

Introduction

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My five-year-old daughter helped me think about thinking recently.

I was editing the essays found in this book when she insisted on collaborating on a new book together. How could I say no? So we gathered all the necessary supplies and got to work. She set about designing a cover. She needed a little bit of help writing out the book's title: *Thinking Book*. When the time came to illustrate the cover, she was a bit stumped. I encouraged her to draw a picture of someone thinking. Still flummoxed, she eventually concluded, "We're thinking about thinking. That's hard." She was right. This is hard work.

After all, the odd thing about thinking is that we barely have to think about thinking in order to think.

Let me explain.

Your brain is constantly at work. Whether you are asleep or awake, aware or zoning out, exercising or resting, your brain is a buzz

of activity. It is guiding your movements, synthesizing new information, recalling old data.

Think about it this way. You are breathing at this very moment, aren't you? If you start thinking intentionally about your breathing, you will find yourself thinking about breathing as you compel your lungs to expand. You may even notice the complex physiological exertions breathing requires. But remember: even as you are reminding your body to breathe at this very moment, in a short while, you will forget to remember to breathe. And yet you will continue to inhale and exhale because your brain will pick up the slack. Imagine the intellectual burden we would carry if we had to *think* about breathing and digestion, healing and sleeping. Our brains are marvelous creations, never stopping their meticulous work until the day we draw our last breath.

And yet that's not exactly the kind of *thinking* we want to talk about in this book. The thinking that regulates breathing and practices habits and leans on instinct doesn't actually require much thought or intentionality on our part. That kind of thinking is usually not a powerful source of transformative theological and personal reflection and change. It won't necessarily shape and reshape the work of ministry to which you have been called. It probably won't be tested and honed as you work through seminary.

The kind of thinking we do discuss in the book is intentional and potentially transformative. It is much more than my brain's sometimes feeble, sometimes inspiring machinations. The thinking we discuss in the chapters that follow is thinking about the God of the universe, the world God has created, and God's many children who populate it. Thinking theologically is hard work, for it seeks to discern the very source and sustenance of life: the God in whose "mind" we were first an inkling, the God who "thought" us into existence, the God whose "thinking" sustains us at every turn. Our

thinking poignantly reflects God's own image. And so our thinking can help us participate in God's reign.

At the same time, we know that our thinking can be flawed, errant, unduly biased, prejudiced, sinful. Thinking theologically requires training and education certainly. But most of all, we lean on the Spirit when we think theologically. This is the Spirit God has promised will accompany us whenever we call on God. Paul writes in Romans 8:26: "Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words." As Amy Marga explores in her essay "Thinking Systematically," thinking theologically is a prayer, a yearning for the Spirit to help us, as much as it is an act of the intellect.

Like *Reading Theologically*, this volume draws together the reflections of nine writers. They all share a common vocation: teaching people like you to think and grow and be in a rapidly changing world for the sake of the good news of Jesus Christ. Moreover, they are all excellent scholars who are seeking to hone our knowledge and understanding of a God whose grace and magnitude we cannot exhaust. In their diverse approaches, however, they share some important ideas, ideas we hope will dwell in your hearts as you study, and as you struggle and rejoice in your learning.

1. *Thinking theologically is as embodied as it is cerebral.* Thinking is not the exclusive domain of the brain. Certainly, the neurological work of learning and contemplation happens between our ears. But our brains are not severable from our bodies. Our brains are very much a part of our bodies. And so thinking is not just a cerebral act but also an embodied interaction with the world. Thinking theologically does not just deal with abstract thoughts and theoretical notions. Thinking theologically also requires us to see and touch and taste the world

that God has created. In short, we think not only with our brains but also with feet that guide us to strange places, hands that serve our neighbors, ears that listen to songs of joy and regret alike.

2. *Thinking theologically is as emotional as it is intellectual.* When we think theologically, we exercise the whole breadth of human experiences. Thinking theologically is not just a matter of learning facts, reading arguments, or writing informative essays. Thinking theologically also involves our spirits and our hearts. Thinking theologically calls us to love what we learn and grieve that sometimes our answers are wholly insufficient to the task of ministry. Sometimes all our thoughts will culminate in a faith that asks for God's help. Thinking theologically means that we see failure as a painful but indispensable part of following a path of faith, that we can measure ourselves not just by the grades we receive but also by the relationships we can foster with the help of a God that draws us together.
3. *Thinking theologically is as relational as it is individualistic.* To put it bluntly, you can't think theologically by yourself. We don't measure our theological acumen by participating in some sacred version of *Jeopardy*. Instead, thinking theologically drives us to our intellect in order to draw us to our neighbors. Thinking theologically does not require us to retreat into our studies and dwell in our minds; instead, it compels us with an insatiable curiosity to know and love one another—even and particularly those who differ from us.

In short, thinking doesn't just happen in that intricate collection of nerves and nodes in your skull. Thinking is not just a matter of dwelling alone with lofty thoughts. Thinking is not just a matter of accumulating bits of trivia or even collecting a wealth of theories. Thinking theologically also draws us to others, for how else will we

know the world and know God? Thinking theologically draws us to our deepest fears and hopes, to the depths of despair and the heights of joy, to failure and risk. Thinking theologically, that is, thinking about God, is as human as anything else we do. And for this reason God draws near to us when we think in this way, for God's Spirit dwells whenever and wherever we gather together in faith and seek the face of God. Thinking theologically is about discerning a God who loves, cherishes, and exults in all our particularity; who shares our deepest griefs; who tastes our pain; who will not be limited by our imagination or hide from us.

Thinking can sometimes be akin to breathing. We are constantly engaged in processing data and sensory inputs all around us even when we are not conscious of the many neural pathways our minds are traveling. So, taking a step back to ponder the dimensions and practices of a particular way of thinking is a challenge. Even more important, however, is cultivating the habits of mind necessary in a life of ministry. Thinking theologically invokes an embodied set of practices and values that shape individuals and communities alike. Thinking theologically demands both intellect and emotion, logic and compassion, mind and body. In fact, this book will contend that these binaries are actually integrated wholes, not mutually exclusive options.

Thinking theologically is, I hope, something that will become as ingrained in you as breathing. Perhaps you will be so shaped by God's Spirit, so loved by God that your every thought will be infused with God's graciousness and justice, your every word marked with hope and expectation, your every deed surrounded by God's love. When we think theologically, we live theologically. When we think theologically, we exit the life of the mind and enter God's creation.