



Bible Study Guide

ED CYZEWSKI

NAV PRESS 



NavPress is the publishing ministry of The Navigators, an international Christian organization and leader in personal spiritual development. NavPress is committed to helping people grow spiritually and enjoy lives of meaning and hope through personal and group resources that are biblically rooted, culturally relevant, and highly practical.

**For a free catalog go to www.NavPress.com
or call 1.800.366.7788 in the United States or 1.800.839.4769 in Canada.**

© 2008 by Ed Cyzewski

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form without written permission from NavPress, P.O. Box 35001, Colorado Springs, CO 80935. www.navpress.com

NAVPRESS and the NAVPRESS logo are registered trademarks of NavPress. Absence of ® in connection with marks of NavPress or other parties does not indicate an absence of registration of those marks.

ISBN-13: 978-1-60006-278-0

ISBN-10: 1-60006-278-4

Cover design by studiogearbox
Cover images by Veer

Published in association with the literary agency of Sanford Communications, Portland, Oregon.

Some of the anecdotal illustrations in this book are true to life and are included with the permission of the persons involved. All other illustrations are composites of real situations, and any resemblance to people living or dead is coincidental.

Unless otherwise identified, all Scripture quotations in this publication are taken from the HOLY BIBLE: NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION® (niv®). Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House. All rights reserved.

Printed in the United States of America

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 / 11 10 09 08

CONTENTS

First Thoughts	7
Acknowledgments	11
Getting Started: The Supremacy of Love	13
1. Theology from the Inside Out	21
2. How to Do Christian Theology	29
3. Christianity Is Embedded in Culture . . . Now What?	37
4. From Modern to Postmodern	47
5. Christianity in a Changing World	55
6. The First and Only Foundation	63
7. The Bible: Our Salvation Story	71
8. Learning from Our Traditions	81
9. The Diversity of the Church	87
10. The Joining of Spirit and Truth	95
Notes	103
About the Author	107

FIRST THOUGHTS

With *Coffeehouse Theology*, I provided an introduction to contextual theology. If you haven't read the book yet, you might wonder, *Just what is contextual theology?* Briefly, it's the challenge of learning about God with an awareness of context, while at the same time valuing different insights from other cultures where Christians are learning about God in their own particular situations. We form contextual theology by understanding our own context and traditions and by including perspectives outside of our own, all in the midst of our study of the Bible.

While you can find a number of great books written on a scholarly level by leading contextual theologians, the goal of *Coffeehouse Theology* is to provide a bridge to connect their work with today's church.

However, because I often reduced and simplified complex issues and rarely had opportunity to dig into a thorough study of Scripture verses in the main book, I also want to help you explore several key Scripture passages that show how you can actively participate in a contextual theology that leads to kingdom action. The goal of this Bible study guide is to help you (and others you meet within a small group or Sunday school class setting) take these first steps.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

This Bible study workbook is actually one of two study guides that can help you apply what you've learned from *Coffeehouse Theology*. The other study guide, *Coffeehouse Theology: Contemporary Issues Discussion Guide*, will help you put the thoughts of global and historic theologians regarding a variety of pressing issues to best use in theology today. The study guide you're holding begins with biblical passages and then works through a series of discussion questions and commentaries. After reading a chapter of *Coffeehouse Theology* (or in the case of session 4, two chapters), you can find the corresponding session in this guide and dig deeper while also learning how to put a sound method of contextual theology into practice. In each session, you'll

- walk through some relevant contextual issues,
- meditate on a pertinent passage from the Bible,
- consider a few words of my commentary to jumpstart your thinking,
- ponder brief but valuable insights from historic or global Christians,
- discuss some ways to apply the issue to the mission of God's kingdom,
- begin exploring ways to live out your theology in your daily life.

Through *Coffeehouse Theology* and this Bible study guide, you'll quickly catch on to simple ways to form and to live out theology today. Allow me to share a few thoughts that will help you and your group get the most out of each session:

- Study the entire chapter from which the selected verses in the session are taken. In fact, I suggest that you read the chapters preceding and following the quoted chapter. Better yet, pick up *The Message* or the New Living Translation and read the entire book of Scripture to gain an idea of where the passage you're studying fits in with the author's main ideas.
- Don't try to answer every single question. We all learn in different ways. The same holds true when it comes to how we approach

theology. You and the other people in your discussion group might come at theology from a variety of angles, so I've done my best to provide a wide range of questions. But don't worry; I won't be handing out grades after you complete this study!

- Tackle the hard questions. When a question seems especially unsettling, that's one you should try to answer, even if it means taking some extra time to work through it.
- Remind yourself that your faith rests on the revelation of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. That will allow you to hold up assumptions, personally important issues, and particular doctrines to greater degrees of scrutiny. You might find that God is quite different from your personal sketches of him—I know that I've discovered some fresh and revealing insights about God through studies like this one.
- Pay special attention to the “Living Out Your Theology” section at the end of each session. This section will help you get theology out of your head and into your heart and hands and feet. This section will help you become aware of the best ways to share the gospel and of the greatest needs your ministries can meet.

WHY JUMP IN?

Again, this study guide aims to help you learn how to put contextual theology into practice. Each session will help you reflect on the main points of *Coffeehouse Theology* while also working through some of theology's contextual, biblical, historic, and global aspects. Please keep in mind that understanding and even forming theology isn't limited to “professional” theologians. In fact, a growing conversation is taking place in the local, global, and historic church, led by the Spirit of God as his people study his inspired Scripture, seek to know him, and join him in the work of his kingdom.

Ed Cyzewski

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I'm deeply grateful to Caleb Seeling of NavPress for taking the time to discuss the idea of this study guide with me and for helping me put together some practical ideas on how to provide a simple step from the ideas of *Coffeehouse Theology* into everyday, practical theology. My editor, Brad Lewis, did much to sharpen my ideas and bridge the study guide with the main book. I'm greatly indebted to his masterful synthesis of ideas. My wife, Julie, provided timely and indispensable support in both researching and reading through the manuscript, and I do not exaggerate when I say this guide is much better than I could have imagined thanks to her hard work and insights.

GETTING STARTED

The Supremacy of Love

*To get the most out of this session,
I suggest reading the introduction in Coffeehouse Theology.*

I want to start at the end.

At the end of the introduction to *Coffeehouse Theology*, I point out that theology's far-reaching influence into our everyday lives calls us into a careful consideration of just where our beliefs come from. And in the final chapter of the book, I point out that love—loving God and loving one another—stands as the ultimate goal of theology.

I'd like to ground all of theology in this very Christian practice of loving God and loving one another. Good theology should point to love as the highest goal. Theology that doesn't result in greater love becomes a futile exercise in accumulating knowledge. If theology is truly about learning to love God in deeper ways, then love should be at the forefront of our minds during our first steps in theological study. As a result, when we live out our theology in practical ways, we should see arguments, division, and bitterness decrease while love, dialogue, unity, and diversity increase. Unless we measure success by this second list, theology will never help the church embody God's kingdom here on earth.

CONTEXT: LOVE AND UNITY IN TODAY'S WORLD

The willingness to look at both culture and context as we form and then live out our theology plays a central role in *Coffeehouse Theology*. Context simply means your situation—the “where you are” that’s a part of making you “who you are.” While context is somewhat individual, culture might be described as “the way of life for an entire society,” including “codes of manners, dress, language, religion, rituals, norms of behavior, . . . and systems of belief.”¹

And of course, we also look to the Bible as a primary source as we form our theology.

In chapters 4 and 5 of *Coffeehouse Theology*, I address the culture’s shift from a modern context to a postmodern one. Surprisingly, these philosophical concepts can teach us a lot about Christian unity and love. Speaking in broad terms, certainty was the goal in the modern context, while today’s postmodern culture has room for ambiguity and dialogue. The danger in the modern context was disagreement and division, while the pitfall in the postmodern world is a noncommittal relativism that refuses to take a position on important topics.

I bring up these weighty philosophical movements because, whether we like it or not, they radically shape how we think and interact with one another. If the goal is absolute certainty when it comes to theology, then we’ll find it much more difficult to love and accept people who hold perspectives that differ from ours. However, if the goal is dialogue and working toward the truth with room for a variety of views, we have a framework that creates space for love in the midst of disagreements.

With this context in mind, ponder and discuss the following questions:

- When dealing with theology, are you more comfortable with certainty or uncertainty? When might uncertainty be appropriate for theologians?

- Why do you think Christians argue about theology?
- As budding theologians, how should we balance love and unity with theological disagreements?

MEDITATION

Take some time to meditate on 1 Corinthians 13:8-13 and then discuss the questions that follow:

Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears. When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me. Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

- How would you define the words *faith*, *hope*, and *love* in this passage? Which do most churches today seem to show? Why?

- Why do you think the apostle Paul said “the greatest of these is love”?
- Think about what’s most important to you and to your Christian community. How would placing love above everything else change your community?

MY THOUGHTS

Today’s church romanticizes the early church as happily meeting in homes in a state of unity under the godly teachings of Paul, the super-apostle. In fact, in some Christian quarters today, churches have a fascination with going back to the ways of the early church. However, the truth is that the early church was full of quarrels, debates, divisions, and groups that refused to get along. In addition to theological disputes, early Christians also struggled with a racial tension among Jews and Gentiles who were suddenly expected to worship the same God after hundreds of bitter years of avoiding each other. In fact, the early church could have split in innumerable ways.

Now that we’ve got the background straight, let’s talk about meat. I grew up in a home where meat was the main ingredient of just about every meal. Americans (by which I mean citizens of the United States of America) love cheap meat, and producers have developed an entire system to provide the cheapest meat possible to consumers. No matter how this system affects the streams and fields—not to mention the hormones and slop stuck into the animals crammed into buildings where they stand in their own filth—the modern meat industry delivers the cheap meat that Americans crave for their meals. Even if locally purchased, grass-fed animals provide healthier meat and probably keep the environment in better shape, price becomes the

ultimate determiner for many people who can't afford pricey organic products.

If Americans are willing to purchase meat injected with antibiotics and raised in questionable conditions, then we should be able to relate to the problems Paul had with meat during the days of the early church. Instead of dealing with chemicals or conditions on a feedlot, Paul struggled to find a godly path through the issue of meat sacrificed to idols. With so much meat left over from the sacrifices to false gods who didn't have much use for animal flesh, the Greeks established a system of selling the sacrificed meat at a reduced rate. This was almost like joining together the temple of the local gods and a Sam's Club. Savvy Christian shoppers could eat well while saving quite a bit of money.

However, this method of shopping didn't sit well with some recent converts to Christianity from pagan religions, who struggled to separate the meat from the worship of idols. Imagine the confusion that arose when Christians gathered for the Lord's Supper (or Communion, which was a meal back then) and placed in front of them was meat that had been sacrificed to idols! In the midst of a Christian act of worship, they faced the idolatry they'd left. Meanwhile, other Christians had no trouble eating this meat because they were confident these fictitious gods posed no threat to their faith in God.

Enter Paul.

Think of the kid you knew who always found his way into trouble, spent a lot of time in the principal's office, and yet possessed irresistible charm and moments of brilliance, and you'll have a rough sketch of the Corinthian church and its relationship with Paul, the parent with graying hair. God had granted the Corinthian Christians incredible gifts of healing, prophecy, and teaching. But they abused these gifts, struggled to maintain unity, and even looked down on Paul, whom they considered unimpressive and timid. The apostle, however, exerted much time and energy to bring this wayward church back in line with the love of Christ and the gospel. When those troubled by the meat sacrificed to idols spoke up, they were largely ignored by those who claimed to possess superior knowledge.

In 1 Corinthians 10:24, Paul attacks this rampant individualism and

theological snobbery with this simple principle: “Nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others.” While avoiding a black-and-white condemnation of one group or the other, Paul points this church to love, proclaiming that love should guide every aspect of their lives and worship. Because God called Christians to glorify him in all they do, Paul reminds the Corinthian brothers and sisters to avoid offending each other by following the example of Christ (see 1 Corinthians 10:31-33).

I find it amazing that through the centuries since Paul wrote these words about Christian unity, some Christians have used 1 Corinthians 13 to foster other divisions in the church. Some factions use this chapter to argue against the continuation of prophecy, healing, and tongues after the apostolic period. Others take Paul’s statement about knowledge fading away and all of our pithy little beliefs amounting to little more than the reflection of a dim mirror as proof that serious Christian scholarship is of little value. So I have to ask, are we really catching on to this passage and Paul’s focus on Christian unity?

Sometimes I can’t help wondering if we’re hopeless. Far from laying out what was in or out for the church, Paul cut through all of the petty squabbles and established love as the supreme way for the church to thrive. If we really dig into the story behind this epistle, we see a church not so different from our own today, and we’ll find Paul’s words oddly . . . relevant, as he commands the church to follow the way of love (see 1 Corinthians 14:1).

Fortunately Paul doesn’t stop with correcting the Corinthian Christians for failing to remain unified. He shows them the most excellent path to follow no matter what the situation: love. It might have been much easier if the apostle simply provided a list of what’s approved and what’s taboo. But instead Paul points this troubled church to love—and God desires that Christians today follow that same path toward unity.

INSIGHTS FROM THE HISTORIC/GLOBAL CHURCH

The great church father Augustine made a radical statement that chafes against the desire of some Christians to be right instead of being united or loving: “When interpreted correctly, all Scripture leads to love of God and one’s neighbor.”² I find that many American Christians make it their

business to protect Christianity, to guard the Bible, and to fight a battle against secular culture in order to preserve a Christianized version of our society. This combative outlook runs counter to the biblical witness, pitting God’s chosen people against the people we’re supposed to serve as ambassadors of God’s kingdom. While we should always speak the truth as Christians, an unnecessary level of antagonism arises when we speak of defending the Bible or the truth. Instead of focusing solely on arriving at the correct doctrine, Augustine set his sights on reflecting the character of the God he studied.

In his book *The Heavenly Man* (London: Monarch, 2002), Chinese house church leader Brother Yun shares how the Chinese church struggled through a difficult period of division. When Western Christians began smuggling Bibles into China, they added the bonus of books about doctrine. Over the course of time, the Chinese church split along the lines specified in these theology books to the point that certain church leaders would hardly stay in the same room together. Brother Yun worked tirelessly to bridge the splits destroying the Chinese church and eventually succeeded. He not only managed to bring various leaders together, but one prominent pastor humbly washed the feet of a rival. This landmark moment marked the beginning of a sorely needed period of reconciliation in the church. In the end, the love of God conquered the supposedly superior knowledge of differing denominations, as they united in their love for and fellowship with Christ.

APPLYING TO MISSION

- If good theology “leads to love of God and one’s neighbor,” as Augustine stated, what needs to change when we form theology?
- Do you have any contact with someone who holds a low opinion of Christians? If appropriate, ask this person to express his or her opinion about Jesus and Christians. Don’t argue—your objective is to listen and learn.

- What group in your area needs to experience the love of God? This might be a socioeconomic group or some other demographic category of individuals. List one or two of these groups and then brainstorm ways you can demonstrate the love of God to them. (Hint: Think beyond a simple gospel presentation.)

LIVING OUT YOUR THEOLOGY

- Have you been burned by a Christian who failed to love, or have you failed to love a fellow Christian? What was the central issue of your argument or division?

- How can you increase your dialogue with Christians from other backgrounds?

- What five theological issues are most important to you? How can you hold on to these doctrines while also preserving unity and love with Christians who disagree with you?

Session 1

THEOLOGY FROM THE INSIDE OUT

*To get the most out of this session,
I suggest reading chapter 1 in Coffeehouse Theology.*

At rock bottom, Christianity is a story about God reconciling himself with the disobedient children of the human race. The love and mercy of God take center stage as he invites humanity to enter his kingdom, where his healing and justice reign. Jesus proclaimed that God's kingdom is very much present in this world; when Jesus returned to heaven, he left his followers the task of living under and declaring God's present and imminent rule and inviting one and all to enter. For Christians carrying out this mission today, theology becomes their vital tool. The kingdom of God isn't just the content of Christian theology. It's the driving force.

CONTEXT: AMERICANS AND THE KINGDOM OF GOD

As Americans who live in a democratic society, we can easily misunderstand the nature of God's kingdom and his rule. We're used to having a say in our government, so handing over control to an all-powerful ruler seems terrifying, no matter how benevolent he may seem.

While we struggle to re-create the mood of the prophecies concerning

the coming of God's rule, for the most part the focus of God's kingdom is a reunion with his beloved people and the establishment of true justice and peace. Far from establishing a cruel dictatorship, God delights in his people and wants to bring healing to the nations. Of course, this can only happen if we drop our own agendas—which typically put us first—and submit to his rule.

While most people readily agree that all is not as it should be in this world, the tough part is getting the same people to admit that God's plan is the one to follow. Americans especially seem convinced of their own goodness and excellent intentions. To make matters worse, many American Christians ally themselves tightly with political parties, committing resources to flawed, man-made methods of bringing God's kingdom to earth.

What's more, if this overall allegiance to man-made institutions isn't bad enough, many American Christians create their own little kingdoms within their denominations or local churches. Theology often gets caught up in the tangled mess of these hefty organizations that eat up time and resources. Instead of helping Christians spread the gospel and live in the reality of God's kingdom among people who need both so badly, theology serves the agenda of these smaller kingdoms, providing the ammunition for internal disputes and unending debates. Most of us find it much too tempting to cling to our own plans. But as a result, we restrict theology to our internal concerns instead of using theology to draw near to God, to live in the reality of his rule, and to spread the message of the kingdom.

With this context in mind, ponder and discuss the following questions:

- Use a Bible concordance and look up three passages in the gospels where Jesus talks about the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven. How is the kingdom different from the church?

- List three theological doctrines that you believe have a powerful influence on your faith. How do they affect the way you share the gospel?
- Tell your “salvation story” in a few paragraphs. How has theology changed your understanding of God since you first began your relationship with Christ?

MEDITATION

Take some time to meditate on Isaiah 42:1-7 and Luke 4:18-19 and then discuss the questions that follow:

“Here is my servant, whom I uphold,
 my chosen one in whom I delight;
 I will put my Spirit on him
 and he will bring justice to the nations.
 He will not shout or cry out
 or raise his voice in the streets.
 A bruised reed he will not break,
 and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out.
 In faithfulness he will bring forth justice;
 he will not falter or be discouraged
 till he establishes justice on earth.
 In his law the islands will put their hope.”

This is what God the LORD says—
he who created the heavens and stretched them out,
 who spread out the earth, and all that comes out of it,
who gives breath to its people,
 and life to those who walk on it:
“I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness;
 I will take hold of your hand.
I will keep you and will make you
 to be a covenant for the people
 and a light for the Gentiles,
to open eyes that are blind,
 to free captives from prison
 and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.”
(Isaiah 42:1-7)

“The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
 because he has anointed me
 to preach good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
 and recovery of sight for the blind,
to release the oppressed,
 to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” (Luke 4:18-19)

- Did Jesus bring justice as these passages suggest? How?

- How do you think the original readers interpreted these passages compared to how we read them today? Do you think Christians today overly spiritualize these verses? How?

- What role do the people of God play in these passages?

MY THOUGHTS

Easter is one of my favorite Christian feasts because I love the story of Jesus' resurrection. Celebrating the Resurrection is as good as it gets for Christians, because the event heralds the new life and freedom won by Christ. The only damper on this celebration of new life and salvation, in my opinion, is the church.

In many churches, Easter Sunday ends up being an awkward time. The irregular attendees known as "Easter People" show up in their best Sunday clothes, while the regulars sit smugly and wait for the preacher to roast these people who like God a lot but only as friends. Easter morning often becomes the primary ambush time to drop the full weight of the gospel message on the Easter People who clog up the parking lot and drink all the coffee. I remember spending many Easters glaring at the new faces in the crowd and thinking, *You're really in for it now*. The Easter People quickly realize they must pass through the sermon gamut: God loves you and has a wonderful plan for you that includes attending *this* church and saying *this* prayer to be saved.

The worst Easter morning I ever experienced involved a long, elaborate, and technical explanation of just how salvation works. The preacher hauled out words such as *atonement* and *propitiation*, spending enormous amounts of time defining them, setting them up, and then reconnecting them with his

main point, which ambled toward saying a prayer at the end of the service. As a theology student, I could follow his lengthy treatise. But even I was bored and uninspired, so I wondered how our church's guests felt that day.

Sadly, we've somehow managed to lose the incredible story of God's rescuing humanity from death by conquering it from the inside, substituting abstract doctrines and a mechanical, step-by-step salvation process. We focus so closely on a few crucial details that we lose the grand narrative and immense scope of salvation.

In Luke 4:14-30, Jesus isn't preaching on an Easter morning. But he does make a strong connection to the prophecy in Isaiah 42 about his mission to bring righteousness and justice to Israel and ultimately to the entire world. Christians who spend their Easter mornings listening to sermons about receiving the death of Jesus in order to go to heaven—and I include myself with this group—aren't quite sure what to do with Jesus' message about proclaiming freedom for prisoners, recovering the sight for the blind, or releasing the oppressed.

The gospel of John reminds us that Jesus' ministry combined *physical signs* that pointed to deeper *spiritual truths*. The spiritually blind and oppressed people of Israel needed spiritual vision, but Jesus also healed people who were blind physically. Both the physical and spiritual pointed to the arrival of God's kingdom and a new way of interpreting their role as God's chosen people through the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus.¹ While those who follow Jesus indeed enjoy eternal benefits, the passage from Isaiah suggests something significant is also taking place in our world right now. The rule of God has dawned.

Far from simply establishing a message about spiritual change through accepting a new doctrine or praying a prayer, Jesus' mission reached more broadly and deeply into the lives of his listeners. He also called for a new world with greater freedom and justice resulting from the spiritual change brought about when people learn to love God and one another. Jesus not only redefined the terms of knowing God—as a Father or parent—he brought the beginning of God's rule on earth.

INSIGHTS FROM THE HISTORIC/GLOBAL CHURCH

In the Philippines, farmers have suffered the loss of their lands and watched a few wealthy individuals accumulate wealth at the expense of the many poor. After selling off their lands to large farming conglomerations, many of these farmers go hungry while feeding the rest of the world. In this context, the message of Luke 4:19 jumps off the page to offer hope in ways few Americans would ever consider.

Theologian Helen R. Graham points to the implications of Jesus' message in Luke 4:19 concerning the year of the Lord's favor or the year of Jubilee. Jesus refers to Leviticus 25:8-54, where God commands Israel not only to take a year off from planting, but also to return all land to the original owners.² Because of this command, no one could accumulate vast amounts of land and the wealth that would result. God proclaimed, "The land must not be sold permanently, because the land is mine and you are but aliens and my tenants. Throughout the country that you hold as a possession, you must provide for the redemption of the land" (Leviticus 25:23-24). I wonder how that would preach on a Sunday morning in America.

APPLYING TO MISSION

- What social problems does your church or ministry work to remedy? Why does your church focus on these issues?
- Reread Luke 4:18-19. How do you think your church interprets and applies these verses? Can you think of any ways that your church needs to change its approach to the poor and other social issues?

- If your church is located in a relatively affluent area, contact a church or ministry leader in an area without the same kind of wealth. Ask this leader how he or she interprets Luke 4:18-19 and how your church can better apply this passage.

LIVING OUT YOUR THEOLOGY

- Can you think of a richer way to share the gospel message (as opposed to the four-minute, shrink-wrapped version) in light of Jesus' proclamation in Luke 4?
- Review the list of your three most important theological issues (from the "Context" section of this session). What theological issues are you unclear about—either you haven't considered them or you haven't landed on what you believe? Reflect on your list and discuss these issues with your group as you continue through this study guide.
- Talk with others in your group about how to balance the doctrine of life after death with the doctrine of the kingdom of God being established on earth now.