on Culture and Religion*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1997), pp. 9-25.

⁶See, for example, Garry Wills, *Saint Augustine* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), an excellent and very accessible biography of Augustine in the Penguin Lives series; and Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, a new translation by Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).





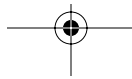
edge.⁷ Theologians and other Christians, in this intellectual environment, can offer their private opinions about the eternal realm. But theology cannot deal in *real* knowledge, it is reasoned, because nothing can be known about the eternal. Anyone's guess about theological matters is as good as anyone else's. Only the disciplines that deal with quantifiable material are entitled to the name "science." The scientific disciplines deal in provable facts, in public knowledge, not in private opinion or beliefs. So eventually the rather benign dichotomy between the visible and the invisible, the sensible and the intelligible, grew up into the beautiful blue-eyed seductress "Materialism" who charms so many people into believing that she is the only girl in town.

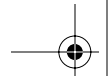
Determining the value of something on the basis of whether or not it can be seen, touched, felt and, most important, measured is an intellectual trap of the first order. We are forced to decide—before we ever encounter an object or an event—whether or not we will allow that object or event a place in our system of knowledge. And so many will say, even before beginning the voyage of discovery, that they will not recognize as real those things so radically new or otherwise unique as to call into question their framework of assumptions about the way reality functions. This sort of (what is often called) an *a priori defining of the frame of knowledge* may make one comfortable with his or her preconceptions, but it guarantees—by definition—that one will never meet reality in any terms that are genuinely new or unique. These prior assumptions bar the gate to any possibilities that are outside the boundaries of what we have already conceived. In other words, this aspect of Enlightenment thinking becomes an extraordinarily close-minded and unscientific way in which to do any kind of inquiry.⁸

It is this trap that theology guards against in its dogged determination to remain open-ended to existence, to the reality that demands to be met on its own terms. Christian theology shapes its discipline around the possibility that *something new* has happened in the midst of the old, and this *some-*

⁷Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (London: SPCK, 1986), pp. 1-19.

⁸See T. F. Torrance, *Transformation and Convergence in the Frame of Knowledge* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1984). Also see Colin Gunton, *Enlightenment & Alienation: An Essay Towards a Trinitarian Theology* (Basingstoke, U.K.: Marshall Morgan & Scott, 1985); and John Polkinghorne, *Science and Theology: An Introduction* (London: SPCK, 1998).





thing new demands of us *new ways of thinking* because it refuses to be captured within our prior categories.

This is why Arius, the archconservative theologian of the fourth century, represented such a deadly threat to orthodox Christian faith. He demanded that the new wine of the gospel be poured in an old wineskin (a Hellenistic wineskin, in this case). But Athanasius, the radical theologian, led the vanguard of orthodoxy. God became human, he said; therefore we need a new way of thinking about God and humanity, Creator and creature, to take into account the possibilities this new understanding of reality raises.

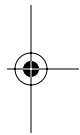
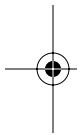
To return to Karl Barth's comment that "we always seem to be handling an intractable object with inadequate means," we can see that the intractable object we are trying to handle (knowledge of God) is always forcing us to find more adequate means, means that are better fit to understand who God is. Or, to refurbish Anselm's motto, our *faith is forcing us to reshape our understanding*.

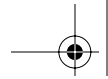
The Trap of Utility

The second trap into which we can so easily fall is a relatively new one. This is the trap of setting up "utility" as the ultimate criteria by which we judge the value of something. If we can "use" something in our present experience—especially if we can use it for economic gain—then we say that the thing is valuable. If the thing cannot be put to practical use, then we say it has no real value. "Practical use," in this way of speaking, can imply a social, industrial, business, management or military application among others. *Real* should be translated as "material," "visible" or "economically profitable." And so we see how closely the two traps coincide.

This trap of use is more subtle than in the previous trap because often the test is very, well, "useful." Practical utility is a reliable criterion for determining the value of so many things.

Take an automobile, for instance. If I design an automobile that is beautiful but will not start up when the key is turned and move when put into gear, it is of no practical value. An automobile's value is determined, first and foremost, by its function. A motor vehicle is made to carry persons and goods from point A to point B. All the other reasons for buying a car (as demonstrations of our affluence, our taste, our sexuality and so forth) are secondary to the primary function. An automobile that does not fulfill the primary function of transportation is practically





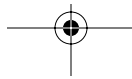
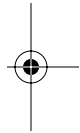
useless and practically valueless, despite its appearance.

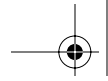
Another example: suppose someone devises a fascinating new economic theory, a sort of grand unified theory of economics, that would suddenly transform the entire monetary landscape. But if the theory proves unreliable when it is put to the practical test, then it is useless. It is of no practical value despite how fascinating it is, how aesthetically pleasing it is or how many copies of the book announcing the new theory the author has sold. (By the way, the first time I used this example of how a grand unified theory of economics is useless unless it works, I received a letter from a furious lecturer in economics in England. She said that she *knew* I was referring to her theory and that she'd finally worked out all the bugs, and the theory did work now. I never did rally the courage to inform her that I had never heard of her or her theory before!)

The test of utility is often useful. However, there's a vast world of reality that does not submit itself to this test. There are situations in which the test of utility proves useless for assessing value. The problem, however, is not so much the *use* of the test of utility, but the *indiscriminate and universal use* of a test which has specific and limited application.

For instance, it is useless to ask what is the use of Monet's "Water Lilies." When one encounters it for the first time, perhaps dashing into the museum where this panoramic painting is housed in Paris to escape a sudden rain shower, shaking off the water in the foyer, waiting in a line, not knowing what to expect, then stepping expectantly into the presence of the artist's vision with an audible gasp—the question of the "practical utility" of the painting is rendered meaningless.

Or take another example: love. Love calls the criterion of utility into question at the deepest level. In order for love to be love it must be, much of the time, useless in any terms that can be practically defined. The greatest love does not answer a craving need. It flows out without thought of being received. The love that is unconditional in its acceptance of us is by definition useless because it comes from One (God) who has no need of us at all and yet who (out of an overflowing bounty of self-giving love) created us for life and for relationship. We may or may not make use of the life that God has given us. We may or may not become all we are meant to become in gratitude to God and in joyful response to God's grace. But our use of the gift does not determine the value of the love that gives the gift or the love that characterizes the Giver.





In specific cases, in rather limited kinds of situations, the test of utility is appropriate and may prove very helpful. But when it comes to evaluating and understanding many things, including some of the most important things in life, like love and beauty, the test is useless.

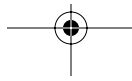
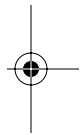
The Value of Theology

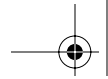
So just to recap: In testing the value of things, the test of measurability fails at the point of its fundamental assumption about the nature of reality, splitting apart into opposing spheres the realm of intelligible eternity and the realm of sensible matter, the private realm of opinion and values, and the public realm of knowable facts. And the test of utility fails at the point of its universal application. There are some things that transcend the merely useful. Both tests become traps into which we can easily fall. And Christian theology obviously can and does at times fall into these traps. Nevertheless, theology can also serve to provide a reasonable alternative to these rather limited viewpoints.

Theology can do this by remaining true to its proper subject: God. To be more precise, God as God is known to the faith of the human community as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The God who is ineffable in mystery, transcendent and hidden, beyond every and all efforts of finding out is found out in the divine humanity of Jesus Christ without ceasing to be the divine mystery. The triune God, who created all things seen and unseen in unconditional love and who sustains all things now by unbounded creative will, graciously is bringing all things to completion and reconciliation in Jesus Christ. God is *known by faith*. God is *really known and believably known* as God's Spirit engages us to worship and enjoy and adore this infinitely adorable God, to reflect on his Word and to live in his radiance.

Now, everything I have just said involves an explicit rejection of any idea that spirit and matter can be split apart into two discrete and opposing realms. Everything I have just said also involves the rather disturbing idea that genuinely new, even unique, possibilities surround us and that these new and unique possibilities present themselves to us in ways that demand new and unique ways of thinking and speaking.

As Christians we believe that theology is the church's work of critical reflection performed in the afterglow of a new and unique encounter with God, an encounter that forces us to redefine what we mean by knowledge





and reality. Rather than forcing on this encounter with God a grid of prior assumptions about God, creation and humanity, according to which we are forced to categorize the divine-human encounter in ways we have previously defined as valid and possible, we choose instead to come to this encounter asking God to be God according to God's own criteria, allowing our walls of perceptual alienation to be broken down.

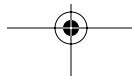
The value of Christian theology lies in the ways it challenges the mythologies of every age and the manner in which it literally turns upside down the whole question of usefulness. Christian theology, inasmuch as it remains true to the God it attempts to speak of, mirrors the altogether strange ideas of utility God has (described in what Jesus called the "kingdom of God" or the "reign of God"): putting the last people first and the first people last, binding up the broken, feeding the hungry, setting prisoners free, showing gratuitous generosity to underachievers, throwing banquets for hookers and layabouts, welcoming prodigals home in the most absurd festival of impracticality the world has ever seen.

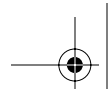
Summary. The value of theology is not determined by how well it reflects the values of a particular age or even the theology's practical and economic application. The value of theology is determined by how faithfully it bears witness to the voice and the character of its subject: God.

As we begin our exploration of Christian theology, we are going to do so in a way that tries to avoid the two traps of measurability and utility. We'll hear about possibilities that are genuinely new, so new they force us to redefine what is possible. We'll hear about values that go deeper than usefulness, *values of the greatest value*. And we'll discover these new possibilities and deeper values revealed to humanity in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, whom we Christians believe to be the Christ, the Son of God. We'll discover how this affects our theological reflections as we consider theology both as an act of faith and as a science. But we'll leave that till our next class.

Homework Assignments

Like any course worth its salt, this one has homework. If you are reading this book by yourself, you may want to write out your homework assignments as a way of making yourself accountable to yourself. Be sure to have your homework in on time! If you are studying this book with a group, you'll find these assignments a lot more fun as group projects. To start out,





today's homework will focus on basic comprehension.

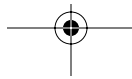
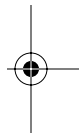
1. Go back through the first class lecture. Make sure you understand every word, every technical term and phrase that is used. Many of the words that we toss around glibly may need more careful definition. For instance, here's a few relatively common but tricky words:

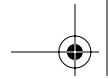
orthodox
heretic
polytheism
Enlightenment (as in Age of)
reason
agnosticism
Hellenism
materialism
utilitarianism

It would probably be a good practice to underscore or highlight every unfamiliar or technical word you come to in the course. Then go back through with a good dictionary (*Oxford English Dictionary*, for example), and make sure you understand how the word is being used in this context. Some of the more specifically theological words may not be defined too well in standard dictionaries, so let me suggest that you take a look at *The Pocket Dictionary of Theology Terms*, ed. Stanley J. Grenz, David Gruetzki, Cherith Fee Nording (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1999), *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, ed. F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone, 3d ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), or *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology*, ed. Alan Richardson and John Bowden (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983). When it is time to start writing your term paper (Yes, a term paper is required in this course), you may also want to turn to these dictionaries to get your bearings on your subject.

2. Let's think about "measurability" and the dangers of materialism. The following observation is made in the lecture: "The trap of determining the value of something on the basis of whether or not it can be seen, touched, felt and, most important, measured is an intellectual trap of the first order. It forces us to decide—before we ever encounter the knowable object or event—whether or not we will allow that object a place in our system of knowledge." Is that on target or off the mark? Why do you think so?

(If you have access to a library, examine a similar line of thought developed by Lesslie Newbigin in his book *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel*





and Western Culture [London: SPCK, 1986]. Newbiggin's manner of expressing some of these ideas is quite different from mine because his work grew up in rather different cultural settings, but there are interesting parallels.)

Let's think about what I call "the trap of utility." When is the test of usefulness useful? When isn't it?

3. When I speak of genuinely "new" possibilities that surround us, what do you think I mean? What does it mean for the Christian faith to speak of possibilities that are genuinely new? Does the Christian faith bear witness to possibilities that many people would consider impossible? Why might people consider these things impossible? What tests might they use to determine possibility?

This first session ends with some reflections on "the value of Christian theology." What is Christian theology? What is the value of Christian theology, in your own view? Is Christian theology valuable for your study? Will it make a difference in the way you live? pray? worship? act in relationship to others?

