

Week Twenty-three

YEAR ONE

Read

1 Samuel and 2 Samuel
Collins, Chapter 11, “First Samuel” and Chapter 12, “Second Samuel,”
pages 116–30

Focus

First and Second Samuel paint a sweeping picture of the formation of the Jewish faith. As you read, identify the concepts, ideas, images, and actions that expressed knowledge of God, human nature, and the world as the people of the time understood.

YEARTWO

Read

Philemon
Jude
Powell, Chapter 27, “Philemon” and Chapter 28, “Jude,” pages 415–25 and
509–17

Focus

Identify a common idea or theme in Philemon and Jude. Notice how Powell explored that idea. Analyze the idea or theme by asking two or three theological perspective questions of creation, sin, judgment, repentance, or redemption. For example: For repentance, a question of whatever theme or idea you identify could be “From what did someone in the scripture of Philemon or Jude turn?”; for the creation perspective, a question might be “What kind of world did the people in Philemon or Jude inhabit? What were the norms of that world?” In addition, consider contemporary views in our news media that connect with the identified idea. Decide what you believe to be true in relation to the idea you are using in your reflection and the implications for your ministry in daily life.

YEAR THREE

Read

MacCulloch, Chapter 16, “Perspectives on the True Church,” pages 551–603

Focus

With this chapter, MacCulloch returns to Western Christianity. Events, especially tragic ones, impact how people think about and know God. Describe how the Black Death influenced behavior and belief.

YEAR FOUR

Read

Allen, Chapter 16, “The Holy Spirit, the Church, and the Sacraments,” pages 169–82

Focus

Select an image Allen uses, for example, “the rush of a violent wind.” Imagine what it is like to feel the wind’s rush. Ask two or three other theological perspective questions of that image—from creation, sin, judgment, repentance, or redemption. Connect the reflection with something from literature or film. Finally, what do you believe about the matter under reflection? Recall a time when you experienced a gap between that belief and your behavior. Consider how Allen’s chapter on sacraments addresses such a gap.



ALL YEARS

Respond

Incoherence between belief and behavior has a long history. In his Letter to the Romans, St. Paul confessed:

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. —Romans 7:15–20

In congested traffic, drivers may demonstrate an inconsistency between claiming love of neighbor and words or gestures directed at another motorist that suggest a different belief. Patterns of consistency or disjuncture between behavior and belief point to what might be termed “behavior theology.” Such theology is illustrated by the story about a fifth grade teacher who in the teachers’ lounge made pronouncements using a graphic

image: “Human beings are the scum on the cesspool of life,” then among his students showed great patience, love, and commitment. His behavioral theology clashed with his professed theology. A Pauline-like confession or a blatant contradiction of behavior and his opinion represent the theology of professed beliefs and the theology of revealed actions and may cry out for reconciliation and agreement.

What is required to fashion a harmony between belief and behavior? Several factors must be kept in mind as one enters the integration process. First, theological positions and actions have fluidity. For example, in the early morning moments a person snuggling with a lover in a warm, comfortable bed will easily feel the poetry of praise. Later in the day, the same person being robbed in a dark recess of an urban skyscraper will voice a markedly different theology. Theological thoughts and actions morph within starkly different situations. Second, a person’s theology develops as the spiritual journey proceeds. The slogan “Be patient with me, God isn’t finished with me yet” encapsulates the reality of theological formation. Additionally, limitations imposed within the particularities of time and space necessitate partial knowing, which invites living by faith more than by certitude. Premature certitudes generate dangers that St. Gregory of Nyssa expressed well, “Concepts create idols; only wonder comprehends anything. People kill one another over concepts. Wonder makes us fall to our knees.”

Recall three or four personal incidents that indicate a gap that existed for you between a personal belief and your behavior. Select one and write a short paragraph that describes the incident.

Practice

As a way to reflect theologically on belief and behavior, use the incidents you identified in the Respond section. The following “Wide-Angle Lens” reflection method is one possible avenue.

The Wide-Angle Lens Method

Why this title? The Wide-Angle Lens Method begins with a variety of perspectives and focuses on a thread/theme/idea/image that connects them. An individual would start by finding the threads or themes present in several personal incidents, a movie that one watched, weekly assigned EfM reading or the like. The key is that use of this method by an individual requires initiation from something that could produce several themes or ideas. In an EfM group, the beginning point can be themes from the spiritual autobiographies, themes from the week’s reading, themes from any on-board time of the group, or some other starting point from which a variety of perspectives can be elicited. The key is to list themes and find a thread that runs through several of them.

Identify**FIND A COMMON THEME FROM EXPERIENCE**

Begin with your incidents identified in the Respond section of this week's work.

What are the common themes or elements that emerge? Is there a burning question, struggle, or issue? These threads may be expressed as simple statements, as an image, as a metaphor, or as an issue.

Select *one thread* that connects various themes. For instance, a review of several incidents (either ones identified by an individual or those identified in a group) could yield themes of frustration, tiredness, hurry, and feeling overwhelmed. Those themes would have shown up in two or more of the incidents. Asking, "What ties some of those themes together?" yields a thread that may have run through some incidents; perhaps, "Having too much to do results in impatience with others" could be named as a thread that ties two or more incidents.

Explore**REFLECT ON SOME THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES**

What kind of an image could paint the picture of the example thread above or of your identified thread based on your incidents?

Draw that image. Examine the image for what's going on in it.

Write about what's going on in that image.

Which theological perspective (Creation, Sin, Judgment, Repentance, or Redemption) does it seem to indicate? What would Repentance look like in that image? Or Redemption?

Connect

This is the point at which one looks at the various sources in life to help find meaning in matters of daily life and ministry. The object is not to find the worst in the sources, but to find connections that teach us something; what gets taught could be either creative or destructive and sometimes it is difficult to distinguish which is which.

CONSIDER THE CONTEMPORARY CULTURE AND SOCIETY

Focus on **one or two** areas of your culture or society so that the reflection will not be too broad. These connections might come from your local community or the larger world; our work environment, our education system, our health care system, our grandmothers, movies, TV, literature, art, songs, artifacts, architecture, government, the press, to name a few. Just pick one area of our contemporary society with which to connect.

What does the world in which you live teach you about dealing with the identified theme? Where do you find evidence of people dealing with tiredness and anger in the world around you?

What have you learned from your culture that helps you or challenges you regarding the theme?

How do the areas of Culture/Society speak to or about this thread? For instance, what does the world of employment teach us about tiredness and anger?

What about our health care system? What about our advertising? Again, just use one aspect of our society.

CONSIDER THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION

1. Identify biblical passages or other elements from Christian Tradition in which this common thread is evoked or brought to mind. Provide time to find and read passages.
2. Select one text that seems to speak most clearly to the thread that was evoked.
3. Examine the passage with these questions:
 - a. What do you know about the meaning of the text in its original setting?
 - b. How have others interpreted this text?
 - c. What does this text mean to you?

COMPARE AND CONTRAST CONTEMPORARY CULTURE AND CHRISTIAN TRADITION

From the perspectives of Culture and Tradition, what kind of a world emerges?

Where do these perspectives join or compete? Where do they clash or contrast?

Use the themes of creation, sin, judgment, repentance, redemption, celebration, the doctrine of God, or grace to shape your reflection. Likely, there is time to use only one or two of these themes during any one reflection unless there is time for more exhaustive exploration. As an example, if the New Testament passage about Jesus cleansing the temple were used for the Christian Tradition and the work environment for the Contemporary Culture connection, how do those two perspectives compare and contrast? What messages do we hear from either or both?

CONNECT TO BELIEFS, POSITIONS, AND AFFIRMATIONS

What do you do with the messages from our Christian Tradition and our Contemporary Culture?

What do you feel about where this reflection has led?

What do you think about it?

Where are you in the reflection?

What positions or affirmations do you hold about this reflection?