

Chapter 1: Introduction

Statement of purpose

It was said that good theology is merely the unpacking of what faithful Christians have always believed. What does it mean to you that, because you are a Christian, you are a theologian?

Have you ever considered making a sketch, detailed or otherwise, of what you believe as a Christian? Consider reflecting on this as you go through this work. Pay attention to how you might order a personal confession of faith.

What is Theology?

How would you define "Theology?"

When theology is defined in terms of "ultimate beliefs about God, about humanity, and about the relation between the two," what key issues come to mind?

What does it mean for the reality we are speaking of to take priority over the words we use to speak of it?

Have you ever considered yourself as part of a theological community, who work together to discern the will of God and interpret the scriptures? What does being such a community require of its members?

Is it surprising that few serious debates within the church have been resolved by an appeal to scripture? How have you seen problems surrounding Biblical ambiguity in your own local church or denomination?

What is the difference between using scriptural citations as "proof-texts" and using scriptural citations as explanations of theological claims?

How do you view the role of the Bible in theology?

Chapter 2: God's Interaction With Israel

The Scandal of Particularity

The claim that God has revealed God's self in Jesus Christ and in Israel in ways quite unlike in any other time and place has been deeply offensive to many. How does this radical focus on a time and place so foreign to our own make you feel?

What difference does it make that what God has done *then* and *there* is the standard by which we interpret what God is doing *here* and *now*?

Time and Space

For Christians, God is not an abstract concept developed from our own experience or from cultural ideologies. How might the fact that God's revelation is so radically concrete challenge the ways we often think of God?

The Shaping of the Israelite Culture

The idea is introduced in this section that God engaged distinctively with the Israelite culture in order to shape it to be an appropriate vehicle for God's full and final self-revelation in Jesus Christ. In doing so, God shaped not only the content of Israel's culture, but the very framework of thought and life of a whole nation. It is difficult to identify the framework of our thought and life since it forms the basic pattern of our lives and culture. However, these elements can come to light when we interact with other cultures. In what ways have you become aware of the, normally unseen, basic framework of your thought and life? Is this a new idea to you? How might one become aware of such frameworks?

What events or patterns have shaped how you and your culture understand particular words and concepts?

Though we can imagine a situation where God had not chosen Abraham and his descendants to be his people, this is what actually took place. In what ways are we tempted to substitute our own history for the history of Israel?

Reciprocal/Holistic Relationship of Knowing Between Christ and the Old Testament

In what ways have you found that reading the Old Testament has helped you understand the New Testament? Vice versa?

Sacrifice

How does an understanding of sacrifice rooted in the history of Israel as born witness to in the Old Testament differ from a purely secular understanding of sacrifice that makes no reference to the scriptures?

Law

What are some concrete ways that we might interpret the Old Testament law in light of the person of Christ?

Chapter 3: God the Incarnate Son

Jesus as a Jew

What are some concrete ways that it makes a difference that Jesus was a first century Palestinian Jew and not a twenty-first century American?

Israel's history is marked with God moulding and shaping their culture over centuries, which was something of a painful process. In what ways might we need to let God similarly transform our own culture?

Jesus Redefines Judaism

Jesus, being who he is, redefined Judaism. In what ways does Jesus, being who he is, redefine what it means to be an American who is also a Christian?

In this section, various ways are mentioned of attempting to deal with the problem of a monotheistic culture dealing with the Christian conviction of having God the Father and God the Son. Which of these seem more reasonable? Why?

The Incarnation

It is claimed in this section that the incarnation of God among us in and as Jesus Christ is the very most central claim in all of Christian faith. Do you agree or disagree? What other beliefs, in your judgment, might be in competition for centrality?

Of One Being with the Father

More Christians agree that the Nicene Creed is an accurate confession of Christian faith than can agree on the number of books in the Bible. What does this say about the relation of theology to scripture?

It was claimed that attempting to reason from the creation to the Creator is unreliable at best. In what ways might drawing conclusions based on nature be misleading.

Cosmological Dualism

What does the fact that God came among us in and as Jesus Christ tell us about how heaven and earth are related to one another?

Epistemological Dualism

The radical disjunction between "things in themselves" and "things as they appear to us," quickly became developed into evidence for postmodern relativism. How does Jesus being both the revelation of God and also God help us to navigate through such relativism?

Anthropological Dualism

How does the fact that our soul is always soul-of-our-body and our body is always body-of-our-soul shape the way we think of caring for our bodies? Our souls?

Real Knowledge of God

To claim that one can actually know God in Jesus Christ (and, consequently, that God cannot be known as fully in any other way) can be quite offensive. The two main ways that people tend to express their offense at this is by saying that it is arrogant to assume that you *really* know God as God actually is, or by saying that God simply would not have done what Christianity claims Jesus did, for whatever reason. Which way would people you know lean on this particular issue?

"Change" in God

Does the way that we can say that God changes and the way that we can say that God remains always the same discussed in this section make sense to you? How does this idea comfort or, alternatively, disturb, you?

The Person and Work of Christ

What does it mean that we cannot separate who Jesus is from what he does or what he does from who he is?

Hypostatic Union

In this section and the ones that follow it, the issue of the divinity and humanity of Jesus Christ is taken up. There has been a strong tendency to either separate the two natures or to collapse them together. Which direction have you or those you know leaned on this issue?

The Vicarious Humanity of Christ

Have you ever considered the fact that, since Jesus did not only die, but lived a real human life, we need not only a God who dies for us, but one who lives for us? How might that change the way we think about God and our relationship with him?

Birth

How does the fact that, when God became a human being, he did so as a newborn give us insight into God's care for newborns and for the human condition?

12 Year Old in the Temple

What encouragement can we give adolescents in light of the fact that Jesus had to learn the law and to grow to maturity, just like we do.

Baptism

What light does Jesus' baptism shed on the church's practice of baptism? Does it give any insight into the infant baptism question?

Temptation

What comfort can the temptation of Jesus give to us in the midst of our temptation?

Teaching

In Christ, the very teaching of God has come to us in a way that we human beings can grasp. How does this incarnation, so to speak, of God's teaching help us to make sense of difficult passages?

Prayer

Jesus, God in flesh, made a habit of regular prayer to his Father. How should we understand our own relation to God in prayer in light of this?

Crucifixion

Reflect on the words from Charles Wesley's hymn, "And Can It Be That I Should Gain."
"Tis mystery all, the immortal dies. who can explore his strange design? In vain the
firstborn seraph tries to sound the depths of love divine. Tis mercy all, let earth adore,
let angel minds inquire no more." Write any response you have.

Resurrection

In the resurrection, Jesus rose from the dead in glory in the humanity he took from us
(this is why the tomb was empty). What does this have to say about God's ultimate will
for humanity?

Ascension

With Jesus' ascension to heaven (again in our humanity), God made the earthly ministry
of Christ the covenanted place in space and time where he meets with us in a special
way. What does this have to say about our understanding of the Bible and the canon
(the books we recognize as authoritative for Christian life and teaching)?

Chapter 4: God the Father

Knowledge of God

We live in an increasingly pluralistic and skeptical world. On what basis can we say that we really know God and can speak with any degree of certainty about the divine?

If it is really true that Jesus is God, what can we learn of God through Christ that we cannot learn any other way?

Attributes of God

Are there any attributes of God, such as those discussed in the following sections, that take on new shape when looking at Christ for our clue about the nature of God?

Theological Language

There are some who approach the Bible as a word-for-word transcript of the words (or even the thoughts) of God and is, therefore, revelation in itself. How does such an understanding differ from an understanding of the Bible as primarily a witness to revelation as presented here?

Priority of Being Over Language

What words and concepts can you think of that have been taken from common English usage and redefined by the gospel? Consider words such as "save" "sacrifice," etc.

Use of Non-Biblical Language

What are some words that are not found in the Bible that have become important terms in Christian faith nonetheless?

Gender Language for God

In your opinion, is the maleness of Christ a stumbling block for women?

What is your understanding of using gendered language for God?

Does using male language for God add to or undo patriarchalism and sexism? Why?

Is the argument for the use of male language for God (called in the text somewhat arbitrary), and made parallel to the question, "Why the Jews?" convincing?

Connection Between Creation and Incarnation

What difference does it make whether we say "God created the heavens and the earth" and "(The Triune) God created the heavens and the earth?"

The Contingence of Creation

After reading this and the following sections, does contingency seem to you to be a valid alternative to the Chance/Necessity couplet? Why or why not?

Eternal/Necessary Creation

If the universe could not have been other than it is, and God had no choice in creation, what would be the result for Christian life?

Creation as Illusion

The idea that creation might be an illusion has revived in light of postmodern philosophy. How might Christian faith pose a viable alternative to such skepticism?

Creation as Emanation

Many philosophers and modern theologians have affirmed that the world either *is* God or is an important thing that helps *make up* God. Is such a view compatible with a Christian understanding of the Incarnation? Why or why not?

Creation as Contingent

How does the contingency of creation teach us about the freedom and love of God?

Natural Science

Have you considered the deep roots that modern empirical science has in the Judeo-Christian tradition? How might some of the shared assumptions woven into the fabric of Christian theology and natural science make way for dialogue and progress for both fields?

Science as "a Posteriori" Investigation

We have seen, in the shift to post-Einsteinian science, that the framework of our thought can damage progress. Has this happened in our thinking of God as well?

Chapter 5: God the Holy Spirit

The Problem of the Holy Spirit

How might associating a concrete image with the Holy Spirit be misleading?

The Spirit of the Father

What is the significance of the fact that the one who is sent to dwell in those who belong to Christ is of one being with the Father, that is, the Holy Spirit is truly God?

What do you think of the idea that the Spirit images God in an "imageless" way?

Spirit of Christ

If we only come to know Christ in the Spirit and if we only can understand the Spirit in light of Christ, how can we understand the relation between the two and how each impacts our Christian life?

What impact does it have on our understanding of evangelism if nobody in the New Testament *really* understood Jesus until Pentecost?

The Holy Spirit and Revelation

How are the divinity of Christ and of the Holy Spirit related to the canon being closed?

What is the difference between saying that further so-called revelation must not contradict what we see in scripture and saying that further so-called revelation must not contradict what we see in Jesus?

Union with Christ

In what ways is the idea of Christians being united to Christ like branches on a vine deeper and richer than simply that of being forgiven?

Fruit of the Spirit

How does the call to bear the fruit of the Spirit become clarified or deepened when understood as being united to the life of Christ?

The Gifts of the Spirit

Can the understanding of the gifts of the Spirit as the participation of the church in the high priestly ministry of Christ foster helpful discussion between those who affirm the continued operation of such gifts and those who reject them? In what way?

Chapter 6: God the Holy Trinity

Problematic Ways of Explaining the Trinity

The examples of the egg and water have a long tradition in the modern church. What makes them problematic?

In what ways, in your experience, does the Trinity go to the root of all authentic Christian experience, or seem irrelevant to daily life?

Unique Nature of the Christian Doctrine of God

How does the fact that no other religion or philosophy has developed a doctrine of the Trinity reflect on its importance for Christian theology and practice?

How is the doctrine of the Incarnation related to the doctrine of the Trinity?

Biblical Roots of the Doctrine of the Trinity

The word "Trinity" never appears in the Bible. Is this, in your judgment, problematic? "Why or why not?"

How does an emphasis on the relations between the Persons of the Trinity as opposed to an emphasis on the persons considered in themselves, change the way we understand the Biblical evidence?

Coming to Understand the Trinity

How does understanding the doctrine of the Trinity as the result of "evangelical and doxological participation in the Gospel" helpful or unhelpful, as compared to the egg and water or other approaches to the Trinity with which you may be familiar?

Explain, in your own words, the relation between the evangelical/doxological participation of the faithful in God through Christ and in the Spirit, the “Economic Trinity” and the “Ontological Trinity.”

Trinitarian Heresies

How is heresy as a pastoral diagnosis of destructive teaching different from heresy as a judgment leading to torture or execution?

It is a fairly straightforward task to determine what a text says, but much more difficult to discern what a text means. How might one decide between rival interpretations of a given text?

Arianism

If the one who came among us as Jesus of Nazareth is not the God of the universe but a creature (even an exalted creature), what impact does that have for Christian worship?

Sabellianism/Modalism

What is the practical implication if the Economic Trinity is not rooted in an Ontological Trinity?

Tritheism

How does the belief in a significant separation of the being and acts of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit shape our understanding of the Oneness of God?

Perichoresis/Perichoretic Co-Activity

How might one consider the Persons of the Trinity to be distinct and yet not have one of them without the other two being present?

Chapter 7: Eschatology

Introduction to Eschatology

Do you perceive your church as emphasizing eschatology? How much do you think about final things?

The Resurrection

In what specific ways does the Christian hope of resurrection differ from pagan hopes for immortality?

What is the connection between the resurrection of Christ and the resurrection we hope for as Christians?

Reflect on the fact that the Holy Trinity now involves a human being.

Christ's Return

What does it mean that we believe in a Christ who is returning, but, in a different sense, has already returned in the pouring out of the Holy Spirit?

What does the return of Christ have to say about the future plan of God and what does this say about our current situation?

Divine Judgment

What Biblical support might views such as universalism, monergism, and synergism have? What Biblical evidence is there against them?

How might we start over and develop more faithful concepts?

How is "all of grace" compatible with "all of humanity?"

Hell

In your opinion, how serious is the issue of hell, whether it exists or not?

Is the argument for a conception of hell as being an expression of love and mercy presented here convincing? Why or why not?

If we were to deny the reality of hell, how else might we maintain the conviction that we live in a moral universe, or is this not possible? Explain.

Between Death and Resurrection

Where one comes out on the question, "What happens between death and resurrection" has never been considered by the main branches of the church to be a central dogma, which one must accept. Which of the options presented here seems the most plausible to you?

The World to Come

How does an affirmation of the *annihilatio mundi* (The Annihilation of the world) quietly deny the resurrection?

Chilistic Views

What core, biblical conviction, do premillennialism, postmillennialism, preterism and amillennialism each have?

Implications of Eschatology

How can thinking eschatologically help us to sort through and discern whether things are of lasting or only temporary importance?

Chapter 8: The Christian Life

Some Introductory Remarks

As one who has gotten this far in the study of theology, would you say that your faith and life has changed over this journey? Explain.

Have you been convinced that the incarnation of God in our midst is intrinsically relevant for our Christian lives? Why or why not?

The Human Condition as Revealed in the Incarnation

How could asking the question "What would Jesus do?" in isolation from the answer to the question "What has Jesus done?" lead to distortion?

What is the difference between saying that something is evil because God condemns it and saying that God condemns something because it is evil?

How is a response to Christian revelation different than a response to a purely existential crisis?

Holistic

When God took on human flesh, he took on our *entire* humanity. How does this reflect on the extent of the Christian life?

Is there a noticeable difference between asking "What would Jesus do?" and asking that, along with "What would Jesus *think*" and "How would Jesus *feel*?"

Dynamic and Personal

The fact that Jesus is dynamic and personal means that our Christian lives are also dynamic and personal. This means that any transformation of Christ or the Christian life into a list of rules or an ideology is out of line. In what ways are we tempted to do this?

What would it mean to place God as our authority over rules, even such rules as the Ten Commandments?

Participatory

How does remembering that, as Paul says, we have been crucified with Christ and that it is Christ living his life through us, help us to focus on what God would have us do?

Chapter 9: The Church

Definition/Biblical Imagery

How does a shift from thinking of the church in terms of Matthew 18:20 to thinking of it in terms of Ephesians 4:1-6 change our understanding of the church?

Which of the images for the church discussed in this section (Body of Christ, Bride of Christ, Branches on a Vine) stick out to you? Which have you not considered as much before?

The Marks of the Church

Is the use of marks of the church useful for you? Why or why not?

One

How might we defend the unity of the church in light of the rampant division that we have seen?

How might we strive for increased unity with our brothers and sisters in other denominations?

Holy

The church has unfortunately, throughout history, been incredibly unholy. How can the idea that one of the marks of the church is holiness help call us back to our purpose? How might the idea be interpreted in a divisive way?

Catholic

Do you consider your church as being a vital part of a worldwide body? Why or why not?

Apostolic

What continuity or discontinuity do you perceive the modern church to have with the first generation of Christians? Are we truly an apostolic church?

Baptism

In what way can we say that baptism is the sacrament of our justification (forgiveness)?

Holy Communion

In what way can we say that Holy Communion is the sacrament of our sanctification (our being made holy)?

Order

How much have you thought about the way your local church or denomination is organized? Is the particular form of order important to you or your local church?

Episcopal

What are some advantages to the Episcopal form of church government as you understand it? What are some disadvantages?

Presbyterian

What are some advantages to the Presbyterian form of church government as you understand it? What are some disadvantages?

Congregational

What are some advantages to the Congregational form of church government as you understand it? What are some disadvantages?

Ecumenism

Is ecumenism a goal that is worth being pursued? Why or why not?

In what ways is your denomination involved in ecumenical dialogue?

How might your local church be involved in ecumenical activity?
