



session 1

God Talk

Theology

Prepare


FOCUS STATEMENT

“Theology,” which literally means “words about God,” helps us reflect on and make sense of our experience of God and our life in the world.

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

If we take seriously the idea that *theology* means “words about God,” then all of our thoughts, prayers, reflections, and musings about God count as theology. That means that all of us *do* theology, even if we don’t always realize it. At the same time, theology also means “the study of God” and describes the ordered reflections of Christians through the centuries on God, especially as God is described in the biblical witness. It can be helpful to compare our reflections with those of Christians who come before us.

Sometimes we get interested in theology because of something we read in the Bible or heard in church. Something that perhaps puzzled or intrigued us, or something that maybe confused or even frustrated us. At other times we become interested in theology because of something going on in our lives. Perhaps we, or someone we care about, is going through a difficult time and we want to understand where God is in all of this. At still other times we may grow interested in theology as we reflect on God’s creation and are struck by its simultaneous beauty, majesty, and fragility. So we may see a flowing volcano and notice it holds all the colors of the sunset we admired the evening before and wonder if God is in one, the other, or both.



All of these and more are good reasons to be interested in theology, and by naming your own questions and insights, as well as being open to hear those of both the Christians who have gone before us and the Christians with whom we presently gather, we can learn a great deal about God, ourselves, and the world. In this sense, theology is always a journey, something that can enrich our lives and never ends.

Our primary source for doing theology is the Bible. The Bible, contrary to some popular opinion, is not primarily a book of rules or doctrine but instead is a collection of confessions of faith of people who were so gripped by their

TIP

Many people do not imagine that their thoughts or words about God “count” as theology and so may be hesitant, or even embarrassed, to talk about themselves as doing theology. It may be helpful to name this hesitation from the outset and invite the group to trust that through our words about God—whether we call it “theology” or not!—God is still at work helping to guide our lives.

TIP

If possible, distribute copies of *Making Sense of the Christian Faith* to participants before the first session and invite them to read the introduction and chapter one, “God Talk.” Be prepared to recap the chapter for any group members who did not have the book or were not able to do the advance reading.

experience of God that they had to share that experience with others. Sometimes those experiences were shared as stories, and other times as poetry, sometimes as wisdom sayings and at others, as laws. Taken together, these confessions of faith offer a story of God and the people of God that continues to inform our understanding of God and of ourselves.

In addition to the Bible, we also draw from three other places for our theological reflection: church tradition (the theology Christians have done through the centuries), human reason, and our own experience. Together, we can use these four sources of theological reflection to make sense of God’s presence in our lives today.

It will be helpful to keep two things about theology in mind as we work our way through this course. First, all theology is done from a point of view. Who we are and what we’ve experienced shapes how we read the Bible and understand God. There is no “neutral” or “objective” theology. For this reason, people who have had different life experiences or grew up in different cultures may understand God differently. That’s true of the differing theological views in the Bible and in our own congregation. We can appeal to the four sources of theological reflection, and especially to the Bible, but that does not mean we will always agree or that we can prove that our theological view is the right one. Ultimately, the theology we do remains an act of confession.

Second, theology can’t answer everything. The Bible isn’t simply a divine reference book with answers to all of life’s difficult questions. Really big questions like the meaning and purpose of life, or why there is evil in the world, have no single answer. But not being able to answer something once and for all is not the same as having nothing to say. Theology can help us think more deeply about some very important questions and in this way can help to give us hope, faith, and courage when we face challenging times.

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

This chapter begins by having the two conversation partners get to know each other a bit. In particular, we learn about some of the recent life events of one of the participants—attending a baptism, a friend’s accident, a parent’s cancer—that have prompted some questions. Think for a moment of some of the things in your life that have made you wonder about God. Think also about what might be going on in the lives of the participants who will be coming to the study. We may tend to think of theology as an academic subject, but because it arises from real life experience and touches things we feel deeply about, theology is almost always anything but academic. It may help to be prepared to share some of things that have happened in your life that have made you want to learn more about God and to invite others to do the same.

SESSION INSTRUCTIONS

1. Read chapter one in *Making Sense of the Christian Faith* and this Leader Guide session completely. Highlight or underline any portions you wish to emphasize with the group. Note also any bonus activities you want to do.
2. If you plan to do any special activities, collect all the materials you'll need. Each session will call for chart paper and markers or another means to collect insights and questions.

FACILITATOR'S PRAYER

Spend some time in prayer for those who will be coming to this class, for yourself, and for the session ahead. If it is helpful, you may use this prayer as a guide:

Dear God, bless each one who comes to this study and bless me as a leader. Open our ears, hearts, and minds so that we may come to know you more deeply as we learn together about you through our study and conversation. Amen.

Gather (10 minutes)

WELCOME AND CHECK-IN

Welcome the group. Small group study may be a new experience for some, and it is important for people to feel welcome and secure. Provide name tags and make time for introductions. Snacks, or even a meal together to celebrate this new venture, can help the group feel more comfortable.

OPENING PRAYER

Dear God, we gather together with questions, hopes, dreams. Some of them we can name, some are hard to put words to. But we trust that you know our needs and will use this time of study and conversation to help meet them. Bless our time together as we listen to and learn from each other, from Christians through the centuries, and from your Word, that we may grow in our relationship with you and each other. Amen.

INSIGHTS AND QUESTIONS (IQ) TIME

Ask the group to share any questions they have about what they read. Collect these on chart paper as well.

Set the lists aside so you can return to them at the end of the session.

SUPPLIES

- Name tags
- Pens
- Snacks or a meal (optional)
- Chart paper
- Markers
- Copies of *Making Sense of the Christian Faith* (for those who did not receive one ahead of time)

TIP

Invite participants to share any insights they had while reading chapter one. List these insights on chart paper where all can see.

TIP

Reassure group members that all questions and insights are welcome. There are no “wrong” questions or insights. If you go around the room to give everyone a chance to participate, make sure people know it’s alright to “pass” or not offer an insight or question.

SUPPLIES

- Making Sense of Scripture* DVD
- TV and DVD Player (or computer, projection system, and screen)
- Copies of *Making Sense of the Christian Faith*
- Session handout (p. 19)

TIP

Preview the DVD segment and take some notes. Set up DVD equipment before the session begins. If you will not be showing the DVD, summarize the “Chapter Overview” for the group.

TIP

Encourage the group to follow along in their books as you (or volunteers) read each quotation.

Join the Conversation (20 minutes)

VIDEO INTRODUCTION

Watch the video segment for session one. The course author will introduce the key concepts from the book and prepare the group for the activities that follow.

CONVERSATION STARTER

Read these quotations from chapter one of *Making Sense of the Christian Faith*, and then invite the participants to discuss the questions that follow:

“... faith is really hard to do alone. You need company. You need other people to talk with—to share your questions and doubts, and to hear their faith and hopes. Or, at other times, to listen to their doubts and share your faith. However you slice it, faith is something that takes help.” (p. 13)

“... theology is less about trying to prove a point and more about what we’ve been doing already—describing how we think about God in relation to what we read in the Bible, hear in church, experience in the world, and think with our brains.... this kind of theological thinking, or God-talk, is really important. After all, how we think of God—as just, loving, angry, stern, threatening, tender, or some combination of these—is definitely going to shape our view of the world, of ourselves, and of each other. And more likely than not, it will really affect the way we relate to others.” (pp. 26-27)

Discuss:

1. When have you felt most comfortable or at ease with your faith? What were some of the factors that made it easy to believe?
2. Conversely, when has faith felt difficult or challenging? When was it difficult to believe? How did having other Christians around you help (or not) during this time?
3. What are some of the adjectives that you might use to describe God? Compassionate, loving, stern, just, tender? What kind of picture do the words you choose offer you of God? And where do you think your picture of God came from—Sunday school, your family, the Bible, experiences with and of other Christians?

ACTIVITY: QUESTIONS FOR GOD

Have the group form pairs. Instruct them to share one question they have about God and one question they would like to ask God. After they have shared with each other, collect some of these questions and compose them in the form of a letter. “Dear God, we have come together to study you and to get to know you better. But we have some questions: (add questions).”

You can save this letter until the end of the session and return to it the group, seeing if some of those questions have been answered, whether you see those initial questions differently, and/or whether there are other questions you would like to ask.

BONUS ACTIVITY

Look at the illustration of the four-legged stool or table on page 22 of *Making Sense of the Christian Faith*. Theology (God-talk) combines all four legs. Which leg seems strongest for you? Which leg seems weakest? Why? How would you draw your own personal “theology table” to picture this?

TIP

Some people may feel that it is “unfaithful” to question God. It may help to remind people ahead of time that the Bible is filled with the questions believers have about God and that these examples of “faithful questions” and even “faithful doubt” can help us perceive that questions and doubt are part of the life of faith.

SUPPLIES

- Drawing paper
- Pencils or colored markers

Open Scripture (20 minutes)

LUKE 24:1-35

Luke 24:1-12 tells of the empty tomb and the reaction of the disciples to the news the women brought. Luke 24:13-35 tells of Jesus’ encounter with two disciples on their way from Jerusalem to Emmaus. (You can read each story as a whole group, or divide into two or more groups and assign one passage to each group.)

Discuss:

1. Where do you see evidence of questions or doubt in these stories? What do you make of them? How are these doubts resolved?
2. If the disciples had questions and doubts, how does that reflect on the questions and doubts we might bring to this study? After reading these passages, how do you imagine the relationship between doubt and faith?
3. Why do you think it seems that Luke emphasizes the believing community in his story about Jesus? That is, Luke doesn’t share any stories of an individual’s encounter with the Risen Jesus. Instead, Jesus appears to groups—of the disciples, of the two walking to Emmaus. What do you think this says about the importance of gathering with other Christians to talk about our shared faith?

SUPPLIES

- Bibles
- Session handout
- Copies of *Making Sense of the Christian Faith*

BONUS ACTIVITY

JOHN 20:24-31

Here is another famous story of doubt. The disciple Thomas has difficulty believing Jesus has been raised from the dead until he can touch the wounds in Jesus' hands and side.

Discuss:

1. Why does Thomas have a hard time believing?
2. What kinds of things make it hard for us to believe sometimes?
3. Was Jesus rebuking Thomas, or do you think he was encouraging others to have faith in spite of not being able to touch him? Why?

Extending the Conversation (10 minutes)

SUPPLIES

- Chart paper from IQ Time
- Copies of *Making Sense of the Christian Faith*
- Session handout

LOOKING BACK

Review the list made during IQ Time. Which insights and questions have been answered or clarified? Which remain unanswered? Ask participants to share additional questions or insights that have surfaced during your time together.

LOOKING AHEAD

Direct the group to the session handout for your next session together, and review ways to prepare for your next meeting.

TIP

You may wish to keep the IQ lists from each study and review them as you prepare for each session.

1. Before reading chapter two, write down some of your thoughts about creation. What do you admire about creation, what do you fear, what do you think about your relation to the creation?
2. Read chapter two in *Making Sense of the Christian Faith*—“Original Blessing.”
3. Jot down any insights or questions you have after reading the chapter. In particular, pay attention to your reaction to the ideas that a) God is still creating, and b) God invites us to participate in God's ongoing work. Does this make sense? Where do you see it happening?

Optional: Science Fiction books and movies sometimes offer a picture of a new or innocent world. Often, these are pictures of what we imagine our world was like at creation, before it was tainted by sin. What does a movie like *Avatar*, with its portrayal of the world Pandora, suggest about our vision of Eden and creation?

Session 1 Handout

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2. Conversely, when has faith felt difficult or challenging? When was it difficult to believe? How did having other Christians around you help (or not) during this time?
3. What are some of the adjectives that you might use to describe God? Compassionate, loving, stern, just, tender? What kind of picture do the words you choose offer you of God? And where do you think your picture of God came from—Sunday school, your family, the Bible, experiences with and of other Christians?

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