

## A Surprising Hunger: How Systematic Theology Classes have Blessed a Tasmanian Congregation

*By Campbell Markham*

Nearly two years ago a Christian couple arrived at Cornerstone, and almost immediately urged me to begin teaching systematic theology to the church. The husband is a Portuguese-speaking Aussie, the wife is Brazilian, and they had come from –who would have thought – a Brazilian congregation of a Presbyterian church in New Zealand.

Their pastor, João (John) Petreceli, had trained at Mackenzie Presbyterian University in São Paulo, the hub of the vibrant and long-established Presbyterian Church of Brazil, with over a million members, some 8000 pastors, nine seminaries, and a rich Lusophone theological literature. Pastor John left Brazil with a deep appreciation for John Calvin and Reformed Theology, and determined to teach this first to his church in Chile, and then to his New Zealand church plant using his own notes, and a translation of Louis Berkhof’s Systematic Theology.

He soon saw that that not only was there a hunger for this kind of thorough teaching, but those who were learning it were quickly growing in their knowledge and capacity to serve as elders and deacons, as Sunday school and youth teachers, as evangelists and mentors, and as faithful servants of Christ in every area of life.

Back in Hobart, having heard these stories, the elders agreed that we should trial something similar. I put together a course of eight two-hour lessons, a broad overview of Reformed theology looking at revelation and inspiration, the attributes of God, the work of God, biblical anthropology, Christology, ecclesiology, and eschatology. We called it an “eight-week theology taster.” The idea was this: “Come along and get an idea of what it means to study systematic theology. If there’s enough interest, then we will run a two-year course with eight six-week units

corresponding to each lesson of the Taster.”

On our first night we felt truly optimistic and assembled two folding tables in the church office with 10 chairs. Five minutes before start time we realised that there was no way everyone was going to fit in. We quickly moved across to the church auditorium where about 30 of us gathered. We also set up a webcam and about 10 Skype connections were made, representing about 20 to 30 people. A group of between 45 and 60 attended or Skyped-in for the full eight weeks.

Very encouraged, I drafted a two-year program of 48 two-hour lessons, which we began this February. We start at 7pm, break for about 15 minutes at eight, and finish by nine. I send out a PDF handout – between 10 and 16 pages – by email and Facebook in the afternoon. John Frame’s outstanding Systematic Theology is our textbook: we don’t follow Frame’s order, but many attendees read the corresponding chapters to strengthen and deepen their understanding. We also begin each class with a review quiz to consolidate what we have learned. We have deliberately made the course demanding, and for Unit One I invited people to write a “non-academic” essay of 1000 to 2000 words on some set questions. About 15 people submitted papers, all of which were well thought-out.

The motto of the course has been:

***“Theology leads to Doxology.” The study of God leads to worship (of God). And so we begin each night with prayer, and finish by singing, a cappella, one or two verses of an old hymn. We want our classes to be overtly spiritual gatherings.***

Attendance so far for the full course has been about 25 attending in person, and about 10 YouTube live connections representing

another 20 or so people. The age range is very evenly mixed, from 18 to about 55, and we have a handful of people attending from outside our church, from Seventh-day Adventist, Roman Catholic, Uniting, and Pentecostal churches.

This whole project has been a great surprise. I had no idea that there was such a hunger for this kind of thorough and demanding teaching in the church community. In thinking over this, I realise that fewer Christians today are reading and “self-feeding”. And although the 40-minute Sunday sermon brings vital congregational proclamation and exhortation, it is not the best forum for delivering large chunks of detailed and systematic instruction. Midweek Bible studies are a very important place for mutual support and encouragement, but they too are not suited to grappling with large slabs of information. The theology classes appear to be filling a gap in our teaching ministry, providing opportunity for learning the Bible in large and in-depth chunks.

What advantage is this? First, as the great Benjamin Warfield once pointed out, when it comes to systematic theology, we all have one, and we all “do theology” all the time. Every Christian thinks about God, and what the Bible teaches us, which builds itself in our minds into some kind of system. The question is not, “Do you do systematic theology?” (we all do!) but, “Do you do systematic theology well?” Is your theology meagre or rich? Is it sickly or healthy? Is it well-thought out and ordered, or haphazard and confused? We all do theology, and Christians will be keen to do it well: to hold in their minds a thoroughly biblical, well-digested, and well-ordered theology.

Ultimately, the Christian is devoted to “no longer conforming to

the pattern of this age” (Rom. 12:2). Instead we devote ourselves to being “transformed (metamorphoō) by the renewing of the mind”: driving out false, idolatrous, and anti-Christian thought, and rebuilding our thinking with the truth of Christ. We want to think biblically, so that we might think truthfully and wisely, that we can “test and approve what God’s will is – His good, pleasing, and perfect will”.

We renew our minds in order to renew our lives: that we might become faithful and obedient servants of our Lord and King. Carefully and prayerfully studying theology helps us to do this.

I have been a pastor for some 20 years now, and, while fully acknowledging God’s sovereign and perfect plan, I regret not embarking on this before. Yes it is demanding: I have had to find and devote, including delivery, at least 12 hours work to each lesson. But we are seeing people grow, myself included (the teacher always gets the most out of teaching!). We are seeing people becoming better equipped for manifold kinds of ministry. We are seeing weak Christians, and possibly non-Christians, come face-to-face with God in a deep way. We are seeing young people building their minds to be able to face the powerful and seductive lies of the world. Above all, we are seeing doxology.

And for this reason alone we will persevere with this.

To my surprise and delight, I have discovered that Jesus’ sheep are very hungry: “Feed me till I want no more!” If you are an elder, why not consider doing something similar in your church?

*Campbell Markham is pastor of Cornerstone Church in Tasmania.*