Why Everyone Should Think Theologically

Thinking theologically is an essential and inclusive activity of the community of faith.

While this thesis is neither new nor bold, it is so important and so consistently neglected that it deserves further attention. The thesis is important because the essential involvement of the whole community derives from the nature of the community as a community of faith— that is, a community whose identity is defined by its shared spirituality, practices, and beliefs.

The thesis is neglected, I believe, because of an unfortunate coincidence of elitism and apathy: certain groups within the community—principally church officials, professional theologians, and sometimes also pastors—are eager to assume the theological task that is the proper responsibility and privilege of the whole community; and the rest of the community is largely willing to let these groups do its theological thinking. As a result, almost no one is enthusiastic about involving the whole community in the interpretation of faith. Besides, actually getting the whole community involved is extremely difficult and the process seems hopelessly inefficient.

In order to avoid the historical, theological, and personal baggage often carried by the term “the church,” I usually use instead a designation such as “the community of faith,” “the Adventist community,” or simply “the community.” For the essence of what we commonly call “the church” is not its organizational structure, its
officials, or its clergy, but its people.¹ Identified in traditional Latin as *communio sanctorum* (the communion of the saints) or *congregatio fidelium* (the congregation of the faithful), the people as a whole are the community.² The clergy are the professional ministers (literally, “servants”) employed by the community to assist it in fulfilling its mission; and the church officials at various organizational levels are employed by the community to facilitate and coordinate its various activities.

The community of faith is constituted by persons who know they belong to one another, and who live in deliberate relation to one another—worshipping, searching, and serving together; caring about and for one another; and experiencing in the context of the community their own personal fulfillment and identity as daughters and sons of God. What initiates, legitimates, and maintains this spiritual community is the people’s shared faith—their similar forms of spirituality, similar behavioral and liturgical practices, and similar understandings of God’s activity in behalf of humanity and of the appropriate human response—often shaped by a common heritage. There are, to be sure, other factors—socioeconomic, political, social, and personal—involving the establishment, identity, and continuation of such a community;³ but my point here is that it is, always and essentially, a community of faith.

This picture of “the community of faith” is, of course, the delineation of an ideal—what it is in principle rather than a description of its typical actuality. If we took it as a formal definition, we would conclude that not all, and perhaps not many, religious groups are true communities; they are merely organizations, establishments, societies, or associations of some sort. Yet in spite of its idealism, I want to use the word “community” instead of “church” as a frequent reminder of the ideal we are called to actualize as often and as well as we can.⁴ The incidental fact that a Christian community of faith is


³An influential early discussion of some of these factors was H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism,* reprint (Hamden, CT: Shoe String Press, 1954).

⁴See, for example, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York: Harper, 1954); Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre
usually organized into a structured church does not alter the essential fact that it is, first and foremost, a community. It is important to the health of the community that it recognize the ways in which its organizational structures tend to distort and subvert its nature as a community.

Because I am an Adventist theologian writing primarily for Adventist readers, the phrase “the community of faith” often refers particularly to the Adventist community; but most of the content of this chapter is applicable as well to many other Christian—especially Protestant—denominational communities and would be consonant with their self-understandings. Referring to “denominational communities”—Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Episcopal, Methodist, Southern Baptist, Pentecostal—recognizes that these different groups understand the activity of God and the proper human response to it in ways that tend to differentiate them from other Christian communities. Unfortunately, every denominational community, including our own, tends to make its distinctiveness the very center and soul of its spirituality and theology, thus often blurring, and sometimes distorting, the Christian gospel.

The concrete, living, invigorating reality of the community of faith is the interaction of its members—or, better, its “participants,” since not all its official members actually participate interactively, and not all its actual participants hold formal membership in the community. This interaction occurs in various modes and in wide spectrums of frequency and intensity. Most commonly the life of the Adventist community occurs in worship services, Sabbath School activities, and Sabbath potlucks; participants also interact significantly in academic and professional settings, in small study and mission groups, through networks of friends, and by means of official and unofficial publications. Of varying degrees of significance for the spiritual vitality of the community are the interactions that occur in connection with ecclesiastical structures—church boards; conference, union conference, division, and General Conference


I am indebted to Roy Branson for pointing out the spiritual and sociological significance of the potluck dinner as a Sabbath ritual.
executive committees and constituency sessions; meetings of pastors, teachers, and other professional groups.

In all of this variety of groupings and occasions, the common element is the personal interaction that constitutes the living reality of the community of faith. This point needs to be emphasized because of a long-standing, deeply felt, and thoroughly mistaken tendency of some to think of “the church” as a transcendent spiritual entity that somehow floats “above” the individuals in the community of faith. The truth is that the community of faith just is the people, and their interactions constitute its life.

An Essential Task

For the community of faith, the theological task—the interpretation of faith—is not optional; it is entailed in the community’s mission in and to the world. As “God’s appointed agency” for communicating the good news of salvation, the community cannot evade its theological responsibility. However difficult and sometimes disturbing the task of theological reflection, criticism, and construction may be, it is absolutely essential. If the community refuses to do its theological thinking, it endangers its own spiritual health and reduces the effectiveness of its witness to the world. Conversely, if the community is willing to engage actively in the ongoing interpretation of its faith, it will enhance its spiritual stability and vigor and increase its effectiveness in communicating its understanding of God’s love.

As one component of the community’s total mission and ministry, theological reflection is a complement to other components, such as proclamation, witness, service, fellowship, and nurture. Indeed, in one sense we can say that the community engages in theology for the sake of these other components. It is obvious, for example, that theology is closely related to proclamation and witness. For proclamation and witness typically involve not only the “first-order” language of faith I described in chapter 1, but also the “second-order,” reflective language that interprets faith.

Any proclamation or witness that elaborates the reasons for, or the meaning of, religious faith is by definition a form of theological

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activity. And the more carefully and thoroughly the community thinks about its faith and the language that expresses it, the more effective will be its explanation and the more powerful its proclamation. Thus we can “present sound arguments, that will not only silence our opponents, but will bear the closest and most searching scrutiny.” If Adventist preaching is not as rationally persuasive as it should be in the light of the intrinsic attractiveness of God’s universal love, the Sabbath, and the Advent hope, one reason is the inadequacy of the community’s interpretation of faith—its thinking about the meaning, validity, and implications of its faith.

Less obviously, but just as truly, theology is also related to the community’s service to the world (as reflection on the nature of and the motivation for that service), the experience of fellowship (as one of the shared activities of the community of faith), and nurture (as one of the necessary factors of spiritual growth). The more the community understands the reasons for and the meaning of its faith, the deeper its experience of faith will be, the more interesting its faith will be to its own children as well as to others in future generations, and the less danger there will be that its worship will degenerate into monotonous routine or empty ritual.

In another sense, however, we can say that the community’s theological task has its own objectives and thus its own dignity and integrity. While it makes a significant and perhaps indispensable contribution to the other components of the community’s mission and ministry, it is not merely a useful means to these other, worthy ends. For the task of understanding and interpreting faith, in and of itself, is entailed by the call to love God with all our minds; and to the extent that this call comes to the community as well as to individuals, thinking theologically is a collective responsibility of the community.

Indeed, theology may finally serve the other dimensions of the community’s ministry best when it is not done deliberately for their sakes but is undertaken for its own sake. When, for instance, theology is done primarily to provide “ammunition” for proclamation, it is in danger of losing its integrity by being distorted into propaganda or polemic, neither of which is adequate proclamation in the long run. Paradoxically, therefore, theology may be most useful precisely

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when its “usefulness” is not its motivation—when, in other words, it is simply “faith seeking understanding” for the sake of truth.⁸

Yet I want to reiterate the conviction that theology is not “more important” than the other components of the community’s mission and ministry; it is not a “supreme good” in relation to other, supposedly lesser, goods. It continues alongside of, and in close relation to, the other components as an essential task, a God-given vocation.

An Inclusive Task

As soon as it becomes evident that thinking well—carefully, comprehensively, coherently, creatively—about what it experiences, practices, and believes is an essential and ongoing task of the community of faith, it is necessary to emphasize the corollary conviction that thinking theologically is an inclusive activity in which the entire community is called to participate.⁹

A Community Activity

Although the history of Christian theology includes some towering figures—Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Jonathan Edwards, and Karl Barth, among others—and although theological thinking is always a first-person activity, the interpretation of faith is not ordinarily a one-person project undertaken in solitude by a theological genius. Rather, the most productive thinking about the meaning of faith regularly occurs in the dialogue and dialectic of a lively working community in which theologians are teachers, pastors, or administrators. We can readily see three reasons for this pattern.

One reason is the prospect of complementarity: a community can provide a more diverse array of resources for theological thinking than can any individual, however brilliant and educated. There can be, for example, a complementarity of scholarly competencies, resulting from special interest and education in such areas as Biblical


⁹A similar and more extensive argument has been made by John B. Cobb, Jr., Becoming a Thinking Christian: If We Want Church Renewal, We Will Have to Renew Thinking in the Church (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1993).
studies, church history, philosophy of religion, comparative religions, ethics, religious education, preaching, and pastoral care. Each of these disciplines makes its own contribution to the total understanding of the meaning of faith.

Equally important is the complementarity of personal sensitivities and perceptions resulting from individual patterns of temperament, intellectual abilities, environment, and experience. To cite a biblical example, the differing but complementary views of Paul and James regarding the relation of trust in God’s love (“faith”) and obedience to God’s will (“works”) give a more complete understanding of life in Christ than can be derived from either one without the other.

A second reason why theology is properly a community activity is the desirability of minimizing the occupational hazards that confront theologians.

On the one hand, there are the twin spiritual hazards of pride and polemicism. It is always a temptation to take one’s own ideas too seriously, as if the difference between them and ultimate truth were vanishingly small. When that happens, it is easy to let theological differences among members of the community become occasions for suspicion, antagonism, and invective. And that, of course, is a vicious circle: isolation tends to estrangement, and estrangement encourages isolation. “Theology must be done in community, not competition.” 10

Fortunately, like many vicious circles, this one has a gracious opposite: interaction can lead to modesty and mutual respect, which in turn encourage interaction. If we engage in serious theological dialogue, listening especially carefully to those with differing views, we may truly learn in unexpected ways, and we may rediscover the limitations and fallibility of our own thinking.11


11Such a happy conversational outcome is not, however, inevitable; it is entirely dependent on the good will and openness of the participants. Unfortunately, and perhaps surprisingly, within communities of faith as well as between them, it sometimes happens that the more theological opponents interact with each other, the more antagonistic they become. Each side is increasingly convinced that “the other side” is willfully perverse, intellectually or morally.