UNIT TWO

Theological Reflection as a Life Skill

NOTES for Unit Two:

- This PDF was prepared from a proof copy of the Reading and Reflection Guide, Volume A. There are some corrections noted that have been made in the book. Since the highlights and strikethroughs sometimes do not print from the PDF, please consult the electronic file copy before notifying us about a needed correction. (And, yes, we do want to hear about any not already noted.)
- The DuBose essay assigned to Year Four in Week Twelve is at the end of this document.
- Online resources are available for digging deeper:
    - http://oxfordbiblicalstudies.com for everyone (login: efm-sewanee; password: ministry)
    - http://store.fortresspress.com/store/product/3811/A-Short-Introduction-to-the-Hebrew-Bible for Year One (tabs include student and teacher resources)
    - http://bakerpublishinggroup.com/books/introducing-the-new-testament/264690/esources for Year Two (note new address, but the old one should redirect)
- The copy below was inserted in the introductory pages prior to Unit One. It is repeated here in the interest of reminding users of the Guide that the Read and Focus sections are specific to one's year level, but the Respond and Practice sections are to be done by all year levels.

A Four-fold Discipline for the Practice of Ministry

In each six-week unit, the five weeks following the introductory essay incorporate a pattern for the year's work that encourages the development of a four-fold discipline for the practice of ministry in the world:

- **Read**
- **Focus**
- **Respond**
- **Practice**

In each case **Read** and **Focus** are specific to an individual's year of study in the EfM program while the **Respond** and **Practice** are intended for all levels. Addressing the **Respond** and/or **Practice** work in the seminar meeting may encourage a conversation of great depth since each individual, having previously considered the question from the context of his or her assigned reading in the Christian tradition, will bring a different perspective to the group's work together.

Week Eight

Theological Reflection as a Life Skill

Two people sitting at a table over coffee engage energetically in conversation. Clearly, even from a distance, what they are saying to one another matters. Moving closer we can begin to hear something of what concerns them. Some relationship of one kind or another seemingly occupies their minds. While we cannot make out exactly what they are talking about, the two people say enough to have us realize that one of them has recently undergone some experience that left them with the desire to make sense of the experience. Together they struggle to find meaning in what happened. Only partial phrases can be overheard: "I read about this recently on the Internet," one says. "That reminds me of something I read in the Bible recently," the other adds. Near the end of the conversation they both can be heard saying, "I can't believe that, but I can believe this!"

That scene, or one like it, occurs throughout the world and all languages. The desire to create meaning out of experience is universal. From one generation to another people need to find answers to important questions or at least simply to understand better their experience. As a person matures the issues change but the desire to know and understand remains. We are meaning-seeking beings who hope to find wisdom that guides us.

Theological reflection is a life skill used to create meaning, in fact, to discover ultimate meaning. What makes reflection theological is not a specialized vocabulary, but the relentless, restless urge to experience wholeness which brings a person to the Holy. The word "holy" in English stems from the Old English word *haleg*, which means whole.

Education for Ministry makes a bold claim: **Each of us is a theologian**. It is not an option. The question is not whether or not we reflect theologically. The question is how proficient we are.

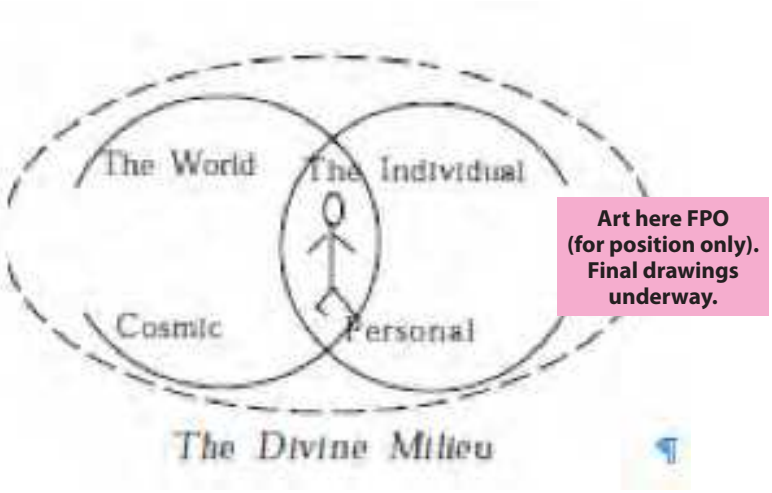
Throughout the four years in EfM, participants practice the discipline of theological reflection. Models and methods developed within the program guide and support theological reflection. Assignments in the coming weeks will present fundamentals of theological reflection. The intent is to provide resources and practice for the refinement of the life skill of theological reflection.

In general, the term "theological reflection," used in various ways throughout the theological world, means knowing God and knowing about God through experience. EfM over the years has developed a vocabulary in support of implementing the discipline of theological refection. Two broad areas of development were model and method.

The EFM Four-Source Model for Theological Reflection

Sources from which one draws meaning have long been important for theological learning. Richard Hooker, a sixteenth-century Anglican theologian, used three sources: scripture, tradition, and reason. Paul Tillich, a twentieth-century theologian, indicated that the theologian's sources are the Bible, church history, history of religion, and culture. Contemporary theologian John Macquarrie, while disliking the term "sources," lists six "formative factors": experience, revelation, scripture, tradition, culture, and reason.

The EFM program suggests that theological reflection occurs at the juncture of our personal experience and the world we encounter. Both are enveloped by the divine milieu which we encounter in liturgy and spiritual points of our lives. Reflection occurs when we stand in the juncture as depicted in the following diagram:



Art here FPO (for position only). Final drawings underway.

Our experience indicates that theological reflection is more likely to occur if we differentiate personal experience and experience of the world and are careful to distinguish among four sources: Action/Personal Experience, Personal Position (Beliefs, Values), Culture/Society, and the Christian Tradition. The Action and Position sources reflect personal experiences and beliefs, while Culture and Tradition identify what we receive from the world.

Please note: Although in EfM, these have often been shortened to **Action, Position, Culture, and Tradition**, in this Guide we will frequently use the alternate descriptors to emphasize the fullness of what is contained in each source.

ACTION

The **Personal Experience/Action** source of meaning involves what we do and experience. The specific actions we take, as well as the thoughts, feelings, and perspectives associated with the actions, come from this source.

In constructing spiritual autobiographies, each person works principally with the Action source. We remember past events and weave them into a pattern that tells our life stories. We say, "I remember . . ." or "My thoughts were . . ." or "I felt. . . ." And we say, "Then I walked to . . ." or "I did. . . ."

POSITION

The **Personal Belief/Position** source of meaning refers to that for which one consciously argues–personal attitudes, opinions, beliefs, and convictions. Phrases beginning, "I believe . . .," "I know that . . .," "That's the way it is . . .," and "It's true that . . ." indicate drawing from the Position source. Included here are tentative opinions as well as passionately held convictions.

CULTURE

The **Culture or Contemporary Culture/Society** source of meaning encompasses almost all the objective content available to a person. The libraries of the world contain material that is in the Culture source. The attitudes and opinions generally held in a society also fall within this source. The Culture source draws from movies, television, magazines, advertisements, law, architecture, customs, and attire–in short, all the aspects of life that are around us. Culture is so vast that one can only deal with certain specific aspects of it; therefore, there is need to identify specific items from Culture on which to focus in a theological reflection. Culture frequently sends mixed messages and may be intertwined with aspects of our faith, such as a picture that mixes the Christmas crêche with Santa Claus and a Christmas tree.

TRADITION

The **Tradition** source refers to faith tradition, and in EfM generally refers to **Christian tradition**, the content of the Christian heritage. It begins with the Bible and extends to the liturgies, stories, documents, music, artifacts, and history of Christianity. The Tradition source contains the literature that the Christian community has designated as authoritative. In addition to conveying truth and meaning, the contents of the Tradition source evoke awareness of the Holy, experiences of awe, or a sense of God's presence. Phrases like, "The Bible says. . ." and "According to the Prayer Book. . ." mark this source. The EFM program provides a four-year presentation of the Christian faith tradition through the participant's reading material. The Tradition source of meaning relates to the underpinnings of a faith tradition. Therefore, the term Tradition could be modified by Native American, if someone has that experience in their personal history; or Buddhist, or Hindu, and so forth. The important point is that Tradition as a source of meaning refers to that area of life that has nurtured or formed someone's view of God and the holy.

It is useful both to distinguish among these sources and to notice where they overlap. Each person draws on the sources as they try to make sense of the world around them. Each source functions as a kind of framework within which an individual, or even a group, interprets their experience. Often

there is an inclination to keep these frameworks separate from one another. For example, what happens at work may lead to quite cynical conclusions about human nature. An individual may keep these conclusions altogether apart from how he or she views life as a family member or as a member of the church or faith group. In theological reflection we bring together these different ways of looking at the world. We look at each of the four sources of meaning so that our entire understanding may be informed by the Christian faith tradition.

Merely accessing a variety of sources–the Christian faith tradition, contemporary culture, personal experience, and personal beliefs–is not the whole of theological reflection. Doing theology requires a holistic response that involves the intellect, imagination, and emotions. The work of theology requires developing the ability to employ imagination to create metaphors, symbols, and analogies. Analogical thinking, especially practiced within a community of faith, is an essential element that constitutes theological reflection. Whenever a person gives studied attention to knowing God, the person begins to reflect theologically. How one understands God will influence an individual's view of the church (ecclesiology), worship and prayer (liturgics and spirituality), mission (missiology), human nature, and ministry. The *Guide* presents ways to practice analogical thinking by using images and metaphors and practice in connecting to the four sources of meaning in our lives–Christian Faith Tradition, Personal Experience/Action, Society/Culture, and Personal Beliefs/Positions.

A Method for Theological Reflection

For literally decades, a beginning artist tried to draw human faces using pencils and paper. While the drawings were recognizable they resembled what one might see in a fun house mirror that distorts facial features. He decided to attend art classes to learn the basics of drawing. The first class introduced four principles: 1) all drawings are made up of basic shapes such as circles, triangles, squares, and rectangles and their oval, trapezoid, and parallelogram cousins; 2) arranging the shapes on the paper (the picture's composition) is primary; 3) shading adds depth; 4) details are drawn last. The instructor then said, "It is important to follow the composition, shading, and detail steps in order. Almost all problems arise in the composition or shading steps and not in the details. The problems you encounter in drawing can be solved by returning to the basics." The novice artist came away from the introductory lecture understanding how to solve difficulties in drawing. He also knew that to become proficient in sketching he must practice, practice, and practice again the basics of drawing.

This section begins with a story about drawing because theological reflection is an art analogous to drawing. Basic principles, developed over several decades within the EfM network, introduce the art of theological reflection. Learning the basic principles helps "correct" problems experienced as an individual or group works with theological reflection.

Disciplined thinking works with models and methods. A model shows *what* is to be done while a method guides *how* it is done. The discipline of theological reflection as practiced within EfM works from the Four-Source Model (Christian Faith Tradition, Contemporary Culture/Society, Personal Position/Belief and Personal Experience/Action), producing a "picture" of what we are trying to do. Methods allow us to apply the model.

Each theological reflection method within EfM follows a four-phase process: *identify*, *explore*, *connect*, and *apply*.

Identify: To provide a starting point, each method begins by identifying a focus, e.g. something from **Personal Experience/Action** such a personal incident; from **Contemporary Culture/Society** such as a news story, movie, poem, work of art; from **Christian Faith Tradition** such as the Sunday scriptures, sermons, prayers of the church, hymns; or from **Personal Belief/Position** such as found on a bumper sticker or an essay or opinion page of the newspaper (a Position that occurs in a Culture piece). A note about the Position source: whether someone writes an essay, a news article, a poem, work of fiction or non-fiction, a news program or many other examples, there will be a Personal Position contained within the writing or presentation.

This week's work introduces a method that begins with a text from scripture (Christian Tradition). The focus centers on something that produces interest in exploring further. For example: A person reading the Priestly Creation Story might focus on verse 31 ("God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good."). The *identifying* phase would continue by recalling a specific time of experiencing life as being "very good." Next would be to develop an image that expresses what that experience of "life is very good" was like; e.g. "it was like finding an ordinary-looking box and discovering a wonderful, joyful gift." The image becomes the identified focus. At that point the reflection moves from *Identifying* (e.g., an ordinary box that contains a wonderful gift) to *Exploring* what it is like to live in a world of discovering unexpected gifts among the ordinary.

Explore: the next phase of theological reflection uses some theological questions to examine the focusing image or metaphor. The purpose, like any concentrated investigation, is to notice the features and characteristics of the identified focus. Thematic questions used in EfM are based on theological topics, often developed from basic doctrines. For example, theological themes or perspectives developed from the Hebrew Scriptures include, but are not limited to,

creation (What is the world or life like for those in the image or passage or text being considered?);

sin (What alienates, breaks, or separates in the image-world?);

judgment (What surprises, jolts, or causes one to be aware of alienation or wholeness?);

repentance (What turns someone in that image from destruction and turns them toward life?);

redemption (What brings life, renewal, restoration to someone in that image?).

Look at the image from different theological viewpoints, e.g. asking what characterizes the "world of the image" (creation perspective) or what causes alienation in the world (sin perspective) guides the conversation into an exploration of the theology contained within the image.

Use two or three of the theological themes/perspectives to explore the focus.

Connect: The point is that during the ***connecting*** phase associations with each of the sources of meaning in someone's life begin to occur. If someone is not yet able to discern distinctly the four sources, the reflection may produce confusion and feelings of being lost. Therefore, it is important to become proficient in distinguishing the four sources that offer wisdom or meaning in our lives: **Personal Experience, Faith Tradition, Contemporary Culture,** and **Personal Position**.

To recap to this point: The reflection began in the Christian Faith Tradition source of meaning with the passage from Genesis. Recalling an experience of "Life is very good" drew from Personal Experience to help *identify* a focus. The image of discovering a box with a joyful surprise inside further identified a focus of that passage. The *Explore* phase asked theological questions of the image to help get a sense of the dimensions of that kind of world. The *Connect* phase deliberately turns to the other two sources, Contemporary Culture and Personal Position (though connections to other sources can occur at any point and in any order).

Examination that draws from the Contemporary Culture could use movies that may have shown something about life being very good, or perhaps for another perspective, movies that have shown life as not good. Or the Culture source of meaning could draw from how advertising in America looks at life or "the good life." Once something from Contemporary Culture comes to mind relating to the identified focus of the reflection, comparing and contrasting the view presented in the Culture source of meaning and that presented in the Christian Faith Tradition source produces further food for reflection.

Finally, the ***connecting phase*** of this particular reflection example draws on Personal Beliefs/Positions: What do I hold as true about life? What positions do the views of Culture and Tradition cause me to take? Where do I get those beliefs?

Theological reflection can result in entertaining ideas that quickly evaporate if not put into practice. As you enter more fully into theological reflection, it is essential that the applying phase be given significant attention. It is hard work to apply what one learns to concrete and specific life situations.

Apply: The *applying phase* of theological reflection involves clarifying what the exploring and connecting phases bring into view. New learning often touches on values and behavior. Often the learning involves a change of behavior and occasionally a shift in how a person understands self, human nature, and God. Deep, significant insights need support and encouragement to enter into the change. That is one of the reasons theological reflection is done best in a supportive community.

It is good to remember that the terms "learner," "disciple," and "discipline" are closely related. Knowing God and learning how to think about God, especially for Christians, necessitate a congruency between belief and behavior. Insights require drawing out implications for living more faithfully in "thought, word, and deed."

When the *applying phase* is brought center stage, the skills, knowledge, and attitude needed to "incarnate" insights into daily life have energy. As you do your reading and focus your study, do so with the continual question of what relevance your study, reflection and learning have to your life and ministry.

Weekly you participate in discussion with other members of your group. Theological reflection is done individually and as a group. The variety of experiences and thoughts of group members and the group dynamics enrich and add complexity to the process.

"Reflection" involves thinking carefully about what one reads, experiences, believes, or knows. Such thinking requires willingness to be open and vulnerable as one reconsiders what each believes, understands, or interprets.

Julian Marias, a Spanish philosopher of the twentieth century, said: "Christianity does not give solutions; it gives light by which to seek them."[1] Careful theological reflection illuminates experience. Theological reflection is not a problem solving process, but a means to new or renewed awareness and understanding. As a person learns more about the Christian tradition, the increased knowledge provides fuel that generates light by which to "see" situations more clearly.

A Word about Metaphors

The use of metaphor is the method of teaching that Jesus used in the parables. In theological reflection, we employ the power of a metaphor to take us from the specific to the universal–the collective experience of human beings in God's world.

Metaphors are verbal pictures. We are not concerned here with the distinctions among images, metaphors, and similes. All of these translate meaning from one thing to another. The literal meaning of the Greek *meta* + *phero* is "carry over."

The metaphor functions as a bridge that connects what happens to us in our contemporary world with the other sources of meaning in theological reflection.

Metaphors provide a means to move from the known to the unknown, to understand the unfamiliar by means of the familiar. The metaphor also can offer a fresh look at what we think we already know. Religious metaphors depend on the intersection of the known, daily, human world and the unknown, mysterious, divine realm of God. Metaphors can be generated from experiences, thoughts, and feelings. The metaphor emerges from the identified reflection focus. In a group, the similarity of feelings and thoughts among members of the group makes the metaphor unifying. It paints a clear picture of contemporary life as experienced, at least on occasion, by the members of the seminar.

Theological Reflection in a Group[16]

During the first phase of reflection the subject is identified. This may be something that has happened to the group member, a particular belief the member holds, something from our Christian tradition, or an aspect of contemporary culture. Before we can begin, we need to name the subject. What exactly are we going to talk about? Where does it begin? Where does it end? How are we involved?

Identify: The more sharply defined the focus of the reflection, the more likely it is that the reflection will shape the understanding and the actions of the participants. Using the "theology of the Psalms" as a starting point for reflection is likely to lead to a very general discussion. However, using the first two verses of Psalm 37, for example, provides much finer focus:

> **Fret not yourself because of the wicked, be not envious of wrongdoers!**
> **For they will soon fade like the grass, and wither like the green herb.**

Dealing with a particular passage makes it more likely that our partner in conversation will be the tradition itself and not merely our opinions about the tradition. Similarly, when the starting point for reflection is an experience from our life, it is important to describe that experience with specificity and clarity in order to avoid merely rehashing previously held positions. The focus that is chosen for reflection should not only be clearly identified, but it should also matter to the participants. Whether the reflection begins with **Action**, **Tradition**, **Culture**, or **Position**, the focus should engage the interest and attention of the group members. Unless this happens, the reflection is likely to lack energy.

Explore: The second phase explores the subject that has been identified. What is it like? What language best describes it? What do we discover as we examine it from different vantage points? If the subject has been raised by

16. This section is adapted from *Common Lessons and Supporting Materials,* page 2-11-1 ff.

some life event, what does this event say to us about our world? If we are reflecting on some belief that we hold, to what does this belief apply? What assumptions and values are implicit in the belief? If our starting point is a text from the Christian tradition or from another text? What does the text say to us on its own terms?

As we explore the subject of our reflection, we will often find it useful to use the language of metaphor. Using an image or metaphor deliberately encourages the evocative, intuitive quality of exploration.

Connect: The third phase makes connections between what has been discovered so far and the wider sources of meaning and truth. A reflection becomes theological by making deliberate connections between the Christian tradition and our own experience. Christian theological reflection links the Christian heritage with the personal and cultural dimensions of our lives. In this phase we are interested in the following general categories of questions:

- How does our exploration of this particular subject fit with our beliefs, with the scriptures, and with the creeds of the church?
- Does our exploration test out in everyday life? What would others in our family or at our work say about this?

The questions above are too broad to be of much practical help. More sharply defined questions help us connect and compare one source with another. A particularly helpful question is one that moves us right inside the subject of our exploration so that we can see what things look like from this perspective. We refer to questions like these as **perspective questions.** An example follows:

> *What kind of world* is depicted in the first two verses of Psalm 37? It is a world in which there are wrongdoers, and the wrongdoers sometimes flourish, but not for long. The question "*What kind of world?*" gives us a structure for developing a conversation with other sources of meaning. For example, we can think back to our own experiences with wrongdoers. Have they in fact "faded away like the grass" ? What kind of world do we seem to inhabit when we look at what happens to us and at how we actually behave?

Then we can move from questioning the **Action** source in this way to questioning the **Culture** source. What is the wisdom about wrongdoers in the magazines we read? What kind of world do our newspapers' editorial pages assume, and what of our own **Position**? What do we really believe about the place of wrongdoers in the world we inhabit?

This example illustrates *"What kind of world?"* as a question that allows us to explore the perspective of a particular source and then structure a conversation with elements from other sources by asking the same question of those sources. A question focuses our attention on a particular aspect of a given source.

In the EfM program we frequently use perspective questions designed to investigate the doctrinal themes of **Creation, Sin, Judgment,** and **Redemption**. *"What kind of world?"* is a question that opens up our perspective on the doctrine of **Creation.**

Apply: The final phase of theological reflection deals with the insights gleaned from conversation among the sources and with the implications for action decided by each individual on the basis of these insights. A desired outcome of theological reflection is a renewed understanding of what it means to be one of God's ministers in the world. To this end group members take their insights and learning from the reflection and apply them to their lives and ministries. Sometimes this involves a clear direction for action. More often the resulting application clarifies their questions, thereby preparing them to explore further their study of the Christian tradition. During this phase of reflection, questions fall into the following general categories:

- How can I apply my learning and questions?
- What am I being called to do differently?
- What do I want to take into our time of prayer?

The more specific each participant can be about the next small step necessary to apply the insights, the more likely it is that the reflection will be of lasting value.

One final note: There is no one "correct" way to do theological reflection. There will be several theological reflection methods for use during the weekly sessions. As you and your group become familiar with the dynamics and purpose of theological reflection, you can refine or develop your own methods.

Respond

Note the questions you have. What stood out for you? What did you learn about theological refection?

Practice

Analogical thinking undergirds theology, for we can only speak about God using metaphor, images, story, or pictures. Listed below are some exercises designed to help you become more comfortable in the practice of generating and discovering metaphors:

1. List biblical images–as many as possible (the vineyard, lost sheep, etc.).
2. List metaphors from everyday life. Come up with as many as you can: ~~an exploding pressure cooker~~, a caged tiger, walking a tightrope blindfolded, ice cream melting in the hot sun, traveling an unfamiliar highway without a map, and so on.

3. Describe characteristics of each metaphor. What are the feelings and thoughts in the world of the metaphor?
4. Tell a family story and ask the group to listen for metaphors within or evoked by the narrative.
5. Tell or read a news item or other print media piece and listen for metaphors.
6. Listen for sources in a sermon. In most liturgical churches, the sermon is a brief reflection on a scripture passage of the day. Which passage does the sermon draw from (Christian tradition). Where does the homilist begin: a joke (Culture), a personal experience, a personal belief, another scripture passage? What insights does the preacher offer? What call to ministry (application) does the sermon suggest?