How to Think Theologically
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Introduction

Christian theology is at its root a matter of faith seeking understanding. . . . To be Christian at all is to be a theologian. There are no exceptions. . . . Theology is a seeking after understanding—a process of thinking about life in the light of the faith that Christians engage in because of their calling.¹

Agree or Disagree: The church should help people think for themselves as Christians instead of the church authorities telling people how they are to think.

Theological Reflection

Serious thinking about the meaning of Christian faith can and does take place anywhere. It goes on while conversing, worshiping, weathering a life crisis, keeping up with the latest news, working, taking some time out for recreation.²

To engage in theological reflection is to join in an ongoing conversation with others that began long before we ever came along and will continue long after we have passed away. Realizing that theology is a perpetual conversation is something of a comfort to most theologians. It is not up to you or me or anyone else to invent Christian theology, to control it, or even to perfect it. We are called only to do the best we can, given who and where we are.³

This is not to say, however, that being conversational makes theology easy or pleasant. Conversations do not always go well. They are sometimes bitter, pointless, mean-spirited, painful, or futile. Accounts of strife within certain Christian denominations regularly make the evening news.⁴

Question: Why are theological issues, beliefs, and positions so emotional?

The Christian faith it purports to understand is personal but not private. It is a faith shared by

¹Page 2, Stone and Duke
²Page 4, Stone and Duke
³Page 4, Stone and Duke
⁴Page 5, Stone and Duke
A lively exchange of views among the varied members of the body is essential for the church’s theological well-being. . . . Each member’s contribution may serve to enliven and enrich the conversation as a whole. . . . A model of theological reflection based on conversation allows for an appreciation of diversity, healthy debate, and creative tensions. It does not, however, gloss over the difficulties of coping with divergent theologies or endorse an “anything goes” policy. At certain points Christians must set limits. There are things said and done in the name of Christianity to which we must respond—because of our understanding of the faith—with a firm “no.” “Here I stand,” we must say, or “This theology is a profound misunderstanding of faith and cannot be condoned."

Problems arise when the question is asked, “Where do we draw the line?” Where do we set these limits and who sets them?

The work of theology is a matter of personalized, conversational thinking about shared convictions. It routinely deals with common topics, grapples with common issues, visits and revisits many common themes, and draws upon a common stock of tools and materials.

**Question:** What do you think the authors mean when they use the phrase “draws upon a common stock of tools and materials”? For Christians, what would be identified as a common stock of tools and materials?

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**Faith Seeking Understanding**

_Theology is a belief, conception, or study of God._

_The gospel has to do with the salvation that God brought about through Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ._ . . . _Essential to the Christian religion is a message from God concerning God’s relationship to the world, to history, and to all of human life._

_The subject matter, [Christian theology] embraces the nature and will of God, the person and work of Jesus Christ, the activity of the Holy Spirit, creation, redemption, and hope. It also embraces everything connected with faith, church, ministry, and the Christian life._

**Terms:**_ **Orthodoxy** is a term that historically expresses the church’s call for emphasis on correct opinion or belief. **Orthopraxy** is a term that historically expresses the church’s call and emphasis on correct practice.
**Question:** In defining orthodoxy and orthopraxy, which do you more highly emphasize?

The Christian message of God calls for both beliefs and actions. . . . To say that theology is “faith seeking understanding” is to say this: that as theologians we seek to understand what we believe about the Christian message of God, and how we as individuals and as a community are to live in light of that message.  

(Combination of orthodoxy and orthopraxy).

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**Chapter One: Faith, Understanding, and Reflection**

**Embedded Theology**

**Term:** *Embedded theology* points to the theology that is deeply in place and at work as we live as Christians in our homes, churches, and the world. . . . It is rooted in the preaching and practices of the church and its members. It is the implicit theology that Christians live out in their daily lives.

The theological messages intrinsic in and communicated by praying, preaching, hymn singing, personal conduct, liturgy, social action or inaction, and virtually everything else people say and do in the name of their Christian faith fall into this category.

Embedded theology is also the stuff that makes for a great deal of real-world skepticism and indifference. [People] give up on the faith because of what they have gathered about it from the embedded theological testimonies or actions of other people and their churches. Most mental health professionals and pastoral counselors have spent much time tending counselees who were scarred by what passed for Christianity in their homes or their home churches.

And it is embedded theology that rushes to the frontline in every battle over the moral and social issues of the day. Christians rise up to defend their theological convictions or express outrage when those convictions are threatened.

Language and images greatly shape our theology. Such language and images are more powerfully expressed in prayers and in hymns.
**Question:** Have you ever been singing a hymn and had a negative response to the imagery or language?

Often hymns are loved for their melody not their words.

**Possible Exercise:** Examine hymns that you love and see if you truly agree with the theological images. You may be surprised.

**Question:** How do you respond when images and language conflict with your theology?

*What is your concept of God, your understanding of sin or salvation, your account of the nature and purpose of the church, or your Christian view of right and wrong?*

**Question:** What is embedded in your theology?

**Possible Exercise:** Have the class write a credo on a faith (moral/social topic) related topic. This exercise will allow participants to examine their embedded theology.

*Deliberative Theology*

**Term:** Deliberative theology is the understanding of faith that emerges from a process of carefully reflecting upon embedded theological convictions.

*Our embedded theology may seem so natural and feel so comfortable that we carry it within us for years, unquestioned and perhaps even unspoken except when we join in the words of others at worship. . . . Frequently it is during crises that people first experience this call to theological reflection.*

**Question:** Can you recall events in your life that caused you to question some of your embedded theological beliefs and positions?

**Question:** Can you think of anything that you have had to remove from your theological body because of a change in your theological understandings? (This often occurs when our concepts of God change).

*Deliberative reflection questions what had been taken for granted. It inspects a range of*
alternative understandings in search of that which is most satisfactory and seeks to formulate the meaning of faith as clearly and coherently as possible.\textsuperscript{18}

\textbf{Question:} What do you think the authors meant when they stated that deliberative theology helps keep “the church honest”? 

An impulse within faith itself calls forth deliberative theological reflection. This impulse is conscientiousness. . . . Conscientiousness means taking care to live lives that witness to God in the most fitting way possible. . . . Conscientious Christians are aware, like Paul, that our vision of God is always imperfect and partial, a seeing in a mirror dimly. Faith’s impulse of conscientiousness causes us as Christians to continue seeking a deeper understanding of what it means to be followers of the Way.\textsuperscript{20}

Pressing issues of church teachings and practice [orthodoxy and orthopraxy] also lead to theological reflection. Christians simply cannot avoid making decisions, individually and corporately, about how they will carry out their calling. . . . [Responsible] decision making ordinarily reckons with alternatives. . . . Here Christians are not merely expressing their convictions; they are examining the adequacy of convictions, their own and others’, in order to arrive at a deeper understanding of the meaning of faith.\textsuperscript{21}

\textbf{The Relationship between Embedded and Deliberative Theology}

More often, the two orders of theology overlap and the boundaries between them exist only as points along a continuum, a matter of degree.\textsuperscript{22}

Nearly all Christian doctrines or teachings set forth in historic creeds were composed in response to controversies over conflicting embedded theologies.\textsuperscript{23}
Christians encounter diverse views in the church as well as in wider society, and they undergo constantly changing life experience. Thus, it is both natural and inevitable that they find themselves giving serious second thought to their embedded theologies at some time or another. To grow in faith is to deepen, extend, and perhaps revise our understanding of its meaning and to arrive at clearer means by which to state and act on our convictions.24

Agree or Disagree: Theological tensions that are felt within a community of faith develop when the embedded theology of the church is being challenged.

Question: Can you name issues in today’s world that may lead to such a challenge?

Question: Can you recall moments or issues that caused theological tensions within you? How did you resolve the tension?

The Challenge to Think Theologically

When the time does come for them to state their theology, many Christians hardly know what to say except to echo familiar phrases.25

Question: Do you agree with the authors’ statements regarding the inability for most Christians to articulate their theological understandings and beliefs? Why do you think this is?

Revealing our own theological views of such basic Christian concepts as “church” can be extremely hard for all of us—especially when the speaking or writing of what we believe is true to our own heart and is thoughtful as well.26

Theological reflection cannot flourish unless it is valued and practiced in the church itself.27

Question: Consider your community of faith experiences. Do you think your church has valued and practiced theological reflection?

Questions: Does your current community of faith value and practice theological reflection? In decision-making discussions, how much “theological energy” is devoted to the conversation? How do you think your church could be more intentional in valuing and practicing theological reflection?

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24Page 21, Stone and Duke
25Page 21, Stone and Duke
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27Page 23, Stone and Duke
**Possible Exercise:** Depending on the size of the group, divide the class to discuss an agreed upon issue for general discussion. Make the issue one that is likely to be addressed by the church governing body (e.g., a church building expansion). Have one group discuss the issue from a pragmatic position and the other group from a theological position. Within a timed period, bring the group back together to compare discussions and decisions.

The tendency is to listen only to what we already like, and close our ears to what we already dislike. . . . At that point deliberations about the meaning of faith go no further then repeating our favorite phrases and finding fault with the views of others.  

**Question:** Do you agree with the authors that we often listen to what we already like?

Striving for a degree of distance from our embedded understanding of faith and subjecting it to a searching examination may prove hard and painful work. . . . What had seemed so obvious as to be beyond question may not withstand a thorough theological examination; in the final analysis it may turn out to be quite uncertain, one option among many, or no longer tenable. Our first understanding may prove to have been a misunderstanding.

**Question:** Is it threatening to think that possibly our embedded theologies are in need of repair/replacement? Why or why not?

**Question:** When our embedded theologies are threatened, what other factors become threatened as well, i.e., family values, social values, church doctrines, etc.?

As Christians we are called to pursue growth in faith: by relearning and reinforcing what we already understand faith to be and by expanding, deepening, and even correcting our initial understandings of that faith.

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**Chapter Two: Fashioning Theology**

Theological reflection is in many respects comparable to a craft. . . . The central operations they perform are three: (1) interpreting the meaning of Christian faith; (2) correlating those interpretations with other interpretations; and (3) assessing the adequacy of the interpretations and their correlations.

Our embedded theology usually is serviceable . . . until, that is, our conscientiousness, or a crisis, or some conflict prompts second thoughts. It is then that the quest for something more
satisfying sets us on the path of deliberative theology.\textsuperscript{32}

\textit{Theology as Interpreting}

All of us are ceaseless interpreters; that is, we are finders and givers of meaning. . . . The interpretations we make become, in simplest terms, our views.\textsuperscript{33}

Our own interpretations change over time. Views that seemed beyond question in childhood (or even last year) become less settled, and need to be reconfirmed or modified.\textsuperscript{34}

Possible Exercise: Have class members identify theological positions that they have seen change over the years. (As an example, how has the relationship with the church and the issue of divorce changed over the past 30 years?)

Question: Is there a correlation between our life experiences and our theological positions? Why or why not?

A number of views grouped into a more or less distinct set of interpretations comprise a viewpoint, or perspective. . . . We are capable of shifting from one viewpoint to another. We may try to look at things from another’s perspective or to examine a matter from several differing standpoints.\textsuperscript{35}

Christian theological reflection interprets the meanings of things from the perspective of faith in the Christian message. Thus, an interpretation of God and the nature of faith itself are of paramount concern to theology.\textsuperscript{36}

The theological viewpoint that Christians form in the course of the life of faith is a distinctive set of many views, each relating in one way or another to the Christian message of God. Exactly what that message means is of primary concern to those seeking to understand their faith. In the church its substance is transmitted from generation to generation by means of the language of faith, a loose-knit collection of stories and symbols. . . . Learning how to use the language of faith is of critical importance in forming the set of interpretations that make up a theological perspective.\textsuperscript{37}

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\textsuperscript{33}Page 28, Stone and Duke
\textsuperscript{34}Page 28, Stone and Duke
\textsuperscript{35}Page 29, Stone and Duke
\textsuperscript{36}Page 29, Stone and Duke
\textsuperscript{37}Pages 29–30, Stone and Duke
The concern in this is language in the church. Because it is perceived by some that traditional liturgical language that teaches and expresses the faith has been misused by others, the traditional language has been for the most part abandoned. The concern is that one cannot teach nor articulate the faith without it. The challenge then is for those to return to the language, and to redefine the terms that are essential to the Christian faith.

Appeals for a return to tradition or recovery of the language of faith are often offered as correctives to the cultural captivity of the churches. . . . Much of the language of the faith may seem—even to many Christians—a foreign tongue; rather than aiding them in interpreting the meaning of things, it is itself a riddle.38

Theology as Correlating

Correlation is the process of bringing two or more discrete entities into a mutual relation with each other. . . . Correlation remains a handy label for a complex process of comparison and contrast that takes place in all theological reflection, embedded and deliberative.39

Our theological thinking has to do with interpreting the meaning of things. Theologians make their interpretations from the distinct perspective of faith in the Christian message, hence, similarities and differences between theological and other viewpoints on any given matter come to light by acts of correlation. In some cases the views may be mutually compatible and even supportive, but at other times so diametrically opposed that Christianity and culture find themselves locked in a bitter conflict of interpretations.40

For every Christian, correlating is at its base the task of relating theology to the circumstances of their lives, and vice versa.41

The point of correlating theological and nontheological views is to identify what things mean in relation to that message so that Christians may carry out their life of service keenly aware of its distinctiveness.42

Theology as Assessment

Offering some evaluation of the rationale and trustworthiness of a theology is an integral part of

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38 Pages 33–34, Stone and Duke
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41 Page 33, Stone and Duke
42 Pages 34–35, Stone and Duke
the reflective theological enterprise. . . . When our initial understandings seem no longer
tenable, when we must decide among several conflicting understandings of faith, deliberative
theologies develop as the result of self-consciously weighing alternative theological views. If we
proceed reflectively, we will give careful thought to the standards of judgment, that is, the
theological criteria, used in assessing the views we take.\footnote{Page 35, Stone and Duke}

To engage in theological reflection on such an issue is to seek clarity not only about the relative
merits of each option but even about how we determine what counts as merit.\footnote{Page 35, Stone and Duke}

Several types of assessment are used in theological reflection. Inasmuch as theology has to do
with faith seeking understanding, the theologian aims to attain the most complete and accurate
understanding possible. . . . Several considerations are taken into account in making such an
assessment. Four of the most common tests of adequacy deserve brief comment: Christian
appropriateness, intelligibility, moral integrity, and validity.

(1) Christian appropriateness evaluates a theology in light of its “Christianness,” that is, its
faithfulness to the Christian message. What is it about faith in the Christian message of God that
commends this theological view rather than some other? . . . Every theological view is subject to
an assessment regarding whether or not it is something worthy of Christian commitment.

(2) Intelligibility is the concern that a Christian theology makes sense to Christians even if to no
one else. One way of showing intelligibility is logical consistency. . . . The [more] realizable goal
is plausible coherence—a degree of cohesiveness in the multifaceted meaning of Christian faith
and the avoidance of contradictory messages.

(3) Moral integrity is concerned with a theology’s ethical standards. Christian faith is, in
addition to believing and heartfelt feeling, a way of living guided by moral values. The field of
Christian ethics makes the moral dimension of the Christian message of God its primary focus.
All theological writings, regardless of the topic on which they focus, contain indications of the
theologian’s ethical sensitivity. Thus an assessment of theological views in terms of their moral
integrity plays a role in coming to a judgment about their overall adequacy. . . .

Assessments of this sort sometimes seem easy to make. . . . At other times, moral assessments
may prompt much soul searching and controversy. . . .

The moral integrity of God is also important to most present-day liberation theologians. Without
denying the universality of God’s love, they note that the God of the Scriptures repeatedly
opposes bigotry, injustice, and oppression and stands for the downtrodden of the world. In their
assessment, theologies that fail to address the world’s manifold forms of suffering also fail to
honor God’s moral integrity.

\footnote{Page 35, Stone and Duke}
(4) Validity. The question of validity has to do with the credibility, reality, and truth of theological truths. When Christians set forth their theology, they do so out of a conviction that their affirmations of belief are true to life and God’s intentions and will. . . . Assessing the validity of theology, whether our own or that of others, is inevitable. We do it all the time.45

Explaining why a theological view is valid is perhaps the most difficult task that theologians face. Whether a theology even should be tested for its validity is itself much disputed. . . . Assessing the adequacy of a theology—in terms of its Christian appropriateness, intelligibility, moral integrity, and validity—is a complex and critical matter.46

Assessment . . . is carried out in very down-to-earth terms. “Is it Christian?” is a common concern of church members who question the appropriateness of a particular view. The matter of intelligibility arises whenever someone’s theological statements leave listeners or readers bewildered by what has just been said. Moral integrity often surfaces in gut-level responses to some Christian’s theological views. Issues of validity arise whenever theological views come into conflict with what has come to be accepted generally as truth.47

Christians are not reticent about expressing their opinions on such matters, and on countless others. In doing so they are assessing the adequacy of the correlated interpretations of Christian faith they encounter. But if assessments are to be made on more than an ad hoc, ill-informed, and inconsistent basis, all Christian theologians need to give thought to the standards of judgment they apply.48

Agree or Disagree: Societal messages and positions are easily blended into our views. Therefore, when we are confronted with an issue, we must seek to separate the gospel message from societal practices and beliefs.

Possible Exercise: Examine the issue of prayer in public schools. What makes having (or not having) public prayer in school Christian? Examine if this issue is more rooted in theological or traditional, societal soil.

Chapter Three: Resources for Theological Reflection

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45 Pages 36–37, Stone and Duke
46 Pages 37–38, Stone and Duke
47 Page 38, Stone and Duke
48 Page 39, Stone and Duke
Martin Luther’s refusal to recant his theology may seem brave to some, obstinate to others. In any case, it alerts us to an important point about theology. He could not back down because, among other things, he could not stand anywhere else than where his lifelong journey of faith had led him.

Like every undertaking, theological reflection begins by necessity _where we stand_. In effect we are saying, “This to the best of my understanding is what Christian faith means.” . . . We set out from where we are, continuing along the path of faith consciously seeking greater understanding.

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**From Theological Viewpoint to Theological Template**

To view things _theologically_ is to identify, correlate, and assess their meaning in light of their relationship to that message. In moving from embedded theology to deliberative theology, we become aware—perhaps for the first time—that our theological viewpoint functions as a _template_, not unlike those used in fields other than theology.

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**Templates of the Mind**

The human mind operates with certain indispensable structures or schemata that organize and make sense of data received by the senses. . . . These structures of the mind, which we will call _templates_, are essential for organizing information into a manageable whole.

The template . . . is forged from the accumulated learning and reflection that is unique to their particular discipline. No template can be regarded as final and definitive in the sense that it captures the meaning of things in their entirety.

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**Theological Templates**

Christians who engage in theological reflection operate with a theological template that sorts and organizes the data of life. . . . It is the lens through which they look at the world. . . . It is a pattern of theological meanings that interprets, correlates, and assesses things in relationship to
Perhaps the easiest way to recognize the key to a theologian’s template or to discover your own embedded theological template is to look for what is emphasized. Every theologian operates with a certain set of core theological views—favored images, categories, and themes.55

Possible Exercise: Examine your embedded templates by writing down your core theological views. Begin this process by answering the question, what is fundamental to your faith? What are my core beliefs?

Elements of a template are identifiable by their functions: they are the points by which theologians take their bearings in order to set a course of interpretation, correlation, and assessment.56

All Christians operate with a theological template. . . . A Christian theological template affords resources, insight, and an angle of vision that no other template can provide. Lacking a theological template, contemporary Christian theologians are liable to repeat the information and alleged “wisdom” of the dominant culture and ignore the singular Christian message of God.57

Resources

What elements go into developing a theological template? The most important, to judge by a study of embedded and deliberative theologies, are four: Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. . . . These elements go into the makeup of the template that theologians use in deciding the questions of faith.58

Scripture

Christianity is a history-based religion; one of the chief values of Scripture is that it speaks of that history. Virtually all that is known of the origins of Christianity is recorded in the books of the New Testament.59
The Christian biblical canon familiar to us today is a legacy of the ancient church. It emerged from a consensus formed over several centuries and reflects the impact these books had on church life. In a strictly historical sense, then, the Bible and the church belong together, and theologians whose faith seeks understanding must return to the witness of the Scriptures. . . . Christians seek to hear through these writings a message from God—the Word of God.\textsuperscript{60}

The use of Holy Scripture in theology has always been a hot-button issue in theology: its authority, inspiration, unity, and diversity, and reliability in terms of history and faith have been particular areas of concern.\textsuperscript{61}

David Kelsey, in The Use of Scripture in Recent Theology, points to four distinct ways in which modern theologians draw biblical texts into their theological reflections. While the authority of the Scripture is affirmed in all four cases, the Word of God heard through the words of the Bible is identified in different ways: as (1) propositions about divine truth, (2) symbolic expressions of faith experiences, (3) recitals of God’s identity, or (4) invitations to existential possibilities for new life.\textsuperscript{62}

Theologians who are at all deliberative recognize that the choices they face in trying to evaluate or construct a theology do not amount simply to quoting Bible verses. . . . The biblical text does not speak for itself; every reading is someone’s interpretation of it.\textsuperscript{63}

**Question:** Do you agree with the authors’ statement, The biblical text does not speak for itself; every reading is someone’s interpretation of it? Why or why not?

Often an appeal to what one passage says on a particular subject can be met by a counterclaim based on another passage that says something different. The tendency for people to pick and choose portions of the Bible to support their own favored views—often called proof-texting—is so familiar that, as the saying goes, “you can prove anything from the Bible.”\textsuperscript{64}

**Possible Exercise:** Have the class view a chosen topic from a “proof-text” prospective. This is to demonstrate that indeed “you can prove anything from the Bible.”

\textsuperscript{60}Page 47, Stone and Duke

\textsuperscript{61}Page 48, Stone and Duke

\textsuperscript{62}Page 48, Stone and Duke

\textsuperscript{63}Pages 48–49, Stone and Duke

\textsuperscript{64}Page 49, Stone and Duke
Is there an alternative to proof-texting? Drawing on the resources of Scripture in the course of theological reflection calls for deciding how the parts relate to the whole and visa versa. It helps to learn as much as possible about the Bible as a whole while remaining attentive to the individuality of each book. . . . It also helps to look for prominent themes—creation, covenant, law, judgment, promise, prophecy, Jesus, sin, salvation, gospel, the church, to name a few. Consider how the themes are developed and what you perceive to be points of connection among them. Throughout church history, theologians have sought to develop an overall scheme for ordering Scripture’s diversity of voices.65

The Bible is a rich story of complex movements and the emergence of extraordinary individuals with revolutionary ways of seeing the world and of acting.

**Agree or Disagree:** How we view Scripture becomes a major factor in theological decisions.

**Tradition**

One way to guard against getting caught up in the implicit theologies of the present culture, or being blown by the latest wind of doctrine, is to take seriously the resources of tradition. Tradition has to do both with the process of passing something from one age to another and with the something that is passed on. . . . The message of God’s good news is to be shared with all, to the end of time. Passing along this message is the dynamic process of active tradition. . . . Not only the content of the Christian message of God but the teachings, writings, rituals, and customs of the church are referred to as tradition.66

**Question:** Do you think tradition plays an important role in the church today? How so?

*The Spirit guides the church throughout history to maintain the truths of faith by developing other traditions that help convey the Christian message.*67

**Possible Exercise:** Discuss “traditional” theological issues that today’s church may seem to be leaving behind.

Many denominations hold historic creeds, confessions of faith, and catechisms to be a special significance for theological reflection. . . . Others disavow any official, churchwide theological standards, confident that their tradition of reliance on the Scriptures leads to teachings which

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65 Pages 49–50, Stone and Duke

66 Page 50, Stone and Duke

67 Page 51, Stone and Duke
preserve the essentials of authentic faith while maximizing freedom on other inessential points.\textsuperscript{68}

Deliberative theologians should give heed to the warning: “Sift tradition with care before use.”\textsuperscript{69} As times change, words or actions that remain the same may take on new meaning while shedding facets of their original significance. Clearly, tradition is dynamic. It is a living, growing resource for theological reflection that provides a glimpse of the ongoing work of God in the world.\textsuperscript{70}

\textit{Reason}

The usefulness of reason as a theological resource has to do with taking care in how we think about things. . . . Reasoning is part of theological reflection. It is involved in interpreting Scripture, tradition, and experience. It also plays a role in every effort to assess alternative accounts of the Christian faith in search of the most adequate one. . . . \textit{Theologians who ignore this one rule of thumb are at risk: theology needs to be as clear, coherent, and well informed as possible.}\textsuperscript{71}

\textbf{Question}: Is there a difference between “blind faith” and sound reasoning?

The wide variety of inquiries carried out in the natural sciences, social sciences, history, philosophy, and even literature and the arts, provides us with a vast array of information about the world. Theologians cannot avoid addressing this store of information. Although all may not accept the information, it is too much a part of the fabric of your lives to be ignored.\textsuperscript{72}

\textbf{Question}: Do you agree with the authors that theologians cannot avoid addressing this store of information? Although all may not accept the information, it is too much a part of the fabric of your lives to be ignored. Why or why not?

\textbf{Possible Exercise}: Select a theological issue where science or other factors have provided additional information that may alter/challenge theological positions (i.e., evolution).

\textit{Experience}

Experience plays a significant role in theological reflection. . . . All of life—and the life of faith—is a matter of experiencing. . . . The life of faith embraces the totality of our life experiences. And

\textsuperscript{68}Page 51, Stone and Duke
\textsuperscript{69}Page 52, Stone and Duke
\textsuperscript{70}Page 52, Stone and Duke
\textsuperscript{71}Pages 52–53, Stone and Duke
\textsuperscript{72}Page 53, Stone and Duke
although the Scriptures hardly ever call them experiences, this is the umbrella term used by theologians for the varied encounters with God, and for the awareness of God that comes through faith to the people of Israel, to New Testament Christians, and to us today. . . . An experience is always an experience of something. It is this something, disclosed through our experiences, that is taken up into our theological reflections.\textsuperscript{73}

**Question:** What role does experience play in your theological decision making?

**Question:** What happens when your experience of something is in contradiction to Scripture and the church’s tradition? (Example: You have grown up in a denomination that does not ordain women. This is the church’s position based on Scripture and tradition. A crisis develops in your life where you are ministered to by a hospital chaplain who is a woman. You experience her to be compassionate, understanding, comforting, and a representative of the Christian faith and ministry.)

*Firsthand experiences contribute to our understanding of the faith. And what we have learned firsthand enhances our theology and helps contribute to the theological reflections of others as well. . . . Individual religious experiences need not to be remarkable in order to be theologically significant, but all experiences need rigorous theological testing. . . . The corporate experiences of the community of faith also play a role in theological reflection.*\textsuperscript{74}

**Question:** How would you understand “religious experience”?

*Theological reflection makes use of resources derived from experience. Theology has experiential roots. Doing theological reflection calls for Christians to be aware of the experience factor in their own understandings of the faith, and the understanding of faith of others.*\textsuperscript{75}

### Chapter Four: Theological Method

Texts, activities, situations, and events outside and within the church also benefit from theological analysis and theological construction. . . . It would seem fundamental that Christians would want to reflect on their understanding of the Christian message of God. But since their understanding of God’s message is worked out in the context of the church, there is also good reason to reflect on the nature of the church. . . . [Then again] daily life presents itself with many personal, social, and political issues that cannot be avoided. The fact is, we are rarely afforded the leisure to choose what issue upon which to reflect first. More often than not, they hit us in the face.

- Where do you begin?

\textsuperscript{73}Pages 53–54, Stone and Duke

\textsuperscript{74}Pages 54–55, Stone and Duke

\textsuperscript{75}Page 56, Stone and Duke
• How do you proceed?
• How do you develop a theological template?
• How do you prioritize the issue of theology in their order of importance?

Issues such as these belong to an area of theology called theological method, which examines the bases, proper ordering, and norms of theology.\textsuperscript{76}

**Question:** What issues seem to be “hitting the church in the face”?

**Possible Exercise:** Make a list of issues that are facing the church. From that list select one for discussion as you continue working through this chapter.

*The Starting Point of Theology*

Christian theology is reflection on the faith in the Christian message of God in Jesus Christ. The connection between faith and God’s message is an invitation to reflect either on the human side of the connection (faith) or on its divine side (God’s message).

These two tracks have given rise to a distinction between theologies with an anthropological or human starting point and those which begin with divine revelation. An anthropological starting point leads theologians to look first at Christian faith in the context of human living and then seek to ascertain the meaning of God’s message to the world. Theologies with a revelatory starting point typically begin by focusing on the message of God as revealed in Scripture and/or tradition, only then moving on to explore its human implications.\textsuperscript{77}

**Question:** Which track do you best identify with—anthropological or revelatory? Why?

The question of starting point is a significant one. Where theologians begin influences where their theological reflections will lead them. Each starting point has its merits, but also its risks. An anthropological starting point acknowledges that Christian faith develops within the concrete, specific setting of human life. But anthropologically oriented theologians must be on guard lest their views become governed more by their personal, social, or cultural milieu than by the distinctiveness of the Christian message.

For its part, a revelatory starting point has the merit of acknowledging that God’s message alone determines the character and content of an authentically Christian faith. But theologians working from the sources of revelation need to avoid the very real danger of confusing God’s revelation itself with their own fallible grasp of it.\textsuperscript{78}

\textsuperscript{76}Pages 59–60, Stone and Duke

\textsuperscript{77}Page 60, Stone and Duke

\textsuperscript{78}Pages 60–61, Stone and Duke
Question: Why is it important to understand one’s point of origin?

In actual practice, those who go about theological reflection . . . take as their starting point who and where they are, here and now.  

Starting points include life situations in which Christians find themselves: happy in marriage, worried about their children, hoping for a promotion at work, strapped for money, worried that the politicians have the nation on the wrong track, active in a recycling project . . . . The problems of the outside world infiltrate the church. The congregation seems divided between the members who would like to keep those problems at bay and others who urge responding to them with increased funding and new programs for outreach.

They prompt us to reflect on what it means to be faithful to the Christian message of God in these situations. And that involves seeking to understand the meaning of that message.

The topics of theological reflection are infinitely varied and are ordinarily chosen for us by our life situation.

Possible Exercise: Identify the risks that face a congregation when it attempts to ignore pressing social issues that infiltrate the church. Then identify the risks when a congregation intentionally tries to develop ministries bases on such needs.

Question: How would you identify your denomination/local church regarding social issues? Ignore or embrace?

Creative Theology

Whether or not God cares which hymnal a church uses for its Sunday worship, issues like these inevitably come up, every week, in thousands of churches. They can’t be wished away; they have to be dealt with.

In forging an approach to theological reflection that is creative as well as critical, it may be helpful to look at different ways in which our minds deal with information.
Two Modes of Thinking

Sequential thinking is linear cognitive information processing: A leads to B, B leads to C, and so on. Sequential thinking functions logically and analytically. It compares, analyzes, measures, and judges. It orders things successively or chronologically.

Parallel synthetic thinking sees the total picture or Gestalt and the interrelatedness of its parts. It processes information all at once, without separately considering each individual factor.\(^5\)

Question: Which thinking mode suits you best: sequential or parallel synthetic?

Question: How important is it to understand your basic mode of thinking? Why or why not?

Creative Thinking

Creativity is listening and questioning.\(^6\)

Deliberative theological reflection is a communal task; verification requires sharing our thoughts with others.\(^7\)

Question: To what degree does your denomination/local congregation discourage or embrace creative thinking and questioning?

Question: Are there any areas within your church’s discipline where questioning is “out of the question” (i.e., biblical interpretation and tradition)?

A Rudimentary Procedure

Theological reflection is a creative process. It pays attention to where we begin—the starting point. The question remains, How do we begin? What is involved as we go about the task of deliberative theological reflection?\(^8\)

This much, at least, is called for as we deliberate theologically on the questions and struggles of our Christian lives:

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\(^5\)Page 64, Stone and Duke

\(^6\)Page 65, Stone and Duke

\(^7\)Page 66, Stone and Duke

\(^8\)Page 67, Stone and Duke
to make explicit the theological understandings of the Christian message implicit in the discussion;
• to examine those understandings and note their strengths and limits;
• to propose what seems the most adequate resolution to the issue in light of the Christian message of God; and
• to explain in theological terms why what we propose is preferable to other options.

The first two tasks are primarily functions of theological analysis, which is the investigative side of theological method that sets out to discover the understanding of faith implicit or explicit within any issue. The latter two tasks fall under the heading of theological construction, which strives to interpret matters in light of the Christian message. Both tasks are essential in creative deliberative theological reflection, and in practice are interrelated and carried out together.89

To repeat: The subjects for our theological reflection have a tendency to choose themselves.90

Chapter Five: The Gospel

The natural response to life situations is to ask, What do you do? It is a vital, necessary question that cannot be put off for long. But for Christians there is a prior question that requires an answer, one that will shape what we do. It is at the heart of the faith: What is the gospel in this dilemma? Not, What do we do, but, What does the gospel mean here?91

Agree or Disagree: The authors write that the starting question is, What does the gospel mean here? This implies that the gospel is relational and what is “gospel” in one situation may not be fitting for another.

Diagnostic Exercise One

How we view life’s crises and dilemmas, how we reflect upon them theologically, and what choices we make in that light depend upon our understanding of the gospel—God’s good news in Jesus Christ. The gospel . . . is the core of meaning behind their faith, behind what they do and what happens to them. . . . Three questions lend themselves to theological reflections on the gospel.

• What is the gospel?
• How does the gospel reach people?
• How do people receive the gospel and its benefits?92

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89Page 67, Stone and Duke
90Pages 67–68, Stone and Duke
91Page 72, Stone and Duke
92Page 72, Stone and Duke
Agree or Disagree: Our understanding of the gospel is largely determined by how we view and interpret the Scriptures.

What Is the Gospel?

Gospel is among many words used by Christians to speak of the essentials of the Christian message of God.\textsuperscript{93}

The use of the word gospel in the titles of books such as Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John shows that the early church also set forth the meaning of God’s message by retelling the story of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.\textsuperscript{94}

Through Christ, the early Christians claimed, the purpose of God for humanity and all of creation is made known. In the New Testament this purpose is referred to as: salvation, the love of God, the forgiveness of sins, the coming of the reign of God, the grace of God, and covenant.\textsuperscript{95}

Theological reflection on the gospel frequently focuses on questions concerning its content.\textsuperscript{96}

One recurrent approach to examining the meaning of the gospel is to discuss it in terms of its relationship to the notion of law. . . . In Matthew’s view, then, the primary task of faithful disciples is obedience to the law of Christ. Paul conveys another view: he describes the gospel as both the fulfillment and the end of the law.\textsuperscript{97}

Question: What is the relationship between gospel and law?

Agree or Disagree: Some would interpret gospel as following the moral laws that were established by New Testament writers while others believe that the gospel frees us from laws that disconnect us with God, neighbor, and self.

How Does the Gospel Reach People?

The figure of Jesus is understood to be the means by which God makes known glad tidings to the world. Thus, early Christians referred not only to the gospel but to the gospel of Jesus Christ, and not only to salvation but to salvation in Jesus Christ. References to other means by which the gospel is made known are understood to be derived from what God has done in Jesus Christ. The

\textsuperscript{93}Page 72, Stone and Duke
\textsuperscript{94}Page 73, Stone and Duke
\textsuperscript{95}Page 73, Stone and Duke
\textsuperscript{96}Page 73, Stone and Duke
\textsuperscript{97}Page 74, Stone and Duke
earthy life of Jesus was brief. Once the generation that had known him passed away, knowledge of the gospel would die unless it was passed on by other means.

The church understood—and still understands—itself to be that means. Its proclamation of the gospel continues the ministry of Jesus and makes God’s good news known to all nations. So the church is a means by which God continues to impart the good news to people.

The church also understands its Scriptures to be a means by which the gospel is announced.98

It is not the Scriptures alone but the whole life of the church that is to preserve and communicate the gospel. Worship, rituals, sacraments, activities in the outside world are to be means by which the gospel is communicated.99

This task is entrusted to the church as a gift and an obligation coming from God. Such statements, however, raise many serious issues that deliberative theologians have to address. Is it the case, for example, that God’s good news to the world is made known only in Jesus Christ or is the will of God revealed by other means as well, by other persons and at other times and places? When speaking of the church as the means by which the gospel comes to the world, is it true that outside the church there is no salvation? Is it not the case that the church is as sinful as it is saintly and therefore that God’s promise of salvation can come to pass even if churches prove weak or faithless? How can Christians proclaim the gospel confidently without seeming smug or arrogant? . . . By what means does this theology understand the gospel to be made known to the world?100

**Question:** Do you believe that God’s good news is found only in Jesus Christ, or is the will of God revealed by other means as well?

*How Do People Receive the Gospel and Its Benefits?*

This response is referred to as faith . . . It means viewing our own lives and everything else in light of the gospel. It means committing ourselves to live ever-mindful of the love of God in Jesus Christ.101

**Question:** What is the difference between faith and a belief system?

*How do people receive the gospel and its benefits? Your first reaction to these items deserves to be taken seriously. Is what you have always considered essential missing?*102
The task of theology requires that we make judgments about claims—ours and those of others—concerning how God’s message in Jesus Christ becomes a vital force in the lives of people today.\textsuperscript{103}

Suggestions for Theological Analysis

Above all, it is critical to establish one’s own theological account of what the gospel is, how it is imparted, and how we receive its benefits. To do so is to set out on a journey of deliberative theology and will serve as a foundation for all further theological work.\textsuperscript{104}

Agree or Disagree: How one defines “gospel” largely determines one’s understanding of the church’s mission and identity as well as one’s response to the world.

Chapter Six: The Human Condition

How we understand our condition as humans—not only our strengths and our preciousness to God, but also our limits and our opposition to God—is an important part of how we reflect theologically on the circumstances and events of our lives. The second diagnostic exercise, therefore, addresses the condition in which humans find themselves.\textsuperscript{105}

It also deals with the difference that the gospel makes in our lives and with the way in which this change comes about.\textsuperscript{106}

Diagnostic Exercise Two

Christian anthropology—the very theological understanding of the human person. Three questions advance our theological reflection on the human condition:

• What is the basic problem with the human condition? (What is sin?)
• What is the resolution to that problem in the human condition? (What is salvation?)
• How is the problem resolved? (What is the means of salvation?)\textsuperscript{107}

Thus in references to the human condition, attention has to be directed to sin, and vice versa.\textsuperscript{108}

\textsuperscript{103}Page 78, Stone and Duke
\textsuperscript{104}Pages 81–82, Stone and Duke
\textsuperscript{105}Page 83, Stone and Duke
\textsuperscript{106}Page 83, Stone and Duke
\textsuperscript{107}Pages 83–84, Stone and Duke
\textsuperscript{108}Page 84, Stone and Duke
What Is the Basic Problem with the Human Condition? (What Is Sin?)

What comes into view when our human condition is seen from the perspective of the Christian message of God? Scripture records that human beings were created by God. It also records that sin is always a factor in human life.\(^{109}\)

Understanding sin is a challenge for all who do theological reflection. One reason for the difficulty is that there never has been an agreed-upon listing of the many attitudes and actions that are called sins.\(^{110}\)

Acts viewed as sin in one particular cultural milieu or social setting may not be thought of that way in another. It is up to theologians to decide which commands and prohibitions are of enduring validity and which should be left to pass with the changing times.\(^{111}\)

**Question:** What is your definition of sin? (Pride? Disobedience? Broken relationships? Etc.)

**Agree or Disagree:** Sin is any thought or act that creates broken relationships between God, neighbor, and self.

What Is the Resolution to the Problem of the Human Condition? (What Is Salvation?)

Salvation connotes health, wholeness, and rescue.\(^{112}\)

Since the beginning, Christians have spoken of salvation as a tension: already present, yet awaiting completion.\(^{113}\)

Christian soteriology (the doctrine or study of salvation) attempts to distinguish the role of God’s action and human action in the reality of salvation. Few theologians would deny that salvation is a gift of God, or assert that human beings save themselves.\(^{114}\)

Is grace unconditional and irresistible? Or is it an offer that humans are free to accept or reject? Is the kingdom of God brought in by God’s direct intervention, or do human efforts help build it

\(^{109}\)Page 86, Stone and Duke

\(^{110}\)Page 87, Stone and Duke

\(^{111}\)Page 87, Stone and Duke

\(^{112}\)Page 88, Stone and Duke

\(^{113}\)Page 88, Stone and Duke

\(^{114}\)Page 88, Stone and Duke
Question: Is salvation about wholeness and restoration of creation and broken relationships in the present world, or is salvation the “prize” one receives for believing in Jesus?

How Is the Problem Resolved? (What Is the Means of Salvation?)

The special status of Jesus is that of Savior. It is the task of the branch of theology called Christology to develop a proper doctrine of the work and person of Christ.¹¹⁶

Is it true that there is no salvation outside the institution of the church? What about Christians who are by circumstances isolated from other Christians? In what respects is the Way of Christian people synonymous with God’s Way?¹¹⁷

Question: Do you believe that salvation is not found outside the institution of the church? Why or why not? Is there a formal doctrinal statement regarding this from your denomination/local congregation?

Sin, Salvation, and the Human Condition

Christian views of sin seem to fall into four clusters, in which sin is viewed primarily as ignorance, corruptible mortality, broken relationship or alienation, and bondage or oppression. There are also four corresponding clusters of theological themes regarding salvation: bringing true knowledge, incorruptible immortality, reconciliation (justification), and freedom. Finally, there are four parallel theological clusters concerning the means of salvation, in which Jesus is viewed as the teacher of wisdom, the victor over death, the Crucified and Risen One who restores a right relationship with God, and the Liberator.¹¹⁸

Question: What is the relationship between sin and salvation?

The Case of the Great Peasants’ War

Possible Exercise: Read the Case of the Great Peasants’ War in light of the following questions.

Question: To what extent should the church be concerned with basic human rights? Do you agree with the actions of Luther? How do you think Luther came to his conclusion?

¹¹⁵Page 88, Stone and Duke
¹¹⁶Page 89, Stone and Duke
¹¹⁷Page 89, Stone and Duke
¹¹⁸Page 90, Stone and Duke
Is there any time in which taking law into our own hands is justified? How does one’s understanding of sin and salvation relate to this story? If a revolt occurred today in your city, would you side with Luther? The peasants?

The peasants living in Germany at the time of the Reformation suffered pervasive economic and social misery. Crime, disease, hunger, oppression, and early death had long been their plight. Sporadic, localized rebellions against the rich and powerful were not unusual. One such uprising began in the summer of 1524 in the area of the Black Forest. The disturbances quickly spread, and this bitter conflict has come to be known as the Great Peasants’ War.

Its scope and intensity distinguished the Great Peasants’ War from previous rebellions. Another distinctive mark was the widespread use of slogans (for instance, the true gospel, Christian freedom, Scripture alone, and the priesthood of all believers) associated with Martin Luther’s call for church reform. The war itself, however, was not an attempt to establish Lutheranism. The most famous list of peasant demands, the Twelve Articles of 1525, focused primarily on economic concerns—permission to fish and hunt and cut timber, adjustment of rents, the reduction of taxes and tithes to the church, and the proper administration of justice. The peasants also insisted that each local community be allowed to choose its own pastor and that, “since Christ redeemed us all with the shedding of his precious blood,” serfs should be freed. The Twelve Articles explained that “the basis of all the articles” was a desire to live in accord with the gospel, a just Christian demand that only “certain antichristians and enemies of the gospel” oppose and seek to suppress.

Luther initially responded as a mediator. He professed sympathy with the lot of the peasants and criticized the nobility for its callous disregard of their reasonable demands. He also admonished the peasants for taking the law into their own hands and committing acts of violence against persons and property. But as the revolt became (in his eyes) more excessive and anarchistic, he lashed out in a tract “Against the Murderous and Thieving Rabble of the Peasants,” calling upon the nobility to use force to quell the rebels. The nobles hardly needed Luther’s advice. There were already at work on a counteroffensive when the tract was published. In a brief time the revolt was put down.119

Possible Exercise: Read and discuss the Suggestions for Theological Reflection in light of the following questions.

Questions: In this story, who has the power and how is it being used? How did the European feudal system shape theological thought? How would Liberation theologians respond to this story?

Suggestions for Theological Reflection

The European feudal system of lords and peasantry has long since passed away. Even so, the

119Page 91, Stone and Duke
instinct to take sides is hard to quell. The particularities of this long-gone event seem less important than its symbolic meaning. The peasants either stand for the downtrodden of the world or for all who resort to violence in order to improve their lot. The nobles, likewise, represent either oppressors or defenders of law and order. And Luther stands for the church and each of its members who must decide which side they will take in times of economic and political upheaval.\footnote{Page 92, Stone and Duke}

For the peasants, the fundamental problem of the human condition was the control over God’s creation by rulers who, lacking faith and violating the truth of the Word, made common cause with the powers of evil and oppression. The resolution of this problem would be the reinstatement of the rule of justice and freedom in accord with God’s purpose for the world. This end would be achieved by the exposure of the unjust stewards, appeals for renewed commitment to Christian teachings, and finally the forcible overthrow of the oppressors—as God freed the children of Israel from the hand of Pharaoh.\footnote{Page 93, Stone and Duke}

In spite of sympathy for the plight of the peasants and criticism of unjust, hard-hearted nobles, Luther denied that robbery, murder, and destruction were justified by appeal to the gospel. . . . He upheld the command to be obedient to secular authorities and sharply distinguished between “the two kingdoms”—the kingdom of the world and the kingdom of God.\footnote{Pages 93–94, Stone and Duke}

To Luther, the basic problem with the human condition was sin, which he viewed primarily as a broken relationship with God. Created to live in right relationship with God and with one another, humans had instead turned from their Creator in search of autonomy. . . . Luther held that the only resolution to this estrangement is the grace of God—that is, God’s forgiveness and acceptance of us despite our sin. . . . Everything we do, as Luther wrote, is “tainted with sin.”\footnote{Page 94, Stone and Duke}

Had the issues been discussed in a sixteenth-century think tank, those upholding the views of the peasants might concede that, though their cause was righteous, their means involved regrettably evil deeds. Those taking the views of Luther might concede that, just as one good turn deserves another, so the evil of sinful overlords can be expected to incite their sinful subjects to evil.\footnote{Pages 94–95, Stone and Duke}

Whatever the action that Christians understand their faith calls them to undertake, it is to be intricately related to their views of the human condition.\footnote{Page 95, Stone and Duke}
Chapter Seven: Vocation

Christians understand themselves to be called by God—called to be truly Christian, faithful witnesses to the gospel of God in Jesus Christ. The theological term for this responsibility is vocation. It refers to the call to be faithful in the immediate context of one’s life.\textsuperscript{126}

**Agree or Disagree:** When we think of call, we often reserve this for the ordained clergy. From a theological standpoint, the question of Christian action can only be asked from the perspective of a proper understanding of faith as expressed in the gospel message, announcing that God has taken life transforming and world-changing action in the person of Jesus Christ.\textsuperscript{127}

The community of faith has a God-given mission and each of its members a God-given vocation. . . . A key task of theology, therefore, is to describe the meaning of Christian calling.\textsuperscript{128}

**Possible Exercise:** Review your church’s mission statement in light of this chapter.

*All Christians are summoned to be faithful servants of God in the context of their life situation.*\textsuperscript{129}

**Question:** What is God calling you to do?

“What is the right thing to do?” is a question that faces every individual or community. Answering the question involves taking into account not only the situation itself but the moral views that people bring to it.\textsuperscript{130}

They interpret the situations they encounter with a conscious or implicit ethical system. But asking “How are Christians called upon to act?” implies that being Christian calls forth actions that may not be in agreement with other-than-Christian standards. It also implies that there are Christian-specific reasons for acting and Christian-specific criteria for deciding which actions are in keeping with the will of God.\textsuperscript{131}

Committed Christians understand themselves to be under obligation to uphold certain values and to undertake some actions while opposing others.\textsuperscript{132}

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\textsuperscript{126} Page 97, Stone and Duke
\textsuperscript{127} Pages 97–98, Stone and Duke
\textsuperscript{128} Page 98, Stone and Duke
\textsuperscript{129} Page 98, Stone and Duke
\textsuperscript{130} Pages 99–100, Stone and Duke
\textsuperscript{131} Page 100, Stone and Duke
\textsuperscript{132} Page 100, Stone and Duke
**Question:** Can you think of a situation where the church may be called upon to defy the “law of the land” in order to remain faithful to the Gospel?

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**Diagnostic Exercise Three**

*Three questions lend themselves to reflecting theologically on Christian vocation.*

- What deeds are Christians called to do?
- What are the reasons for doing a service or action?
- Why is one course of action the most fitting in a given situation?\(^{133}\)

**What Deeds Are Christians Called to Do?**

*People in the church express their views about how Christians ought to respond to whatever is going on in the world.*\(^{134}\)

*Discriminating the most appropriate understanding of Christian service from among the different views found in both Scripture and tradition has been a matter of ongoing controversy in the church. Cultural values find their way into Christian views of their calling so unconsciously that at times it is difficult to distinguish what is Christian from what are simply societal norms.*\(^{135}\)

**Question:** How do you systematically separate what is gospel from what are societal norms?

*Church members regularly differ on the standards for Christian action, praising or condemning others for their views. Heated arguments break out when the church cannot speak in one voice or act in concert because of divergent understandings of Christian vocation.*\(^{136}\)

**Possible Exercise:** Choose a topic that is currently taking place in the world. This can be an issue facing the church or an event in the global scene that involves the political systems. Raise the concerns and questions regarding the appropriate actions for the church. (Example: Should the United States be involved in warfare activity in an attempt to liberate the country from a destructive leader?)

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\(^{133}\)Page 100, Stone and Duke

\(^{134}\)Page 101, Stone and Duke

\(^{135}\)Page 102, Stone and Duke

\(^{136}\)Page 102, Stone and Duke
Theological reflection on the reasons for commending a course of action must deal with at least three concerns. It seeks first to uncover the real reasons behind the action in question. Second, it attempts, from all reasons given for a particular action, to separate out the distinctly Christian reasons. And third, it examines whether the reasons given are sufficient to justify a particular action. After all, an earnest attempt to be faithful to our Christian calling does not necessarily mean that any given deed is the one and only faithful action to be taken. In short we ask:

- What are the real reasons?
- What are the Christian reasons?
- Are they sufficient reasons?

Throughout the history of the church the reasons Christians have given for the actions they take typically combine “because of” reasons and “in-order-to” reasons.¹³⁷

Why Is a Course of Action the Most Fitting in a Given Situation?

Having examined reasons for various courses of action, we find that most issues which call for theological reflection require that we choose one action of service to the exclusion of all others.¹³⁸

Determining the suitability of an action takes into consideration both the reasons for doing it and the situation.¹³⁹

Deliberative theological reflection about fittingness may question moral standards that have already been decided by the church.¹⁴⁰

It is hard at times to come up with Christian reasons for reopening cases that have been settled. Indeed, there are some, who might be called moral absolutists, who hold that God’s rules for living are fixed for all time. Behind that view is the conviction that faithfulness to the Christian calling is already stipulated by biblical or churchly guidelines that are obligatory in every situation.¹⁴¹

Decisions about the Christian thing to do involve genuine theological deliberation rather than following an already fully prescribed rule.¹⁴²

¹³⁷ Pages 103–4, Stone and Duke
¹³⁸ Page 104, Stone and Duke
¹³⁹ Page 105, Stone and Duke
¹⁴⁰ Page 105, Stone and Duke
¹⁴¹ Page 106, Stone and Duke
¹⁴² Page 106, Stone and Duke
Differences over such decisions are often at the heart of church conflicts.\textsuperscript{143}

The point of the third question of the diagnostic exercise on Christian vocation is to choose one particular view or action that is the most fitting expression of Christian faithfulness in a given situation.\textsuperscript{144}

In the real world, a Christian sense of calling rarely demands that we act in only one particular manner.\textsuperscript{145}

By examining the ways an action can be deemed the most fitting service for Christians, theologically reflective Christians perform a ministry that might otherwise go undone. They help unravel the threads of conviction that are woven into difficult moral choices. They help not only themselves but the entire body of Christ arrive at decisions concerning how Christians ought to act.\textsuperscript{146}

**Possible Exercise:** Discuss the following situation in light of this chapter. The pastor of your church has been contacted by the local AIDS foundation requesting the use of the sanctuary for a memorial service for AIDS patients who have died in the past year. The director of the foundation says that the news media will be there. He also tells the pastor that the invited speaker is a gay man who wishes to share his story in hope of keeping others from contracting this horrible disease.

**Chapter Eight: Theological Reflection in Christian Community**

Theological reflection—critical thinking, spiritual formation, the community of faith, and day-to-day life in the trenches of human existence.\textsuperscript{147}

**Critical Theology**

Critical inquiry. That is not to say it is negative or faultfinding, but it questions. It takes an honest, observant, probing stance toward everything that falls under the watchful eye of the Christian as theologian.\textsuperscript{148}

\textsuperscript{143}Page 106, Stone and Duke
\textsuperscript{144}Page 107, Stone and Duke
\textsuperscript{145}Page 108, Stone and Duke
\textsuperscript{146}Page 108, Stone and Duke
\textsuperscript{147}Pages 113–14, Stone and Duke
\textsuperscript{148}Page 114, Stone and Duke
Embedded theologies express answers about the meaning of the Christian message of God that are already inherent in the church and the experience of its members. Deliberative theology is an additive step. . . . Do these answers adequately convey the meaning of the Christian message for the people of faith?\(^{149}\)

This primary question turns theological reflection into critical inquiry, for it challenges (at least temporarily) every status quo understanding of faith. . . . Critical inquirers want to know: Is this understanding of Christian faith adequate? If so, why? If not, why not? Can a revised, more adequate understanding be developed?\(^{150}\)

**Question:** Do you agree that the church should be doing critical inquiry regarding pressing issues facing society? Is there a vehicle in your congregation that allows this to take place (i.e., theological reflection group)?

**Description**

To describe is to give a clearheaded look at the subject of theological reflection. . . . Accurately describing every observable aspect and detail of the situation, the problem, or the topic and detecting the embedded theology is a first step toward dealing with it in an honest critical light.\(^{151}\)

Accurate description is as necessary for clear thinking in theological reflection as it is in any endeavor.\(^{152}\)

**Questioning helps us to observe accurately.**\(^{153}\)

**Analysis**

The task of critical inquiry in Western Christianity during the twentieth century has focused on three main lines of questioning. The first, a by-product of modern philosophy and science, is the test by reason and experience.\(^{154}\)

A second line of questioning has its roots in the rise of historical consciousness and modern

\(^{149}\)Page 114, Stone and Duke

\(^{150}\)Page 114, Stone and Duke

\(^{151}\)Page 115, Stone and Duke

\(^{152}\)Page 115, Stone and Duke

\(^{153}\)Page 115, Stone and Duke

\(^{154}\)Page 116, Stone and Duke
approaches to the study of history. . . . How, for example, can the truths of faith be said to be unchanging when history shows that Christian teaching has changed over time?155

**Question:** Do you believe that Christian teaching has changed over time or is “God’s truth” unchanging?

**Possible Exercise:** Identify changes the church has made regarding its teachings (i.e., slavery, women in ministry, divorce, etc.). What do you think caused the changes?

A third line of analytical questioning has as its focus the conditions of human living—the psychological, sociological, economic, and political forces that shape the course of human life.156

**Question:** What does theology have to say about such matters as poverty, world hunger, ecology, welfare, gender issues, racial and ethnic discord, immigration policy, family values, mental health, and so forth?157

Critical questioning is as individual and as diverse as Christians and their situations. We ask questions not only of the specific problem, but about how those elements relate to the core themes of our faith, applying the diagnostic tests of gospel, human condition, and Christian vocation. No question is off-limits to theological reflection. All questions are worth exploring.158

**Framing a View**

Theologies identify the meaning of things viewed through the eyes of faith. These theological meanings are formed by acts of interpretation, correlation, and assessment.159

There comes a time when we have to frame the view that is being formed. . . . Using our embedded theology, we do this pretty much in simple “point-and-shoot” fashion. In deliberative theology, however, we adjust the aperture, zoom in or out, while double-checking whether we are getting the very best view possible. Careful observation of the scene and exploration of its relationship to the core concerns of faith can lead to a more intentional, refined understanding.

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155 Pages 116–17, Stone and Duke
156 Page 117, Stone and Duke
157 Page 117, Stone and Duke
158 Pages 117–18, Stone and Duke
159 Page 118, Stone and Duke
of what it means for our life and for the community of faith.\textsuperscript{160}

*Questioning is the primary means by which our view is brought into focus.*\textsuperscript{161}

**Judgment and Response**

*To judge, in the context of a critical theological method, is to make a choice.*\textsuperscript{162}

*We have to decide. Fear of being wrong is no excuse; it is a risk every theologian takes. With a critical method and the resources of Scripture and the church’s tradition, experience, and reason to guide us, we reach a point where all of our deliberations bring us to a certain understanding or a sense that certain acts are more fitting than others. We form views, take a stand, commit ourselves, choose a course of action.*\textsuperscript{163}

**Question:** What are the risks in deciding and acting?

*At this stage of theological reflection it is important to articulate reasons for our judgments and subsequent actions.*\textsuperscript{164}

**Agree or Disagree:** Articulation is critical to theological reflection. Why or why not?

*Theological reflection occurs in the context of community. Because it is communal, it is also collaborative and dialogical. Even though we eventually come up with our own unique operational theology, its formation occurs in testing, sharing, talking, and listening to others.*\textsuperscript{165}

*Our theology also is formed by the convictions of the community of faith. We influence each other’s understanding of the faith.*\textsuperscript{166}

**Agree or Disagree:** Many of our theological positions are influenced by others.

**Possible Exercise:** Identify those in your denomination/local congregation/personal faith journey who have been influential in shaping your theology.
Question: Giving up embedded theology (even when necessary) is often painful. Could this be because we believe that if we disregard certain theological beliefs, we are somehow showing disrespect to those who were so instrumental in shaping our faith?

Knowing why we believe what we believe allows us to enter into conversation with other Christians.  

Agree or Disagree: Theological discussions can be threatening especially when we have not formulated our theological positions from scripture, tradition, reason, and experience.

Chapter Nine: Forming Spirit

The sensitive nature of an intimate relationship with God may be displaced by an attitude of detachment. Genuine concern for the meaning of faith may give way to mere intellectualizing.

Spiritual formation is a traditional term, now in widespread use once again, for what we are describing. In the practice of spiritual disciplines such as worship, Scripture reading, meditation and prayer, or spiritual direction, we are not asleep or passive but receptive, sensitive to the presence of God and open to the power of the Spirit. . . . Spiritual formation can enrich, balance, and inform our theological reflection, and bridge the gap between our experience and our study of faith.

Worship

In corporate worship we involve our intellect, eyes, bodies, ears, the senses of touch and smell, even our sense of rhythm.

Theology became life.

Spiritual Disciplines

We operate each day in the presence of God.
The disciplines of Scripture reading, meditation, and prayer remind us that our relationship with God is the overarching concern that focuses all others and helps us rise beyond only basic human needs and desires to follow the gospel.\textsuperscript{173}

Paul distinguishes between the \textit{nepioi}, those beginners in the faith who are fed only milk, and the \textit{teleioi}, those more mature Christians who can receive solid food. It often seems many churches today focus so much on the \textit{nepioi} that the \textit{teleioi} are left to fend for themselves. They deliver many introductory lectures and not enough nourishment to help the faithful grow to a deeper understanding of the gospel and a more significant relationship with God.\textsuperscript{174}

A Trenches Hermeneutic

The process of theological reflection occurs in concrete life situations.\textsuperscript{175}

\textsuperscript{173}Page 126, Stone and Duke

\textsuperscript{174}Page 127, Stone and Duke

\textsuperscript{175}Page 128, Stone and Duke