

Theologians and their Thinking

A survey of some of the most influential thinkers of the Christian faith.

The Explorers Sunday School Class

- ♦ *Friedrich Schleiermacher*
- ♦ *Horace Bushnell*
- ♦ *Soren Kierkegaard*
- ♦ *Walter Rauschenbusch*
- ♦ *C. H. Dodd*
- ♦ *Oscar Cullmann*
- ♦ *Reinhold Niebuhr*
- ♦ *Karl Barth*
- ♦ *Rudolph Bultmann*
- ♦ *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*
- ♦ *Paul Tillich*

Sundays, 9:45 - 10:45



Theologians and their Thinking

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Karl Barth

<p>Background</p>	<p>Karl Barth (1886 - 1968) is considered by some the greatest Protestant theologian of the 20th century and possibly the greatest since the Reformation. More than anyone else, Barth inspired and led the renaissance of theology that took place from about 1920 to 1950. He studied at the universities of Bern, Berlin, Tübingen, and Marburg and held pastorates in Switzerland between 1909 and 1921. During this time, he became known as a radical critic both of the prevailing liberal theology and of the social order. Liberal theology, Barth believed, had accommodated Christianity to modern culture. The crisis of World War I was in part a symptom of this unholy alliance. In his famous commentary on Romans (1919), Barth stressed the discontinuity between the Christian message and the world. With the rise of Adolf Hitler, Barth emerged as a leader of the church opposition to Nazi control, expressed in the Barmen Declaration of 1934.</p>
<p>Major Works</p>	<p><i>Church Dogmatics</i> (1932-67; over 12 volumes of 1000 pages each); <i>Commentary on Romans; From Rousseau to Ritschl</i></p>
<p>Scripture</p>	<p>He led the Church back to the Bible as the primary medium through which God speaks to humankind. Maintained that theology is concerned only with unfolding the revealed word attested in the Bible and has no place for natural theology or the insights of non-Christian religions. He held that religion is humankind's attempt to grasp at God and is therefore diametrically opposed to revelation, in which God has come to humans through Christ. Scripture is normative for the Christian life.</p>
<p>Jesus Christ</p>	<p>Barth held to an orthodox view of Christ and his atoning life, death, and resurrection.</p>
<p>Humankind</p>	<p>Barth stressed the sovereignty and initiative of God in revelation—God, not man, is the center of all things. Reformation is the persistent activity of the Church's life. "Religion is the enemy of faith," because it is our attempt to meet God on our own terms. So we must transcend our religion if we are to arrive at the real self-giving of faith in which we die and Christ lives in us. (It was religion which crucified Christ, and a good one at that, he said).</p>
<p>Legacy</p>	<p>Although Barth's uncompromising position was a great strength during the period of Nazi power, his views were increasingly subjected to criticism in the following decades. Some argue that he was too negative in his estimate of humankind and its reasoning powers and too narrow in limiting revelation to the biblical tradition, thus excluding the non-Christian religions.</p>

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Rudolf Bultmann

<p>Background</p>	<p>Rudolf Karl Bultmann (1884 - 1976) was one of the greatest and radical New Testament scholars of the 20th century. Educated at the universities of Marburg, Tübingen, and Berlin, he held professorships at Breslau and Giessen before returning in 1921 to Marburg as a professor of New Testament studies, a post he held until his retirement 30 years later.</p>
<p>Major Works</p>	<p><i>Jesus and the Word</i> (1934); <i>Theology of the New Testament</i> (vol. 1, 1952; vol. 2, 1955); <i>Jesus Christ and Mythology</i> (1958); <i>The History of the Synoptic Tradition</i> (1963); and <i>The Gospel of John: A Commentary</i> (1971).</p>
<p>Scripture</p>	<p>Bultmann was one of the leaders in the development of the form criticism of the New Testament. According to this method, the Gospels comprise episodic fragments that can be classified according to their forms as apothegms (sayings set in the context of illustrative incidents), miracle stories, historical narratives, or similar categories. These fragments circulated as units of preaching and teaching in the primitive church and were later unified to form the Gospels.</p>
<p>Jesus Christ</p>	<p>Bultmann was skeptical about gaining reliable historical information about Jesus Christ. In his view, the Gospels concern instead the beliefs of the early church. Bultmann admitted that in a general way Jesus is correctly portrayed in the Gospels, and he made it clear that theologically he was not troubled by historical skepticism. Accepting the Lutheran principle "faith alone," he argued that faith cannot be established by historical research. This position was developed further in his program for demythologizing the New Testament. Bultmann felt that the history of Jesus had been transformed into myth and that the gospel thus comes clothed in mythological ideas. He felt that the gospel, therefore, must be translated out of mythical into existentialist language and that Christianity would then be understood as a new possibility of existence.</p>
<p>Humankind</p>	<p>Bultmann's demythologizing of the Biblical record calls for us to translate Scripture from mythical language to existential language. Our existential selves become the center for interpreting faith. To believe is not to hold some theory of the cross, but to make a radical decision of faith—to reconcile ourselves to God, to give up self-sufficiency and live by unseen grace, to be one with our true selves and with God, to experience resurrection in ourselves and in this way rise from the death of sin to authentic existence.</p>
<p>Legacy</p>	<p>Bultmann made a major impact on theology—and continues to do so today. His thinking challenge theological thinking in three areas: theology and philosophy; theology and history; and theology and hermeneutics. He continued to be one of the most discussed theologians today.</p>

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Horace Bushnell

*“The Father of American
Religious Liberalism”*

Background	Horace Bushnell (1802-1876) was an American Congregational minister. He had planned for a career in law, but a religious conversion caused him to choose the ministry instead. Drawing most of his ideas from practical experience as a pastor (at the North Church, Hartford, Conn., 1833-59), Bushnell fashioned a new approach to theology.
Major Works	<i>Christian Nurture; God in Christ; Christ in Theology; The Vicarious Sacrifice; Forgiveness and Law; Nature and the Supernatural;</i>
Salvation	He returned to a previous concept of baptism and nurture. He stressed the churchlike quality and genuinely redemptive role of the family, and the family-like quality of the Christian congregation. He insisted that a child of Christian parents should never know himself as being other than a Christian. Moral theory of atonement: (1) the subjective, Christ’s work was to change the lives of people, to redeem them from all iniquity; (2) the objective that Christ died for us as a propitiary sacrifice that we might be accounted righteous before God.
Jesus Christ	“...the Grand Chief Miracle of the world...a Savior come to bring salvation. Mankind can rely on no stock powers in human nature; men are not going to mend themselves; neither history or evolution will avail. Nothing short of a salvation brought down from out of nature and above, in his divine person, can be any sufficient remedy.”
Humankind	People in community is the persistent theme of his thoughts. Noting that all language is metaphoric, he concluded that doctrinal arguments are relative. Personal experience of spiritual matters is much more important. Bushnell also considered the world as an organic whole. He saw no sharp distinctions between categories such as the natural and the supernatural, individual and society, humanity and divinity. Rather, he held that there is constant penetration and interaction between aspects where one affects the other, where God reunites the world to himself through reconciling love instead of punishment.
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C. H. Dodd

Background	Charles Harold Dodd (1884-1973), English New Testament scholar and theologian, held numerous academic posts both in the U.S. and in the Continent. He was the general director of the New Translation of the Bible—also called “The English Bible.” He held honorary degrees from Oxford, Cambridge, London, Manchester, Aberdeen, Glasgow, Wales, Harvard, Strasbourg, Oslo, Jesus College, Cambridge, and University College, Oxford.
Major Works	Wrote over twenty books covering a wide range of New Testament studies including <i>The Parables of the Kingdom</i> (1935), <i>The Apostolic Preaching and its Developments</i> (1936), and <i>History and the Gospel</i> (1938), <i>The Meaning of Paul for Today</i> , <i>The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel</i> , <i>The Authority of the Bible</i> .
Scripture	God is Lord of history, and the word of God spoken in Scripture is inextricably interwoven into the fabric of historical events. It can be let loose into the modern world in the fullness of its relevance and power only through historical criticism. The Word of God in Scripture is not a series of eternally valid propositions which can be disengaged from their temporary setting.
Jesus Christ	Jesus is first of all a historical figure deeply immersed in the affairs of his own time. Argued that for those who who unwaveringly believed in an incarnation, there is no avoiding the historic quest. The Kingdom of God became a present reality through his ministry, confronting persons with an offer of redemptive power and a demand for instant response and unconditional obedience. With the coming of Jesus, the Kingdom of God is fully revealed and fully realized. “Whenever the Gospel is proclaimed, it brings about a crisis, and in the experience of the individual...every such occasion is the “fullness of time” in which the kingdom comes.” (realized eschatology).
Humankind	History consists not of bare facts but of facts plus meaning, facts selected by the historian as worthy of record because of their significance.
Legacy	The concept of realized eschatology, and a fresh approach to biblical studies: “The ideal interpreter would be one who has entered into that strange first-century world, felt its whole strangeness, has sojourned in it until he has lived himself into it, thinking and feeling as one of those to whom the Gospel first came; and who will then return into our world, and give to the truth he has discerned a body out of the stuff of our own thought.”

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Oscar Cullmann

Background	Oscar Cullmann (b. 1902), Protestant (Lutheran) historian, theologian, and biblical scholar. Cullmann's teaching career was spent at the Universities of Strasbourg (1930-38) and Basel (1938-72).
Major Works	<i>Christ and Time</i> (1946), <i>The Christology of the New Testament</i> , <i>Prayer in the New Testament</i> .
Scripture	Cullmann argued that the New Testament must be understood in the context of salvation history (<i>heilgeschichte</i>). The Bible is not a collection of “facts” or “historical sources” to be proved or disproved. It is the confession of faith of the early church—a biased interpretation of Jesus and his message which can see through first century eyes. He contended that everything happening at the present moment secures its meaning by reason of its relationship to the decisive Christ-event of the past and the Second Coming of Christ in the future.
Jesus Christ	Jesus rules as living and present Lord over his church, the world, and the life of each individual. He <i>was</i> crucified and <i>will</i> come again and <i>is</i> the living Lord—from this center the whole line of redemptive history is interpreted. The Christology of the NT is a functional one, it asks “what does Jesus do?” (Not “who is he?” or “what is his nature?”).
Salvation	Cullmann’s analogy: the decisive battle of a war may be won before the enemy is willing to acknowledge or even knows about it. Fighting may therefore continue for a time, although the outcome of the war has already been determined. The final “cease fire” and declaration of victory are only the inevitable result of the decisive battle already fought. For Christian’s Christ’s triumph over death and sin in his resurrection and ascension means that the deciding battle has already been won. Although resistance may continue for a while, the final vindication of God and his gracious will can only make clear to all the victory already achieved.
Legacy	The concept of interpreting all of Scripture and theology from the framework of “salvation history”— <i>heilsgeschichte</i> .

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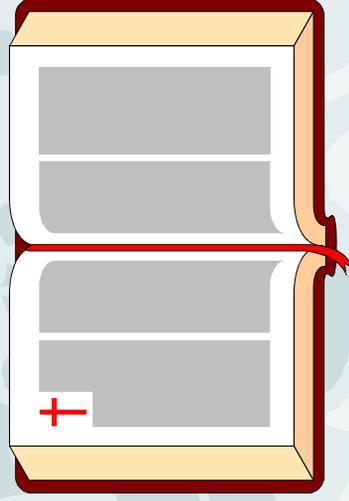
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Søren Kierkegaard

Background	Soren Aabye Kierkegaard (1813-1855), was a Danish philosopher and religious thinker whose reaction against the depersonalization of society and against the established church of Denmark took the form of brilliant literary and philosophical essays. He is regarded by philosophers today as a precursor of existentialism.
Major Works	Many of Kierkegaard's books were written under pseudonyms. <i>Either/Or</i> (1843), <i>Philosophical Fragments</i> (1844), <i>The Stages of Life, Fear and Trembling, Repetition, The Concluding Unscientific Postscript, The Concept of Dread, The Sickness Unto Death, Training in Christianity.</i>
Salvation	Christianity is qualitatively different from all other religions or reasoned world views. It forces people to choose either "faith" or "offense." The meeting with Jesus can happen in any generation in the "contemporaneity of faith" and is a God-encounter and not a reasoning toward God. It creates a real crisis, a turning point, in which eternity enters time. God must be met face to face on his own terms. True Christians are not spectators, they must live what they profess.
Jesus Christ	Jesus was the promised Messiah only to those who surrendered to his claim. To the others, his claim is an offense. In Jesus God speaks and acts in the fullness of time. God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself.
Humankind	Kierkegaard's unifying theme was that there are three spheres of existence--the aesthetic , the ethical , and the religious --in constant tension. Personal aesthetic enjoyment, is the fickle search for pleasure that is essentially egoistic. The ethical sphere, is not egoistic; it is an impersonal ideal, a law based on reason rather than personal preference and convenience. In this stage, life is not a series of separate moments of pleasure but a long-range project to be organized according to rational principles which include not only the rules of ultimate self-interest but also the abstract principles of morality that describe what an individual ought to do. In the stage, of true religious choice, no automatic, rational decision procedure can be employed, but rather a "leap of faith" provides the grounds for decision.
Legacy	Although few 19th-century thinkers have surpassed Kierkegaard's influence on 20th-century thought, there is no "Kierkegaardian school" of philosophy, theology, or literary criticism. This is due largely to the fact that he did not develop an all-embracing system but instead deliberately developed his ideas from several often incompatible points of view at the same time. But lack of an explicit following is itself a confirmation of Kierkegaard's philosophy, for he insisted that the individual was the repository of truth.

“...in Protestantism we have long attempted to say what we mean by revelation by pointing to the Scriptures, but

we have found that we cannot do so save as we interpret them in a community in which we listen for the word of God in the reading of the Scriptures, or in which we participate in the same spiritual history out of which the record came.”



H. Richard Niebuhr,
The Meaning of Revelation (1941)

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Friedrich Schleiermacher

The Founder of Modern Protestant Theology

Background	Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher (1768-1834) was the most influential theologian of the 19th century. His parents had been influenced by Pietism, and his early education was in institutions of the Moravians. While at the University of Halle (1787-90), his mind was broadened by exposure to philosophy, and soon after he fell under the influence of the romantic movement. Apart from a period when he was professor of theology at Halle (1804-07), most of his life from his ordination in 1794 until his death was spent as a preacher and teacher in Berlin. From 1810 he was professor of theology at the University of Berlin.
Major Works	<i>On Religion, Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers; The Christian Faith; The Soliloquies; Brief Outline of the Study of Theology; Christmas Eve;</i>
Faith	He represented religion as the "sense and taste for the infinite" and considered it to consist primarily in feeling; belief and action are secondary. In <i>The Christian Faith</i> (1821) he specified religious feeling as the "feeling of absolute dependence." He believed that this feeling is universal in human beings and that to acknowledge it takes the place of the traditional dubious proofs of God's existence. Correlated with the feeling of absolute dependence is a consciousness or intuition of God.
Jesus Christ	Jesus Christ shared the humanity of all human beings but was unique in the strength and constancy of his God-consciousness. Christ is the man who was utterly dependent upon God in every thought, word and action. This dependence added up to an existence of God in him. Christ's mission was to communicate this sense of dependence to others.
Humankind	Human blessedness consists in the strengthening of the God-consciousness, and sin is the obscuring of this consciousness. Sin is a failure of our sense of dependence on God. He struggled with the question, "What is the nature of the human creature, whose existence is determined both by God and the world?" Argued that (1) religion is impossible except in community; and (2) religion is a self-consciousness that is not identified with action, morality, knowing, or science.
Legacy	Schleiermacher anticipated by over a century some of the radical views of theologians like Paul Tillich and Bishop John Robinson. He has been criticized for relying too much on religious experience and "feeling;" and that he took too narrow a view of the nature of religion. He abandoned the natural-supernatural dichotomy and returned to a more pre-scholastic, biblical idea of humankind and the world.

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Albert Schweitzer

Background	Albert Schweitzer (1875-1965) was a distinguished musician, philosopher, theologian, and medical missionary. Awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1952. His father was Lutheran pastor, served both Lutherans and Catholics. His scholarship included books about the life and music of J. S. Bach, philosophy, the religious philosophy of Immanuel Kant, and theology. He became principal of Strasbourg's Theological College of Saint Thomas. He left Saint Thomas for medical school. In 1913 the Schweitzers sailed for French Equatorial Africa as medical missionaries.
Major Works	<i>The Quest for the Historical Jesus</i> (1906); <i>Philosophy of Civilization</i> (1923); catalogued the works of J. S. Bach. <i>The Mysticism of the Apostle Paul</i> , <i>The Mystery of the Kingdom of God</i> , <i>On the Edge of the Primeval Forest</i> .
Salvation	Only as we obey Jesus is the mystery of his personality revealed to us. People are to prepare themselves by repentance to receive the character of Kingdom citizens, which is given supernaturally. Jesus' coming would be a dramatic event, involving cosmic disturbances. The Kingdom's coming would be climactic, not a gradual ingression—a radically transformative event.
Jesus Christ	The historical Jesus is the eschatological Jesus who proclaimed the immediately imminent breaking-in of the apocalyptic Reign of God. Jesus preached repentance in preparation for this Kingdom and went to his death in order to bring in the New Eon and to suffer the tribulations of the End Time vicariously for the elect. Since the parousia failed to come, a de-eschatologizing of the Christian message set in.
Humankind	Schweitzer concerned himself with the problem of a worthy cultural ethic. A healthy ethic cannot ground itself solely in this world, nor can it reject the other-worldliness of faith—but it cannot retreat from the world. Ethics can only issue from a will to life. He coined the formula “reverence for life” as descriptive of the force of a functional and appropriate ethic.
Legacy	While Schweitzer accepted the historical-critical methods of the liberalism of his day, he rejected some of their conclusions—but mostly rejected the reading back into the mind of Jesus contemporary philosophies. He thoroughly and accurately lay bare the shortcomings and weaknesses of the liberal views of Jesus and the Kingdom.

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Doing Theology...

1. Barth said that "Religion is the enemy of faith." Do you agree? In what sense?
2. In your thinking, is the Bible the Word of God, or is there something else that is the Word of God that is apart from Scripture?
3. Bultmann claimed that Scripture contained only myth, not historical accounts. To what extent do you agree with this? Totally? Partly? Why?
4. Extra credit: Divide into two groups and read the creation account in Genesis 2:4-15; 20-23; 3:1, 6-10; 13-24. **Group A** reads it as a historical-literal account. **Group B** reads it as mythic literature. Each group then gives an interpretation as to the *meaning* of the account. Implications?

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Doing Theology...

1. Dodd started from the view that Jesus was first and foremost a historical figure and a product of his time. Others give emphasis to the pre-existent Christ as the starting point of faith. Which way do you lean? Why?
2. Dodd argued that the Kingdom of God was “fully revealed and fully realized” with the coming of Jesus. Do you agree? Why or why not?
3. Cullman hints that the Jesus of the early first century church is far removed from the Jesus we know today. Would you agree with this? Why or why not?
4. You know how “the story” is supposed to end. Does it make any difference in your life today that the ultimate outcome of salvation history is determined? How so?

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Doing Theology...

1. In your thinking, is the Jesus of our faith the same as the Jesus of history? Why do you say so?
2. Is Christianity qualitatively different from all other religions? If so, how? Why? If not, is it unique from other religions? In what ways?
3. Kierkegaard said that Christians cannot be spectators, they must live out what they profess. Do you agree? How might this manifest itself in today's society?
4. Kierkegaard claimed that faith is not rational—in the end, it must be attained by a “leap of faith.” Is this true for you? Explain.

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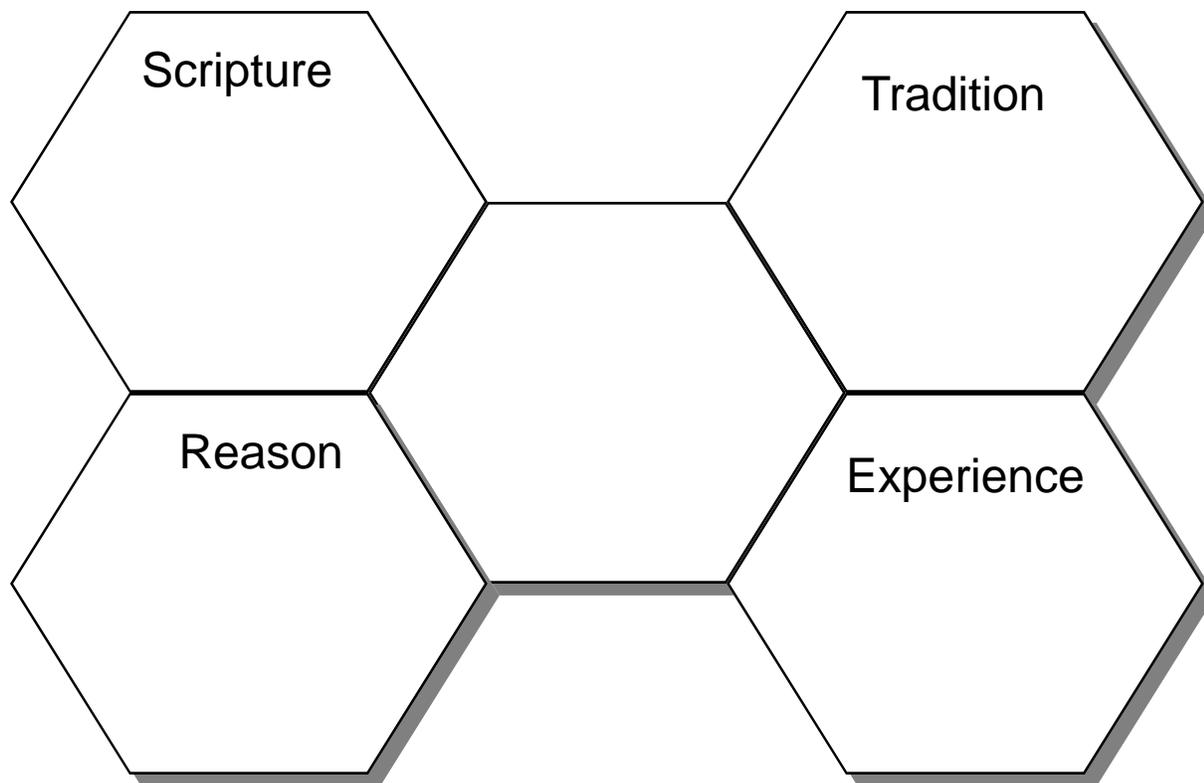
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A Theological Template

A Theological Template is a tool for theological reflection. Use it to sort and organize the data of life, identify how things are, make a prognosis of what is likely to happen, and make a prescription—a theological proposal—for that for which your faith calls you to.



PROCEDURE:

1. Identify the issue you want to consider (what's the question?)
2. Determine how each quadrilateral component informs the issue (resources, statements, truths)
3. Interpret how the components interrelate
4. Hypothesize on the implications of your interpretation
5. Compose a theological statement on the issue or question at hand
6. Predict how your theological statement will impact you and your ministry.

A Theological Template

worksheet

1. Identify the issue you are considering (what is the question?)
2. What do each of the quadrilateral components (scripture, tradition, reason, experience) have to offer to the issue at hand by way of a statement, a truth, a proposition, a resource, a question, etc.
3. With the information at hand, give an interpretation of how all of this relates—answer the question, “The big picture as I see it is”
4. What might be some implications of your interpretation of the big picture? Do you need to revise your thinking at this point?
5. Based on your thoughts so far, compose a theological statement (no more than three or four sentences long) on the issue or question at hand.
6. Once you are satisfied with your theological statement, predict how the application of your statement would impact you and your ministry.