**An outline of what we might study at St. Esprit Bible Study on Wednesday evenings.**

*We don't have to cover all of these topics, they are just broad suggestions and questions as a starting point.*

**1. What or who is God?**

* The relationship between philosophy and theology when talking about God.
* What do the Creeds say about God, and who wrote them?
* Are there any 'proofs' for the existence of God?
* Can we know anything about God through nature?
* Can human beings know about God without God choosing to reveal him/herself?

**2. What are the sources of theology and religious thought?**

* The Bible and the principles of its interpretation. Literal and allegorical senses of scripture.
* What is the relationship between scripture and tradition?
* How do our personal experience and our capacity to reason become a sources for beliefs about God? Can we always trust our experience?
* What do we mean when we talk about 'revelation'? Is the Bible unchangeable 'revealed' truth?

**3. What or who do Christians in particular think God is?**

* Where did evil come from, if God is all good?
* What is the point of the doctrine of the Trinity?
* Can God suffer, or is God completely changeless?
* What do we mean when we say that God is Love, or God is Compassionate?
* What does the theology of icons teach us about God?

**4. Who was Christ?**

* What did early Christians think when they said that Jesus was both human and divine?
* How do we understand the incarnation?
* Is it correct to call Mary "The Mother of God"?
* Is Jesus unique in all of human history?
* Can we know anything about the real historical Jesus?

**5. What is Salvation, and how does Christ 'save' us?**

* Theories of atonement, propitiation, penal substitution, redemption, ransom, recapitulation, and Jesus as an example of love in action.
* Salvation and Theosis, or Deification.

**6. What do we mean by human nature, and how does it relate to sin and grace?**

* Are we all condemned through original sin?
* Is salvation unmerited, or do we have to earn it somehow?
* What role do we play in our own salvation, if any?
* Is everything predestined, including our salvation or perdition? Are we really free to choose?
* What roles do guilt, shame and repentance play when we talk about the grace of God?

**7. What is the church for?**

* How does salvation work in the context of belonging to a church?
* Should there be only one church?
* How does the church relate to the state?
* What role should popes, bishops, priests and deacons play in the church?

**8. Baptism, confirmation, holy communion.**

* What is sacramental theology?
* How do the sacraments work?
* What is the relationship between the sacramental and the magical?
* Is Christ physically present in the bread and wine?

**9. How does Christianity relate to other religions?**

* What happens to people who were born before the time of Christ?
* Is the religious instinct universal, or does Christianity claim something unique and special?
* How do we hold our Christian claims in a pluralist culture?

**10. What will happen at the end of time?**

* What will happen to creation?
* What do we believe about hell, heaven and purgatory?
* Should we pray for the dead?
* Will we be reincarnated?
* What is the Christian hope, and how do we live it?
* Are we immortal by nature?

1. I will prepare some passages for us to look at together, and have them available on the website and as handouts on Wednesday evenings.
2. We may want to spend more than one week on any given topic: this is not set in stone.
3. We will also examine the bible readings for the coming Sunday to see how they pertain to the topic we are covering on that particular evening.

I According to theology and philosophy, what (or who) is God?

**How did the earliest Christians think that pagan thought - particularly philosophy - related to what they believed about God?**

Justin Martyr: (148 - 161 AD, written in Greek in Rome, influenced by Platonism)

We have been taught that Christ is God's firstborn, and we have proclaimed that he is the Logos, in whom every race of people have shared. Those who live according to the Logos are Christians, even though they might have been counted as atheists, like Socrates. We measure how good their philosophy is by relating it to how we think about the Logos. Because they didn't know the Logos in Christ, they often contradicted themselves. The Logos is about love, not about abstractions: because we believe that it was for our sake that he became a human being to share in our sufferings and bring us healing. Those who came before Christ could see this dimly, because God implanted the seed of the Logos in them.

Clement of Alexandria (200 AD)

Until the coming of Christ, philosophy was necessary to the Greeks to enable them to understand righteousness. Philosophy was a sort of preparatory training for true religion. It was a custodian to bring the Greeks to righteousness, just as the Jewish Law was a custodian that brought the Hebrews to Christ. Christ is the true perfection to which Greek philosophy and the Hebrew law were pointing.

Tertullian (220 AD Written in Latin)

Philosophy is worldly wisdom. The heretics use it as a weapon - they found in it ideas like the hierarchies of heavenly beings and the trinitarian nature of human beings; all this is just Platonism, not Christianity. What is there in common between Athens and Jerusalem? Our wisdom comes from Solomon, who taught that it was necessary to find God in the simplicity of our hearts. When we believe, we believe nothing more or less than Jesus shows us.

Augustine (400 AD)

Using the Exodus as a pattern, he says that there is no reason why Christians shouldn't plunder the riches of philosophy and put them to the service of preaching the gospel. Israel left all their heavy burdens back in Egypt, and carried off its gold and treasures: that's what we should do with philosophy.

The Nicene Creed (325 AD)

Against Arius

The Apostles Creed (700 AD)

A formal declaration of faith for those who wanted to be baptised. Twelve affirmations

**Can the existence of God be proven?**

Anselm of Canterbury (1079)

In the context of a devotional manual intended to help people to meditate, Anselm formulated what people have called the 'ontological argument' for the existence of God. He defined God as "That than which no greater thing can be thought." The Ultimate reality, or Being. He claimed that God cannot be thought of as not existing, because if the notion of God was just in our imagination, it would not be the greatest being imaginable, since our *idea* of God is inferior to God's *reality.*  God - in God's very nature transcends everything that exists. Once a believer understands what the word God means, it is impossible for God not to exist for him or her.

Thomas Aquinas (1225 - 1272) The *Summa Theologiae*

Thomas believed that it was possible to deduce the existence of God through human reason, although he said that some things about God could only be known because of Christ's incarnation, and through the revealing power of the Holy Spirit. He thought you could logically deduce the existence of God in five ways.

1. Everything is in motion(from the planets to the tiniest breeze), everything is changing. The world is not static, it is dynamic. Each motion must have something that set it in motion, and that thing must have had something to set it in motion in its turn. There must be a single origin of all this motion, and that origin is God.

2. The argument of cause and effect: all effects have to be traced back to a single original cause, and that is God.

3. The world contains many beings whose existence is contingent on something else. They don't exist out of necessity. Only God can be said to exist out of necessity: God's existence (unlike ours) is not caused by another being. The original cause of being can only be someone whose existence is necessary, and that is God.

4. Truth, goodness and nobility exist in our world. But where do those values come from? Aquinas says that there must be something which is in itself true, good, and noble, and that something is God.

5. The world shows signs of being created by an intelligent force. The world looks designed for a purpose. The designer must be God.

Martin Luther (1518, defense of his Theses in Heidelberg)

Luther didn't think that human reason produced the soundest or best theology - let alone enable people to logically deduce the existence of God. He called theologians like Aquinas "Theologians of Glory". For Luther, the Cross was the only place to find the nature of God, and described people who believed this as "Theologians of the Cross." God can only be found revealed in and through the cross of Christ.

John Calvin (1559 *Institutes of the Christian Religion*)

According to Calvin, faith is not about believing or deducing that God exists, it is about trusting the promises of God. For him, Jesus is proof of the truth of God's promises. God is revealed to our minds and sealed in our hearts by the Holy Spirit. Doubt is therefore necessary "We therefore affirm that believers have a perpetual struggle with their own lack of faith, and are far from possessing a peaceful conscience, never interrupted by any disturbance."

John Locke (1690 *Essay concerning human understanding*) Empiricism and the Deists

The empiricists concentrated on gaining knowledge through an analysis of human experience. He claims that we take our small and simple human experiences (of existence, knowledge, power, pleasure, happiness etc), and then expand them, or enlarge them to form an idea of God. "For it is Infinity, which, joined to our ideas of Existence, Power, Knowledge etc., makes that complex idea, whereby we represent to ourselves the best we can, the supreme being." The idea of God is made up of human rational and moral qualities, projected to an infinite degree.

Blaise Pascal (1662 *Pensées*)

Le coeur a ses raisons que la raison ne connait pas. Pascal was a critic of the trend towards purely rationalistic defenses of the Christian faith. He thought that human reason had several weaknesses; it is dangerous to exalt the human mind over the human heart. There are an infinite number of things that are beyond human wisdom. Knowledge of God is of little use to anyone, unless it is accompanied by an awareness of human misery and of the possibility of redemption in Christ. Finally, it is very proper and even necessary for God to be partially concealed from us and to remain a mystery. If that weren't the case, humanity would become arrogant and too trusting in its own ability to discover the full truth. Humanity is obliged to seek assistance in the form of divine revelation.

John Henry Newman (1870 *Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*)

The grounds of our faith don't lie in rational arguments or demonstrations. Our faith rests on a deep-seated intuitive or instinctive knowledge of God. Immediate and spontaneous feelings or revelations can't be grasped or expounded by reason alone. There is no knock-down argument for God's existence. But there are a series of considerations which, if you take them together, will persuade you of the truth of the gospel.

Karl Barth (1934, Paris Lectures to the Protestant Theological Faculty)

"Of all the sciences which stir the head and heart, theology is the fairest. It is closest to human reality, and gives us the clearest view of the truth after which all science quests. The task which is laid upon theology, and which it should and can fulfill, is its service in the Church, to the Lord of the Church. In theology, the Church seeks again and again to examine itself critically as it asks itself what it means and implies to be a Church among humanity. Theology is not a private subject for theologians only. Nor is it a private subject for professors. Fortunately, there have always been pastors who have understood more about theology than most professors. Nor is theology a private subject of study for pastors. Fortunately, there have repeatedly been congregation members, and often whole congregations, who have pursued theology energetically while their pastors were theological infants or barbarians. Theology is a matter for the church.

Ludwig Wittgenstein (1952 *Culture and Value*)

Wittgenstein wasn't impressed by the logic in the arguments for which were supposed to 'prove' the existence of God. He said that believers themselves don't base their faith on those arguments. "I think that what believers who have furnished such proofs have wanted to do is to give their belief an intellectual analysis and foundation, although they themselves would never have come to believe as a result of such proofs. Life itself can educate one to a belief in God. And experiences too are what bring this about. But I don't mean visions and other forms of sense experience, but sufferings of various sorts. Experiences, thoughts - life can force this concept on us."

Paul Clayton (2004) *In whom we live and move and have our being*

"Panentheism (Everything in God) The belief that the Being of God includes and penetrates the whole universe, so that every part of it exists in him, but (as against Pantheism) that his being is more than, and is not exhausted by, the universe."