*Theology &*Episode 6: What is Theology?

**Jeff Liou:** Hey, Emily.

**Emily Hill:** Hi, Jeff. How are you?

**Jeff Liou:** Doing okay. Hey, you know, something that our listeners probably don't know is that you and I have been working on this podcast for probably over a year now, but we didn't actually physically meet until relatively recently.

**Emily Hill:** That's right. It was a very interesting, strange experience of working on this during the pandemic, which is cool that you can do something online and not have to live in the same city. But we only first met at the conference for the American Academy of Religion and Society for Biblical Literature.

**Jeff Liou:** That is a mouthful: AAR/SBL These two conferences coming together. Usually it's like, I don't know what 8,000, 10,000 scholars getting together in one location at a large conference center and talking about exciting ideas. So welcome to what we hope is the first annual AAR/SBL episode. It's an annual conference. So we hope to make it there each year to have conversations with some of our academic colleagues and friends.

**Emily Hill:** What you're going to hear are snippets of the conversations that we got to have. We had interviews with a lot of great theologians and Jeff and I had so much fun just getting to sit down with them. And we basically had our own little mini conference getting to, to sit down and have coffee with people and record our conversations with them.

**Jeff Liou:** And get this. You listen to scholars read papers to you. Now, if you've ever heard someone read something to you, not talking about bedtime stories, I'm talking about like an academic paper-- it's an experience. But we got to sit down across the table and just have conversations with folks. And we're excited to bring you that.

**Emily Hill:** This is our last regular episode of our pilot season. And we are excited to share these snippets of conversations with you.

**Jeff Liou:** It's been super fun to do this first pilot season, and we want to thank our sponsors, the Emerging Scholars Network, and also InterVarsity's Faculty Ministries for their generous support of what we've been trying to do here.

**Emily Hill:** To get your feedback on the podcast, what we've been trying to do with Theology &. So if you've been listening, we'd love if you could leave a rating on iTunes or you could leave a comment and engage with us on our social media, we have Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter on Facebook or Instagram, you can find us on @theologyandpodcast. And on Twitter, our handle is @theologyandpod.

**Jeff Liou:** I think all InterVarsity staff should probably take a look at some point at AAR SBL. There's really exciting things going on. And we have the good fortune of having been joined by Dr. Jon Boyd, who is Associate Publisher and Academic Editorial Director for InterVarsity Press, which by the way, listeners is different from InterVarsity Christian fellowship. And maybe Jon, you could tell us a little bit about that. And since we both share a mission to the academy, to the university, what would you say is InterVarsity Press or IVP Academic's, particular mission to the academy?

**Jon Boyd:** Yeah, that's great, Jeff. It's, it's true that we are separate, but our DNA is in InterVarsity. We were founded in 1947, making this is our 75th anniversary we're celebrating all year through 2020. The DNA that we share with the campus fellowship is the mission to the university. You can't always sit down, not just because of pandemics, and have a conversation with a colleague, a student, a faculty member. Books have always been part of what campus staff workers do. Part of what student leaders do always been part of the tactics of fulfilling this mission to engage in great conversations about Jesus, about the Bible, about the life of faith in the world of higher education and the academy.

So InterVarsity Press is part of that. We publish a wide range. One of our metaphors, especially in the IVP Academic imprint is to think of the campus map and that we want to have books in every place in the student union books, in the library books, in the classroom books, in the president's office books for the board of trustees, for undergrads, grad students, nursing school, business school, all of that. We'd just love to see ourselves covering the whole map.

**Jeff Liou:** Absolutely. And so I see bestselling books from IVP, like Esau Macaulay's *Reading While Black*, a classic like JI Packer's *Knowing God*, uh, the *Liturgy of the Ordinary* by Tish Harrison Warren, and so many others. We're grateful for the work of InterVarsity Press and IVP Academic. And thanks for what you do, John.

**Emily Hill:** That goes with what we're trying to do here on a podcast to show how theology makes a difference in all kinds of aspects of the world, and then all the different disciplines. So thanks a lot.

So one of the things that we hope that you can tell that we've been trying to do on this podcast is talk about what theology is, and what difference it makes in the world and big issues that are going on. And so we asked Justin Bailey, who is a professor at Dordt college who teaches theology, what he thinks about that and how he talks to students about. And so we wanted to share his answer with you first.

**Justin Ariel Bailey:** I have a class or ask students, you know, what do you believe and what difference does it make in your life? Which is the question that was asked in the famous moral therapeutic deism study by Christian Smith and others. And I'm always just really fascinated by the answers that students give to that question and how even the students who have grown up in church are quite inarticulate. Not able to really articulate what they believe. But then when it comes to popular culture or politics or even things like that they really are invested in care about they can, they're super eloquent and can talk at length about it. And they don't really realize that a lot of the same questions are being asked, right? As to, uh, both identity and community, and what sort of place is this. We see beauty and brutality in the world, which one is more definitive? Which one is deeper? Do you interpret the beauty in light of the brutality? And the popular culture and the things that my students are engaged in are asking all of these questions, which are theological questions.

And I think if you can start to just help people see that, um, that the big questions of life are intrinsically theological questions about what it means to be human and what it means to be a good human and then, the openness to something else. You know, so the other thing I always say is that theology in some ways serves to listen to lots of different conversation partners from other disciplines and to create a hospitable space for them. But then also the particular burden of theology is to remind the other disciplines, both not to dominate the conversation, but that there's another voice that we're listening for, which is the voice of God.

**Jeff Liou:** So I think you can see from Justin's answer that doing theology is not just about answering difficult questions. It's about thinking about all of life as theological. But then at some point we have to begin to live that life. And Dr. Erin Dufault-Hunter, who's a professor at Fuller Seminary has a few thoughts about that. Again, it's not about answering questions, but living into an entire Christian story that began long before us. Listen to what she says.

**Erin Dufault-Hunter:** Part of what I do is try to help people live into the Christian story. So every religious faith has a kind of understanding, narrative understanding, storied understanding of the world. Um, and our task as Christians, or I would say because I went to a school for my PhD that had Jews and Muslims, as well as others who were attending, one way of understanding what comparative ethics would be or what ethics is, is living into that story faithfully. So how do I perform the story?

But the challenge, of course, is performing a story that has a kind of ancient past, right? We have this, these ancient texts, these old stories. How do we live into those in our own moment? So I always say in some sense, Christian ethics is always improvisation within the drama of God. So part of the art of improv is always that you have actually a storyline that's developing. Improv, actually isn't boundless. It is taking what is, and what is handed to what's called *accepting,* and then building on that. And within the Christian story, what I'd say is that we have this advantage that we have a sort of centered story. We're entering in as NT Wright and others have commented. We're invited into this ongoing story. So we know some of the past, we know some of how the story has gone before, and we actually know the end of the story. And we're invited into like the midst of that story to perform it faithfully with the end in mind. So when I talk about improv, what I'm really asking people to do is pay attention to that past, uh, look to your future, and then where do those meet in your present moment and how do you lean into.

**Emily Hill:** So if theology and ethics helps us improvise this Christian story, wherever we live, we need some tools to really help us do that well, so that we're not just kind of going about our daily lives and not really thinking about it. Because there are a lot of things that affect how we live our lives without necessarily knowing, without realizing what's happening. And so Joshua Beckett who is a lecturer at Loyola Marymont has some words for us on that account.

**Joshua Beckett:** I think Christian ethics adds best, uh, interrupts and puts a little bit of static into our kind of clearly defined mental ruts. Such that we can actually be open up to, uh, the voice of God, but also the voices of people who are hurting, uh, and maybe the voices of those who aren't the loudest in the room. And to, to slow down and to not, not damp down our passion, but to be a little bit suspicious and critical, both our interpretations of scripture and the traditions that we've inherited, but also our our own instinctual responses. You know, with that slowing down and with that sustained reflective listening, then be able to kind of move into a, an evaluative, and then ultimately a constructive direction.

**Jeff Liou:** So theology that is capable of listening to the cries of people pain, just, can't be a kind of dead object of study. In fact, veteran systematic theologian Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen at Fuller Seminary talks about it in just this way. He describes it as an elastic and flexible network of ideas in contrast to something that never changes, is static, that we can scrutinize like an object on a table. Listen to what he has to say.

**Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen:** First of all the, the nomenclature systematic theology is most unfortunate because it gives the impression that we are in the business of building a system. As if, you know, you got several blocks or several boxes and you even freeze the Spirit into a box. What systematic theology is in contemporary understanding, I often compare it to a web, a network where you are seeking to relate say, for example, what you are saying of the Holy Spirit, you will seek to relate to what you say of God, otherwise, humanity, creation. So it's an elastic, a flexible network of ideas. You seek to be organized in your thinking, but not systematic. And certainly there's nothing of the idea of building a system. And therefore, when you talk about the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, You are looking at biblical, historical, philosophical, contemporary, global, and other viewpoints. And you are seeking to discern rather than to define everything. You are seeking to look at various ways we may approach the work of the Holy Spirit, reminding us all the time of the fact that a finite human mind can only do so much. We do not have God's perspective. And the Holy Spirit is also inspecting us at the same time. We are not only studying the Spirit, the studying the Spirit, but the Spirit knows more than our own spirit of who we are. That's what Paul says.

**Emily Hill:** So we've been talking about theology and ethics and why does theology matter? And so we have a clip from Vincent Bacote who's Professor of Theology and Ethics at Wheaton College. And he was on your dissertation committee. Is that right, Jeff?

**Jeff Liou:** That's right. Full disclosure, he was on my committee.

**Emily Hill:** So he has some comments for us about how those two need to be held together, theology and ethics.

**Vincent Bacote:** It's absolutely important that we understand what we believe. But last time I checked in the Bible God, isn't only interested in people who talk a good game. So, he wants people to live a good game. So to me, it's never made sense that there's a bifurcation between theology and ethics.

Yes, I get it. Sin-- a really good reason for there to be a bifurcation between theology and ethics, if we want to go by what Genesis 3, as a reason, as opposed to the Enlightenment as the reason. But, but I think, uh, there is that split. And sometimes seminary education is structured in a way or theological education in a way is structured that facilitates that, that split where ethics is tacked on the end of the course. So to me, it's always just been important to see the connection between why theology matters, and the fact that it matters is intimately connected with the fact that it has to do with how we live and not just how we think about things.

**Jeff Liou:** So for these next clips, we wanted to tell you a little bit more about the folks that we sat down with what you're going to hear next is from Dr. Vince Bantu to who is the President of the Meacham School of Haymanot, and also a Professor of Black Church Studies and Church History at Fuller Theological Seminary. And he describes himself as he feels like he's an Indiana Jones type scholar, uncovering resources that have been buried. You'll hear him talk about that in this. But the work that he does and the work that the next set of scholars does really impacts who they understand themselves to be. So we wanted you to hear what it's like for an academic and a researcher to do the work and how it affects them.

**Vince Bantu:** I, I remember when I first learned about a lot of this history, um, and it was after I was years into being a Christian, being a follower of Jesus and being, you know, studying theology, even having ministry experience, but also studying academic theology. And it was years into that, that, I was before it was the first time I actually heard about this and, and it spoke to me as a black man. To be able to see and understand that, that my ancestors have had a pivotal role in Christian theology, going back to the beginning and other, other cultures as well. And that, that truly Christianity has been global from the beginning. But then also to be able to share that, I mean, yeah, it feels like a blessing to be able to have a job where every day I just, you know, I was literally doing all the way over here on the plane. I literally just hunt for, and dig for, and try to unearth and uncover a lot of the suppressed, you know, African Christian history, just share it with the world and to be able to see how that also empowers and affects people of African descent as well, who are the majority of the people that I end up sharing this, like kind of my biggest audience. And that's just really humbling and really, you know, just encouraging to be able to see how that same reaction that I had, that other people are able to have that sense of belonging and that sense of representation that we have a role in the history of God's church.

**Emily Hill:** We also got a chance to talk to some biblical scholars who focus their studies and their research, particularly on how to understand, read, the history of the biblical texts themselves. And so in this clip, we're going to hear from Chloe Sun, who is a professor of Old Testament at Logos Evangelical Seminary, and she's talking here about what difference it made it to her own life and faith to, to learn to read the Bible differently.

**Chloe Sun:** For me, I'm trained in biblical studies. So I have this training in Hebrew and then the training to do expository exegesis, and how to move from the text to the pulpit. All that kind of training. And that's very different from a person who has no training. And so this training makes me most sensitive to what the text says instead of what I think the text says. this process makes me look at the word of God in a more sensitive and more theological way. And the training helps me to think of God theologically, intellectually in a way that expands my personal view of who God is. So when I compare myself now and before I entered seminary, I see a huge difference. And so I think everyone should have some kind of theological training. In order to read the Word more, I won't say accurately, but more appropriately or even contextually instead of misreading the Word of God.

**Jeff Liou:** Speaking of reading the Bible more appropriately, we do want you to know that as InterVarsity staff, we train students and faculty to read the Bible without any special magic tricks or tools. We think that's important. In fact, there's a word for it, it's perspicuity-- that the Bible should be understood by anyone who picks it up to read it. But what Caryn Reeder, who is a professor of New Testament and the co-coordinator of the Gender Studies program at Westmont College, what she helps us understand is that when we read the text in an academic way, in a trained way, complications will come up that match the complexity of our lives. Life is complex. And so we should expect the Bible is complex. Simplistic answers, pat, and easy answers just aren't going to cut it. And I'm glad we have academics like Dr. Reeder to lead the way

**Caryn Reeder:** When I started reading the Bible way back when my mother used to hand me a Bible, when I was bored in church, let me read different stories from it. And I enjoyed them as stories. And I sure that I learned something from them. Um, but I would say over 15 years of being a Professor of Biblical Studies, when I approach the text from an academic perspective, it consistently challenges and shapes my faith in a new way. Students often ask me about this disconnect that they feel, that I used to be able to read the Bible devotionally, but now you've taught me all of the stuff and I don't know what to do anymore. And for me, I think actually all of this stuff, all this academic work I do deepens my devotional life. Even though I've complicated the text, and even though I've added on all of this complexity, all of that complexity makes me appreciate what the biblical authors are doing and how the Bible is representing God's work in the world.

Uh, adding those layers, it's often very challenging because suddenly I'm seeing things asking questions that I would not have asked as a little kid is just starting to read my Bible, um, or even as an early PhD student working through some of these, these issues for the first time. But I appreciate how much more I can understand of the kingdom of God in the world and just how much that should challenge us.

**Emily Hill:** So there is another discipline within the sort of theology, biblical studies discipline, which is church history. History might have a connotation of just being facts. And I always think it's sort of a shame that we, we study history in elementary school and high school, when I think that we often just really can't appreciate it then, because we haven't maybe had enough experience or life experience to really get why it matters.

We got to talk to Helen Rhee, who is a professor of Church History at Westmont College. And she talked about what church history, and what history means to her. And it's really exciting.

**Helen Rhee:** I think the, one of the reasons why people sort of tend to shun history is they just in their understanding history, it's a boring bunch of sort of rote memorization of dates and persons and events. Whereas what I think of a history is, uh, really a tracing our family tree, right? And our spiritual sort of family tree. History is different from antiquarianism. Antiquarianism is studying the past for the sake of the past. And for just academic purpose. History is so we are learning about the past so that we can actually learn from the past, and our understanding of the past shapes, actually our decisions for the present and the future. So I would like to actually draw the, you know, how the past present future are together in the study of history.

A lot of people say the history repeats itself in certain sense. That's true. Right? Because human nature hasn't really changed. Right. And we made the same kind of mistakes, uh, and so on. On the other hand, history does not repeat itself. Because why? The context always changes. Uh, they may actually, uh, do the same thing, but the cultural context, historical, social, you know, the political, religious context always actually changes. There's sort of a delicate, sort of a balance in study of a history. History it's an interpretation. For me, the reason why I love history and teach history is that it helps me love people better. Knowing, you know, the nature of the humanity and, uh, what they've done in the past and, and so both the good and bad.

So how can actually, I see them as, I mean, my people around me and in the world, how can I see them as a better image bearers of God? Right? And how can I actually love them as my neighbors as myself? So that's the bottom line for history. So history really affects me. Study of history, knowledge of history really affects me in a way that I can actually, um, be better prepared to love God and love my neighbors.

**Jeff Liou:** For this last clip, I want to cue it up by saying that our lives declare something to the world about the God we say we believe in. It is a proclamation of a kind. And we asked Jonathan Tran, who is a Professor of Philosophical Theology at Baylor University about what we are doing when we live in this world. He told us that we live in systems and structures. I think what you and I know as listeners is that we are constantly being shaped by myriad influences all around. As Christians, we want the main influence in our life to be God in Jesus Christ. And that is a theological and ethical life. We want that to be the case. But Jonathan Tran has a warning and a question for us about what happens when that is not our driving influence.

**Jonathan Tran:** The structures and systems, teach us to see the or to not see the world, and therefore a set of possible behaviors they never even occur to us. That's the problem with the Delta Chinese. It's not that they're bad people. It just never occurred to them that their life could be anything more. And so this is a great question because proclamation, it has everything to do with the conventional nature of our lives.

The problem with the racist society teaches you and inculcates you endlessly to be racist. If not in an active, nefarious way, just by passively leaning into and be carried by the momentum of our history. That's the difficult thing about America and pretty much any place on earth is that we live in structures and systems that we have to either choose to repair, or we perpetuate. And that's part of the rub of Christian life is it illuminates the world for us, how beautiful it is and therefore how violent its distortions. And then it poses a question: what now will you do? Will you continue the momentum and perpetrate the violence, or will you live into the life that God is perpetually and endlessly giving the world?

**Emily Hill:** Well, I just love Jonathan's last question to us. I think it's a brilliant question. I think it's disruptive. And I think that that, was kind of a theme of some of the earlier comments as well that we heard. And I think it was the theme of one of our later episodes in the season. And I think in my life, theology has been disruptive of things that I've experienced, helped me to experience the world in new ways, understand God in new ways, and then think about how am I going to change my life, the way that I live and response to that?

**Jeff Liou:** I couldn't agree more. Theology is disruptive for me because God is disruptive in our lives. You know, when I think about my own coming to Jesus experience, it was a huge series of disruptions from when I was very young and gave my life to Christ for the first time, to today. I mean, every time I thought I had a plan for me, God had something else in mind.

**Emily Hill:** What plans?

**Jeff Liou:** What plans? How could I possibly make plans for myself? I'm glad that God has ordered my steps for me and living that adventure, that life of theology takes us into every corner of creation and for InterVarsity staff, students and faculty, every part of the campus, like Jon said at the beginning of the episode, we would love to see a book in every corner of the campus, because that's where we find God at work. And I hope that we can learn from these academics about what they're doing. In fact, you should stay tuned for the bonus episodes between this one and the next season. That's in development right now.

**Emily Hill:** That's right. We are going to release the full interviews of the clips that you just heard between now and when we released our brand new season of Theology &. So if you thought that these clips and these conversations were interesting, then tune in to hear the full interview is coming soon

**Jeff Liou:** Until then you can actually now check us out and keep track of all things related to this podcast by surfing over to theologyandpodcast.com.

**Emily Hill:** And definitely follow us on social media. We have Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter. Thanks for listening.

**Jeff Liou:** Thanks so much.