

Keys for Everyday Theologians
Participants Guide
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10 Keys for Personal Discernment

Preface

This study guide is intended to support reflection on the “keys” by offering these suggestions: (1) some questions for personal reflection after reading each key's section, (2) and some questions designed to prompt discussion in a group setting if that is the context of the study. The ten keys supply the framework for the study guide, with other parts of the book (noted in each section) supporting each key.

This study guide, like many learning opportunities, is far less about absorbing facts and theories and far more about developing tools and habits of the mind that foster thoughtfulness and discernment in our faith journey. It is dedicated to the idea that we are all, indeed, theologians - thinkers about and followers of God. It is our hope that this study guide is helpful in “unlocking the doors to faith seeking understanding”

Key # 1 - Faith and Theology

Our focus is on faith and theology, and the distinction between these two words:

Faith - the ongoing journey in our relationship with God as we follow Jesus

Theology - exploring the meaning of God and all that is involved in a relationship with God

Personal reflective questions

What are some of the significant relationships in your life (e.g., with parents, life partners, friends)? How did you think and speak about those relationships in their early stages, and how has your understanding of them grown over time? What are some of the experiences that have influenced your understanding of those relationships?

When you intentionally embraced and began your faith journey (as at confirmation or baptism, depending on your tradition), what do you remember about how you thought about it and its meaning at the time? Did you understand it then the way you do now? How has your understanding changed?

If one’s thinking and speaking about faith is one’s “personal theology,” how much of a stretch is it to think of oneself as an “everyday theologian”?

Considering the suggestion that theology (formal and informal) involves the “3 p’s” of perspective, process, and product, how do you see these at work in your thinking about your faith?

Discussion questions

Think of the different understandings of faith that you encounter among friends, family, and church members. What are some examples of how people understand and speak of their faith? How can faith have such different understandings? Is it important for people to think and speak the same way about the faith they share?

Have you ever observed conflict over different ways of understanding a shared faith (this would be theological conflict)? Could you share anything about that experience and observation?

In your experience, are some ways of thinking about faith more helpful than others? Can you think of some examples of more helpful and less helpful ways of thinking and understanding? What do you think makes the difference?

Considering the suggestion that faith is a growing relationship and theology is a “work in progress,” what direction does your theology seem to be moving? Are there some changes to this point that suggest future developments?

Key #2 - Faith and Beliefs

Our focus is on faith and beliefs, and the distinction between these two words:

Faith - the ongoing journey in our relationship with God as we follow Jesus

Beliefs - the ideas, concepts and understandings that accompany our faith journey

As a relationship grows and deepens, the beliefs that accompany it change and are refined by time and experience.

Personal reflective questions

How has your faith changed over time?

How have your beliefs changed as a result?

Have new or refined beliefs brought tension about letting go of old beliefs, either within you or with your faith community? Can you think of specific examples of this tension and how it was resolved?

Review “How Can I Know What to Believe” on page 59

Discussion questions

Can you identify particular times in your faith journey where your beliefs changed as a result of new understandings?

How has your faith journey changed the way you see your relationship with God?

What insights have you found that help or hinder your maturing faith?

Have there been times in your life where rigidity of belief (your own or others) has caused tension or conflict with others? Describe one if you are willing.

Key #3 - Faith and the Partiality of Understanding

Our focus is on recognizing that our understanding of any reality is necessarily partial:

What do we claim to know about God based on our faith?

The more complex the reality, the more partial is our understanding.

Personal reflective questions

Think of an aspect of your life in which you have experienced significant growth of understanding. It may be a subject you first studied in school and later continued as an area of personal interest. It may be a feature of your work or professional life where experience has led to broadened and deepened understanding.

Can you identify some of the steps in that growth – a new level of certification, a diploma, a degree, etc.?

At what point did you arrive (or do you think you will arrive) a complete understanding of that part of life? When would there be no more to learn?

How has your understanding of faith and its many subtopics grown as you have moved along in the journey of life? Have there been significant modifications in your understanding along the way? What areas of your religious thinking have been most affected by this process?

Review and consider the illustration on pp. 56-58 - “What Kind of God Is This?” and the discussion of theological concepts/beliefs that “grow up” on pp 93-97

Discussion questions

What are some examples of basic understandings in the broad arena of human culture that have changed over the course of history?

Diana Butler Bass in a recent book has observed that the Hebrews passage that says, “Jesus is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow,” does not mean that *her understanding of Jesus* has not changed in the course of her faith journey.

- a. What do you think she means by that, and how do you relate to what she is suggesting?
- b. Is the Jesus you “accepted into your heart” at the beginning of your journey the same as the Jesus you follow now? In what ways is he the same, and in what ways is he different?
- c. When do you think you will know everything you need to know about Jesus? How is what you know now related to what you may yet learn about Jesus?

Can something be authentically true without being the whole of truth? Can you think of some examples?

How would you describe the difference between God and one’s *concept of God*? Or, between love and one’s concept of love?

If our understanding of something is different, can I be right if you’re not wrong?

How would you describe the difference between certainty and confidence?

Key #4 - Faith and the Sources of Theological Guidance

Our focus is on three primary sources of influence (formative factors) in our understanding of faith:

- Scripture
- Tradition
- Experience

How these three interrelate has a lot to do with our “theology”.

Personal reflective questions

How has your understanding of the Bible changed over time? What accounts for these changes?

How does a description differ from an affirmation when we talk about the Bible?

How do you assess the validity and usefulness of different sources of guidance?

Review the illustration on pp. 66-67 and the section on “the Inspiration of the Bible” on pp. 86-87.

Discussion questions

What sources of guidance have been useful to you in your journey of faith?

Referring to page 15, what best describes your understanding of where the Bible came from?

How has your understanding of church teachings changed over time? Are some teachings more lasting than others for you? Which ones and why?

How do we balance the need to conserve what is of enduring value in church teachings while being open to changes based on new understandings?

How does your personal faith experience condition the way you read and use the Bible or study the teachings of the church?

Is community important for your faith journey, and if so, why? And how?

Key #5 - Faith and the Religious Marketplace

Our focus is on the care needed to evaluate and choose carefully the sources of guidance for faith’s quest for understanding:

- Personal experience
- Discernment about what is helpful and un-helpful
- Expert guidance

Personal reflective questions

Think about particular things (books, articles, movies, etc.) that have been influential in your thinking about faith. What are they, and how have they been helpful to you?

Have there been things that proved not to be helpful, or maybe even specifically “un-helpful”?

What are some resources that you would suggest to a friend, family member, or co-worker who asks for help with a religious question? What would guide your choice of something to suggest?

Discussion questions

Have you “browsed” in a religiously oriented bookstore lately?

What seem to be the “hot” topics and authors on the cutting edge of marketing?

Is there a mixture of “classics” and contemporary resources?

Consider the difference between “devotional” materials and “critical issue” or “controversial “ materials. To whom and to what features of the faith-life are these offered and appealing?

What do you personally look for in choosing reading/study material (the credentials and reputation of the author? The particular “pitch” of the marketing? The relation of the topic to a personal concern?)

Key #6 - Faith and the Levels of Truth

Our focus is on the different ways “truth” presents itself:

- Truth as factual accuracy
- Truth as historical accuracy
- Truth as essential meaning

Personal reflective questions

What are the different levels of truth and their meanings?

How are “historical truth” and “theological truth” the same and different from factual truth?

What does “truth” mean in the context of fables and other wisdom stories?

Review “How can the Bible be true ...?” on pp. 66-67.

Review “How Can I Know What to Believe” on pp. 59-60.

Discussion questions

Is “factual truth” the only valid kind of truth? Why or why not?

Much human wisdom throughout history has been encapsulated in parable, fable and myth. Is this wisdom still wise and/or true if it is not factual? Why or why not?

In what way might stories that point to deeper truths become more important than the truths they point to? Can this become a form of idolatry? How might this idolatry look?

With regard to parable, fable and myth etc. and the value of these stories to convey deeper truths: do we lose any of their truth if we pay less attention to their facticity? Is deeper truth more important here?

What kinds of idolatry are there - i.e., what are some things that become more important than the faith relationship itself?

Can a “historical” account contain accurate information and still not capture the “truth” of the event? Can you name an example?

How have theological “truths” and understandings changed for you as a result of your faith journey?

Key #7 - Faith and Science

Our focus will be on how to find and develop helpful responses when the questions of the relationship between science and faith come up, rather than to win points in the debate.

Personal reflective questions

Do you recall the first time you noticed a difference in what your religious teaching provided and what your “common sense” or study of science encouraged you to think? (Examples: a six day creation of the universe, a flood covering the entire earth, the sun stopping in the sky, Jonah’s three days in the belly of a great fish, Jesus walking on water, Lazarus coming back to life after being dead for several days, etc.)

How were you encouraged to deal with that difference?

Do the ongoing discoveries of science challenge your faith in any way? (Examples: The James Webb telescope, genetic engineering, gender identity)

When faced with a choice between believing something from the Bible or believing the findings of scientific discovery, what do you do?

Review the discussion on pp. 75-76.

Discussion questions

Did your thinking in response to the personal reflection questions lead to any insights that you think are important?

Have any teachers, subjects of study, books, movies or plays been helpful to you as you have lived as a person of faith in a scientific world? In what ways have they been helpful?

The chapter observes that religious faith is always accompanied by a particular “worldview” – meaning an understanding of the world/universe at the time. How different is the “worldview” of the book of Genesis from the worldview now accessible to us after Galileo in the 16th century and this year’s James Webb telescope? How is the concept of God as creator affected by these changing world views?

Key #8 - Faith and History

Our focus will be to affirm enough, but not to claim too much, for the historical framework in which faith is rooted:

- We take our faith history seriously rather than literally
- “Theologizing history” and “historicizing theology” – seriously or literally...

Personal reflective questions

What does it mean to say that biblical/Christian faith is “rooted” in history?

How are each of the three dimensions of history (see the bottom of page 32) important to our faith journey?

How does your faith inform your actions in the present?

Discussion questions

How, if at all, is the authenticity of our faith experience connected to the historical “accuracy” of our biblical stories and affirmations?

If we come to understand that a biblical story we once thought was historically accurate is not, does it affect the “truth” or value of the story? Why or why not?

How have you “theologized history” with significant faith events in your life? Can you share one?

How can “historicizing our theology” lead us to miss essential truths in a biblical account? For example, in discerning the meaning of Noah’s ark, Jonah and the big fish, sun stopping in the sky to help Joshua, parables of Jesus, Jesus’ walking on water, the raising of Lazarus?

Key #9 - Faith and Personal Development

Our focus will be on some of the common stages of faith development as we move towards a mature faith.

Personal reflective questions

Think about some of the features you associate with “maturity” (Context of maturity)

What are some of the differences between mature and immature responses in interpersonal relationships and in life situations generally?

What experiences can you identify that have contributed to your personal maturation process?

Review the discussion on pp. 93-97 on theological concepts that “grow up.”

Discussion questions

In conversation with someone on some aspect of faith, what “signals” do you look for to help you understand where that person is in his or her faith journey? (the infant level, child level, adolescent level, adult level)

How can a community of faith/faith family/church fellowship/ assist its members in their faith maturation process? How might that community, perhaps unwittingly, hinder that process?

Which of Allport’s “characteristics of the mature religious sentiment” resonate with you? Have you seen things that illustrate what he describes? (pp. 42-43)

How would we relate this part of our discussion to the admonition of Jesus that we embrace a “child-like faith”? (Are a “child-like faith” and a “childish understanding” the same thing? How do they differ?)

Key #10 - Faith and Other Faiths

Our focus will be on giving some careful attention to the relationship of the faith that is the core of our understanding of life and the faith of others that serves the same function for them.

Personal reflective questions

Review “What is a faithful way to respond to other faiths” on pp. 68-71.

How does “**I** am the way, the truth, and the life” differ from “I am **the** way, **the** truth, and **the** life”? How might this difference inform our response to other faiths?

Is Christianity the only “true faith”? How does your answer affect your thinking about the validity of other faiths? Has your thinking about this question been a source of concern for you as you have encountered persons of other faiths?

What is your level of knowledge of details of other faith traditions?

What is your experience and relationship with people of other faith traditions?

Discussion questions

What assumptions, spoken or unspoken, were you raised with about the uniqueness of Christianity in the broader religious landscape?

How might the exclusivist perspective be an attractive or comforting option for some people?

What do you see as the strengths and weaknesses of the two “relativistic” perspectives the book describes on pp. 46-47?

How can a “partialist” perspective be faithful to the truth in our faith tradition while being open to enrichment from other traditions?

Are there any aspects of the teachings of Jesus that would lead us to respect and see the sacred in another’s faith? Interfaith relationships, communities? Should we be competing with other faiths?

Why have some groups of Christians drawn a tight circle around themselves? Is the truth of the Christian faith diminished by being broad enough to include the truths of different faith traditions? For example, would my friendship with you be diminished if I found out you (or Jesus) had other friends? Is the validity of my marriage diminished by the fact that your marriage is different?

