CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY HAS MANY TASKS. THIS IS EVIDENT BOTH FROM a reading of the history of theology and from the wide variety of current understandings of its nature and task. Some theologians today contend that the task of Christian theology is to provide a clear and comprehensive description of the Christian faith. Other theologians emphasize the importance of translating Christian faith into terms that are intelligible to the wider culture. For others theology is defined broadly as thinking about important issues from the perspective of Christian faith. And still others insist that theology is reflection on the praxis of Christian faith within an oppressed community.¹

Underlying each of these understandings of the task of theology is the assumption that faith and inquiry are inseparable. Theology arises from the freedom and responsibility of the Christian community to inquire about its faith in God. In this chapter I propose to describe the work of theology as a continuing search for the fullness of the truth of God made known in Jesus Christ. Defining the theological task in this way emphasizes that theology is not mere repetition of traditional doctrines but a persistent search for the truth to which they point and which they only partially and brokenly express. As continuing inquiry, the spirit of theology is interrogative rather than doctrinaire; it presupposes a readiness to question and to be questioned. Like the search of a woman

for her lost coin (Luke 15:8), the work of theology is strenuous but may bring great joy.

Theology as Faith Raising Questions

According to a classical definition, theology is fides quaerens intellectum, "faith seeking understanding" (Anselm). It is faith venturing to inquire, daring to raise questions. If Christian faith is basically trust in and obedience to the freely gracious God made known in Jesus Christ, theology is faith asking questions and struggling to find at least provisional answers to these questions. Christian faith is no sedative for world-weary souls, no catchphrase of ready answers to the deepest questions of life. Instead, Christian faith invariably prompts questions, sets an inquiry in motion, fights the inclination to accept things as they are, continually calls in question unexamined assumptions about God, ourselves, and our world. Consequently, faith has nothing in common with indifference to the search for truth, or fear of it, or the arrogant claim to possess it fully. True faith must be distinguished from fideism. Fideism says we reach a point where we must stop our inquiry and simply believe; faith keeps on seeking and asking.

Theology grows out of this dynamism of Christian faith that incites reflection, inquiry, and pursuit of the truth not yet possessed, or only partially possessed. There are at least two fundamental roots of this quest of faith for understanding that we call theology. The first has to do with the unique object of Christian faith. Faith is faith in God, and God is and remains a mystery beyond human comprehension. Precisely as the object of faith, God does not cease to be "subject." Faith is a relation to the living God and not to a dead, manipulable idol. In Jesus Christ the living, inexhaustibly rich God has been revealed as sovereign love. To know God in this revelation is to acknowledge the infinite and incomprehensible depth of the mystery called God. Christians are confronted by mystery in all the central affirmations of their faith: the mystery of the holy love of God manifest in the creation of the world, the mystery of the forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ, and the mystery of the renewal and promised transformation of broken human lives and of the entire world by the power of the Holy Spirit. To the eyes of faith, the world is encompassed by the mystery of God.

As Gabriel Marcel has explained, a mystery is very different from a problem. While a problem can be solved, a mystery is inexhaustible. A problem can be held at arm's length; a mystery encompasses us and will not let us keep a safe distance. Christian faith prompts inquiry not least because it points to the shocking mystery that in the humble service and terrible passion of Jesus, God is at work for our salvation. So while Christians affirm that God has decisively spoken (Heb. 1:1-2), there is much that they do not understand. Perhaps there will come a time when no questions need be asked (John 16:23), but here and now faith sees only dimly, not face to face (1 Cor. 13:12), and the questions of faith abound.

The second root of the quest of faith for understanding is the situation of faith. Believers do not live in a vacuum. Like all people, they live in particular historical situations that have their own distinctive problems and possibilities. The changing, ambiguous, and often precarious world poses ever new questions for faith, and many answers that sufficed yesterday are no longer compelling today.

Questions arise at the edges of what we can know and what we can do as human beings. They thrust themselves on us with special force in times and situations of crisis such as sickness, suffering, guilt, injustice, personal or social upheaval, and death. Believers are not immune to the questions that arise in these situations. Indeed, they may be more perplexed than others because they have to relate their faith to what is happening in their lives and in the world. Precisely as believers, they experience the frequent and disturbing incongruity between faith and lived reality. They believe in a sovereign and good God, but they live in a world where evil often seems triumphant. They believe in a living Lord, but more often than not they experience the absence rather than the presence of God. They believe in the transforming power of the Spirit of God, but they know all too well the impotence of the church and of themselves. They know that they should obey God's will, but they find that it is often difficult to know what God's will is in regard to particular issues. And even when they know God's will, they frequently resist doing it. Christian faith asks questions, seeks understanding, both because God is always greater than our ideas of God, and because the public world that faith inhabits confronts it with challenges and contradictions that cannot be ignored. Edward Schillebeeckx puts the point succinctly: Christian faith "causes us to think."

In emphasizing the point that far from producing a closed or complacent attitude, faith causes wonder, inquiry, and questioning, we underscore the humanity of the life of faith and of the discipline of theology. Human beings are open when they ask questions, when they keep seeking, when they are, as Augustine says, "ravished with love for the truth." To be human is to ask all sorts of questions: Who are we? What is of highest value? Is there a God? What can we hope for? Can we rid ourselves of our flaws and improve our world? What should we do? When persons enter on the pilgrimage of faith, they do not suddenly stop being human; they do not stop asking questions. Becoming a Christian does not put an end to the human impulse to question and to seek for deeper understanding. On the contrary, being a pilgrim of faith intensifies and transforms many old questions and generates new and urgent questions: What is God like? How does Jesus Christ redefine true humanity? Is God present in the world today? What does it mean to be responsible disciples of the crucified and risen Lord? Those who have experienced something of the grace of God in Jesus Christ find themselves wanting to enter more fully into that mystery and to understand the world and every aspect of their lives in its light.

According to the philosopher Descartes, the only reliable starting point in the pursuit of truth is self-consciousness. *Cogito ergo sum,* "I think, therefore I am." The logic of Christian faith differs radically from this Cartesian logic in at least two respects. First, the starting point of inquiry for the Christian is not self-consciousness but awareness of the reality of God, who is creator and redeemer of all things. Not "I think, therefore I am," but "God is, therefore we are." As the Psalmist writes, "O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth. . . . When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them" (Ps. 8:1, 3-4).

Second, for Christian faith and theology inquiry is elicited by faith in God rather than being an attempt to arrive at certainty apart from God. Not "I seek certainty by doubting everything but my own existence," but "Because God has shown mercy to us, therefore we inquire." If we believe in God, we must expect that our old ways of thinking and living will be continually shaken to the foundations. If we believe in God, we will have to become seekers, pilgrims, pioneers with no permanent residence. We will no longer be satisfied with the unexamined beliefs and practices of our everyday personal and social world. If we believe in God, we will necessarily question the gods of power, wealth, nationality, and race that clamor for our allegiance. Christian faith is thinking faith.⁴

As long as Christians remain pilgrims of faith, they will continue to raise questions—hard questions—for which they will not always find answers. Rather than having all the answers, believers often find that they have a new set of questions. This is surely the experience of the women and men in the Bible. The Bible is no easy answer book, although it is sometimes read that way. If we are ready to listen, the Bible has the power to shake us violently with its terrible questions: "Adam, where are you?" (Gen. 3:9). "Cain, where is your brother Abel?" (Gen. 4:9). To judge the cause of the poor and needy—"Is not this to know me says the Lord?" (Jer. 22:16). "Who do you say that I am?" (Mark 8:29). "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34). When faith no longer frees people to ask the hard questions, it becomes inhuman and dangerous. Unquestioning faith soon slips into ideology, superstition, fanaticism, self-indulgence, and idolatry. Faith seeks understanding passionately and relentlessly, or it languishes and eventually dies. If faith raises ever new questions, then the theological task of the Christian community is to pursue these questions, to keep them alive, to prevent them from being forgotten or suppressed. Human life ceases to be human not when we do not have all the answers but when we no longer have the courage to ask the really important questions. By insisting that these questions be raised, theology serves not only the community of faith but also the wider purpose of God "to make and to keep human life human in the world."⁵

Theology is strenuous inquiry, a process of seeking, contending, wrestling, like Jacob with the angel until dawn, wanting to be blessed and limping away from the struggle (Gen. 32:24ff.)

The Questionableness of Theology

If Christian faith causes us to think, this is not to say that being Christian is exhausted in thinking, even in thinking about the doctrines of the

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