



**Theology in the Life of the
Congregation**
Edward Farley

Theology & Worship
Occasional Paper No. 17
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

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INTRODUCTION

Edward Farley is an exceptional theologian – exceptional in several particular ways. Not least among his qualities is a consistent concern for the ways theology is present in (or absent from) the life of the church. In addition to foundational books such as *Ecclesial Man* (1975), *Ecclesial Reflection* (1982), *Good and Evil* (1990), and *Divine Empathy* (1996), Farley has given careful attention to the life of the church and the place of theological education in schools and congregations.

More than twenty years after its publication, *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education* (1983) remains an influential critique of theological education for clergy. Going beyond stale complaints about the inability of seminaries to relate “theory and practice,” Farley proposes a fundamental reorientation of theological education. Both his analysis and his prescriptions continue to challenge the prevailing paradigm of seminary education. *The Fragility of Knowledge: Theological Education in the Church and the University* (1988) extends the analysis to both university and congregational education. In the essay “Can Church Education Be Theological Education?” Farley asks, “How is it that the Christian faith, committed as it is to relating faith to reality, world, knowledge, and learning, continues to restrict this effort to its ordained leadership and to withhold it from the laity?”

Farley’s most recent contribution to the church’s faith and life is *Practicing Gospel: Unconventional Thoughts on the Church’s Ministry* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2003). This collection of thirteen essays addresses issues in pastoral theology, homiletics, worship, Christian education, and pastoral care. Farley avoids both theoretical abstraction and cheap advice, engaging the church in careful thinking about its faith and faithfulness. As the publisher notes, “For seminarians and pastors too often tempted to equate pastoral care with popular psychology, good preaching with snappy public speaking, and Christian education with flashy curriculum, esteemed theologian Ed Farley offers a more faithful approach to the tasks of ministry . . . By holding theology and practice in an inescapable partnership, Farley rightly refocuses the church’s life on its proper object and subject: a mysterious, transforming God.”

The Office of Theology and Worship is pleased to present the opening essay in *Practicing Gospel*, “Theology in the Life of the Congregation,” as Theology and Worship Occasional Paper No. 17. The essay stands by itself as a valuable contribution to the self-understanding of the church and its ministers. Pastors and seminarians will benefit from its analysis and its suggestive description of “a theology of ministry and ministry as theology.” The essay also serves as an introduction to the whole collection, and may inspire some to read further, exploring such issues as “Preaching the Bible and Preaching the Gospel,” and “The Tragic Dilemma of Church Education.” The Office of Theology and Worship is grateful to Westminster John Knox Press for permission to publish the present essay, and hopes that readers will find their way to all the essays in *Practicing Gospel*.

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Theology in the Life of the Congregation

“Practical theology” is the subject of this book. “Theology” in that phrase suggests matters of interest for people who teach in theological seminaries. I would hope that is the case. At the same time, “theology” in this collection names something much broader than the scholarship and teaching offered by professional schools. Theology is a deliberate, focused, and self-conscious thinking that has its origin in faith’s need to interpret itself and its situation. Theology is stirred into existence as believers struggle for clarity and understanding. Since the essays in this collection presuppose this broadened notion of theology as a possibility and task of congregational life, I feel obliged, here at the start, to make a case for what may seem to be an idiosyncratic definition. This case involves four themes: theology’s banishment from the life of the believer and the congregation, its place in redemptive transformation, believers as theologians, and ministers as theologians.

THEOLOGY FOR PROFESSIONALS ONLY

Let us begin by acknowledging that in many circles, lay, clerical, and even academic “theology” has a negative ring. It refers to something that has to do with the head not the heart, with philosophy not scripture, schools not churches, books rather than life. Even when theology is not a pejorative term, it suggests something on the margin of life, ministry, and congregation—something that stirs the blood of a few professors. Even if theology does have a place in the church, that place is outside the congregation. How did theology acquire this marginal status? To put the question that way implies that at one time, it was not on the margin of the life of faith and ministry but in the center. I do want to avoid idealizing earlier centuries of Christianity for the sake of present criticism. But it is the case that theology was at least *thought of* in a very different way in early periods, both as to its genre and its breadth. Throughout the medieval period and the early centuries of Protestantism, theology meant simply the knowledge of God and the things of God. Because that knowledge had to do with salvation, it was a practical knowledge, a “habit” (*habitus*) of wisdom: that is, a fundamental way of being disposed toward things. The genre change and narrowing of theology after the Renaissance coincides with the rise of modern universities and their sciences.

The first narrowing of theology was the result of a praiseworthy historical trend in the Christian movement, namely, the adoption, although not necessarily imitation, of scientific rigor (scholarship) in its schools. Scholastic (dialectical) modes of thinking entered Catholic Europe by way of the Muslim discovery of Aristotle and marked a new philosophical and conceptual rigor in the cathedral schools. The founding of universities in the twelfth century created a distinctive population of wandering students. The trivium and quadrivium way of organizing studies in the Middle Ages eventually gave way to new sciences (mathematics, cosmology, optics, astronomy, etc.) of the Renaissance. In the European Enlightenment, especially in Germany, a new kind of university arose and with it came the notion that a university is organized by its “sciences”; that is, by discrete, corporate bodies of knowledge and inquiry, each with its jargon, methods of research, and distinctive subject matter. Given these developments, it was inevitable that if theology were to have a place in the universities, it, too, would have to be a “science” in this new sense of the word. And since theology called for several types of inquiry, theology itself began to break up into particular sciences (church history, dogmatics, practical theology, biblical studies). Accordingly, in the period from the Middle Ages to the eighteenth century, theology underwent a sea change from being a practical knowledge or wisdom that attends the life of faith to a scholarly enterprise of school-located academics and school-trained clergy. After this narrowing, academics and clergy, not believers, were the theologians.

Theology's initial narrowing was from the genre of wisdom to the genre of specialized knowledge. Insofar as clergy were educated in this specialized knowledge, that is, in the various fields of "theological studies," they, too, were theologians. However, a second narrowing of theology laid the groundwork for the eventual banishment of theology from the clergy. In the new way of organizing theology into academic fields, theology (as Systematic Theology) reappeared as one of the fields of the seminary curriculum. As an academic field, it existed in contrast (and sometimes competition) with biblical studies, ethics, history, and practical theology. In this sense it was part of the minister's education. However, the actual exposure of the student to this very specific and sometimes formidable subject tended to be limited to one or two introductory courses. "Theology" is officially part of what clergy study. Unofficially, it has become distant and marginal.

A third narrowing more or less completed the banishment of theology from the consciousness and self-understanding of ministers. This happened when Protestant churches began to define ministry as a cluster of distinctive activities of trained professionals. A minister is a minister by way of such professional skills as counseling, preaching, administering, and educating. The ministry, in other words, is a set of functions, and the education of a minister ("theological education") means a preparation for the exercise of those functions. But ministerial functions, professional skills, and responsibilities do not coincide with the cluster of fields offered by seminaries. Church history is not one of the functions nor is ethics or theology. Even if the seminary student is required to study these things, there is no powerful paradigm for their continued presence in the practice of ministry. Theology, accordingly, became functionally obsolete. The minister can be a minister without it. As the result of these narrowings, theology became marginal to believers, to ministers and church leaders, and thus to congregations.

THEOLOGIAN BELIEVERS

Redemptional Interpretation

In its broadened sense, theology—like prayer, worship, and compassionate service—is a feature of the life of faith. But how so? The phrase "the life of faith" connotes the way human beings are redemptively transformed under the gospel. If theology is a feature of the life of faith, it must have some role to play in redemptive transformation. Accordingly, we must inquire, at least briefly, how redemptive transformation takes place and what it involves. One meaning of redemption, at least as far as it is visible to us, is the transformation of corrupted human beings and their institutions. Redemption can liberate the human being from every level of human evil: systematic oppression, skewed personal relations, and the loss of individual freedom. Christians have always said that salvation occurs "through Jesus Christ." They mean that an actual person existed at a certain time in history, that the total event of that person was decisive for salvation, and that redemptive transformation became available in history by way of a new universal community of salvation called the *ecclesia* or church. Somehow redemptive liberation takes place in conjunction with the activities of that community. This need not mean that God is unable to redemptively transform human individuals and institutions by way of other communities and religious traditions. Nor does it mean that the church saves. It does mean that the event and person of Jesus redemptively transforms in and through this community. For we have in this community a strange new form of human interrelationship (*koinonia*) that is redemptive; and this redemptive interrelationship is closely tied to a narrative that has a powerful, redemptive effect on those who hear it. Somehow the oppressions and lack of freedom of individuals and institutions begin to lose their power when this narrative takes hold.

These comments do not explore very deeply how redemption occurs, but they do imply that redemption is somehow connected with activities of *interpretation*. Jesus himself interpreted and reinterpreted the faith of Israel. Paul interpreted the early apostolic tradition that was passed to him to the situation of his congregations. The new community of redemption was charged to remember Jesus of Nazareth and proclaim the good news about him. To relate this event, person, symbol, or narrative to one's own present situation is to interpret. Specific congregations are localized institutions of interpretation, environments in which the narrative of Jesus of Nazareth is remembered, proclaimed, and related to the present.

If we ask how individual human beings are redemptively transformed, we find ourselves led along the same track. While it is always God who saves, what God does to save is to found a community of redemption through a powerful, history-changing event. Individuals are transformed not only when they hear and respond to Gospel's narrative but when they participate in that human relationality (*koinonia*) of the *ecclesia*. Bound in close relations with other human beings who are responding to Gospel narrative, human beings experience new freedoms in their ways of being, thinking, and feeling, and in their relationships. This transformation does not happen by way of an external causality—for instance, by magic. God does not redemptively transform human beings the way the fairy godmother turns a pumpkin into a carriage. The symbolism and story of redemption reach the depths of individuals as they interpret and reinterpret themselves and their world. The narrative engages the inner dynamics of both human persons and their communities. The interpreted Gospel exposes layers of language, self-understanding, and commitment that harbor bigotry, sexism, and xenophobia. To submit such things to Gospel, to allow Gospel to reveal alternative ways of being and speaking, is an activity of ongoing interpretation.

BELIEVERS AS THEOLOGIANS

The notion that interpretation is at work in redemptive transformation returns us to the issue of theology. Theology, at least in its older meaning, confronts any and all believers with the obligation to interpret. Accordingly, its location in degree-granting schools and in the work of scholarship is only one of its modes. In its most fundamental form, theology names the interpretation or reflective thinking that subjects situations to the power and illumining light of Gospel. Let us summarize and extend this point. First, redemptive transformation takes place, at least in part, through interpretive acts directed to the corruptions and possibilities for change of both individuals and institutions. Remembering the event and person of Christ, attesting to the gospel, and relating various themes in the world of Gospel to situations are all interpretive-thinking acts. Second, because theology is both an activity of interpretation and the understanding that it yields, it can be characterized as either active (a reflection, inquiry, thinking) or passive (a knowledge, wisdom, insight). What are we talking about when we call theology an interpretation? To what is the interpretation directed? Since the interpretation is bound up with the occurrence of redemption, it will have something to do with the event, person, and remembered tradition that have brought about the *ecclesia*, the community of redemption. Theology, in other words, has a commemorative and attesting aspect. The narrative and symbolism able to expose human corruptness and human beings toward freedom are not universal and inevitable creations of human culture. They come down to us from a specific historical and community-defining past and are remembered as Gospel, tradition, the essence of Christianity, the Christian faith. This is the historical given of theology. But because it is historical, it presents itself for interpretation. This gathering of narratives, symbols, and events that we call Gospel arose in acts of interpretation, and because it resides in the ambiguities, richness, and time-bound meanings of human language, it ever summons the community to reinterpretation. Gospel then has a history, a long tradition of reinterpretation that added new insights about the Christian

faith. Accordingly, to interpret Gospel is to come face to face with the centuries-long legacy of reinterpretation.

Third, interpretation is not merely a carrying forth of ancient meanings out of the past into the present. To the degree that we see it this way, we make the ancient interpreters infallible and absolute. We turn their work into magic and thaumaturgy. Hence, everything that comes out of the past as tradition, even Christian faith, must pass through tests of truth. The event, person, or narrative of redemptive transformation could not be efficacious if they were simply phony, reality-denying, contradictory, or superstitious. No believer can be indifferent to whether or not the discourse he or she is using is a truth or a lie.

Fourth, interpretation is not merely an assessment of the truth of ancient tradition. Interpretation always and inevitably begins with and reflects the historical time, culture, corruption, language, and bias of its own situation. It is just that situation which needs transformation. Not only does the believer interpret the tradition or the Christian faith; she or he interprets the present. Hence the “truth” of the Christian faith is a truth in which the present receives, embodies, and reembodies the past. Theology, then, in its broadened meaning, is an interpretive or thinking activity determined by Gospel, the concern for truth, and a response to the present situation. Theology thus degenerates whenever any of these three elements are absent.

Finally, this focus on an egalitarian, nonelitist, and broadened theology might suggest that theological interpretation is simply the believer’s casual and momentary opining about religion, or the beliefs the believer happens to have. If we are all theologians, any theology (believing) is as good as the next. This view would be to miss what even the older view of theology as a “knowledge of divine things” had in mind, and it would certainly misunderstand the nature of theology as interpretation. Consider what is involved in the three elements of interpretation. The struggle to understand the remembered tradition (the Christian faith) has spanned twenty centuries. The assessment of the truth of Gospel faces us with unfathomed complexities. The interpretation of our situation, even a very simple situation such as a problem that has risen in one’s family, rarely yields itself to instantaneous and effortless intuition. Theology may be egalitarian, but at the same time, it has a rigorous, disciplined aspect. There are no shortcuts here. To interpret and think about Gospel calls for a lifelong pedagogy, an educational discipline, and habits of reflection. This does not mean that the believer must become a scholar in order to interpret or think. There are distinguishable modes of interpretation. The believer-theologian is the basic mode. But, special kinds of interpretive responsibilities are laid on those called to be leaders, preachers, and teachers in the congregation, and on those called to be scholars and doctors of the church. Theology thus does span different modes, different kinds of institutions, and different aims. This brings us to the fourth theme in our inquiry into theology in the life of the congregation, the mode of theological interpretation distinctive to the church’s lay and ordained leadership.

MINISTERS AS THEOLOGIANS

If theology names the interpretive life of faith, a thinking of situations under Gospel, and if all believers are in this sense theologians, then church leaders and ministers, as believers, are also theologians. Most church leaders will agree that to take up the tasks of ministry calls for a thinking of those tasks in relation to Gospel. At the same time, there appears to be a widespread resistance among clergy to the notion of minister-theologian. Part of that resistance is rooted in the narrowed or academic way of understanding theology. If theology is restricted to the work of scholars or professors, if it is a matter of technical papers, professional societies, and strangely titled books, then obviously most ministers are not theologians. A second kind of resistance is rooted in a certain way of understanding church leadership and (ordained)

ministry. A latecomer in the history of Christendom, this functionalist view defines ministry by the “professional” skills the minister needs to successfully maintain a congregation. In the second part of this essay, I shall try to soften this resistance by exploring the distinctive sense in which church leaders are summoned to a theological task.

Ministry Minus Theology

One way to uncover the theological dimension of ministry is to examine what church leadership looks like when it repudiates its theological task. A generalization may be in order. It seems fair to say that when the congregation or its leadership eschews theological interpretation or thinking, it takes on, chameleon-like, the colors of the larger culture. Interpretation and thinking do not disappear, since to exist in a situation is inevitably to interpret. But without a rigorous alertness to Gospel’s power to transform situations, church leaders will allow a variety of cultural trends to determine their own self-understanding and set the agenda of the congregation. Three such cultural trends come to mind, trends so powerful as to set models or paradigms for grasping the nature and work of congregations and of church leadership.

The first trend comes with the rise of modern bureaucracies. In spite of its bad reputation, a bureaucracy can be a valuable asset to institutions that try efficiently to deliver their services. Bureaucracy is now a characteristic feature of modern institutions: governments, colleges, public education, corporations, and churches. It is also the framework for one popular image of the “successful” minister. According to this paradigm, the tasks that define a minister are maintaining an institution (congregation), enlarging its membership, mediating its conflicts, and organizing its undertakings. In this paradigm the minister’s primary responsibility is to the program. The model of the minister as a program officer tends to spawn resistance or indifference to theological-interpretive responsibilities. One can preach, hold meetings, and erect new buildings without subjecting these things to Gospel.

Moralism constitutes a second paradigm for church leadership. Moralism is a broader phenomenon than the ordering of human life by a detailed code of behavior (casuistry) or ethical rigidity (legalism). In the moralist’s world, “shoulds” and “oughts” displace or marginalize other human possibilities: forgiveness, joy, creativity, compassion. In a moralist paradigm, ministry means showing people what they ought to do and be, and preaching centers on helping people learn the lessons of life. Granting that moral experience, obligation, and laws are in themselves good things, they are not Gospel. And when they set the paradigm for ministry, they displace the congregation’s primary reality and calling.

A third paradigm for church leadership emerges when the redemption, welfare, and contentment of the individual become all in all. This paradigm has roots both in religion’s perennial concern for individuals and in what social scientists have called the therapeutic (Philip Rieff) and the culture of narcissism (Christopher Lasch). When this paradigm sets the congregation’s primary ethos and agenda, transindividual problems lose their importance. Matters of oppression, the homeless, environmental pollution, HIV, and discrimination fade in importance. What organizes the tasks of ministry is the eschatological redemption, moral reconstruction, and consolation of the congregation’s individuals.

These three paradigms of ministry or leadership share a common trait: they mirror and foster the prevailing trends of current secular society. A subtle secularism colors the congregation that focuses totally on the welfare of its individual members, offers to them moralizing or therapeutic bromides, and directs most of its energies to its own growth and success. When Gospel is the congregation’s paramount referent and symbolic world, bureaucracy, moralism, and individualism may not disappear, but they will lose paradigmatic status. When church leaders are oriented to the prophetic summons of authentic faith,

they resist defining themselves by their institutional functions. Their task is not simply to maintain the social institution but to assist a community of redemption to transcend its own self-orientation. When Gospel is paramount, church leaders are hesitant to be simply moralizing scolds or therapeutic consolers.

What does this distinction between the secularizing paradigms and Gospel have to do with theology and with minister-theologians? Note what prompts the church leader's resistance to these paradigms, what makes a congregation alert to bureaucratic, moralistic, and individualistic displacements of Gospel. Church leaders become suspicious of these secularizing paradigms when they *interpret* their tasks under Gospel. It is Gospel that awakens church leaders to a critical transcendence of the cultural (and even religious) situation of the congregation. And this transcendence is not an automatic feature of a congregation's leadership. It does not come with an official appointment by a judicatory or with a paycheck. It is impelled by an ongoing theological struggle with the meaning of Gospel, faith, and church.

A Theology of Ministry and Ministry as Theology

The contention here is that ministers and church leaders have a theological responsibility. In the preceding section, I argued this case by means of a negation, a picture of what happens to church leadership when it abandons the ongoing theological interpretation or thinking of Gospel toward situations. Secularizing paradigms of ministry quickly replace Gospel. But what precisely is the church leader's theological responsibility? It goes without saying that the basic form of theology will be part of the life of ministers as they are also believers. Do church leaders also face distinctive theological tasks? I argued previously that theology (the interpretation of Gospel in situations) was present in the community of faith in many different ways, genres, or modes. This suggests at least the possibility that one of theology's modes arises with the interpretive tasks of church leadership, for church leaders or ministers exist in and are responsible to a distinctive situation. Recall that redemption takes place in connection with the faith community's memory and testimony to the good news of the event and person of Jesus. When the believer participates in this community, a process of interpretation begins that lasts throughout life. But how is it that this "participation" is also a confrontation with the good news? How specifically does the good news (Gospel) do its work? Liberation by the narrative and metaphors of Gospel does not come simply with human DNA or with acculturation. The church self-consciously takes on the task of speaking, reinterpreting, and living Gospel mediated through the memorial tradition. The ecclesial community is ever astir with interpretations that take place in liturgy, song, pedagogy, sacrament, organization, and preaching. Since the early apostles and the beginnings of the Christian movement, these tasks have called out a special leadership whose calling is not just to clone tradition but to facilitate its interpretation. We can assume, I think, that all believers engage in ministries that respond to the needs of their situations. The role of a special leadership—the ministry in its conventional sense—is the facilitation of the ministries of believers. This includes the facilitation of the interpretive aspects of these tasks.

If church leaders facilitate the congregation's ministries, and if this role includes a facilitation of its interpretations, then they are summoned to a distinctive responsibility. What would it mean to facilitate the interpretive life of a congregation and its members? Recall the components of theological interpretation: the grasp of the content of the memorial tradition (the faith once delivered), the struggle with its truth, and the reflection on situations in the light of that truth. All believers are summoned to interpret Gospel in their situations; church leaders are called to facilitate (stimulate, discipline, inform) the interpretive life of believers. Accordingly, church leaders need the theological capabilities this facilitation requires. But what members of the congregation are called to interpret is not only Gospel, Scripture, or tradition but, through Gospel, their life situations: the dynamics of their families,

contemporary political environment, the general trends of their culture. To facilitate interpretation in this sense implies that theology is not simply a discrete aspect of ministry. It is not an item on a list of ministerial responsibilities: for instance, preaching, pastoral care, administration, teaching, *and* theology. Rather, theology names a way of carrying out all of these tasks, since all of them require a thinking of Gospel in its truth and its power.

Spheres of Facilitative Interpretation

To repeat a point, theological thinking takes place in different modes: the believer's specific reflections on life situations, the facilitation of such by church leaders, or scholarly inquiry. In its facilitative (ministry) mode, theological thinking is never a single activity but a varied set of responses. In other words, a number of different spheres of congregation life engage the theological thinking of church leaders.

The first sphere of the theological thinking of church leaders is their own distinctive situation as church leaders. If ministers refuse to think theologically about what it means to be a minister; if, in other words, they refuse to construct a theology of ministry, they may never take up the facilitation of interpretation. Alternative paradigms of ministry may displace that task. Pertinent to a theology of ministry are resources in the social sciences, such as social psychology, the sociology of urban or rural life, and management theory. Such resources do not, however, set the tasks of ministry or determine their meaning. Ministry in, to, and beyond the congregation is what it is because of Gospel, the character of the ecclesial community, and the way redemption takes place. A theological interpretation of the church leader's ministry faces the task of understanding how Gospel, church, memorial texts, and redemption set the tasks of ministry. Even as the interpretation of situations is an ongoing dimension of the life of faith, so self-conscious and critical thinking about ministry is an ongoing part of the minister's reflective life.

The second sphere or level of the church leader's theological thinking concerns specific tasks of ministry. These vary, of course, from minister to minister and congregation to congregation. They include children and youth ministries, urban problems, homeless people, preaching, ministries to the aging, teaching, and counseling. When the minister refuses to think about these tasks theologically, that is, to subject them to Gospel, prevailing trends of culture, conventional pieties, and the politics of the congregation shape and define them. The preacher does not discover what preaching is simply by studying rhetoric, nor does the church educator grasp the distinctive task of church education by boning up on learning theory. These important auxiliary disciplines have their part to play in theological thinking, but they do not tell us how Gospel shapes or affects the task. Preaching presents to the minister a variety of complicated problems: the many genres of biblical texts, the sense in which those texts (or genres) are authoritative, and the relation between the texts and Gospel. A general theory of rhetoric addresses none of these problems. The minister rather thinks or interprets preaching (the sermon) in relation to Gospel, the Christian faith, and issues of their truth. Counseling presents the minister with the complex problem of the relation between various human pathologies and sin, between psychological health and the freedoms that come with redemption. Similar theological complexities attend all the tasks and spheres of ministry.

In these first two spheres of theological thinking, church leaders address their own distinctive situation. They turn the spotlight of interpretation on the nature of ministry and its task. But ministry is always an activity directed *to* and *on behalf of*. To repeat an earlier point, the most general character of church leadership is the facilitation of the ministries of people in the congregation. Most tasks of church leadership are oriented to facilitation and mobilization. Accordingly, the third sphere of the minister's theological thinking is the interpretation called for by these activities. In other words the acts themselves

have an interpretive, theological dimension. An example is in order. A church leader may develop over time a theology of preaching, concluding that preaching is not simply a restatement of popular religion but a voicing of Gospel. Yet another step is called for in which each sermon, the act of preaching itself, embodies theological thinking. Here the preacher works hard to place the situation, biblical narrative, and questions of truth and reality under Gospel and into the world of Gospel. Familiar to us all are ways of preaching that are so literalistically bound to the text, so enamored with some secular fad, or so moralistic or ideological that they have little relation to Gospel. Church education offers a second example. Recall theology's primary meaning, the self-conscious interpretation of situations engaged in by any and all believers. How does such an orientation, discipline, and alertness to Gospel actually come about? Most generally expressed, it happens as the believer participates in the community's worship, partakes of its ancient memory, and is part of its diaconal activities. At the same time, theological thinking is never simply the casual and spontaneous declaration of religious opinion. Theological interpretation proceeds by way of self-conscious alertness, situational focus, and some degree of historical knowledge. Theological thinking, in other words, develops, at least in part, by way of a long-term disciplining, toughening, and training. The church leader then has a special theological responsibility to facilitate (theological) education in the congregation. In addition to being a preacher, liturgist, counselor, and administrator, the church leader is always also a teacher. And the aim of that teaching is the disciplining of the believers' theological, interpretive, or thinking capabilities.

CONCLUSION

Our theme has been the almost unthinkable possibility of theology in the life of the congregation. I have developed that theme in four steps. (1) A long-term historical trend in Christendom has so narrowed the meaning of theology that the possibility of theology in the life of the congregation has been suppressed. (2) Theology names the interpretation or thinking aspect of faith in which situations are subjected to Gospel. (3) The primary mode of theology is, therefore, the interpretive dimensions of the redemptive transformation of any and all believers. (4) More specific theological tasks constitute the distinctive situations of ministers and church leaders. The results of the narrowing trend show up in all aspects of the congregation's life. Thus a congregation and its ordained and nonordained leaders and members can become frozen in the patterns of popular piety (biblicism, casuistry, individualism), caught up in prevailing cultural bigotries, or seduced by temptations of superficial success, growth, and entertainment. For these reasons, theology in the life of the congregation is anything but a trivial issue.