

SERVING CHRIST  
THROUGH BIBLICAL  
AND THEOLOGICAL  
RESEARCH



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Tyndale Fellowship.

First published 1983

Revised 1997

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I need a job. Not much time left. Finals in a few months. All my friends are busy at interviews or job fairs. Engineering, Marketing, Accountants. What have I got? An 'ology'! Theology at that! I love the work - wrestling with issues and researching all the information is great - but what am I going to do with it? There are many things I could try, but should I leave all my theology behind? Must go to the supermarket. Mince, spaghetti and parmesan. Think about jobs later ...

We live in a world of pressing need. How can we help? One vital and practical way of helping is through biblical and theological research. It is as important as missionary, medical or social work. More people are needed to do it. Have you considered that God might want you to be involved?

**Why is research a Christian priority?**

Theological research? Why on earth would I want to join a group of old and grumpy men with more books than brain cells? The church needs more men and women involved in action, not more theological compromise and deliberation. Doesn't it ... ?

### **1. God's revealed truth - vital for today's world**

It is easy to see why medical, agricultural and scientific research are important for a world faced with the problems of poverty, disease and pollution; but why theological research? Because what the world needs much more than even new technology is to find God and to know his will. Christians believe that God has made himself known, supremely through Jesus Christ, and that we have access to that revelation in the Bible. If that is true and if indeed the Bible is the Creator's handbook for human life, there can be nothing more important, exciting and practically useful than studying the biblical revelation in all its dimensions and seeking to apply it faithfully to today's world.

**But is there anything new to study in theology and the Bible? Hasn't it all been done in the past 2000 years? Not at all. Not only is God's**

Word an inexhaustible store of teaching from which we will always be able to learn new truth; but our modern world has also thrown up a vast agenda of new questions that need study. For example, recent social and economic trends have raised urgent questions as to the biblical teaching on subjects such as poverty, feminism and ecology. Archaeological, sociological and literary studies have shed new light on the biblical world, opening up new avenues for understanding, but also sometimes posing new challenges to traditional Christian belief. There is thus great scope and need for new and ongoing theological research.

## **2. Well-researched teaching necessary for Christian growth**

It is a curious fact that the church, despite its professed belief in God's revelation, has often neglected to study it in depth. Some Christians, who would take for granted the value of expert scientific research into the wonders of God's creation, have been content with a very superficial and amateur understanding of God's truth in Scripture. The problem may partly stem from a false idea of the 'simple gospel': because the essence of Christian faith may be understood by a child, some Christians have tended to assume that there is no need for expert study or demanding teaching. But God's revelation is utterly profound, as well as essentially simple, and no amount of study and reflection on our part will exhaust its riches. The result of feeding adult Christians on Sunday-school-level teaching is liable to be disastrous: some will fall away altogether, because they are not satisfied with inadequate answers to real questions; others, because they are confused, will lose their enthusiastic commitment to Christian witness and service. Christians need to grow in understanding. That means a need for teaching; and if that teaching is to be really satisfactory, careful study and accurate research must undergird it.

## **3. Well-researched answers to false teaching needed**

Another reason some Christians neglect and suspect theological research is because they know how much harm bad theology has done both inside and outside the church by spreading confusion and doubt. But the antidote to theological error, whether it comes from Christian theologians or others, is good theology, not no theology. Confusion and doubt will not go away if we shut our eyes to the problems and simply denounce the heresies of theologians; we have to show convincingly why their ideas are wrong and, more importantly, to work out true biblical answers to the problems, answers that will satisfy. This is an ongoing need: new theories are continually being propounded that contradict some aspect of our Christian faith, and so new research is

required to meet the challenge. Committed and qualified Christians are needed to do research and to write tomorrow's textbooks; such textbooks will mould the thinking of tomorrow's teachers and preachers and so ultimately affect profoundly the future life of the church.

#### **4. Balance in the body of Christ**

It is natural enough to feel that in a needy world things like evangelism and relief work are far higher priorities than theological study and research. But if we evangelize without teaching adequately and without answering false teaching, we are in the long run cutting the ground from under our feet. In the body of Christ we need not only front-line evangelists and people who give aid, but also teachers who will build up the church fellowship and research workers who will give time to the study and explanation of God's truth for today's world.

#### **Who can and should do research?**

OK, but not me. I've seen the post-grads. Always in the library, always talking about their pet subject, always three steps away from reality. Not for me thanks.

Research is not everyone's cup of tea! The necessary qualifications include

**1 Some academic ability.** You don't need to be brilliant to do research, but you do need to be able to think hard and critically, and in nearly all cases to learn some foreign languages - ancient and/or modern. For all post-graduate research you are (by definition!) going to need a first degree, either in theology or in a related subject such as oriental or classical studies.

**2. Some powers of application and concentration.** If you can't stand an indoor life, or if you are the sort of person who can't get beyond page 50 of most books, you may not be suited for research. Few of us take naturally to slogging away for hours at a desk, but the research student has to learn to discipline himself or herself to long hours of study on a particular problem, and also has to develop meticulous accuracy over detail.

**3 Some spiritual toughness and definite Christian commitment.** The Christian who wants to serve Christ and his church through research must be prepared for a spiritual struggle. The temptation to modify our commitment will often be powerful, but very subtle. It is important to have a firm and well-thought-out grasp of Christian belief when we start and a prayerful determination to be faithful to Christ and Scripture and not to be tossed to and fro by scholarly ideas and fashions. That is not to say that we will know all the answers at the start of our research, nor that we will never be confused; it does mean being prepared for intellectual and spiritual battles and being alert to the dangers. We do not want to end up as modern false prophets, who will be a danger to the church (and to our selves; Jas. 3:1).

The most important qualification of all for research is **the call of God**; if we are assured of his call, then we can confidently look to him for his guidance and help; without that help we will certainly go astray and fail the church. This doesn't mean that we await a voice from the sky to tell us to do research; it does mean that we need to pray a lot about the idea, asking for God's will to be done. It is also wise to take the advice of others before setting off on the research road.

### **How to get into it**

**Money makes the world go round, but it seems no-one want to make theological research to go even one turn.**

1. For anyone hoping to do full-time research the biggest practical question is liable to be **money**. A PhD degree will take at least three years and it's an expensive business keeping alive, let alone paying college and university fees. For most the only practical option is to apply for a grant. The majority of British research students are on government grants: the competition for these is intense, and only those with a good primary degree (in most cases a first class degree) can even hope to obtain one. There are also some scholarships or fellowships offered by particular universities, or by bodies such as Tyndale House in Cambridge and the Whitefield Institute in Oxford. For these also a high academic standard is required.

2. For those unable to engage in full-time research, the Pauline tent-

making option is a real one - i.e. doing a remunerative job full-time or part-time, and doing research work **part-time or in spare-time**. This can be extremely hard going: it will take longer, and it may be intolerable for someone with heavy family responsibilities (contrast Paul! There are definite advantages in being single when undertaking one's first major research degree!). But some people have the persistence to complete research projects in this way.

3. For a research degree it is necessary to find a **university or college** with which to register and a **supervisor** who will guide your work. A number of **colleges** are now recognised for research degrees through the CNAA, and it is also possible to do research directly through the CNAA. The choice of where and who may be determined for you, if you are doing it part-time from home. But if you have a choice, it is worth choosing carefully. The choice of a university/college will be governed by the sort of subject you are interested in. Some universities have specialised biblical studies departments, others broader religious studies departments; some have no theology department, but you may still be able to do relevant research under a good supervisor in e.g. departments of history, archaeology, Semitic and classical languages.

So far as a supervisor is concerned, you preferably want one who is (a) **competent in your field of interest**: other things being equal, if you want to study comparative religion you will not be well served by a biblical studies expert, or if you wish to study the Pentateuch, by a supervisor who is a specialist in the OT Wisdom literature and not much else. (b) **Reasonably open** to your theological position - at least if you are working on a topic where theological disagreements may cause a clash. Some supervisors have been known to make life difficult for their research students by appearing to insist on their students endorsing their viewpoint or following their approach. It is generally unwise to choose a supervisor whom you expect to cross a lot! (c) **Good at supervising**. Supervisors come into various categories - the 'non-interventionists', who leave you very much on your own, sometimes floundering, the 'highly interventionists' who almost tell you what to do and write, and those in between, who give you plenty of freedom, but also keep you moving in useful directions and writing up your results in good time. It is well worth trying to find out in advance what particular supervisors are like - by visiting them and if possible meeting some of their present students.

It should be noted that in some universities you may not be able to

choose which of the staff supervises your work. So find out the position before you are disappointed. You need also to remember that sometimes staff change jobs, and it may not be possible for you to move with your supervisor.

### What to study?

How many angels on a pinhead? How many times does 'kai' appear in the NT? And if there was no one in the woods to hear the tree fall, would it make a sound?

**1. Areas of study:** the scope is enormous. You can study Old Testament, New Testament, Semitic and Ancient Near Eastern studies, the sociology and anthropology of the biblical world, church history and doctrine, philosophical theology, ethical issues, other religions, etc. - all with or without computers! A few examples may illustrate the sort of thing: **Redating the Exodus and Conquest** - a study of the biblical and archaeological data. **Synonymy in Biblical Hebrew** - a linguistic study done at Liverpool University with implications for Old Testament translation and exegesis. **The Theological Problem of the Relationship between the Old Testament and the New Testament** - a Sheffield University thesis: its author went on to teach Old Testament in Indonesia. **Man and woman in 1 Corinthians** - a Cambridge University thesis of obvious current relevance. **A study of the letters to the seven churches of Asia with special reference to their local background** - a Manchester thesis that involved the author in extensive travel in Turkey and in archaeological study; its author was subsequently a research librarian and a research fellow who followed up his work on Revelation with important work on the book of Acts. Other theses come to mind: on **the Day of Atonement and the function of the scapegoat** (a CNA A thesis), on **Eschatology in Mark's gospel**, on **Liberation Theology** (by someone subsequently involved in trying to help the Indian church respond to the problems of poverty and injustice), on **nineteenth century views of the Bible**, on **the uniqueness of Christ in a multi-faith world**.

**2 Choosing a topic:** the subject and title of your research project have to be approved by your university (or equivalent body), and will be worked out in consultation with your supervisor. The choice of topic may well make or break a thesis. If you choose a topic on which there are little

data and therefore little you can say, you may be unable to put together a good thesis. If you choose a topic that is too big, such as 'the doctrine of man in the OT' then you will not be able to cover the ground in depth, and you will be unlikely to end up with a penetrating and thorough thesis. If you choose a topic that has been very well-worked by others, you may not be able to contribute something new of value. If you choose a topic of great obscurity (e.g. the length of the finger-nails on Egyptian mummies), your work may be of little use to the church when it's done, though some apparently obscure topics are more important than they first appear, e.g. the cuneiform chronicles of Babylonian kings, which shed significant light on the Old Testament. If you choose a topic that is not of real interest to you, then you may not have the drive and enthusiasm to see the job through. So the ideal topic is (a) not too broad, (b) not too well-worked, (c) related directly or indirectly to questions that are of importance to the church, and (d) one that you are really enthusiastic about yourself.

Of course you don't need - nor is it usually advisable - to nail down a particular topic at the start of your research. The best procedure is often to work around an area of interest for not more than a couple of terms - and then in consultation with your supervisor to fix the topic with the suggested guidelines in mind.

### **What's it like?**

Doing research is some times exciting, e.g. when you have been following up an idea, and the jigsaw of evidence all starts fitting together and making sense, or when you suddenly discover something that other scholars have missed. It can also be very satisfying to wrestle with another scholar's idea, to work out painstakingly what he is saying, and then to offer one's own critique and alternative suggestions. It is great to have a thesis successfully completed.

But often research is quite the opposite of exciting: grinding one's way day after day through difficult and tedious books (perhaps in a foreign language) is often not fun, and research work can be lonely, though research students are often required to attend some lecture or seminar courses. (Whether required or not, it is good to have the stimulus of such courses, especially if they relate directly to your research or are on study methods. But other courses which broaden your knowledge and expertise are also worth attending.) Coming up against evidence which disproves a pet idea can be disappointing; and most disappointing of all

is the experience of some who realise that their whole thesis is, for some reason or another, not going to make it; failure is a possibility. To say this is not intended to be discouraging but is intended to be realistic: research work, like missionary work, is eminently worthwhile, but often hard-going and sometimes an apparent failure.

Research work is also sometimes **spiritually difficult**. For example, although the biblical studies student is enormously privileged to be able to study the Word of God in depth, it is not always easy to rejoice in a passage when one has to study it forwards, backwards, and sideways in the company of commentators who disagree not only over its interpretation, but also over its truthfulness and authority. There is no simple solution to this problem, but it is important for the research student not to neglect the non-academic side of his or her Christian life: prayer, worship and especially active involvement in 'ordinary' church life help to give a different perspective on things. It is in any case important to keep earthed to the situation of the church, since it is the church that we are seeking to serve. And we need the support and prayers of other Christians.

Sometimes in research there is **the uncomfortable experience of coming across evidence that seems to conflict with one's own Christian preconceptions**: e.g. the discovery in other religions of ideas that seem very similar to what we thought were unique biblical ideas can be unsettling. Sometimes such conflicts resolve themselves, or we can see that a particular problematic point of view is not soundly based but reflects another scholar's dubious presuppositions. But sometimes we may not see the solution, and we may have to rethink some of our own ideas.

Being willing to do such **rethinking does not mean sitting lightly to our basic Christian beliefs and presuppositions**. True preconceptions can only be an asset in research, and those of us who believe in Jesus as Lord and in the Bible as God's Word consider these things to be perhaps the most important and fundamental truths there are. To start research, then, from any other basis would be foolish - and disloyal to Christ. We should be unashamed of our Christian faith and of the fact that it is Christ whom we are seeking to serve through our research.

But still there will have to be some rethinking, as we have said. Our commitment to the Christian revelation does not mean that we believe that our understanding of the truth needs no correction, still less that we

are interested in defending a particular line by devious argument. On the contrary, the same commitment to Christ which makes us determined to be faithful to his revealed truth, also makes us determined to please him by the diligence, carefulness and honesty of our study and makes us keen to grow in our understanding. That means rethinking things; but our confident expectation is that the essentials of our Christian faith will not be undermined through honest research, but will ultimately be strengthened.

**After research, what?**

**It's life Jim, but not as we know it ... It ... it ... it's a postgraduate theologian looking for a job!**

It is difficult, if not impossible, to make a long-term career out of theological research. There are a few research positions at centres such as Tyndale House, but they are for a limited number of years. Research is therefore usually a door into something else, most obviously into **teaching**: there are university posts, where not only teaching but research and writing are expected; there are positions in colleges of education training those who will later teach RE in schools; there are appointments in theological and Bible colleges, where future ministers and missionaries of the church are trained. Some of the most strategic openings are overseas, especially in those countries where the church is relatively small and the openings are very great; training national leaders for the church in those countries, whether in English or their own language, is a responsible and exciting ministry.

But the opportunities of employment in higher education are, if anything decreasing at the present time, and the research student should not expect to find a college or university teaching position easily or quickly. It is, therefore, **essential to be open to other areas of service**, whether for a shorter or longer period of time; e.g. there is church ministry (whether the traditional preaching/teaching ministry or new forms of Christian education), college chaplaincy, school teaching, publishing, or even entirely non-theological work. Your years of research will not have been wasted if you do not continue in full-time academic work for the rest of your life. In the first place if you have completed one useful thesis (and hopefully got all or some of it

published), then you **have** contributed something of real value to the church. But, secondly, you have also had a unique opportunity to study some aspect of the Christian faith in depth, and you have acquired a skill in research and critical thinking that may be useful in all sorts of ways. The researcher, whose subsequent career is outside theology, may be able to continue his or her research interests in spare time - often essays only a few pages long written in spare time can be as valuable as a volume by a full-time academic. He or she should in any case be in a good position to help in the local church as a lay member with theological or other technical expertise.

### **How can I prepare for research?**

Before taking up research, there are various useful things you can do. For example (1) **polish up - or learn from scratch - the languages** that you will need to read in the course of your research. E.g. for New Testament research you will probably need a reading knowledge of Greek, Hebrew, German (the crucial modern language in theological study; J.D. Manton's book **Introduction to Theological German** is a useful help), French and perhaps Aramaic. (2) **Do some preparatory reading.** If you are clear about what area you will be working in, read and take notes on some of the important books in the area. If you are unclear exactly what your area will be, start reading around topics that interest you to try to narrow your field down. In either case get into the habit of taking notes carefully and accurately, noting the page numbers of material you are annotating, as well as details of the book's title, author, publisher, date, etc.; also file the notes in such a way that you can find them and use them again. Developing such a systematic approach from the beginning will save you time later. You may like to write reviews of what you read (for yourself!) - to give yourself practice in critical thinking and in expressing your own ideas. Certainly when you start your research, it is advisable to start writing up your ideas early on, and not to leave it all to the end. (3) **Learn to use a word-processor**, as this will be an invaluable skill to you as you write your thesis.

### **Where can I find out more?**

If you want to explore possibilities of research further, there may be people who can advise you in your local university or college; or there may be local clergy or other church leaders who have had research experience.

**This leaflet has been produced by the Tyndale Fellowship for Biblical and Theological Research, an evangelical organization which exists to further research by committed Christians and which unites people involved in or interested in research. It is associated both with the Whitefield Institute in Oxford and with Tyndale House in Cambridge. The latter is one of the finest residential research centres in biblical studies in the world; various study conferences are arranged by the Fellowship there and elsewhere. For those beginning or considering research there are occasional conferences on how to approach theological research. Interested friends may like to visit Tyndale House or to attend one of our study conferences to meet others with similar interests and to hear about research in progress.**

**The Secretary of the Tyndale Fellowship, the Director of the Whitefield Institute and the Warden of Tyndale House are glad to receive enquiries from those interested in these conferences or more generally seeking advice about research.**

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