

Keys for Everyday Theologians
Facilitator's Guide
By Colin Harris and Mike Sims
10 Keys for Personal Discernment

Preface

To accompany the participants' guide for personal and group reflection on the "keys," the following are some suggestions for those who might serve as leaders in a group study experience. They are not intended to restrict in any way how a group might explore the questions and topics that arise from a study of the keys. They are intended to provide some preliminary guidance for prompting such exploration. The richness of any study of this kind will emerge from the shared experience and insights of the participants.

Each key will offer an opportunity to think about a basic concept within theological thinking, and careful attention to that concept will promote meaning and helpful participation in the work of "everyday theologians."

Key 1: Faith and Theology

In this initial session, it is important to establish an atmosphere of comfort and inclusion. Time spent in introductions (something about church connection, if a church setting, life and work experience, family networks, maybe what prompted a response to the invitation to this study) is usually helpful.

If the participants have given some thought to the personal reflection questions in the participant's guide, that will be good to acknowledge and affirm and to use as a starting point. Suggest that the kind of "preparational thinking" invited there is an important part of the study.

Be prepared to offer a brief personal response if needed to any of the discussion questions, not so much to "answer" it but to open the door for thinking together about it. Use suggestions and observations from group members as specific illustrations of the relationship of faith and theology.

Lift a few sentences from the section on the first key and ask for a reader's understanding of its meaning and significance. For example, you might read this brief paragraph on page 4:

I think you can see the problem of focusing on saying the right things about Jesus rather than seeking to refine one's understanding of God that comes from following Jesus. Formulas can be helpful expressions of what a faith relationship means, but they are not a good substitute for that relationship. In other words, doctrines can provide good and helpful light for the path, but they do not take the place of walking it.

Consider the question on pp. 61-63 on the doctrine of the Trinity as an example of faith and a "product" of theology that accompanies it.

Key 2: Faith and Beliefs

In the simplest of terms, this key has to do with the distinction between "faith" and "beliefs" -- faith = a relationship, and beliefs = the understandings of the relationship and its partners.

It is important to reiterate the distinction between faith, our journey of relationship with God, and the beliefs, understandings and concepts that accompany that relationship and change as the relationship matures. Since "faith" and "beliefs" are often used interchangeably, making a clear distinction between

faith as a relationship and beliefs as understandings accompanying the relationship is important not only for this key but other keys in the book as well.

One helpful way to approach this topic is to ask participants to think about one or more of the significant relationships in their lives -- marriage, parenting, friendship, professional partnerships, etc. -- and to think about how their understandings of those relationships and the people who share them change over time and with experience. For example, one's concept of parenting is likely to change significantly over the two decades of childhood and adolescence,

Then consider the question (and its implications): As our faith in God and in Christ grows and matures, how do our beliefs about God and Christ develop and change?

Suggest that further thinking on this topic will take place as we study Key # 9, especially as we help each other with the process.

Key 3: Faith and the Partiality of Understanding

This session is intended to encourage participants to recognize how our understandings of any aspect of life begin at a certain place of introduction and are modified and refined by time and experience. The distinction between a "reality" and one's "concept of that reality" is the basic and easy-to-grasp distinction.

Perhaps the examples of partial understanding in the first few paragraphs of the Key – the pencil, the squirrel, and the neighbor boy – can help make the point that the more complex a reality is, the more partial is our understanding of it.

The illustration on pp. 59-60 features the experience of Sabrina as she brings the value of her background to the arena of new discovery. Do any members of the group identify with her experience?

- 1) What is the "secret" for honoring one's background and being open to new ways of looking at it?
- 2) What are some helpful features of Sabrina's group and their responses to her questions?

Key 4: Faith and the Sources of Theological Guidance

We have several significant "sources" that help shape our understanding of our faith experience; and without them, we would be a "ship without a rudder" in the varying winds of life. A careful understanding of these sources is the purpose of this Key.

We are encouraged to explore (1) how we understand how the Bible came to be and how it developed, (2) how we embrace and make healthy use of our own background (tradition), and (3) how we understand our own personal faith experience.

As we noted in our reflections on the previous Key, although we may sometimes think of faith and beliefs as "fixed for all time", the reality is that both faith and beliefs are refined as faith matures. Indeed, the biblical understanding of God begins as a tribal god of a small group of people, who is but one of many tribal gods. It's only during and after the Babylonian exile that God begins to be understood as the one God of all people and creation, and that monotheism takes hold.

It may be helpful to recall the example of Sabrina from our previous Key's discussion as we continue its insight into our thinking about the Bible, tradition, and experience. Also, the hypothetical example on pages 56-58 may offer an application to encourage discussion as well.

Review the section on how the Bible came to be (pp. 14-16) and its inspiration (pp. 86-87). It is helpful here to recall the ways in which our understandings of parenting, marriage, careers, education etc. change as these endeavors mature? (review the information on pp. 66-67 and 72-74 for background on how the Bible reflects an evolving understanding of God).

Key 5: Faith and the Religious Marketplace

This session focuses on the care needed to evaluate and choose carefully the sources of guidance for faith's quest for understanding.

The personal experience of participants can be a helpful starting point as they suggest things that have been influential (and things that have not been). Reflection can then move toward what makes the difference between what is helpful and un-helpful. The beginnings are there for developing concepts that can be useful in evaluating resources.

Inviting participants to consider the features of a "healthy" faith suggested by Howard Clinebell's characteristics (pages 20-21) may lead to some specific insights that will be helpful for the group.

Perhaps suggestions can arise about "warning signs" that might indicate a perspective that could be misleading. The general question for this key is "Who (and what) can you trust to offer guidance?" In a quest for guidance in developing a healthy diet, would it be better to listen to a nutritionist or to a candy marketer? Might there be a correlation here?

Key 6: Faith and the Levels of Truth

The discussion of this Key is intended to explore the concept that "truth" is more complex than simple accuracy. There is a tendency to think that something must be factually accurate in order to be "true." This key does not diminish the importance of this level of truth, but it invites a consideration of "truths" that lie beneath the level of factual and historical accuracy. Poetry, fiction, parables, fables and other vehicles of communication often open up truths that lie at a deeper level of experience, and it is to this level that we are invited by this key to attend.

In the arena of theological thinking, the notion that "truth" is only contained in accounts that are historically accurate has become a key "lens" through which many Christians understand biblical accounts. Those for whom this lens is very important may feel some discomfort with the broader understanding of truth in this key.

Two things may help this part of the discussion:

- 1) Invite participants to think of movies, books, or stories that have been influential in the way we see life. Examples might include "It's a Wonderful Life," or "Oh, God!" or "The Shack," or another piece of classical literature, or any of Jesus' parables. In what ways might these be considered "true" and "not true" at the same time?
- 2) It may help to reiterate that biblical accounts, like other literary accounts, are "culturally conditioned by their time and place, and may not reflect what would later be understood to be factual or historical accuracy" (page 25). Key #8 on Faith and History (page 32) will have more to say about this and might be helpful to "preview" at this point.

Key 7: Faith and Science

Faith and science are often portrayed as adversaries in public discussion and conversation, and group members will no doubt have examples from their locale and experience. The goal in this discussion should probably be on how to find and develop helpful responses when the questions come up, rather than to win points in the debate.

Here also might be a good place to preview Key #8. It seems like “historicizing our theology” and “scientificizing our theology” are very similar. Both risk missing the essential truth of theology by insisting that it must be either historically accurate or scientifically factual - or both - to be valid.

Both keys involve caution against claiming for theology what it does not claim for itself - namely historical accuracy or scientific fact

A suggested starting point for consideration of this Key might be to look at the two “scenarios” on pages 26 and 27, and to think about the truth of their experience of awe and reverence, along with such different understandings of what was going on in the natural process of the sunrise.

The obvious intention of attention to this Key is to be able to be religiously faithful and scientifically honest at the same time.

Key 8: Faith and History

This Key can be tricky, because our faith and our history are so intertwined. One of the distinctive features of the covenant faith of Israel and that of the Christian community is that it is grounded in historical events in which the faith community experiences God at work. The acts of God that create the faith experience take place on the historical stage, and the events involved become foundational landmarks for understanding the experience (our theology).

Our Hebrew roots ground us in history. We cannot understand the covenant faith of Israel apart from the Exodus and the journey to and beyond the Exile. We cannot understand the Christian faith apart from the life, teachings, death and resurrection of Jesus.

But here is an important and essential point: we can take history seriously without necessarily taking it literally. Think about what this distinction might mean: How do we take something seriously, without taking it literally?

The focus and purpose of the study of this key is to help participants to affirm enough, but not to claim too much, for the historical framework in which faith is rooted. Not claiming enough for a historical foundation separates an understanding of faith from the stage on which it lives (making it a wholly mystical, other-worldly reality). Claiming too much for the historical context can focus faith on the accuracy of the description of the narrative vehicle rather than to a deeper truth to which it points (for example, the Garden of Eden or the story of Jonah).

Being repetitious, “theologizing history” is taking an historical event (like the Exodus, or the crucifixion of Jesus) and lifting it to a higher level of theological significance than its “mere” historicity. “Historicizing theology” is taking a religious/spiritual/theological experience and its symbolic and poetic framework and creating a historical event or setting to serve as its basis, requiring a belief in its literal factual history (for example, experiencing God as creator of the universe and developing the Garden of Eden as a description of how it happened and insisting that this is exactly how it happened).

Key 9: Faith and Personal Development

It is important in this section to affirm the validity and authenticity of every stage of the faith maturation process. It is not a place for evaluation. It is similar in many ways to what we accept as a standard or normative developmental process, but it also has some significant differences. We see variations in starting point and rate of development in a faith relationship – it can begin in childhood, but it can also begin in adulthood, yet the stages are there; and movement from one stage to the next needs careful support and encouragement from one’s companions on the journey.

The conversations to this point of the study have probably illustrated how our time in the journey of faith changes and refines our understandings of what the journey means. And, participants have already been engaged with each other’s ways of thinking and have offered affirmations for insights shared from various vantage points.

Reflections on this Key encourage the development of some concepts that characterize the maturation process through which faith grows – concepts that can be “aspirational points” or goals to embrace as guides for ongoing thinking.

Having the group reflect on the “traits” of a mature religious sentiment as suggested by Gordon Allport (pages 42-43) can provide helpful illustrations of both the more mature and less mature points of the spectrum of each concept.

It may be helpful by this point of the study to ask the group for reflections on how to discern where on the scale of the faith maturation process a companion on the journey is, and to think about how to affirm that place and offer suggestions for the journey going forward. This is the “coaching” role of the everyday theologian in the faith community. A question like, “How can we be most helpful to each other as we travel the journey of faith?” can lead to thoughts about how we have been helped at particular points of our own journeys.

From this discussion some helpful principles can emerge that can guide this important part of our theological work.

Key 10: Faith and Other Faiths

Since the essential fact that we are Christians underlies any sectarian or denominational differences, there is often an unspoken and unchallenged notion that Christianity is the “one true way”. This chapter makes this unspoken notion explicit by offering several perspectives on thinking about other faiths and their understanding of truth.

This may be surprising or uncomfortable for those who may not have thought specifically about the topic before. It’s important to acknowledge the discomfort and reiterate the suggestion that “To claim ‘partiality’ for an understanding of one’s faith is not to compromise its truth and value as the core of one’s life. It is, rather, an honest recognition that the mystery toward which our faith points us is more complex and profound than any perception at a given time can grasp completely” (pg. 48).

If the participants have read the illustration on pages 68-71, prior to the session, it may help to frame the consideration of this Key in a practical application. Arnold and his minister do some good theological work as they talk and listen together to each other’s concerns about what they have always believed and what they are experiencing in their encounter with neighbors and friends.

There’s an appropriate humility in admitting that, while God fully understands us, we will never fully understand God.

