

Theology states what is believed about God and all that is related to God. It is reflection on our experience of who God is and what God is doing. Theology makes belief understandable for those who believe, guiding their behavior. It also informs those who do not believe. The purpose of theology is to understand who God is, what God is doing and what this implies for our actions. Theology is the theory out of which we plan and carry out our ministry as Christians.

The process by which individuals or groups or churches develop a theology is called "doing theology," or "theologizing" or "theological reflection."

If in reading the definitions above you disagreed with what was said and responded, "Yes, but..."; or, if you wondered what was meant, you are in touch with the problem of describing theology in the United Church of Christ.

Any attempt to proclaim what the theology of the United Church of Christ is or what the United Church of Christ believes will be met with assorted responses: It is wrong; it doesn't go far enough or it goes too far; it omits something important or it is confusing. There is no official theology of the United Church of Christ, but there is theology in the United Church of Christ.

Yet, we make significant efforts to state what it means to be related to God. Individuals, churches and

the denomination have found it to be important to be centered around the Statement of Faith of the United Church of Christ.

## Sources of Theology

Attempts at theology emerged very early in the life of the church. This was one way to eliminate the likelihood of distortions. Early Christians wanted to be able to share their beliefs with others and to have their actions be informed by their beliefs. Today we still are concerned with theology in order to be clear about what we believe, to be able to share our beliefs with others and to be faithful in our lives.

There are at least four sources of theology:

- **The Bible.** It is the primary source of our understanding about God and the things of God. It is in the Bible that we find very basic information that is a foundation of our understanding of the kind of God in whom we believe.
- **The tradition.** Knowledge about God has increased throughout the ages. Creeds, doctrines and statements of faith are part of the tradition of the church that informs our theology.
- **The experience of the contemporary and ecumenical church.** We acknowledge that God is still being made known to us and to people who are our contemporaries. For example, liberation theology,

African-American theology and feminist theology are attempts to discover and articulate new insights about God and the ways of God. We discover that we need the perspectives of people from other cultures, backgrounds and experiences for a full theological understanding.

- **Personal experience.** All Christians can describe their experience with God and the meanings and conclusions they reach because of their experiences. Sometimes these experiences help us understand what other sources mean. Sometimes the theological perspective which we have developed helps us interpret the meaning of our experiences. There are times when our experiences call into question a portion of our theology and force us to see a new insight God is revealing.

The Bible, tradition and many experiences lead to the belief that God is the source of our knowledge and understanding about God. They also support the belief that the Holy Spirit is an active participant in our theological processes and formulations. Not everyone agrees with this theological statement, however.

## The Substance of Theology

The product of doing theology or theologizing is theology: substantive statements about God and the things of God. The forms have varied

through the ages. For some it has been enough to say, "Jesus is Lord." For others, such as professional theologians like Thomas Aquinas or Karl Barth, it has taken volumes and volumes to say it and then it was never complete.

Some of the familiar ways in which the substance of theology is set down are in creeds (Nicene Creed, Apostles' Creed), catechisms (Heidelberg Catechism, Evangelical Catechism), covenants (Salem, Mayflower), platforms (Cambridge), statements of faith (United Church of Christ), declarations of faith, confessions of faith and sermons.

For some individuals and churches, the content or substance of theology is all-important. Thus, some churches have theological formulations or beliefs to which members must agree. These churches are variously called confessional, creedal or doctrinal churches.

Other churches, including the United Church of Christ, do not have set beliefs which members are required to accept and which serve as a test of faith. The Constitution of the United Church of Christ insures the rights of each local church to "... formulate its own covenants and confessions of faith ..." (Article IV, paragraph 15).

The United Church of Christ Statement of Faith, for example, is not an authoritative statement to which members are required to give allegiance. Rather than being a test of faith, it is a testimony of faith which informs, instructs and inspires the

members, groups and organizations of the United Church of Christ.

## The Methodology of Theology

In our tradition the process of theology as well as the substance of theology gives us our theological identity. Theology in the United Church of Christ is experienced through theological dialogue in search of the Word of God in the contemporary setting. This theological dialogue is faithful and sensitive to the four sources of theology but does not attribute sole authority to any one of them. Indeed, the Constitution of the United Church of Christ states:

The United Church of Christ acknowledges as its sole Head, Jesus Christ, Son of God and Savior. It acknowledges as kindred in Christ all who share in this confession. It looks to the Word of God in the Scriptures, and to the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, to prosper its creative and redemptive work in the world. It claims as its own the faith of the historical Church expressed in the ancient creeds and reclaimed in the basic insights of the Protestant Reformers. It affirms the responsibility of the Church in each generation to make this faith its own in reality of worship, in honesty of thought and expression, and in purity of heart before God (Preamble, paragraph 2).

Of course, there are core

theological assertions assumed by all in the United Church of Christ: There is a God; God has been made known through Jesus Christ; the Holy Spirit is present today; and the church is an instrument of God. Even with these statements, however, there are some who would take exception with the way they are formulated. The content of theology is essential to the church, but it is not the content of theology which gives the United Church of Christ its theological identity or uniqueness. Rather, it is our theological methodology.

Our theology emerges as we talk together around questions like: Who is God? What is God doing? What is God calling us to be and do now and in the future? Informed by the Bible, tradition, experiences of the contemporary and ecumenical church and our own experiences and trusting in the presence and guidance of the Holy Spirit, we seek the truth. We live our lives and carry out our ministries on the basis of our insights about the truth.

Creedal churches tend to begin with a well-developed body of formulated belief and then interpret and ask theological questions about life situations. Non-creedal churches tend to begin with life situations and raise questions about what can be believed. In the United Church of Christ, we work toward gaining a theological understanding of the situation in which we find ourselves.

Critics, within and beyond the denomination, point out that our situational orientation keeps us from

dealing with core theological questions that have proven valuable for the church in the past. These include:

- Who and what is God?
- Who is Jesus Christ?
- Who is the Holy Spirit?
- What is humankind?
- What are good and evil?
- What is sin?
- What is atonement?
- What is revelation?
- What are the nature and purpose of the church?

## Implications

The numerous implications from the understanding of theology are crucial for the way we live together and seek to be faithful in the United Church of Christ. Some of the implications are:

- We all need to be responsible partners in the theological dialogue and interaction. Each part of the United Church of Christ-local church, association, conference, seminary and national body-needs to contribute its best insight and understanding to the dialogue. Each needs to immerse itself in the Bible, the tradition, personal experience and the experience of the contemporary and ecumenical church. Each needs to listen carefully to the other partners in the dialogue.

Each must avoid the arrogance of believing it alone knows the truth.

- We need to create more settings in which the partners engage one another in theological dialogue and interaction. Our inclination is to join only those who already share the same understanding or stance that we have. If we believe the Spirit of God gives us the truth as we engage the sources of theology and the partners in the church, then we are called to more vigorous and open dialogue within the United Church of Christ.
- Theological dialogue in search of the truth belongs to all of us, laypeople and clergy alike. No one can do theology for us. We have to be a partner in the enterprise.
- The role of professional theologians is crucial. Their role is not to do for us or for the church. Their role is to do the disciplined work of biblical exposition and interpretation, to teach us the tradition and its meaning, to make us aware of the present theological ferment occurring in the contemporary and ecumenical church. They pose the issues, clarify the questions, provide us with the insight and information, formulate positions and possibilities and challenge us with implications for decision and action. They do not, however, authorize the truth for us
- The weakness of our way of doing theology is that it makes us prone to neglect the historical questions

and affirmations of the church. The tendency is to begin with an issue (for example, sexuality, peace, poverty) and to seek out theological understandings relevant to it. The danger is that the specifics of the situation will prevent our grappling with the broader and more fundamental questions of the meaning of Christ, the meaning of the church and the meaning of the creation. Some people within our church are calling for the development of theological position papers that wrestle with fundamental doctrinal matters. This call reflects a sense of inadequacy of always making the contemporary situation the starting point in the theological enterprise.

- We are prone to have a low opinion of ourselves theologically because we don't seem to be as clear as the confessional churches about what we believe. We can take heart in the recognition of our strengths. We are skillful in engaging one another theologically. Equally important is the seriousness with which we value the Bible, tradition, the experience of the contemporary and ecumenical church and our own experience.

- What are the four sources of theology? Which seems more important to you? To your church? How is each relied upon in your church?
- What are the roles of pastors, laity and theologians in theological growth?
- In what ways is your church engaged in ongoing theological dialogue with other partners in the United Church of Christ?
- How are theological dialogue and growth fostered in your church? How satisfactory is this? What are ways in which greater emphasis could be given to this?

## Questions

- What is theology? What is its relation to Christian living and action?