

Theological Reflection Groups about Work

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Introduction: In 2007, I began an experiment with two med students, in an attempt to help them learn the integration of faith, learning and practice. I formed a “Theological Reflection Group” with the intent of learning to reflect theologically about our work. I wanted to provide an ongoing, consistent opportunity for students to reflect on their work in light of scripture, and to do this in the company of 2-3 Christian friends. I wanted to teach students a spiritual discipline that they could carry with them into future work.

I drew from several important influences in putting this together. 1) While I was at Regent College, I learned the Ignatian Examen (at the end of each day, reflect on 2 questions: what am I most thankful to God for? What am I least thankful to God for? and then give both in thanksgiving to God.) I found that this simple, reflective practice helped me become more attentive to God in everyday life--in both the places where God seemed present and absent. 2) A couple years later, I took a unit of Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE), an intensive internship in hospital chaplaincy. CPE requires rigorous self-reflection of oneself in the midst of pastoral care. I grew in my understanding of self, Christ, people, and work from learning to reflect theologically about these experiences of work--in the midst of a learning/reflective community of peers. 3) I’ve appreciated learning a process of “Group Spiritual Direction,” developed by Hallie Cowan for InterVarsity staff in New England. I’ve included a version of this process below. 4) InterVarsity staff Bob Trube, Nan Thomas, and Kevin Offner led an excellent workshop about “Initiating Conversations of Integration with Students and Faculty.” We brainstormed questions to ask grad students & faculty that would help them consider their work in light of the Creation, Fall and Redemption. I’ve incorporated many of these questions below.

The Theological Reflection Group was structured as follows: The group meets once a month, usually over a meal, for 1 and 1/2 hours. Each month, we reflect on our work with a different theological theme or “lens.” I give students some scriptures and questions for reflection, and they take the month to reflect, pray, and journal about their reflections.

When we gather, we follow a process similar to group spiritual direction. I begin with a brief meditation on the theological theme of the month (3-5 minutes). Then a student shares for 10-15 minutes about their reflections, while the rest of the group listens. After the student shares, the group takes 5 minutes to offer responses or ask questions. Then we pray for the student. We continue the same process for the other students in the group (I’ve led groups of 2 or 3 students, and adjust the time accordingly). This process does not require a leader, but someone does need to keep time.

What follows are various theological themes or “lenses” for reflecting on our work. With each theme, we sought to ask 2 primary questions: How does the creation (for example) inform how I think about my work? And how does my work inform how I think about God’s creation? These questions were merely a guide; students were free to reflect on all the questions or none, depending on what was most helpful for them.

Creation. Read Genesis 1 and 2 periodically this month. A few reflection questions:

- How do you see or experience your work bringing order out of chaos?
- Where do you see the Spirit hovering over your work?
- How do you see or experience the material world as good? or human persons as “very good”?
- Where/how do you experience delight or joy in your work?
- How does your work give you opportunities to be creative?
- How are you finding patterns of work and rest (sabbath) in your work?

The Fall. Read Genesis 3:1-11:9. Some questions to think about as you reflect on your work:

- How do you see or experience the effects of the Fall in your work? How do you see or experience alienation, brokenness, sin, or evil in your work?
- The Fall caused alienation and destruction in our relationships with God, one another, ourselves, and the earth. How do you see or experience struggle and alienation in these different sorts of relationships in your work?
- How do you see our alienation from ourselves in your work? How do you or people around you experience nakedness and shame?
- How do you see brokenness in our relationship with creation in your field?
- How do you see brokenness in interpersonal human relationships in your work?
- How do you see systemic or societal brokenness in your work?
- How are you or others in your field tempted to want to be like God?
- How do you see human alienation from God in your work? How are you or others around you lost, afraid, or hiding from God?
- Are there ways you see or experience evil in your work? What is this like for you?
- How do you experience the consequences of the Fall in your work? such as domination and subordination in human relationships, painful and arduous work, struggling with (or against) creation/land, etc.

Redemption. You might want to read the first couple chapters of Colossians, as well as the last few chapters of Revelation--scriptures that try to picture and articulate the new creation/redemption. You might also want to read some of the parables in Matthew or Luke about the Kingdom of God (mustard seed, sheep and goats, treasure in field, Rich Man and Lazarus, Prodigal Son, etc.). Luke 4 might also be helpful (where Jesus reads from Isaiah in the temple of his hometown, declaring his identity and calling).

Some of the following questions may be helpful as you think about redemption:

- In what sense is Christ the antidote (or solution, healing, redemption) for the issues of sin (or the fall) that you've seen in your work?
- How is God using your work to bring redemption of brokenness, alienation, sin in human lives and the world? How is your work an opportunity to partner with God in making all things new (or fostering the kingdom of God)?
- How do you see God working through your work to bring redemption to:
 - broken relationships? (how does your work further reconciliation?)
 - our broken relationship with creation? (how does your work further care of creation?)
 - our alienated relationships with God? (how does your work foster faith and love for God?)
 - our alienation from ourselves? (how does your work help bring about inner healing and peace?)
 - broken systems and unjust societies? (how does your work foster justice and shalom in world?)
- In what sense does your work only fully make sense when seen through the lens of the Gospel? What is missing when your work is seen or approached without awareness of Jesus?
- When Jesus says, "Well done, good and faithful chemist/economist/pathobiologist, etc", what might that mean?
- What is eternal about your work?
- What does Jesus love about your work?
- Do you ever worship in the midst of your work? Can you worship in the midst of it? why or why not?

The Incarnation: Some scriptures and questions for reflection:

Luke 1:26-2:20

Matthew 1:1-2:23

John 1:1-18

Philippians 2:1-11

2 Corinthians 8:8-9

Colossians 2:9-10

- John says that "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." The word "incarnation" comes from the Latin "in carne", which means "in flesh". How has God become present or more concrete or real to you in the midst of your human work?
- Eugene Peterson paraphrases the above verse from John as: the Word became flesh and "moved into the neighborhood." How has God moved into your neighborhood? How has God taken up residence in your life--specifically in your work?
- Philippians speaks of the downward descent of God the Son in the incarnation and birth of Christ. What might it mean for you to live in accordance with this pattern in your work?
- The accounts of the incarnation in Matthew and Luke highlight how earthy and messy God's coming into the world really was (God was born by a woman through the earthy process of labor, born in a stable of animals, and hunted by a threatened and murderous dictator--Herod). God's coming into our lives is often messy, too. Are there ways that God has come into your life--especially into your work life--that have been messy? What are some messy or "ugly" or "shameful" aspects of your work, that you'd rather God stayed away from? What might it mean for you to know that God is not shocked by this mess, and wants to enter into your life/work even in the midst of this mess?
- How is God hidden from you in your work? How is God revealed to you in your work?
- How does your work inform the way you think about the Incarnation of Christ? Does your work help you understand anything about Jesus' incarnation, birth, or coming into the world?

Jesus as teacher. Some scriptures to read and questions to consider:

Mark 1:21-28

Mark 4:1-34

Mark 6:6-13 and 30-44

Luke 10:38-42

Matthew 5:1-12

Matthew 7:24-29

Matthew 13:52

- How would you describe Jesus as a teacher? How would you describe his teaching "style" or pedagogy? Why do you think Jesus often taught in parables?
- What does Jesus' teaching style suggest about people as learners? (how people best learn)
- What can you learn from the ways Jesus teaches, that could serve as a model for you as you teach?
- How is Jesus' teaching necessarily unique and different from the way you (or any human) might teach?
- How do your own experiences of teaching inform and impact the way you understand Jesus as a teacher?
- How does Jesus as teacher inform the way you approach teaching and learning?
- What kind of student are you with Jesus the Master Teacher? How are you seeking to learn all you can from Jesus?

Jesus as The Great Physician: Some scriptures and questions to consider:

Mark 1:40-45

Mark 2:1-17

Mark 5:1-43

Mark 10:46-52

Luke 10:25-37

Matthew 25:31-46

Psalm 102

Revelation 21:1-5 and 22:1-5

- The stories about the woman with the flow of blood, the demoniac, the blind man, the leper, and the paralytic--as well as the psalmist in Psalm 102--give different pictures of what it's like to be ill. What do these examples show you about illness and healing?
- What do you notice about Jesus as a healer? How would you describe the healing that he offers to people?
- What do the healings of Jesus suggest about the kinds of healing people need?

- How is Jesus' practice of healing different than the healthcare profession you are experiencing and learning to practice?
- How could Jesus as the Great Physician serve as a model for you as a physician/healer?
- How does knowing the "end of the story" in Revelation inform how you think about practicing medicine/healthcare?
- How does your work in medicine/healing inform how you think about Jesus as the Great Physician?

The Crucifixion, Sufferings and Death of Christ: Some scriptures and questions for reflection:

Matthew 26-27

Mark 14-15

Luke 22-23

John 18-19

Isaiah 53

Psalm 22

- What kinds of suffering does Jesus experience and endure? Do you experience some of these kinds of suffering in your work? What difference does it make to know that Jesus experienced similar sufferings?
- How do your experiences of suffering inform how you understand Jesus' sufferings?
- Jesus endured suffering and the cross in obedience to God. Are there any ways that God is asking you to endure suffering for his sake in your work? What would help you to bear it?
- The 12 disciples have trouble staying awake and alert with Jesus in the midst of his agony in the garden of Gethsemane. Are there ways that you struggle to be present to Jesus when there's suffering and pain involved?
- Under pressure, Peter denies Jesus 3 times. Are there ways you struggle to affirm your loyalty and relationship with Jesus when you are under pressure in the workplace?
- Where do you experience or see rejection in your work? How does the rejection Jesus faced give you a different perspective?
- Where do you experience or see death in your work? How do you feel about these experiences or "sightings" of death? How does Jesus' death inform how you see death around you?

The Resurrection: As you reflect on your work in light of the resurrection, here are some scriptures & questions to consider:

Matthew 28:1-15

Mark 16:1-8

Luke 24:1-53

John 20 and 21

1 Corinthians 15

- How do you see God bringing life out of death in your work?
- How has God surprised you in your work--especially in a situation/time when you felt hopelessness, confusion, or despair?
- How has the resurrected Lord walked alongside you in your work--in your questions and doubts and fears?
- When have you not recognized Jesus with you in your work?
- Where/how/when have you encountered or recognized the resurrected Lord in your work?
- How does the resurrection of the body impact how you think about your work and your physical body in work?
- How does the resurrection shape your identity and call? How do you live out Jesus' call to be his witness in your work? or to "feed my lambs"?
- When have you struggled with doubt and questions about the resurrection--wanting to "see and touch" for yourself? Does your work foster doubt or trust? How has Jesus met you in your doubts?

Guide for Group Spiritual Direction*

Plan 30 minutes for each person in the group who will be sharing. If the group is large, not all members will share each time you meet. Sit so all can see and hear each other in a space where you will not be disturbed. Light a candle or set up some other focal point for the group. One person should be designated to keep the group on task, watching the clock and reminding the group of ground rules. (Anyone in the group may call the group back to quiet, if the group gets off task; then the leader can resume the process.)

SILENCE – You may begin with instructions, an opening devotion or prayer, and then have a few minutes of silence to enter into awareness of God’s presence in the group.

SHARING – up to 10 Minutes

First person: Present to the group, without interruption, one of the following:

- An experience of God’s presence, or of distance from God you wonder about
- A question or concern you wish to explore
- A pattern you have noticed in your spiritual life that troubles or puzzles you
- A desire, or lack of desire, you want to reflect on

Share personally, honestly, and include thoughts, feelings, beliefs, values, as well as questions and concerns that this topic raises for you.

Group members: Listen reverently, noticing God’s presence. Do not try to “fix” the person. Do not interrupt, correct, or add on your own experience. Listen for God’s heart – what is God showing the person, and the group?

SILENCE – about 3 Minutes

REFLECTION: QUESTIONS AND OBSERVATIONS – up to 10 Minutes

The group members enter into a dialogue with the presenter, by asking clarifying questions, exploratory questions, and making observations of how or where they noticed God’s presence in what was presented. The whole dialogue is held in an attitude of reverence and prayerfulness.

SILENCE – about 3 Minutes

PRAYER – about 3 Minutes – Group members pray aloud or silently for Presenter.

Repeat this process for each person who will present.

BENEDICTION: One person close with a prayer to summarize and ask a blessing on the group.

*Hallie Cowan 2006 for InterVarsity Spiritual Formation retreat

*Adapted from Rose Mary Dougherty, SSND: Group Spiritual Direction (Paulist Press; 1995)