

Preface to the Third Edition

IN THIS THIRD EDITION we continue to hone the particular tasks that are necessary if we are to be faithful theological thinkers as well as committed doers of theology. What is different about this edition? First, we have updated the For Further Reading section of each chapter with new material. Second, we have added an appendix that discusses some common theological labels one is likely to encounter when exploring theological works. Third, we have added additional Key Points boxes throughout the book to help the reader clearly see what we consider important concepts. Fourth, we have changed or updated several case stories and illustrations. Fifth, we have added additional terms in the glossary at the end of the book. Finally, Ben Hubert, a congregational minister at First Christian Church, San Angelo, Texas, teaches a class on theological reflection in his church based on *How to Think Theologically*. He developed a series of questions and exercises, some of which we incorporated at the end of each of the chapters. They are questions that readers can consider as they think about the key issues found in each chapter.

So please, keep those cards and letters (and emails and texts) coming. We hope there will be yet another edition down the road, and we look forward to hearing from you. You help us keep *How to Think Theologically* fresh and up to date.

Preface

SOME OF OUR COLLEAGUES may think that all we do is drink coffee or go out to eat. Our first collaboration, *The Caring Christian*, began at a coffee break. The origins of the present book can be traced to a hole-in-the-wall restaurant on the south side of Fort Worth one Friday evening in 1990. The two of us with our wives were enjoying Greek food and discussing a question that I (Howard) had asked Jim several weeks before: How do you teach students to reflect theologically? What process do you suggest to help them relate theology to their day-to-day experiences?

The matter sparked lively discussion among the four of us. We discussed the difficulty of thinking theologically about everyday events in the work world, in our personal lives, in our marriage and family relationships, in issues of social or public policy—even in the church.

We noted that seminary professors frequently urge students to give a theological response to various issues, such as the meaning of ordination, the purpose of the church, abortion, or world hunger. And, recalling the last faculty meeting, we began to wonder how well we professors were able to give theological responses to pressing concerns of the day. While we ask students to reflect theologically, we do not often give them explicit guidance about how to do so effectively. Quite possibly, some of us do our own theological thinking in a haphazard fashion.

The discussion continued over coffee at Howard's house (the restaurant, inexplicably, was out of coffee!). Jeanne (Jim's wife), who is herself a seminary graduate, said, "The two of you have already worked together; why don't you write a book on this topic?" Karen (Howard's wife), who has written on the subject of methods for interpreting art, joined in. We both laughed and changed the subject. Both wives made the suggestion again. Finally we began to take the idea seriously. After a period of germination, the result is before you.

How to Think Theologically begins with the premise that all Christians are theologians, simply because they are Christian. The question is not whether or not you *are* a theologian—you are!—but how adequate the resulting theological reflection is in light of the Christian faith.

This book does not present a systematic theology or propose a one-and-only-one way of doing theology. It offers, instead, a framework in which to do ongoing theological reflection. Our hope is that you, the reader, will gain confidence to go about thinking theologically on your own. The suggestions we make are to help you think theologically in real-life situations as well as aid your efforts in responding to other theologians. Adapt them to your own heritage, situation, and experience. A responsible theologian is informed by circumstances and events but not pushed around by them. A responsible theologian is guided by deliberations on the historic themes of faith, by Scripture and tradition, by worship, and by engaged service in the world.

The suggestions we offer are linked by two common techniques: *listening* and *questioning*. Listening involves an active waiting that allows new information in, is prepared to be surprised, and remains open to the illumination of the Spirit. Questioning is a corrective to complacency—the danger of becoming satisfied with old answers and preconceptions. We subject our own answers of yesterday to fresh questioning in order to embrace new situations and new insights. The aim of listening is receptivity; the aim of questioning is honesty. All of the aids for theological reflection discussed in this book are to be applied with this back-and-forth movement between listening and questioning. The ultimate goal of the process is the maturing of our theological understanding. We listen and question and at last bring things together, fashioning conclusions that we set forth in our statements of belief and realize in our actions. These conclusions are important decisions of faith. They are in a true sense firmly held. Yet in another, equally true sense they always remain tentative, ready for retesting as our journey in faith continues. The cycle of reflection is continually in motion. We probe and wait, ask and receive, decide and act.

We would like to thank a number of individuals for helping to shape and refine this volume. First, Karen and Jeanne must be thanked; if it were not for their urging, the book would not have come into being. They not only made the suggestion but read and offered criticism for various drafts. In addition, we would like to thank Robert Benne, Don Browning, Sue Hamly, and Stephen Sprinkle for taking time from their busy schedules to read the manuscript and offer suggestions. We would also like to thank Shirley Bubar for help in the preparation of the

manuscript. Working collaboratively has its perils, not least of which is the difficulty of bringing together two styles and points of view. (In this regard, we may be forgiven for comparing theologians to snowflakes; however much we may agree, no two of us is ever alike.) We owe much to the extended collaboration of these readers in helping us to speak clearly and with one voice.