



It Matters How a Congregation Thinks

Members of the worship committee are arguing. Madeline, a member since 1965 says “Look, it makes no sense to do away with the confession of sin.” Howie, who owns the bookstore in town, says, “All I know is that they don’t confess their sins at my niece’s church. Their worship center is packed.” Madeline responds, “So, if we don’t confess our sins does that mean we don’t sin anymore?” The debate continues. They make no decision at the meeting. However, the committee members decide to think more about sin before they do away with confessing it.

Tim Shapiro

How a congregation thinks matters. Thinking creates feelings. Feelings motivate actions. The way parishioners think about their life together shapes their practice. How worship committee members think about sin will effect whether or not there is a confession of sin in their congregation’s liturgy.

What does it mean for a congregation to think theologically? It means that parishioners use theological language. It means that members of a congregation are more conscious of a worldview infused with God. They follow a logic predicated by faith in God. The logic of the marketplace or the logic of therapy may be helpful. Yet such ways of thinking are secondary to thinking rooted in the ways of faith, through which people are able to see patterns to their lives. “Oh,” Madeline from the worship committee might observe, “I pray for forgiveness. I sense mercy. Then I sin and , well, it starts all over again.” As the patterns of faith become more apparent, parishioners can learn to trust God’s remarkable logic. Congregations achieve a more abundant expression of faith through theological reflection.

When we are intentional about theological reflection we enter a conversation started long before us, one that will continue long after we are gone. Some might suggest that participants in congregational life are not able to use the thought patterns of theology. Some suggest that as we move away from Christendom, the language of theology lacks relevance. I disagree. Parishioners are capable of using the language of theology. In other areas of life, people of faith use sophisticated nuanced ways of thinking. So why not apply the same sophistication to matters of faith? I believe people of faith can know as much about the way of faith, the grammar

of faith, as they know about other interests in their lives.

What happens when congregations learn to think theologically? They become more accurate. Sin is not the same as “messaging up.” Grace is not the same as “good luck.” Theological thinking is precise. It is rooted in narrative: God’s story told in Scripture and God’s story revealed through specific activities of faith communities. Theological reflection does not always bring agreement. It certainly does not make it easier to practice our faith. Yet clear theological thinking does allow us to see the object of our reflection more truthfully. Honest is expressed when a pastor says, “Look, we didn’t just make a mistake, we sinned.” Something truthful occurs when the board of a faith community asks members to wonder, “what part of the Trinity does our ministry most reflect?” Such questions lead to conversations that have depth. Depth supports accuracy. Moreover, accuracy generates health.

So let us be accurate about the reality of congregations. All life is theological. We neglect the responsible use of theology at our own peril. Congregations are God infused. It takes

God-logic to understand congregational life. Theology is the best tool for congregations to speak the truth about the relationship between the human and the divine. There are many voices telling people of faith how to shape stronger congregations. The way most congruent with congregational life is the way of theological reflection. □

Tim Shapiro is President of the Indianapolis Center for Congregations. This article is excerpted from his foreword to *What’s theology got to do with it?* by Anthony B. Robins. Used with permission of the publisher, Alban Institute. See *CIRCUIT RIDER* Reviews for a review of this book.