

How to think theologically / who do you say that I am?

I was at a regional church meeting where a small group gets together to work with would-be pastors discerning their callings. Candidacy, ordination, commissioning, lay leadership - etc. In the introduction to new members, we were told that ordination papers are limited to 10 pages, but most people turn in 1 or 2 pages. The person beside me laughed, "Limited to 10; when 1 or 2 will do? How did that rule come to be?"

Hi. It's me. I'm the reason.

Before I was on that board, I was a candidate for ministry. And I turned in a 300 page ordination paper.

But you have to understand why! These are some of the questions asked:

What is your name? Okay. One line.

Why are you seeking ordered ministry? Harder - 10 pages.

Who is Jesus? ... Well, now. A book later... and I knew I still hadn't fully answered this question.

Who is Jesus?

The pre-existent Word in John.

The promised king descended from David in Matthew.

The Passover sacrificial lamb in Luke.

The heir of John the Baptist, who surpasses him in Mark.

Or the Good Shepherd, the Mother Hen, the Miracle-Worker, the Way-Maker, God-incarnate, Saviour, Messiah, Bridegroom, Son of God -

Who is Jesus?

I thought I was being rather conservative with only 300 pages.

I later learned what the board had meant to ask was "But who do YOU say Jesus is?" Who is your Jesus? What aspect, or story, what part of, which angle of Jesus speaks the MOST to you - out of all of them?

When I got on the board, that is one of the changes I advocated for. Because, look, if you give an open question with open amount of space to answer it - you're going to get panicky seminary students trying to summarize libraries of information.

I relate so much with these disciples in today's story. Jesus' first question is "who do people say that the Son of Man is?" And so of course he's going to get a summary of what the gossip is about the coming Son of Man.

John the Baptist - returned! Or never having actually died.

Elijah returned! For we know he was carried into heaven and didn't actually die.

Jeremiah returned! Prophesizing and speaking God's word.

Another prophet returned - here to guide us and goad us.

Jesus starts getting a summary of the libraries. A summary of all the gossip and wonderings. He rephrases himself, "But who do YOU say that I am?"

I wonder if there is a pause, or if Simon Peter replies right away.

Let's imagine there is a pause. In that pause, the disciples have to sift through all they have heard, and been taught, and witnessed. Who is this Jesus before them?

They know his parents. There's rumours his dad Joseph may not be his biological dad, but none of them have confronted Mary on it.

They know his siblings. Some of them travel with the group. Others have complained about Jesus embarrassing the family.

They know Jesus. Witnessed him preaching, healing, banishing evil spirits and debating with knowledge that seems beyond his years and experience.

They know Jesus - and miracles he has manifested. Things no mere human can do.

And yet they have ate with him, walked with him, seen him stub his toe and get splinters - laughed with him and lived with him.

Who is he?

Simon Peter seems to get the right answer: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God." Jesus praises Simon Peter.

But what if the praise wasn't because of the answer... but because Peter answered?

What if the question wasn't about getting the "right answer" but about articulating ANY answer? Or rather, THE answer of who Jesus is for you?

Fast forward a decade or so. I am on another church board, doing the same work, but now in a different denomination and country. I carry with me the questions of my past and ask the upcoming church leaders: "Who do YOU say Jesus is? Who is he to YOU? What is the one or two things about him that matter most to you?"

To me, and to what I am learning is an autistic ADHD mind, these are questions with boundaries and limits that can be answered in under 10 pages or 10 minutes.

And there isn't a right answer. You don't have to say what Simon Peter does. I believe he is praised because he HAS an answer. And he can articulate it.

Could we each have such? The "elevator speech" of "why Jesus?" "Who is Jesus"?

This is called thinking theologically. And it is hard! It takes practice. And yet, thinking theologically is something we do every single day as Christians, and as living in a world shaped by religion. We just tend to do it subconsciously. Every time we watch a movie, we know

eventually the good guys will win. There will be a big cost, but they will win. This is based in our theological world view of good triumphing over evil.

If you watch foreign films, good doesn't always win. That isn't the theology everywhere.

So how do we make these assumptions we have subconsciously become conscious? How do we think about thinking? As we come from the Methodist tradition - John and Charles Wesley. The Wesleyan Quadrilateral has been used for centuries to help us think theologically. You can use it too.

Imagine a box and divide it into four. One corner is scripture - everything in the Bible - and not other's interpretations, but the actual words. Another corner is tradition - everything the church and history have developed. The third corner is experience - what have you, personally, experienced? And the fourth is reason - what is reasonable, logical?

Each and every person is going to have a different theology because each and every person would put different things in these boxes.

You have a box available now. Let's practice this! And we're going to practice it on the biggest question that you absolutely cannot answer in a few minutes, or a single page. But it is to practice answering, "Who do YOU say Jesus is?"

WHO IS YOUR JESUS?

In the corner of scripture, write or draw 1 or 2 things that are in the Bible you associate with Jesus.

In the corner of tradition, write or draw 1 or 2 things you have been taught about Jesus.

In the corner of experience, write or draw 1 or 2 times you have experienced Jesus.

In the corner of reason, write or draw 1 or 2 logical, reasonable or factual things about Jesus.

SCRIPTURE TRADITION

EXPERIENCE REASON

I imagine one of these four was very easy for you to fill out. That is your theological strong point. I imagine one was hard for you to fill out. That is where your theology could grow. Wesley taught that a well developed personal theology balances all four of these. All four equally important and all four supporting each other.

You can do this in your daily life to think theologically too. I encourage you to try it out over this upcoming week. Pick any experience or scripture, thought or tradition, and try understanding it better.

When we understand what we believe, and why we believe it, we're able to answer questions like "Why are you Christian?" "Why do you go to church?" "Why do you believe [fill in the blank.]" Well, rather, we're able to answer them in less than 10 pages or 10 minutes. And maybe we'll get well enough to answer these as quickly as Simon Peter!

I realize I never answered the question today. Who is MY Jesus? My conduit, my connection, to God. Through Jesus, the Godhead knows what it is to be human. To live. To love. To lose. To die. God took on the experiences of every-day human reality and made them holy - infused every moment of mundane life with sacredness. All that I do, God is present. There is no gap and great distance between the divine and me - Jesus has filled it. And now the Spirit travels, flows, across this conduit connecting all things, all peoples, all creation, across all time. The Creator and Creation are reunited.

That's my answer today. It wasn't my answer 10 years ago and it won't be my answer 10 years from now.

May the Spirit empower you to reflect. May Jesus guide you on the Way. May Creator God create space for you to think. May God bless you in your discernment of answering "Who do YOU say Jesus is? Who is he to YOU? What is the one or two things about him that matter most to you?"

Amen

Scripture Reading – August 23, 2026 – for Little Current United Church

Matthew 16:13-20 NRSV Ue

Peter's Declaration about Jesus

¹³ Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" ¹⁴ And they said, "Some say John the Baptist but others Elijah and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." ¹⁵ He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" ¹⁶ Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." ¹⁷ And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you but my Father in heaven. ¹⁸ And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. ¹⁹ I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." ²⁰ Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

Romans 12:1-8

The New Life in Christ

12 I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, on the basis of God's mercy, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your reasonable act of worship. ² Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of the mind, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

³ For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. ⁴ For as in one body we have many members and not all the members have the same function, ⁵ so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. ⁶ We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ⁷ ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; ⁸ the encourager, in encouragement; the giver, in sincerity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

May God's spirit shape our understanding of these words.

And may they awaken in our hearts

