

How to Survive and Thrive in Theological Study

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I want to start with a short clip from Sir David Attenborough's award-winning documentary, *Planet Earth*...

Here we are in the deepest, darkest jungles of Tāmaki-makau-rau, the natural habitat of one of the world's most rare and privileged species, the *homo studentus theologica*. The life cycle of these strange but delightful mammals can run from 6 months to 6 years – or more.

During this period, these sometimes nervous and excitable creatures will travel great distances through congested urban pathways. They will expend enormous energy in accumulating theological acumen. The journey is an arduous and demanding one. Dangerous and ugly predators abound: *studento loanus*, *essayo procrastinatus*, and the nastiest of all: *mykelango habetus*.

What is the key to their survival and success? Nourishment. The *homo studentus theologica* has three main food sources. Each one of these is absolutely critical to its survival and ultimate metamorphosis...

I am not Sir David Attenborough. So I won't continue with this silly voice. ☺

But I do want to continue with this theme, this line of inquiry. How do you survive and thrive as a theological student? What are the three main food sources, the three main resources, for your journey as theological students? And how do you access them?

1. Scripture

The first resource is Scripture.

I love that scene in the book of Revelation where the apostle John sees a mighty angel coming down from heaven holding a scroll containing the word of God. And a voice from heaven says to John, "Take it and eat it" (Rev.10:9). It's a rich image. The people of God are nourished and strengthened by the word of God just like a human body is nourished and strengthened by bread (or broccoli, Andrew). It is, uniquely, in the words of Scripture that God draws near to us and speaks life-giving words to us.

But it's possible – even at theological college – to read Scripture and hear nothing. Our school system teaches us to read books looking for information, scanning for data that we can use. If we read Scripture this way, just looking for information with which to complete an assignment or prepare a sermon, then we'll misread it, and it's quite possible that we'll reach the end of our studies and leave this place (in the words of St Bonaventure) "knowing much but tasting little". Here at Carey, whenever you read Scripture you are not primarily collecting information; you're listening for a voice, waiting for an encounter with the Living Word.

One way to do this is through rigorous exegesis, working hard to understand the historical background and literary characteristics of each text. This might not feel very spiritual. But it is. On my birthday last year, Lorraine gave me a card. It was a love letter of sorts. She told me how much she loved me and why. She wrote, "You're kind, you're generous, you're brilliantly witty and outrageously handsome..." She didn't write that. But she did say some nice things, and because I love Lorraine, those words were special to me. I read them and re-read them, lingered over them, thought about them. Why did she choose that particular adjective? Why did she put an apostrophe there? Exegesis is like that. It's an act of love. Because we love the One who breathed these words for us, we give them our close and sustained attention. We use the skills and resources of Christian scholarship to understand them properly.

There are times when it will be unsettling. Listen again to the words of Revelation: The apostle John says, "I took the little scroll from the angel's hand and ate it. It tasted as sweet as honey in my mouth, but when I had eaten it, my stomach turned sour." (Rev 10:10) Eugene Peterson comments: "For most of us, our first experience with the Bible is sweet ... We acquire a taste for the promises and blessings of God, we learn to appreciate the sound counsel and direction for our lives, we memorise a few psalms that we can recite in dark and lonely times and find comfort. There is so much here to delight us.... But sooner or later we find that not everything is to our liking in this book. It starts out sweet to our taste; and then we find that it doesn't sit well with us at all; it becomes bitter in our stomachs. ... There are hard things in this book, hard things to hear, hard things to obey. There are words in this book that are difficult to digest." There are passages that don't fit our sin-stunted desires or our tidy little schemes for mastering the text. The process of theological study can be painful. But that's because Jesus is forming us, growing us into his likeness. That's what we want, right? That's why you're here.

2. Practice

So the first resource is Scripture. The second is practice – the work or practice of Christian discipleship and ministry.

We don't study these Scriptures like scientists in a sterile laboratory. We do it as Christians engaged in the messy work of discipleship and ministry. This means application, integration. It means thinking, How might this reading of Ephesians shape the way we structure our youth ministry? What does this theology of the cross mean for the way I treat my mum, or my immigrant neighbours?

So our practice of discipleship and ministry is not the arena in which theological understanding gets to be applied. But it's also the agent by which our theological understanding can be enhanced. Bring your Christian experience, your ministry experience, to the classroom. It will expose inconsistencies in what you really believe. It will provoke fresh questions through which to read and understand Scripture.

John Calvin said that "all right knowledge of God is born of obedience." He's right. A few years ago a friend challenged me to participate in a swimming race. It was to start at Rangitoto wharf and finish at St Heliers beach – 4.5 km. I didn't have a swim background. I wasn't a swimmer. So I watched some videos online about swimming technique: reach, catch, pull to the waist, push up past the hip, swivel. I talked with experienced swimmers about how to breathe in open water, how to navigate. But it was only when I got into water, and tried to swim, that I really started to understand what they were talking about.

The Bible cannot be understood by watching from the beach. You have to dive in; you have to live this text. One of the most important questions we can ask of any biblical text – besides "what did it mean" – is "what does it ask? what is it calling me into"? As you commence this year of theological study remember that we enter and read this text so that it can enter and read us. Theological study is not just about information; it's about integration, transformation, for the sake of participation in Christ's ministry to this world. Which brings us to the third and final resource.

3. Context

It's our context, the world in which we live, the world in which the mission of God is being realised, the world in which the Spirit of God is active.

It's not enough to study the Scriptures (I can't believe I'm saying this! I could lose my job over this!). And it's not enough to reflect on our practices as Christians and churches. If we are to be effective servants of the gospel we must learn about our world, the particular contexts in which we live and

minister. Look at William Carey, the great missionary to India (after whom this College is named). Why did he waste so much of his time translating Hindu poems and other pagan religious writings? He said, I want to understand the thought-world of these people if I'm to explain the gospel to them. Why did Mary Slessor, the Scottish missionary, shed her Victorian petticoats and march bareheaded and barefoot through the jungles of Nigeria? She learned about her context, and how best to embody the gospel in that culture. Why were the first missionaries to the Cook Islands so effective? They weren't from England or Scotland. They were from Tahiti. They were Pacific Islanders. And so they quickly came to understand the culture of the people who they were seeking to reach.

While you're here at Carey, grasp with both hands the opportunity to study your context. Yes, learn about the history of the Apostles' Creed, but also learn about the history of Aotearoa. How can you minister in this country without knowing its history, without knowing your context?

So there are your three resources: Scripture, practice, and context. God's word, God's work, and God's world. It's in the integration of these three things that healthy theological development occurs. And the place to integrate them is in community. Listen to these words from Michael Jinkins:

... when we are left to worship by ourselves, what we usually worship is ourselves. Solitary religion tends towards idolatry, the worship of false gods made in our own image. ... God works through Christian community as "the great iconoclast," using the contrasting personalities, stereotypes and peculiarities; local customs, mythologies and histories; cultural viewpoints and interests of others in the larger community of faith to break through and break down our most cherished stereotypes and mythologies, our images of ourselves and our false images of God. God frequently used the rituals of others to relativize our own. God often uses the unholy foolishness of others to call our own into question. God even uses the interpretations and conceptions of God held by others to call into question and correct our own interpretations and conceptions that, left to themselves, become idolatrous. And often we see that our theological reflections are greatly improved when hammered out on the anvil of someone else's theological perspective.

Theological study is not an individual sport, a solitary pursuit. There is enormous value in listening to other people talk about their reading of Scripture, their engagement in ministry, their cultural context. In a few weeks' time, when assignment deadlines start to loom, and a few of your classmates are starting to irritate you, you'll be tempted to start skipping class, skipping chapel. Don't! Prioritise being in lectures, being in chapel, being at lunch on Tuesday. They're all a vital part of your training.

That was my experience. I remember being in this room 17 years ago. It was a chapel service. I was a young lawyer in my final year of study here. [Photo?] I was still wrestling with my calling. And someone up here was reading the words in John's gospel where the risen Christ says to Peter: "Do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me? [Then] feed my sheep." Don't ask me how, but I just knew in that moment that the risen Christ was speaking to me, saying, "John, do you love me? Then feed my sheep. I want you to be a preacher, a pastor."

Whatever it is that God has for you after your time here at Carey, our prayer for you is that this would be a season of rich nourishment and growth as you feed on God's word, reflect on God's work, and study God's world. May you not just collect information, but experience integration, transformation, and ultimately greater participation in the mission of God.