Making Theology Accessible: Empowering Christians to do their own Theology.

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Abstract

*Making Theology Accessible: Empowering Christians to do their Own Theology* is an exercise in practical theology. Noting a gap between the theology of the ecclesia and the theology of academia, this thesis explores how ‘good theological process’ may be rendered more widely accessible to the church community at large. It considers the roles that both the academy and church have to play in this process. It is particularly concerned with why intentional theological thought is so hesitantly approached by many evangelical churches. It surveys some significant ways in which theology has been defined in the past to create a framework for evaluating helpful theological processes, defined in this thesis as ‘working theology’. Having drawn some conclusions regarding what such processes might look like, it explores why such processes are seemingly scarce in the everyday activity of the church community.

In seeking a response to this challenge, this thesis seeks opinions about theology from six members of an Australian evangelical church through the use of semi-structured interviews, focused around a central allegory as a key discussion point. Interviewees offer perspectives on the challenge of theology from a non-academic viewpoint. Their comments provide valuable insight on how and why theological processes are perceived to be the domain of the academy.

The interviews also offer insight into what generates the theology that church members claim for themselves, notably the impact of peers, the importance of preaching and the theology of available media resources. In light of the interview data, this thesis concludes that theological processes will become more accessible to the church at large when such processes are missiologically ‘clothed’ in language and concepts familiar to people in their everyday lives. It suggests that a concerted, intentional effort is required on the part of theological institutions to devote time and resources to transmitting good theological processes through a variety of media. More support needs to be generated in such establishments for training and equipping those with a variety of gifts in communication, in order to share good theological processes with the church at large. Theological institutions must thus broaden their output beyond that of research papers to incorporate arts, writing, and other forms of creative expression.
Declaration of Authenticity

This thesis submitted for assessment is the result of my own work, and no unacknowledged assistance has been utilised in its planning, drafting, execution or writing. All sources on which it is based have been acknowledged in writing, as has the supervision which I have received in the process of its preparation.

Name: ..............................................................................................................

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This thesis has been almost twenty-nine years in writing. Emerging from a lifetime of experiences in church and college, it represents the interweaving of many questions and conversations about God, church, theology and faith with a wide range of people.

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Introduction

All Christians are theologians. It’s not that they were born that way or decided one day to go into theology. It’s a simple fact of Christian life: their faith makes them theologians, whether they know it or not, and it calls them to become the best theologians they can be.1

Howard Stone and James Duke make an important proposition. Every person with a belief in God also has a system of belief about God. Whether it is implicit or explicit, what people believe about God is expressed in the way that they act and relate to others. This effectively makes all Christians practitioners and exercisers of theology.

On one hand this proposition is an extraordinarily optimistic one. It encourages all believers as doers of theology, as contributors to our combined human knowledge of God, and as sharers of that knowledge with others. On the other hand, the proposition has terrifying implications. In few other contexts does one have such an important role to play in a given field without undergoing substantial training to operate in that field safely and responsibly. I may believe in the benefits of medicine, but that belief does not automatically make me a doctor. Neither does my possession of a knife make me a surgeon. In most professions, there are rules about what constitutes safe and reasonable practice, regardless of the practitioners’ passion for their field.

Granted, being a theologian is not a technical skill like surgery, dentistry or plumbing. Relatively few people become professional theologians. However, that does not diminish the very real danger of theology irresponsibly applied. Out of poor theology, wars have been waged, abuse has been perpetuated, money extorted and dreams shattered. People have been driven out of communities and separated from families. While all Christians may be theologians, not all Christians are good theologians.

The title of this thesis is Making Theology Accessible: Empowering Christians to do their own Theology. An alternative title from two key terms used in this study would be Journeying from Received to Working Theology. It recognises that there are different ways of understanding and doing theology, and emphasises a movement from one mode to another. As this study unfolds, it will demonstrate a preference for ‘working theology’ over ‘received

theology’. Received theology represents the uncritical acceptance of doctrines, creeds and inherited faith systems. I argue that to remain in this mode of theology can be ultimately unsound and dangerous. Working theology, on the other hand, is a theology ‘worked out’ in the midst of one’s own life experience. I observe that some people engage in the shift from received to working theology quite naturally, while others resist it. I will explore why this transition works for some people and not for others, with a view to discovering how the journey towards working theology may be shared with more Christians.

This is not an argument for making all Christians academic theologians. From the outset, I recognise with Stone and Duke that ‘we do theology… at many different levels and in many different ways.’ Frank Rees agrees

…all Christians are theologians, though not in the same ways. Some know God intellectually; some more emotionally; some use words; some are not able to articulate their knowing in words but speak eloquently in deeds of service and love.

To do this kind of theology well, however, I believe that there are a certain set of tools and values that need to be shared with the Christian community at large and integrated into everyday Christian faith. That these tools have largely become the province of theological academia has meant that they have become foreign to local churches, the most formative places of theology for the non-academic theologian. I am particularly interested in how such principles can be discovered for and nurtured in the local church so that a broad range of people can use them in their personal faith journeys.

This study stems from a personal motto that has brewed from my undergraduate years: the need to make good theological process accessible without creating popular theology—books and/or studies that simply confirm what people already believe and want to believe. The study is laid out in five chapters.

In Chapter 1 I will outline the background to this study, situating my place within it as author and researcher. By recounting my personal journey, I demonstrate how the study becomes an outworking of my own story. It is a form of confessional theology, and is an important contribution to my methodology, the explanation of which follows.

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2 Stone and Duke, How to think Theologically, 11.
In Chapter 2 I grapple with the nature of theology. What defines a good theological method, and what types of theologies have potentially destructive consequences? By exploring a range of theological paradigms through the lens of Anselm’s motto ‘faith seeking understanding’, I establish a base for evaluating theological approaches. After identifying problematic approaches to theology, I then explore the requirements for good theological process. I define two key terms involved in this study—received theology and working theology—before describing and identifying the key challenges involved in transitioning from received to working theology.

In Chapter 3 I introduce six voices from beyond the theological academy, each one nurtured and active in the local church. Through a series of interviews, I ask these interviewees for perspectives on the challenges associated with promoting an accessible, working theology.

In Chapter 4 I grapple with the content of the interviews, bringing the perspectives and stories of the interviewees into conversation with the allegory, definitions, challenges and theories I have identified and explored in the previous chapters.

In Chapter 5 I draw together the issues raised within this paper. Using personal insights as well as insights from interviewees, I identify some tasks that may contribute toward making good theological process accessible on a day-to-day, congregational level.
Chapter 1: Confessions

I. A Story

My life has been immersed in concepts of faith, religion and spirituality. Raised in a Baptist pastor’s family, belief in God has been a ‘given’ from my childhood. However, the quest for understanding this belief in God has been a lifelong journey. In an allegorical sense this life of faith could be compared to rising waters and immeasurable sands of a seashore. God, like the sand, has been ever present. However, the waters of theology come and disrupt the shore of faith. The waters pull some things away, bring new ideas in and beckon me to enter their deep where the sands of God are seen and experienced from a whole new perspective.

The overwhelming unknown of the ocean deep has wrought immense change along my seashore of faith. Whether subtly through the rise and fall of the tide of everyday life, or violently and dramatically under rolling waves of doubt, the shore shifts, changes and evolves. As the deep of theological inquiry beckons I rise from the beach, eager to explore. I move from the comfort and safety offered by the sand, gently allowing my curiosity to guide me. Perhaps I hover and wander over the rock pools, investigating the strange new creatures and concepts I find there. Perhaps I enter the shallows of the water. I find new ideas and new people who draw me deeper and deeper into the waters of theology. Tides flow in and out, often bringing something new to consider, pick up, or release.

I remember the stability of my seashore first crumbling as a child. I knew about Jesus and the importance of being friends with him. I also remember having school friends from other faiths: Baha’i, Buddhist, Atheist, Muslim; labels and faiths that were different. These labels did not mean much to me then other than they were ‘not Christian’. Could my friends all be destined for hell for not knowing God? Was that fair? I did not know. It seemed easier not to think about it, and such questions did not remain in my childhood imagination for long. There were other things like Lego and insects to keep me occupied. But these ponderings left the faintest of changes along my shore of faith. I knew there were people standing somewhere different.
When I was ten my shoreline changed a little, perhaps this time through a gently rising tide. I was thinking about death. Particularly my own death. It was not in any morbid way. Rather, I was thinking about how good this life was. My family was travelling Australia and I had seen new things. Life was exciting. Having recently read about heaven though, I was confused. I knew that heaven was meant to be a great place, but could only feel sadness at the thought I might be leaving all the wonderful things I was discovering behind. Then I wondered why we spent time on this earth at all. Surely this religion was a strange thing. It was meant to be good, but there was so much sadness and potential for loss or despair. I decided at the time that God must be a good God, so I would rest content in the mystery of it. But such questions left an indelible mark, like a piece of seaweed or driftwood, along my otherwise ordered shore of faith.

Questions surrounding the Bible also left their mark upon my shore. I had lots of questions about the Bible. I loved it as a story about God, the Israelites, Jesus and the Disciples. I used to pour over a picture storybook version of the Bible, drinking in images of kings, prophets and lepers. My imagination thrived on the stories; of people who spoke directly to God and heard God speak back. But I had questions. I never ‘got’ Adam and Eve and their children. Who did their children marry? Where did Noah’s ark stop? How did kangaroos get to Australia from there? Where did the dinosaurs come from? Why weren’t they in the Bible? Why did nothing get added to the Bible after the New Testament? So many questions, like raindrops of water from the sky, made little indents in the sand. My faith was a constant. I loved my church and the people there, playing music and being involved with youth groups. I loved learning. But the questions never left.

At age thirteen the shore was smoothed out by a large wave. The questions, while they didn’t really leave, were picked up and dumped behind a large rock. I did not think about them for a time. I had a teenage recommitment experience, feeling something prompt me to recommit my life to God. I do not know what it was, but it had me in tears. An elder in my church told me it was the Holy Spirit. I genuinely felt something good and wonderful and I focused fervently on early morning quite times and living my life as ‘Christianly’ as possible. By seventeen, I had established a ‘good reputation’ as one of the pastors’ kids in my church.

‘Jesus was good to people so I’ll be good too’ was a notion that played a significant part in shaping my teenage life. I was determined to do the ‘right thing.’ No teenage romances
because they would not lead to marriage and I did not want to be one of those who fooled around. No cigarettes or alcohol because they could lead to addictions. No swearing because that was not polite. No playing up at school, because that was not considerate of my teachers, and thus not ‘loving your neighbour.’ I would always try for good marks at school, because Mum and Dad encouraged their children with the phrase ‘just do your best.’

In hindsight, I built far too many fences along my shore at this time of my life. I became far too structured and stopped myself from exploring other places along the beach. I focused on keeping my shores clean and orderly. I would hear advice or suggestions, and turn them into maxims for living. The encouragement to ‘do your best’, for example, was meant as nothing but an encouragement from Mum and Dad. It was an exhortation to have a go. Yet what I heard was ‘succeed’. Somehow, anywhere other than near the top was turned into a failure in my own mind. Not that I was a genius through high school. Rather, I was a better-than-competent student who rarely got below a B grade. C grades would make me depressed. It was not until year eleven that I realized that ‘do your best’ was nothing more than a phrase meaning ‘have a crack’ or ‘give it a shot’. There was no expectation for brilliance or genius, just an encouragement to use what naturally came to me. I received my D grade for maths with enthusiastic relish at the end of that year. Deciding to do what came naturally to me, for year twelve I focused almost exclusively on the histories… Revolutions, Australian History, and a first year university subject I could do as part of my Victorian Certificate of Education, Jewish History.

Jewish History served as a catalyst for significant change along my seashore. It muddled things up a bit, brought in some unknowns, pulled those old questions out from behind their rock, and turned my attention from the well-worn sand out into the big, blue, fascinating-but-frightening sea. I stepped from the dry sand into the shallows, and began to discover new and interesting things. Jewish history introduced me to textual criticism of the Bible. It asked questions about the Exodus and Moses, those stories that I had been fascinated by as a child, but struggled to grasp the reality of. At once, I found my journey both affirmed and challenged. I simultaneously found my unanswered questions justified and elements of the faith I maintained refreshingly confronted. I learned through this time that asking questions was okay. Doubting, worrying, and disagreeing with the account of things in the Bible was okay.
So I went into a theological college where these questions were encouraged even further. I
learnt, in the words of 2 Timothy 2:15, to ‘do your best to present yourself to God as one
approved by him, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly explaining the word of
truth.’ I realised I was reasonably good at asking questions, so I decided to make a point of it
by trying to get to the core of some questions in my studies. For the next several years, I
waded deeper into the water. The comparative security of the beach itself was within reach,
but I remained fascinated by the great, murky unknown. I relished wrestling with those
wonderful questions that needed asking. It was cold and uncomfortable at first, but it was
interesting. There was affirmation and encouragement for those questions and I thrived on
splashing around in the ambiguous, liquid substance of curiosity. And so I stepped further
and further away from the drier, safer foundations of my faith.

As I left my sandy shore, some undercurrents came along that I had not anticipated. I was
unexpectedly pulled under by murkier waters, sucked up by a wave, and dumped. Even as I
was experiencing my theological awakening, some of the other issues from earlier in my life,
the fences I had put up, needed dealing with. I was twenty-one, never had a girlfriend, and
was insecure about my sexuality. Uncertain what this meant in the evangelical churches I
belonged to, I began questioning my personal worth. I was dragged by this undercurrent deep
out to sea, where I became lost, confused and struggled for air. I became depressed, lacking
meaning. I was not sure where I belonged any more. Church no longer felt safe. Rolling
under waves, I wondered if I would ever come up again. Like anyone who feels like they
have lost their footing, I was struggling and gasping for breath. The deep sea of the unknown,
one an interesting place of theological exploration, became a dangerous, life sucking entity.
I panicked. I saw no way out. I was unsure of how to deal with a myriad of thoughts and
feelings.

I closed my eyes and prepared for my faith to drown, only to find that I was treading water. I
had somehow arrived at a ‘survival stage’, despite my personal confusion. I concluded that
the God who was out in this ocean, this maelstrom in my life, these very scary moments, was
the same God who inhabited the shore. Equipped with that simple conclusion, I could stop
panicking and instead explore the exciting deep water of the open sea. I explored cautiously
at first, but came to relish my newfound freedom.
So this lifetime journey of exploration lead me into the present vastness of deep. One thing I notice from my new vantage point is that the shore seems particularly benign, its old security frustratingly insular. The people I encountered along that shore—pastors, parishioners, those who helped keep things orderly and secure—many of them seemed ambivalent about the wonders of the ocean. It is more dangerous out here, but a lot more interesting. No longer restricted by what I can stand on, I dive into three-dimensional theologies. Others are swimming out here too, encouraging me to explore, to swim, to taste the salt and see the fish. I can see things for myself, explore things for myself. Yet while I am not confined to the sand, I am not without it either. The same sand that lies along the dry shore is the same sand that stretches, under the water, out into the depths of the ocean. The same cliffs are mirrored on continental shelves. The same God of the beach is here, rich and present as ever.

So many people I know, love and care for are still seated on the beach. The beach is ordered and defined. The beach is safe. But if only they knew about the deep blue sea—there are experiences, and empowerment, and dimensions of God in the sea that they are yet to encounter. They do not know that it is okay to leave the sand for the water and to ask questions. They do not know that God is out here, in the confusing places. They do not know that the warning signs on the beach regarding swimming amidst the sea of spirituality, alternative faith models and biblical criticism are simply that... warnings but not rules. They do not know, because no one knows how to tell them.

II. The Challenge of Subjectivity

In his influential book *A Generous Orthodoxy*, Brian McLaren begins with a ‘Chapter 0’. The chapter functions as a disclaimer, acknowledging the biases and limitations of his work. It is a disarmingly open and honest preface to his argument. The reader is left with the message: you have been warned about what you are preparing to read, proceed with caution.4

Most writing can only benefit from the inclusion of a ‘Chapter 0’. Although the disciplines of academic research have traditionally held the pursuit of objectivity as sacred, the postmodern environment of today compels us to acknowledge the inherent subjectivity of research and

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knowledge in general. To put one’s assumptions and origins in the open at the beginning of a study seems to be the most direct way of acknowledging the environments from which we have emerged and which shape our understanding of the world. In discussing concepts of knowledge through to the (present) ‘postmodern age’, Paul Lakeland well expresses the degree to which language—and thus meaning—is subject to the world or worlds in which we live.

Any and every linguistic formulation bears the marks of culture and history out of which it has emerged, and there is no such thing as a universal language… as a tool for the comprehension of reality, standing outside that historical reality. Rhetoric, mathematics, physics, and the arts come together in the assertion that, because the observer is always already a part of the world of that which is observed, knowledge cannot be pure, may not even aspire to the condition of purity. 5

Whether subjectivity lies within the formation of a question, the motions of investigation, the analysis of data or the reporting of outcomes, no part of the academic process is immune to the fact that we are products of our environments and deal with information accordingly. We can only know and understand an objective reality if we have language entirely separate from the realities of our history, emotions or social context to adequately describe it. This is impossible for finite human beings, an impossibility that must erode our confidence in foundationalist modern knowledge systems. 6 It is thus important to make note of the challenge that confronts any study amidst the fluidity of postmodern subjectivity, particularly in something as personally subjective as faith and theology. In making note of the various responses to modernist concepts of knowledge, Lakeland identifies three major approaches.

Firstly, he identifies the ‘late modern’ response. Late moderns ‘find the project of modernity unfinished, and wish to carry it forward, albeit in the vastly changed world of cultural modernity.’ 7 Practitioners of late modernism are committed to new and exploratory ways of thinking, but are not so radical in that process as to completely unravel the work or culture of previous generations. While the foundationalist structures of modernity are considered an

6 These systems are well defined by Carrie Doehring, who writes ‘…modern approaches to knowledge assume that rational and/or scientific methods yield knowledge of a single reality or truth. Using scientific methods will result in more and more aspects of life becoming known. It is as though each scientific finding fills in a piece of the puzzle depicting “reality” or the way things really are. As pieces of the puzzle are fit into place there is progress toward complete knowledge’. Carrie Doehring, ‘The Challenges of Bridging Pastoral Care Experiences and Post-modern Approaches to Knowledge’, *Journal of Pastoral Theology* 14, no. 1 (2004): 3. For similar comment, see Mark Chan’s comments on foundationalism in Mark L.Y. Chan, ‘Following Jesus as the Truth: Postmodernity and the Challenges of Relativism’, *Evangelical Review of Theology* 31, no. 4 (October 2007): 308.
7 Lakeland, *Postmodernity*, 12.
inadequate basis for investigating knowledge, the inadequacy is viewed as a deficiency. This
deficiency can be remedied by fusing postmodern, non-systemic approaches to the bones of a
modern framework.

The search for a full alternative to modernity is the task of the other two attitudes Lakeland
identifies. One of these is the countermodern approach, also described by Lakeland as a
‗postmodernism of nostalgia.‘ This second group rejects modernism entirely, and sees in the
postmodern world a chance to return to something resembling a countercultural, premodern
state where tradition and/or the emotionally important dictate terms. This group attempts to
turn back to idealised older days when the world was simpler to understand. In theological
terms, it is akin to reverting to a medieval cosmology, or simply giving up intellectual
thought completely and taking solace in the day-to-day ritual of monastic order.

The third approach is labelled radical postmodernism. This view rejects all previous attempts
at ‗knowing‘ as dependent ‗on something else, perhaps on power relations or desire.‘ Reason itself lacks objectivity, and must be scrutinised for the hidden agenda at work in the
description of a particular idea or phenomenon. In the absence of certainty in any singular
truths, the radical postmodern approach essentially rejects all people‘s truths in anticipation
of a time when the underlying assumptions of those truths can be exposed.

While there is something to be commended in radical postmodernism‘s intent to disclose and
expose such oppressive systems as culturally embedded sexism or racism, I consider it an
extraordinarily negative and life-sapping mindset when exercised to its fullest. The reality is
that we can only operate in the cultures we live in. That does not mean we do not try to
operate critically, but we must operate practically. This thesis thus takes a route much more
closely aligned to the late modern approach: grappling with the rigour demanded by
disciplined theology, while claiming the personal and specific as vital partners in theological
exploration.

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8 Attitude is deliberately used instead of ‗group‘ by Lakeland himself, who does not believe that there are clear
schools of thought, but rather varying generic approaches which distinguish the three perspectives that he
outlines. Lakeland, Postmodernity, 17.

9 Lakeland, Postmodernity, 12-13, 17.

10 Lakeland, Postmodernity, 16.
Working honestly within the modern world rather than against it offers more long term value. I have no intention of transcending the relativity or reality of my culture. On the contrary, I believe one part of rethinking our approach to knowledge involves recognising the value to be found in subjective experience. This chapter thus acknowledges as clearly as possible my personal experiences as an important part of this exercise in practical theology.

III. Confessional Research

Augustine’s *Confessions* is considered to be one of the great early theological contributions to Christian thought. As he argued, wrestled with and accounted for his faith and identity, Augustine’s own life became part of a pivotal text central to enduring theological discussion. Through his work, an important precedent was set in demonstrating that theology emerges through the examination and discussion of an individual’s own faith story.\(^{11}\) Augustine’s approach is important for the reason outlined by Albert Outler:

> The sensitive reader soon recognizes that Augustine will not willingly be inspected from a distance or by a neutral observer. In all his writings there is a strong concern and moving power to involve his reader in his own process of inquiry and perplexity. There is a manifest eagerness to have him share in his own flashes of insight and his sudden glimpses of God’s glory.\(^{12}\)

What this paper and its methods take most seriously are the truths to be found within, through, and despite our subjectivities. It considers the life situations, viewpoints and opinions of individuals and communities as rich sources of truth and discovery, albeit to be coupled with considered, critically applied thinking.

The story placed at the beginning of this chapter is a version of my story. It is part of my ‘confession’. It has made and shaped me as a theologian. It represents my journey through middle-class, Australian, Baptist-flavoured Christianity over twenty-seven years of life. It captures the essence of how I have grown through that time, and it is through this story and the encounters I’ve had within it that some of the important questions in this thesis have emerged. My story is a theological journey.

\(^{11}\) So Heewon Chang writes: ‘With the intentionality of self-exposure in mind, scholars of self-narratives consider St. Augustine’s *Confessions* from the 4th century CE as ‘something of a model for the memoirist’.’ Heewon Chang, *Autoethnography as Method* (Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2008), 35.

Some might call my story a movement from a safe, community-oriented, orthodox, clear, accessible, faithful, truth-centred Christian viewpoint into a dangerous, lonely, heterodox, ambiguous, difficult, agnostic, liberal state of faith. Others might describe the same journey as from a stale, comfortable, structured, absolute, easy, simplistically conservative religious community into a dynamic, deep, free, fluid, authentic, engagement with faith and theology.

In truth, my journey is not accurately represented by either description. However, these caricatured sentences do represent two extremes of the faith communities I have encountered throughout my life. I grew up in an evangelical church full of Sunday schools, youth groups and quiet times. I have played in church bands, led on young adult camps, been part of short term missions and participated in Bible study groups. I grew up in churches where the most important element of the Christian faith was to accept Jesus as Lord and Saviour. This would mean asking for forgiveness of sins, then living as sinlessly as possible as we tried to introduce others to Jesus before we died and received our eternal reward. I read and had explained to me Bible verses that spoke of God’s hand in creation, God’s love for me, and consequences for those who reject the faith that I had been taught. Those verses and the truths they contained were all I needed to live a Godly life.

This type of upbringing is common to those raised in many local, evangelical, protestant churches across Australia. I experienced a wonderful place of community that sought to teach and share with the world an eternal hope to be found in Jesus. In this community I learned positive, life-enriching lessons in a safe and loving environment. These lessons taught me about morals, behaving well towards others, seeking God with all my heart, soul, mind and strength, and the importance of listening to God daily through reading, reflection and prayer. I came across Christian literature that encouraged me in my day-to-day growth as a young Christian, whether it was study guides or Bibles for children and teens, or novels that emphasised the importance and value of staying strong in faith, even when it did not make sense to the protagonist or the world in which we Christians lived.

The journey from this place to the ‘faith location’ I currently inhabit has been significant. I now sit more comfortably with a degree of ambiguity in my faith life. I believe in the same God, and still passionately believe in the importance of sharing the message of that God with the world. I believe more than ever in the importance of God’s presence through Jesus Christ on Earth. Yet many things have shifted for me: the way I understand the content of the
Christian message, the significance and meaning of the words contained in the Bible, my understanding of sin, human suffering, and what Jesus saves us from.

The reason for that shift is twofold: partly a natural curiosity, and partly my second faith community—the theological institution. In the context of tertiary theological education, I have found freedom to ask questions that had previously received simplistic answers or were regarded with suspicion. In my earlier communities of faith, I did not generally find empowerment to pursue the questions I had about the authority of the Bible, about a loving God who sends his people to destroy nations in the Old Testament, about the fate of non-Christian friends, about why evil exists, and numerous other challenges.

I found a freedom to ask these questions through theological studies. Moreover, I found questions asked of me and my faith. I was forced to evaluate what, why and how I believed. My faith was challenged, yet I clung to the belief that if Christianity had any integrity, then God and my belief would still be there in some form on the other side of the questions I was asking.

As I travelled on this journey of theology, I encountered numerous people who were dealing with similar questions, and found there was a range of responses. Some, like me, thrived in seeking out the theological depths. We excitedly engaged in theological discovery and dialogue together, sharing what we were discovering along the way. Others rejected the discoveries and difficulties of theological study. For whatever reason, they decided it was too hard, and either turned back to what they knew before, or let their faith slip away. That was the number one warning about college I was given: ‘it might make you lose your faith.’

IV. Practical Theology

The experience of thriving in theology while witnessing other people ‘drown’ has led me to this study. As an exercise in practical theology, this project structures itself on the model established by Don Browning:

When a religious community hits a crisis in its practices, it then begins reflecting (asking questions) about its meaningful or theory-laden practices. It may take time to describe these practices so it can better understand the questions precipitated by the crisis. Eventually, if it is serious, the community must re-examine the sacred texts and events that constitute the source of the norms and ideas that guide its practices. It brings its questions to those normative texts
and has a conversation between its questions and these texts... What happens next depends on how open and self-critical the religious community is.\(^{13}\)

In Browning’s model, a theological question emerges out of a ‘concrete situation’ or circumstance formed by our lived experience as human beings.\(^{14}\) James and Evelyn Whitehead propose a similar model for reflection on theological issues involving a dialogue between Christian Tradition, the experience of the community, and the resources of the culture.\(^{15}\) Practical theology thus draws various resources together to examine the contributing factors behind a given situation, before attempting to identify considerate and practical theological conclusions, responses and outcomes. With creative, unpredictable and culturally influenced humanity intimately involved at every step of the process in practical theology, confessing and celebrating a degree of subjectivity in this research is both important and inevitable.

The crisis at hand is a lack of dialogue and continuity between two communities which should be communicating frequently. I have noticed that there is a significant gulf between these two faith entities that have fed, nurtured and grown me. The church and the academy are both parts of the same faith, the same denomination, the same family, yet there is a significant communication block between them.

This gives rise to a series of questions surrounding the church institutions I have encountered. How can I be brought up in a church and taught one version of Christianity, only to end up at the highest educational body within the same denomination and be learning another? When I discover something new in theology I wonder: why wasn’t I taught this before? A deep curiosity exists as to why I had to wait eighteen years and start paying university fees to gain such new, life-giving, and ultimately liberating theological education, especially when that education contradicted much of what I had learned in churches belonging to the same denomination. What stopped curiosity tinged with criticism, doubt driven by hope, and query alongside creativity being shared and embraced in popular Christian culture before now? How can we make useful, authentic, personal and considered theology accessible and life-giving to those whose faith is formed and grown outside of an academic institution?

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\(^{14}\) Browning, *Practical Theology*, 55.  
These ‘institutional questions’ are linked to questions of a more ‘philosophical’ nature. Why is it that some people can so eagerly dive into the big questions of faith, while others are content, and even prefer, not to indulge? Does it matter that some Christians process their faith critically and others do not? Is the intentional theological experience open to all, or does it just become the sphere of a select, academically-inclined few? To what extent is theological reflection a choice, and to what extent is it a responsibility?

Good theological process has become largely inaccessible and absent from our churches. In this study, I examine how it can be made more accessible to an average congregation member. Along the way, it will be necessary to (i) define good theological process, (ii) explore the ways that Christians perceive and experience theology, (iii) investigate why it is necessary to create ways and means for Christians to transition from one theological mode to another, and (iv) explore how this facilitation may take place. This study signifies both an exploration and critique of the way theology is perceived, transmitted and used within popular Christian culture. These are the questions that fascinate me, and form contributively to this study which ultimately asks: How do we make good theology accessible to all Christians?

V. Methodology

A number of research ‘streams’ contribute towards this study. As identified above, this project builds upon personal experiences of theological growth and learning within evangelical Christianity, containing elements of confessional theology. The opening section of this chapter introduces the first person voice residing within this thesis. I begin with it because this story has shaped and guided my thinking to the central questions of this project. It is a life journey of theological growth and demonstrates my instinctive observations as to how theological processing is generally regarded and engaged within the church. The narrative is thus one of my resources, informing and influencing the ideas and workings of this study. The narrative also serves as an allegory for the type of theological movement I wish to address in this project: how transition from one theological process to another may be facilitated. The allegory is also used as part of the interview process for collecting primary data.
Writing about the autoethnographic research method, which heavily relies on the personal story of the researcher, Heewon Chang names some important ‘potential pitfalls’ in an openly subjective study. The first is an ‘excessive focus on self in isolation from others.’\(^{16}\) The risk is that the study becomes about the author’s life, rather than using the author’s experience as a tool to gain insight into a broader social issue. This is related to Chang’s fifth ‘pitfall’, the potential for such research to be misunderstood and confused with such other personal narratives as autobiography and memoir.\(^ {17}\) In this paper, I am aware of both methodological concerns. While parts of my story shape and inspire this research topic, I consider such a narrative as just one ‘data source’. I also seek to include the voices and viewpoints of other people. In this study I accordingly use a series of unstructured interviews as an expression of action research in order to provide balance.

The opening allegory was initially constructed to share something of my own story and how I have perceived the general attitude towards theological query in churches.\(^ {18}\) Through personal encounters and discussion, I have gathered the impression that the allegory has some resonance with others. I thus explore in this project how a depersonalised account of such an allegorical narrative may form a basis for talking about academic theology with others.

Reporting on the use of fiction in education, Clough makes a helpful statement regarding the use of narrative in research.

> Narrative is useful only to the extent that it opens up (to its audiences) a deeper view of life in familiar contexts: it can make the familiar strange, and the strange familiar. As a means of education report, stories can provide a means by which those truths, which cannot be otherwise told, are uncovered. The fictionalization of education experience offer researchers the opportunity to import fragments of data from various real events in order to speak to the heart of social consciousness – thus providing the protection of anonymity to the research participants without stripping away the rawness of real happenings.\(^ {19}\)

Clough’s use of narrative is used at the alternate end of his research to mine. He applies it to the reporting, rather than the investigative process. However, the same principle applies for the research stage. For Clough, narrative fictions are a way of exploring practical, real life issues without violating the privacy of interviewees/subjects. Instead, I am using narrative at

\(^{16}\) Chang, Autoethnography, 54.
\(^{17}\) Chang, Autoethnography, 54, 56.
\(^{18}\) This opening piece represents the bulk of my personal narrative to be included within this study. Due to the account’s relative brevity in the context of this overall project, I believe Chang’s second pitfall ‘overemphasis on narrative rather than analysis and cultural interpretation’ is not of particular concern here. Chang, Autoethnography, 54.
\(^{19}\) Peter Clough, Narratives and Fictions in Educational Research (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2002), 8-9.
the beginning of my research, offering my own experience as a story to be critiqued and engaged with by the interviewees.

By narrating a real journey of faith through a depersonalised account of this story, I hoped to create a language and conversation point through which interviewees could engage truthfully with questions that might otherwise be confronting or difficult to explore. By fictionalising a faith journey, I could ask questions to determine how others perceive theology and discover alternate ways in which theology may be done. In this, an important part of my study uses a type of action research summarised by Martin Stringer who writes:

...(action research) is a process of entering into a field situation with the explicit intention of becoming involved and making a difference. The idea is to work with those who are perceived to have the problem in order to find a joint solution that could, possibly, be written up as a paper or larger text. 20

The essential element of this type of research is ‘research with’ rather than ‘research of’. It involves giving members of the participating community a full voice in the conversation. I chose to conduct the interviews in a church with which I have had significant past involvement, so that I participated as ‘one of’ rather than ‘one over’, even though interviewees were aware of my status as a researcher. This notion of research ‘from the midst of’ was particularly important for me. It was from this type of church that my journey had begun, and although I was returning as a researcher from ‘beyond’ the community, I was still enough part of it that I was exploring theology as a peer. This fits with an important aspect of action research as outlined by Ernest Stringer:

In community-based action research, the role of the researcher is not that of an expert who does research, but that of a resource person. He or she becomes a facilitator or consultant who acts as a catalyst to assist stakeholders in defining their problems clearly and to support them as they work toward effective solutions to the issues that concern them. Titles such as facilitator, associate, and consultant are more appropriate in community-based action research... 21

More detail on the interview process and action research will be identified in Chapter 3: Introducing an Allegory, which introduces the interview participants. It also outlines the recruitment method used to add their voices to this conversation.

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Both my story and the interviewees represent a high amount of acknowledged subjectivity in this project so far. While they make up a significant component of this work, however, it should be noted that they not the whole. This essay must address broader academic concerns, particularly Chang’s third pitfall of subjectivity in research: ‘exclusive reliance on personal memory and recalling as a data source.’

Taking seriously the academic nature of this work, the third major area of study within this project focuses on a review and integration of relevant literature, bringing other voices into the discussion in defining and exploring the meaning and challenges of theology. Who does it? Who has done it? Who should do it, and how, ideally, should it be done? This literature helps with defining our two key terms for discussion: ‘received’ and ‘working’ theology. Additionally, we might consider theological texts dealing with fundamentalism and liberalism, post-modernism and biblical interpretation as informative to our discussion, as well as referring to the Bible itself.

While this study offers some insight into one Christian theological culture, it does not offer a definitive discussion on how theology is met by Christians the world over. My views emerge from a western, middle-class tradition and have at their focus a western, middle-class church, with my immediate context being the Baptist Union of Victoria. Thus, this study will most likely be useful in exploring the process of ‘Making Theology Accessible’ for churches geographically and culturally nearer to Australian Baptists, and will need significantly more work done by others to find a fuller expression in other traditions.

When considering an exercise in practical theology, I envision a piece of needlework. Methods, resources, ideas or concepts are like small threads, somewhat detached on their own, but only emerge as a useful, valuable whole through a process of interaction, a process of weaving and stitching.

That is how this thesis shall be presented. Chapters will draw materials from the areas outlined above not in a strict sequence, but rather in a more intuitive process which draws the necessary threads into a unified whole. While some areas may focus more on one methodology than another, theological works will complement interview excerpts as I attempt to explore stages of the theological journey through an integrated approach to resources.

22 Chang, Autoethnography, 54.
With that in mind, the best place to begin this work is by identifying the key themes and images to be stitched into this tapestry: identifying, defining, and laying out the study’s core definitions. The next chapter, therefore, grapples with defining theology. It seeks to identify what good theological process is in preparation for outlining the key notions of ‘received’ and ‘working’ theology.
Chapter 2: Good Process, Bad Process

As articulated in Chapter 1, this project prefers ‘working theology’ over ‘received theology’. Elaboration of these terms will develop in the following pages. First, however, a means of evaluating various types of theological processes needs to emerge. In this chapter I attempt to lay such a framework of evaluation as I discuss the components of a classic, commonly accepted definition of theology.

One of the most important Christian thinkers of the twentieth century, Karl Barth modelled much of his theology around Anselm’s famous motto *Fides Quarens Intellectum* – ‘Faith Seeking Understanding’. Ralph Norman, disputing the value of the statement as a sound definition of theology, nevertheless acknowledges that ‘This definition has since met with such approval that it is now difficult to find many professional theologians that would disagree with it.’

In his article, Norman refutes the popular definition on the following basis:

I will challenge the common definition of the theological task as faith seeking understanding, where the faith of a tradition commandeers the critical enquiry of the theologian. In this model, faith – the axiomatic fides that the theologian unfolds and explicates – is left unquestioned; the propositions of faith are assented to as soon as they are stated, are taken as truth from God, and are not open to critical challenge because of their basis in revelation.

Norman’s refutation is curious in that the alternative definition he offers from Abelard is not far distinguishable from the way Anselm is generally understood.

What he (Abelard) saw was that an openness of mind and serious, responsible questioning is necessary, intellectually and spiritually, when the mind engages with Christian teaching. Take the wonder out of theology, and you risk being left with mere church dogmatics.

Norman’s high view of Abelard does not, however, seem so far removed from the way Barth reads Anselm:

Every theological statement is an inadequate expression of its object. The actual Word of Christ spoken to us is not an inadequate expression of its object, though of course every attempt on our

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24 Norman, ‘Ablard’s Legacy’.
part, even the highest and the best, to reproduce that Word in thought or in speech is inadequate.
Strictly speaking, it is only God himself who has a conception of God.\textsuperscript{26}

For Barth, Anselm actually expresses the inadequacy of mindless dogma, emphasising the need for further investigation and openness. We might therefore read Norman’s objection as representative of a common misconception made by most detractors of this definition, whom Thomas Williams addresses in his analysis of Anselm.

Anselm is not hoping to replace faith with understanding. Faith for Anselm is more a volitional state than an epistemic state: it is love for God and a drive to act as God wills. In fact, Anselm describes the sort of faith that “merely believes what it ought to believe” as “dead” … So “faith seeking understanding” means something like “an active love of God seeking a deeper knowledge of God.”\textsuperscript{27}

With the primary objections to the motto thus embedded more in misconception and semantics than philosophical difference, there seems little reason to dispute a well-regarded phrase whose three short words carry such incredible weight and insight. Indeed, we need only read Anselm’s own introductory words to the Proslogion to gain some idea of his intention.

Anselm here acknowledges the very tension that humanity faces between abandonment to a religious fideism and the real day-to-day challenges that shape our human existence. In asking the reader to ‘fly for a moment from your affairs’ and ‘abandon yourself for a little,’ Anselm is not advocating a permanent surrender of thought, query and being. On the contrary, Anselm is inviting the reader to move from that day-to-day setting \textit{for a time} into a more serious consideration of the issues and implications of belief in a creator, and how one can best understand God

Anselm’s words identify theology as a potent combination of belief, action, exploration, investigation, intention and hope. It implies process, endeavour and struggle, an attempt to

synthesise and draw upon multiple aspects of life and discovery in search of God. It defines theology in Daniel Migliore’s words as ‘faith venturing to inquire, daring to raise questions.’

Likewise, Anselm himself seems to elaborate a little when he writes of the futility of ever fully understanding the complexity of God, but nevertheless seeking out of longing. ‘I do not try, Lord, to attain Your lofty heights, because my understanding is in no way equal to it. But I do desire to understand Your truth a little, that truth that my heart believes and loves’.

One reason for the statement’s ongoing theological resonance is its balance as it integrates numerous theological streams. It recognises that a variety of elements contribute towards good theological process. Stated together, the three component words of the motto—faith, seeking, and understanding—embody the best aspects of theological emphases that have, at times, been regarded as distinct, individual definitions of theology in their own right.

However, when used in isolation from one another, the individual terms of ‘faith’, ‘seeking’ and ‘understanding’ provide an interesting trio of potentially conflicting definitions regarding the purpose, role or task of theology. In this chapter I will discuss the ways in which ‘theology’ has been understood using these single-word definitions as a foundation. I will explore some of the dangers of these ‘narrower’ definitions, before exploring the ultimate importance of keeping these terms together in any definition of good theological process.

I. Theology as Faith

Norman’s opposition to Anselm revolves around a concern that Anselm’s definition marries theology to a blind faith. Although his objections are shown to be unfounded with relation to Anselm, they are not completely without merit. Faith is one element of thoughtful theology, but cannot be considered wholly synonymous with it. The theology that is automatically assumed with faith needs to be guided, nurtured, flexed and implemented.
possessor needs to learn to apply appropriate techniques to its use, lest their wielded theology becomes dangerous. I thus find Stone and Duke’s comments constructive, as they crucially identify what they call ‘embedded theology;’

Our embedded theology may seem so natural and feel so comfortable that we carry it within us for years, unquestioned and perhaps even unspoken except when we join in the words of others at worship. We may be secure in the conviction that this is what Christianity is all about and leave it at that.

Noting that ‘it is embedded theology that rushes to the frontline in every battle over the moral and social issues of the day,’ Stone and Duke see embedded theology identifies as a passive, automated mode of existence, responding without genuine consideration of the theological and social issues at hand. Migliore calls it fideism, arguing that it must be held distinct from true faith (and thus, I would suggest true theology). Evans also offers a useful comment: ‘There are, we shall see, many different views that are called fideism, but the root of the idea is that faith should not be governed or regulated by reason, where reason is understood to be an autonomous, relatively competent human faculty.’ Faith as theology thus represents unarticulated, unquestioned beliefs that naturally occur through one’s identification with a given faith community.

This kind of theology sits comfortably with both pre-modern and counter-modern approaches to knowledge. It represents a faith anchored in the traditions, forms, creeds and ways-of-being of the past, often without need for justification, contextualisation or explanation in the present. It rejects ideas of innovative query and progressive development in theology, instead regarding the status-quo as sufficient. Attempts to ‘grow’ or develop in a modern sense, or to ‘reconstruct’ in the postmodern sense are to be regarded with suspicion. The older and more enduring is seen as the better. Faith as theology is what happens when the possibilities of newer voices, questions or investigation are quietened and ignored.

Theology as a synonym for faith is a theology limited in scope. In this theological paradigm, a theology or belief system is assumed by a practitioner as complete. There are no avenues to

has of God’s purposes and action. The reception itself may, more easily, come to all manner of people’. See J.N. Kudadjie ‘Contemporary Theologizing’ in Samuel Amirtham and John S. Pobee, eds., Theology by the People: Reflections on doing theology in community (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1986), 33-34.
34 Stone and Duke, How to think Theologically, 16.
35 Stone and Duke, How to think Theologically, 15.
36 Migliore, Faith, 2. Acknowledging that there are many ways of understanding fideism, here we use and refer to the term in its most extreme sense – faith that ignores reason to the detriment of both.
critique, enquire, contextualise, progress or grow. It is a guarded conservatism, as Jones suggests, whose ‘...result, in practice, is often allegiance to a historically conditioned dogmatism that fails to engage the majority of persons involved in the central sectors of contemporary life.’\(^{38}\) Instead of something continually grappled with, personalised and granted validity by its possessors’ context and community, theology as faith often stands irrelevantly solid and immovable. Peter Cameron, discussing the dangers of a theology without critique, recounts a story that proves most instructive.

There is a cautionary tale which is relevant here, concerning a guru who lived in India several hundred years ago. This guru owned a cat – to the extent that a guru can be said to own anything, and to the extent that anyone can be said to own a cat. The guru was very fond of the cat, and the cat was very fond of the guru, and whenever the guru went across to the temple to conduct a service, the cat went with him. But after a while this became irritating to the worshippers, because they kept tripping over the cat; so the guru, rather than hurt the cat’s feelings by leaving it at home, kept it tied up in a corner of the temple during services. In due course the guru died and his successor, feeling sorry for the cat, continued to allow it to attend the temple services, so long as it was tied up in its corner. But then some time later the cat died; and the worshippers found that they missed its presence during their services, so they got hold of another cat and kept it tied up in the corner. Three hundred years later, there was still a cat tied up in the corner of that temple during services. No one knew why – even the current guru had no idea of the origin of the tradition – but it was regarded by everyone as an indispensable part of the service. They were incapable of worshipping their god except in the presence of a tied-up cat.\(^ {39}\)

When faith and theology are merged into fideism, we forget to question the presence of those things ‘tied to the corners’ of our faith communities. When a nostalgic approach is adopted by theology, we fail to remember that the things left to us by tradition may not have meaning or purpose now, and that other ways of doing things might even be better. In fact, instead of simply being comforted by the presence of the proverbial guru’s cat in our worship, we may find ourselves intentionally and systematically justifying the presence of the cat and placing it in the centre of the room, rather than just in the corner.

Biblical fundamentalism is one example of a prominent Christian ‘cat’. In the early process of canonisation, various thoughts and accounts about Jesus Christ were compiled to assist in community formation, celebration and memory of his incarnation, life and death. As generations passed, and time created a distance between the initial Christ-encounter and aging Christian communities, increasing value was placed on these writings and their written content, while the specific memory of the figure they described faded. The reasons and


purpose behind the content was forgotten or rendered secondary, as communities regarded
the text itself as sacred. Instead of the text serving the theology of a community, the
community began to serve the text. Harris’ encounter with a fundamentalist pastor says
much: ‘A pastor in a charismatic church once said to me, ‘there is only one theology as far as
I’m concerned’—by which he meant the Bible and the plain reading of it.’

When considering the sheer diversity of theological voices within the Bible, we must
consider a plain reading to be impossible. There are too many varying accounts for such a
reading to take place, and too many questions of history, context and culture. Yet these
questions are rejected by the fundamentalist mindset, which has become so accustomed to the
Bible’s presence at the centre of its faith that it forgets to ask how, and why, they ended up
with a Bible at all. Furthermore when questioned, this received Biblical tradition is forcefully
defended. This gives birth to the science of apologetics, the attempt to justify actions and
beliefs that might not be scientifically, spiritually or rationally viable. While fideists might
not know the reason for the guru’s cat being in the room, they defend its presence with
vigorous arguments if its necessity is questioned. Adamant in the security and integrity of
their claims, a fundamentalism is born behind which believers reside without considering or
acknowledging the questions, movements and shifts within the wider world.

This is a problem for the people of God. The views of the past are idolised to the point of
depriving both ourselves and God of a voice in the present. It infers that God’s voice is fixed,
speaking once and for all through the wisdom of the past. It fails to recognise new or
subsequent revelation, the changing needs and demands of societies and the insights of new
types of knowledge.

The reasons for clinging to the revealed past are not necessarily bad ones in and of
themselves. If a level of accountability to our heritage does not exist, how may we claim that
our contemporary theologies have any ultimate relevance to the historical truth-claims from
which we emerge? How can we claim that modern theologies are not just created on a whim
or convenience? There is a need for communities to have foundational texts. Whether
explicitly written or tacitly adhered to, every society has its immovable laws. Yet it is Jesus
himself, and not scripture, that must remain as the foundation for Christianity.

40 Harriet A. Harris ‘Fundamentalism in a Protestant Context’ in Martyn Percy and Ian Jones, eds.,
It is interesting to observe the precedent that Jesus set for grappling with his own inherited traditions. The Sermon on the Mount is one of several examples where Jesus both honours and questions the past and traditions he has received as a practicing Jew. Jesus respectfully re-examines the reasons for which the laws and the prophets were put in place in order to see their purpose fulfilled, but refuses to fall into the traps of subsequent human tradition that Pharisees have put in place (Matt 5:17-20). In the place of Pharisaic legal interpretations, Jesus affirmed one simple principle through which the righteousness of the law and prophets were to be found—love. The value of a tradition was to be evaluated by the degree to which it reflected love of God and compassionate love of neighbours. Fideistic theologies, in their faithfulness to their ancient texts, sometimes miss this more important aspect of faithfulness to Jesus’ life and teachings.

In querying fideist and fundamentalist mindsets I am not questioning the integrity, genuineness, or commitment of those with such faiths. People who follow these forms include those keenly committed to God. Their faith communities undoubtedly wish to make the world a better place. However, it is not the strength or purpose of faith that is being evaluated here. Rather, it is the enduring value of the theological approach attached to their faith. A fideist theology is one that is single-mindedly closed to questions that are posed from beyond the settled and assumed elements of its own faith-paradigm. Fideism demands allegiance to the status-quo of a faith community, without questioning why the status-quo is followed. This renders followers vulnerable to concepts that are unhelpful or worse. As William Placher more explicitly states; ‘If Christians pretend not to think about theology, we end up with unexamined theology, sometimes in forms that are silly or even dangerous.’

Without thinking about why we believe things, or by being unsure why we do things, we open ourselves to believing and supporting (tacitly or directly) almost anything. When Christians have historically taken passive, relaxed or apathetic roles towards the practice of their theology, they have supported actions and systems that were unjust and contradictory. More ‘reserved’ or unexamined modes of theology allowed regimes of racism and slavery to exist unchallenged simply because the practitioners had not been motivated or taught to

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question. What was inherited as acceptable from previous generations was accepted by a later society, without thought given to the ethics or issues associated with such behavior or belief.

To avoid becoming stagnant, dangerous or detrimental, a theology must push beyond the borders of its own world. It must ask questions of those outside its boundaries, and listen to the critical responses. To claim that the expectations of our traditions are clear or valid just because they have ‘always been’ is unacceptable, especially when contrasted against Jesus’ own sharing of great theological truths. Jesus’ most prominently preached theological theme—the kingdom of God—was a concept only vaguely defined by Jesus himself. Jesus’ concept of the kingdom was one constantly held in mystery. Efforts to ‘lock down’ Jesus’ teaching and purpose for all time were resisted. As the Gospel of Luke records:

> Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming and he answered, ‘The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or ‘There it is!’ For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you. (Luke 17:20b-21)

Jesus’ teachings on the kingdom were told in parables and stories. In a series of examples in Matthew 13 alone, we hear Jesus talk about the kingdom as ‘like yeast’, ‘like a mustard seed’, ‘like a treasure’, ‘like a merchant’ and ‘like a net’. Jesus left the crux of his teachings open to audience interpretation. There was no ‘plain reading’ offered, and no ‘hard’ rule could be generated from Jesus’ teaching to create a universal maxim. Truth had to be continually discerned, or sought, by those who wanted to understand it.

II. Theology as Seeking

Seeking is central to the theological task. Unexamined faith, as we have seen, may lose its relevance for a theologian’s contemporary life and community. Acts of seeking, questioning and examining are important countermeasures. Where fideism mires theology in the assumed, present, safe and traditional, theological seeking draws us into the unknown, undiscovered and mysterious. Seeking in theology frees us to discern meaning and truth amidst many truth possibilities, allowing and enabling a theologian to wonder, ask and doubt. However, while seeking offers a new freedom and creativity, it also has its limitations. At its most extreme, seeking ceases to be theological, becoming instead a generic exploration of meaning and values.
In this generic seeking, specific theological claims such as the quest for God give way to generalised conversations about some kind of greater truth. The personal and specific truth claims of the Christian tradition are pushed aside for a ‘more universal’ pursuit of ultimate significance. Distinctives are de-emphasised or erased. Instead of thoughts and ideas about God, theology becomes a critique of the religious bodies and languages that speak of such a being. Theology moves away from the intimate search for a relationship between God, creation and humanity, stripped of the purpose which gave it birth. When the divine ‘theos’ is simply regarded as whatever gives meaning or significance to human existence, theology becomes subservient to humanist philosophy.

A synonymy of theology and seeking ultimately leads us to a place similar to Lakeland’s radical postmodernism. Through its untiring search for an unfettered truth, a purely seeking theology may well conclude that truth about God, humanity and creation is ultimately unobtainable; truth stands unknowable or indescribable, and anything claiming to be truthful is regarded with suspicion. From this perspective any language that speaks of an ultimate God-truth is perceived as a metanarrative subject to a ‘hermeneutic of suspicion’. Ruel Pepa demonstrates how such metanarratives have been systemically challenged over the centuries, from Riceour’s ‘Masters of the Hermeneutics of Suspicion’ down to Lyotard who coins the term metanarrative. Pepa labels this progression of thought as ‘The Imagination of Resistance’, a line of philosophy that questions our construction of meaning and the validity behind it. Having summarised these key forbears of postmodern thought, Pepa writes:

> The postmodern imagination of resistance is therefore a radical expression of a denial of absolute essences, defining characters, inherent natures and other universalisations…
> The postmodern imagination of resistance is truly ‘an incredulity towards metanarratives’ as Lyotard succinctly puts it. Hence, from the postmodern point of view, no interpretation of reality can ever be conditioned by certain universal, absolute, and objective grand presuppositions.  

While this suspicion of metanarratives has been crucial in critiquing the social acceptanc 

theology that have diverged as a result. According to Robbins, Westphal distinguishes between ‘thin’ and ‘thick’ theologies.

By a thin theology, he means the more formal, transcendental theology that has been emptied of, or has filtered out, the positive substance of particular religion…By a thick theology, Westphal means the kind of thinking that begins from the ‘theistic affirmation of God as a personal creator’; it is robustly theistic and faithfully biblical.44

In my view, we must question whether ‘thin’, seeking theology can retain the label of theology at all. At best, it becomes the study about ‘thick’ theologians and their theologies in an abstract sense. Curiously, for an approach that has arisen out of a commitment to break down disempowering metanarratives, this thin theology does its best to disempower those with a fuller, theistic perspective. By claiming that there can be no overarching concept of truth, thin theology makes a generalised truth claim with power agendas of its own, in this case asserting a particular type of philosophy or logic over a rival competing one.

However, if we reject thin theology, according to Westphal’s definition we are left only with ‘thick’ theology, identified previously as dogmatic and foundationalist fideism. This is where Robbins himself becomes useful for us, noting an important new direction in which theology must go, a world of tension whereby our questions and faith are held in balance. Instead of rejecting truth claims in response to new thinking outright, any ‘theism’ is called into a struggle of re-articulation, growing and learning through relational dialogue with other voices.

It is by being both more and less that a non-dogmatic theology might be both non-dogmatic and theological simultaneously… it acknowledges the difference between kinds of theological thinking, but unlike Westphal, it is not content to settle between either-or: it instead at least strives to speak honestly from the plurality of its beliefs.45

Theology as a synonym for seeking is a theology limited in foundation. If theology is stripped of its impetus to seek, explore and know of God, one must question the validity of the discipline. After all, philosophy or anthropology may ask and answer the same questions that a thin theology attempts to address, while adding nothing further to the conversation. At the same time it would be tragic if thick theology became an entirely unquestioned and immovable system open to abuse of power. Robbins’ statement above is thus a vital one in


45 Robbins, ‘In Search’ 189-190.
identifying and grappling with the key objections to theology from two angles. From one, it refutes dogmatic fideism, acknowledging that questions must be asked of ‘thicker’ theologies in a culturally pluralistic world. From the other, it allows for thick theology to actually ‘be’, even while acknowledging a need for reform. At the very least, thick theology must be faith engaged in the act of seeking answers to the questions that challenge it.

What is required, however, is a mechanism whereby thick theology may ‘be’ without becoming the imposing metanarrative which causes postmodern society so much angst. Here we may be informed by the Gospel itself. Jesus’ Kingdom of God sought liberation from the metanarratives that threatened to overwhelm his society. A leper no longer had to live her or his life as a feared source of uncleanness, a demon possessed man was freed of a lifetime in chains and a Samaritan woman no longer stood as an object of scorn in her community. In these stories of Jesus the smaller, less powerful and more vulnerable are empowered and released.46

A ‘thick’, seeking theology of substance and hope must give priority to those in positions other than our own, to decentre our theology from self, and reorientate a theology around the world of others. We must continue to seek the truth of God, but we do so from a position of humility, charity, openness and love. Preference must be given to the voices that make us feel uncomfortable.

Jan-Olav Henrikson presents an excellent discussion of the need to locate the Other in our theology. Henrikson states that ‘the Other is the given,’ making the crucial point that the Other is an entity, idea or concept that is not of our own making.47 When we encounter the Other, we are presented with ideas and realities from beyond the comfort of our subjective location and preferences. We will inevitably create words of our own to describe the Other. Nevertheless, we are irrefutably presented with a source of information, query, insight and truth that begins outside the safe and assumed systems we inhabit. Henriksen’s discussion goes on to focus on God as the Other, but the same concept expands to other people, creation,

46 The ‘Nazareth Manifesto’ of Luke 4:18 jumps to mind as representative of Jesus’ attitude as he reads from Isaiah. ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.’

and traditions. Confrontations with something from beyond our favoured worldviews present enormous possibilities for growth in our thick theologies in a postmodern world.

If we approach this Other with a willingness to listen to its voice, and quieten our own voices until we receive an invitation to speak ourselves, we may enter into a dialogue which is neither oppressive nor submissive. We can hold our own foundations of faith and belief, yet without imposing that faith and belief on others. If we are honest in our search for God’s truth, we need not fear the revelations of other voices even if they critique our belief or expose our faith. Either the illumination of the Other holds true, and we are blessed with an opportunity to learn and grow; or the words of the Other stand false for us, and we must ask ourselves ‘Why does this sound wrong?’ Whether we accept what it teaches us or not, the act of simply listening to the Other represents a helpful foundation for seeking new theological horizons.

III. Theology as Understanding

The third element of Anslem’s motto leads us to ‘theology as understanding’. It might also be described as ‘theology as knowing’. While ‘fideistic theology’ places emphasis on faith and ‘seeking theology’ on questions, theology as understanding emphasises correct theological knowledge.

As far back as Peter, Paul and the early church, Christians have struggled to define and understand aspects of ‘correct’ Christian faith and belief—the essence of early theological disputes. Church history from this time became marked by conflict, angst, heresies, schisms and controversies. Church councils, papal rulings and imperial intervention all sought to discern and defend the implications of the teachings of Jesus Christ and his disciples for their world. Through creeds and definitions, the notion of Christian orthodoxy emerged. Bruce Shelley concurs, writing

> The voice of the apostles had scarcely fallen silent when the church faced the need to define the faith in terms that intelligent men (sic) could understand. A clear presentation of the gospel calls upon the powers of reason. God made men (sic) to think so the truth advances, at times, as Christians defend the gospel against pagan arguments and the errors of professing disciples.

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The Christian priesthood developed as a formal recognition of those who had the strength, wisdom and tradition to lead the church community whilst maintaining ‘proper’ understanding and order within Christianity. Those who could best articulate the intricacies and implications of orthodox teaching gave new light and direction to the Christian faith, and their texts were widely circulated and taught. Names such as Clement, Tertullian, and Augustine held tremendous sway on the development of Christianity over its first few centuries and beyond.

However the pressures of class, privilege and Empire began to bear down on Christianity after the Edict of Milan in 313 CE. The toleration, legalisation and ultimate adoption of Christianity by the Roman Empire saw the emergence of Christendom, where questions of power and rank pushed the relational faith of the early church aside. ‘Correct Christian knowledge’ emerged as key to maintaining status and authority against heresies that subverted the power of the church and state. ‘Good theology’ was theology that adhered to the decrees of politicised church councils, and also understood the intricacies of the arguments surrounding various articles of faith. This led to a growth of interest in both scholasticism and education by the church.

After experiments in intentional education some three hundred years earlier under Charlemagne, Jonathan Hill notes that education began formalising in 1079 CE under Pope Gregory VII, who called for the establishment of special schools to educate the clergy.⁴⁹ As non-clerical scholars and students also coalesced around such institutions, Europe’s first universities emerged. Theology stood as one of the four core areas of study in these universities of the Middle Ages, along with law, medicine and philosophy.⁵⁰ As the existence of any other field hinged for the church on the existence of God, theology as the study of God held a special place as ‘Queen of the Sciences’.

However, the primacy of theology was to be challenged by the discoveries of the Renaissance. Mathematics, physics, astronomy and biology emerged as those sciences that could empirically describe the world. The Enlightenment built on these advances by placing an enormous emphasis on the discoveries of human reason, seeing the sentimental, traditional

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and scientifically unsubstantiated articles of faith and theology lose status among the academic pursuits.

In its attempt to maintain credibility in this new academic environment, the study of theology also submitted to the demands of human reason. Seminaries, universities and training colleges sought to equip their theologians with an arsenal of tools for proper examination of the Christian faith. The tools of Biblical criticism became central to the theologian’s task, bringing theology as a formal study to a fork in the road. In the secular world, it diverted into the ‘thin theology’ discussed earlier in this chapter. In the life of the Church community, the assumption of God remained the central component of theology, although the question of ‘how much’ remained hotly debated. One the one hand was the view championed by Schleiermacher, whereby our understanding of God is to be contextualised by human reason. Stanley Hauerwas summarises his approach.

Schleiermacher, the architect of the new university in Berlin, accepted what Frei calls the ‘great reversal’ by which the theologian's task became fitting the biblical story into a world increasingly dominated by disciplines that assume the that the world could be understood whether God exists or not.51

Schleiermacher did not question the existence of God or the importance of faith, but appeared to give more weight to human investigation when answering questions around orthodoxy. This view was opposed through the approach developed by Barth, who insisted in his Evangelical Theology that human reason must be unapologetically contextualized and subjected to the word of God. Barth demanded investigation and curiosity in theology, but argued that the default position of theology could not ‘…be ordered, much less even allowed, to choose for its object and theme—in place of God—human existence or faith or man’s (sic) spiritual capacity… The dominant presupposition of its thought and speech is God’s own proof of his existence and sovereignty.’52

From early councils to the institutes of our modern day, the Christian community has placed enormous value in those able to glimpse, articulate and navigate the historical discourse of mysteries surrounding the divine, giving rise to the notion of the professional theologian who

has ‘special theological thinking that is invariably demanded of him’. From this specialised study evolved specialised language, terms and assumptions.

This ‘special thinking’ has been shaped and formed today by the desperation with which professional theology has sought a niche for itself in the world of modern academic discipline. Barth, while realistic about the place of theology in the world, nevertheless devotes a chapter to mourning the ‘solitude’ of the theologian among other disciplines, ruing the way in which ‘the essential character of other human sciences does not equip them to consider theology simply as one among themselves.’ There is an extent to which this attitude prevails throughout our theological institutions today. While a thoughtful, rigorous and self-investigating Christianity is important, I wonder whether the historical search for the approval of foundationalist, secular tertiary institutions has impacted our tradition of Christian study too much.

Words such as ecclesiology, soteriology, hermeneutics, redaction—terms of the theological trade—remain irrelevantly out of reach to the wider Christian body that they are meant to benefit. Theology has consequently become something of a quasi-Gnostic enterprise. While there is not an attempt to keep theological understanding hidden, those of us involved in modern theological study can and do use language that is inaccessible to most of the population. Furthermore, we insist that certain concepts, ideas and principles which are also inaccessible to the bulk of the community be applied to the study of theology. We might then say that theology with a focus on ‘correct’ understanding disenfranchises the non-academic in the theological process. I thus feel resonance here with Jeff Astley’s sentiment as he explains his Ordinary Theology.

I wish to persuade the academic, or at least his clerical equivalents and any researchers who are willing to undertake the study of ordinary believers, to adopt a different view of theology. It is only when we adopt a broader concept of what theology is that we shall recognize the ordinary believer’s talk as theological talk.

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53 Barth, Evangelical Theology, 111.
54 Barth, Evangelical Theology, 111-112.
55 Justo González makes a similar statement in discussing the emergence of academic theology. “Scholastic theology—that is, theology as it was done in the universities—also found itself in crisis. On the basis of ever more subtle distinctions, and of a vocabulary ever more specialized, this theology lost contact with the daily life of Christians, and devoted significant effort to questions that were of interest only to theologians.” Justo González, Church History: An Essential Guide (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 16.
IV. The Danger of Disenfranchisement

Disenfranchising the average church community member of theology is a difficulty recognised by Thomas Groome, who refers to the gap between church and theological academy as ‘existential fact.’\(^5^7\) He notes a significant problem arising from this gap. ‘Instead of a mutually supportive and dialectical unity between academia and ecclesia, there is a dichotomous gap that seems to be growing even wider.’\(^5^8\)

A solely academic appropriation of theology loses the very people it was initially intended to serve, leaving them with fideism as their only option, accepting what they are taught by those who ‘know’. It is unsurprising that ‘lay people…’ as Stone and Duke write, ‘…are tempted to let their pastors take care of theological reflection, and pastors in turn to let their church hierarchs or scholars handle it.’\(^5^9\) Theology becomes absent from day-to-day lived contexts through its proud articulation in professional environments, while the average churchgoer has precious little left to do apart from listening and obeying. With deliberate theology so dominated by academic language, church populations simply do not feel qualified to attempt it, and many Christians are tragically reduced to following ‘easy’ theologies. The very real consequences and challenge of this gap are best expressed by Neil Darragh in Doing Theology Ourselves.

Many people nowadays think of ‘theology’ as something beyond them. It seems to be too difficult, or too abstract, or it’s better to leave it to the experts. Somehow, somewhere, someone has misled them. Theology is no more difficult than any of the other life-skills that we can and need to acquire. Those who think that it is too difficult have been cheated – or perhaps it is just that no one has ever shown them how.\(^6^0\)

When theological thinking becomes regarded as the sphere of the academy, it is rendered inaccessible. Christians avoid it altogether. Note was earlier made of Stone and Duke’s ‘embedded theology’ as an expression of fideism, belief systems so taken for granted that they unconsciously inform and affect our day to day operations and attitudes.\(^6^1\) Darragh describes something similar in implicit theology; ‘Most of our theology is carried out implicitly. We make our decisions based on what we think at the time is the most appropriate

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\(^{5^8}\) Groome ‘Theology’, 55.

\(^{5^9}\) Stone and Duke, How to think Theologically, 16.


\(^{6^1}\) Stone and Duke, How to think Theologically, 16.
action to take. This is the primary outlet of theology left for Christians disenfranchised by the heavy language and terms of academia.

Stone, Duke, Darragh and Placher all identify theological polarities along these lines—implicit or explicit, embedded or deliberative, examined or unexamined theologies. In each case, the active and intentional theological modes are preferred, while the reserved modes are regarded with caution. I suggest that they are potentially dangerous. Danger is a strong word, but is a word that I believe Darragh justifies when observing that ‘…often we are unsure just why a (theological) decision was made in such a way.’ With unquestioned, embedded or unexamined theologies, we assume that what we have learned is a safe and suitable guiding principle for our life engagement with God and one another. It is guided by the underlying assumption that the past holds an authority that the present cannot. ‘God’s will’ becomes synonymous with ‘tradition.’ In other words, those who live ‘today’ are perceived as having limited access to truth-finding and truth-discerning, and may only participate in the process of doing so if we do not challenge too deeply the forms and claims handed to us. It is an assumption that disempowers our church communities of creativity and positive struggle, divesting theology of any contemporary relevance. Darragh makes a pertinent observation, writing

There is a serious problem then in communities or cultures which are not used to doing theology themselves, but which have been accustomed simply to receiving it from elsewhere. Unless they are very lucky, the explicitly worked out and articulated theologies they have picked up from elsewhere just don’t fit very well with their own life-styles and their own concerns.

Darragh’s insight above offers a clue as to why the past is an attractive source of theological insight. The past represents a moment where theology was deliberately thought about and articulated for a particular context. In this historical moment, someone came up with a belief or idea that was so insightful for its time, and so well in-touch with its contemporary community, that its thoughts were regarded as vitally authoritative. This was the concept behind the formation of the canon—works that captured something profound about the human-divine experience in a particular day and era. Such treasures do not come easily for us as humans. The attraction of the past is that the work has been done for us, and if we rest in that knowledge we can feel safely confident in our actions, beliefs and in our dismissal of other voices today. We relegate to a secondary or inconsequential role our own experiences,
the challenges we face on a day to day basis, and those of the people who have lived between our own and the idealised past. In doing so, we relegate God’s revelation to a specific, localised foreign context, preventing the infinite Other from speaking freshly into a new age.

V. Reclaiming the Ideal

The widening gap between communities of faith and institutions of understanding is something of a concern when we know that theology is ultimately the task of the whole church. Theology should be the exploration of God’s truth by the people of God, remembering the history of the God who acts among them in the world. Accordingly, communities that seek to serve and experience God through their worship and weekly practices need to participate as equal partners in any theological discussion. Yet while the people have something of quality to offer the ongoing theological conversation, they have limited access to that conversation when it is only spoken in a language available to a select few. While theological professionals have historically operated with the best intentions in pouring time, energy, study and passion into exploring ideas about God, we have claimed a monopoly on theological knowledge that we do not know how to share. As Robert Banks writes

Although the Mission of lay people in the world is affirmed more often these days, de facto they are still mostly appealed to in their roles of financial supporters and participants in institutionally oriented programs... And although more effort is put into their Christian education, this is still too often undertaken at the local level in a way that makes them only consumers rather than producers. So far as their contribution to Theology itself is concerned, this is still primarily regarded as outside their province or at most a quite secondary affair.  

Knowledge, understanding and good theological processes can and must emerge in congregations. Groome argues for the importance of educating all Christians to work out their own faith. He suggests that theology needs to be ‘democratised’, thus enabling Christians to become participating subjects of their faith, rather than merely objects of study or receivers of the teaching of the professional theologians. Otherwise, we risk subjecting the faith community to a form of ‘knowledge control.’  

We need not just a fuller theology of the people, but one developed more by the people. Theologians by profession or pastors can make a contribution to this, but there can be no effective theology of the people without involvement of the people of God themselves. It is

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not they who must help the professional theologians, but the professional theologians who must help them and put themselves at their disposal. 67

It is crucial for both academy and church that the academy put themselves at the service of the people. It is for the service of the church that intentional theology began, and it is to church that intentional theology must return. As thinkers, leaders and teachers in the church community, those in the academy have an important role to play in equipping churches with good theological process. As Clemens Sedmak states; ‘Theology has been on loan from the people of God to professional theologians for a long time. Theologians have become rich, and they have amassed intellectual property.’ 68 We may more fully realise just how long and how completely theology has been ‘on loan’ if we consider the early community in which Christian faith began. In Paul’s first letter to Corinthians he engages with a body of people who have begun placing their faith in the central theologies of a select few leaders. As one of these leaders, Paul is concerned with too much emphasis placed on the message bearer, and not enough on the message.

For when one says, “I belong to Paul,” and another, “I belong to Apollos,” are you not merely human? What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. (1 Cor 3:4-7)

Later, he writes

According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building on it. Each builder must choose with care how to build on it. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ. (1 Cor 3:10-11)

Paul argues that whatever supplementary teachings are offered by knowledgeable teachers, the foundation of Christian faith inevitably remains the same—the foundation of Jesus Christ. This means that all other structures, theologies, thoughts, expressions, councils and creeds should be regarded as human extensions or theory around the central foundation of Jesus. It is a theme continued in the pastoral epistle of 2 Timothy 2, where the author exhorts communities to ‘avoid wrangling over words’ as he again asserts that ‘God’s firm foundation stands… the Lord knows who are his (2 Tim 2:14,19).’

I sometimes wonder whether Paul would look with some horror to the fact that many of his writings have been the driving force behind two millennia of harmonised church doctrine, rather than remaining the localised, contextual and personal letters that were intended for communities who had access to a whole range of views about Jesus and the message that he brought. Paul’s concluding statements in the above passage from Corinthians seem to emphasise a degree of freedom in choice and exploration for individual Christians.

So let no one boast about human leaders. For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all belong to you, and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God. (1 Cor 3:21-23)

All teachers, teachings, theories and questions are at the disposal of Jesus’ followers, even as the followers themselves are at the disposal of Christ. Church leaders are to provide philosophies and thoughts that to serve the believer in their faith, not control. This does not mean there is no place for people who are especially gifted in leading and guiding Christian thought to express ideas that will help the church think through the implications of its beliefs. Rather, it highlights that (i) Christians are called to do responsible faith-work for themselves and (ii) that theologians have a serving role in equipping and informing this faith-work.⁶⁹

Consider the words of Jesus in Matthew:

But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students. And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven. Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah. The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted. (Matt 23:8-12)

The only theological limitations for Christians are in the person and teachings of Jesus himself. Jesus’ teachings claim, direct and reclaim his followers. A degree of self effort is required in discerning and examining one’s faith. In Philippians Paul calls for Christians to ‘work out your own salvation in fear and trembling (Phil 2:12-13).’ Detained in Rome, Paul could only trust and encourage the Christian community of Philippi to grapple with faith for themselves as Paul himself had to do in transition from his Pharisaic days. Peter Cameron makes a compelling point in relation to Paul:

…what subsequent Christians, our own generation included, have tended to do is simply to accept Paul’s conclusions as authoritative and ignore all the struggles which preceded them. We are tempted to see the Bible as the beginning of a process and not as the end. We think of

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⁶⁹ So also writes Robert Banks, ‘Theology’, 71. ‘Those of us who have more formal theological qualification can only offer some of the theological foundation for this, provide some of the theological framework and supply some of the theological tools.’
Paul as the divine apostle who simply wrote down what was dictated to him, and we forget that he himself had to work out his own salvation in fear and trembling.⁷⁰

Indeed we forget that not only Paul, but all Christians before us have had to grapple with the meaning of Christian faith in their own place and time. I think a disservice was done to the ‘foundation of Christ’ that Paul himself sought to follow when the Council of Nicea first defined a comprehensive statement of orthodoxy to be used against those whose ideas were considered controversial. Without devaluing the importance of creeds in articulating the significance of Jesus as a person, one must question the right of any human council to essentially lay a new foundation of understanding over that of Jesus. In claiming that orthodoxy lies in one’s adherence to beliefs about Jesus, the beliefs that Jesus taught about the Kingdom of God have become, tragically, a secondary affair for the most of two thousand years. The profound injustice of a declared and defended orthodoxy must be considered in light of the use of orthodoxies over the course of Christian history. In discussing the unrest in Europe in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth centuries, for example, González notes that ‘all of these wars were fuelled by the inflexible spirit of various orthodoxies... every detail of doctrine was of the greatest importance, and therefore not even the least deviation from the most strict orthodoxy should be allowed.’⁷¹

With this emphasis on orthodoxy dominating church history, we have lost the important role of orthopraxy—the practice of the way of Jesus—as a guiding force in our theology. In his book *Practical Theology*, Terry Veling reminds us that the Biblical call is to act in obedience first, and then seek to understand, while our tendency as a human race is to theorise, understand or know before we ‘commit to action.’⁷² Veling notes that the patriarch Abraham ‘went forth’ (Gen 12:4) before he believed (Gen 15:16), while remaining the ultimate embodiment and forerunner to all who believe (Rom 4:11).⁷³ As Veling later says, ‘Everything begins with this ‘yes, I will’—this answering promise. It is the very basis of faith and hope, of love and fidelity.’⁷⁴ This does not mean we act unthoughtfully or impulsively. Rather, we ‘keep our hearts turned towards heaven and attentive to the ways of God.’⁷⁵ We are to act faithfully to the calling of Jesus, our foundation. Whether we do or not has significant implications. In his conclusion Veling writes that

⁷⁰ Cameron, *Necessary Heresies*, 11.
⁷¹ González, *Church History*, 18.
⁷³ Veling, *Practical Theology*, 81.
⁷⁴ Veling, *Practical Theology*, 89.
⁷⁵ Veling, *Practical Theology*, 95.
We can serve or hinder the association of God with the world. The rabbis offer a commentary on a verse from Isaiah 43:12: “You are my witnesses, says the Lord, and I am God.” According to the rabbis this means, “When you are my witnesses I am God, but when you are not my witnesses I am not God”.  

Perhaps the best orthodoxy for Christians is one that allows God to ‘be’ without depending on complex definitions of God’s nature, instead letting God be known to the world by our obedient action to the Kingdom of God. Doing as Paul did, we would best serve this vision by looking to the commands of Jesus as our theological foundation. Keeping this foundation in mind, and having identified ways in which theology is negatively expressed, we are now in a better position to outline some criteria for putting a good theological process into action:

a) Good theological process calls us to faith. It is orientated in hope for the existence and rule of God, anchored in revelation from beyond our human capacity for reason. Without this openness to the possibility of God’s existence, theology becomes ‘thin;’ a quest for knowledge that values only what human beings can discover by their own merit, and thus no different to any science. For Christianity, the revelation from beyond comes in the person and foundation of Christ. A good theological process is thus founded on a faith in God through the person of Jesus.

b) Theology requires healthy self-critique. While it depends on revelation from God, infinite revelation must find a relevant expression in a finite world. It must be relevant to its practitioners, calling us to a search, sift and filter, seeking to more fully realise the intention of God’s revelation for us today. To avoid the trap of fideism, theology must grapple afresh with its assumptions about God and faith in new times and places. The stories of God’s people in the scriptures include a wrestling with God and the commands that they receive. A good theological process will likewise welcome a re-examination of presumed value-statements and historical truth claims about the divine. We must challenge our faith when faith leads us to hasty action or contempt for the Other. Theology needs to recognise the voice of Abraham bargaining with God for the citizens of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 18:16-33). It needs to be Jacob wrestling with God at Peniel (Gen 32:24), and Moses diverting God from Israel’s destruction (Ex 32:11-14). Theology must include the Syro-Phoenician woman grappling with Jesus (Mk 7:24-30) and Jesus’ disciples plucking corn on the Sabbath (Mk 2:23-28). It needs to have room for Thomas demanding to see Jesus’ hands and side (Jn

76 Veling, Practical Theology, 97.
It must remember Paul’s exhortation to work out salvation in fear and trembling (Phil 2:12-13). Questions are part of the historical journey of faith, and should be part of ongoing theological conversation.

c) Theology should enlighten and empower the whole people of God. The ecclesia is of central importance as the living and active body of Christ, and needs to be central to the conversations about what revelation means for us today. Those conversations should be assisted by professional theologians, but such theologians are to operate as servants to the church at large. Professional theology that does not present itself as understandable to the church is only doing half of its job. Theology should be situated among the people of God, serving the church community as the church serves the world.

d) Finally, we might consider that if faith, seeking and understanding are independently all nouns, theology as ‘faith seeking understanding’ is a verb. The key terms I use within the remainder of the thesis relate to these conflicting notions of theology as verb and noun. I will further explain these terms—working theology and received theology—in the sections below.

VI. Received Theologies

Received theology refers to theologies that are ‘nouns’: ideas, traditions, customs and ‘things’ received as authoritative from teachers, religions and leaders. Such theologies are jealously defended. Received theology is received theology regardless of whether its content is conservative, fundamentalist, liberal, humanist, or anything in between. I suggest that this received theology can be identified by a number of characteristics.

a) The first characteristic of received theology is its ‘objectification’. It is theology reduced to an inheritance to be possessed, something, ‘that we take from the shelf and put some (local) water in it in order to have an enjoyable drink.’ It is theology that can be compared to a metaphoric white box, wrapped in red ribbon and neatly finished with a bow. When joining a faith community, each of us receives such a package filled with the propositional truth-claims and assumptions that come with the acceptance of a faith.

77 Sedmak, Local Theology, 3.
Those with a received theology view this package as the Theology (capital intentional) that ‘everyone’ in their tradition should have: the orthodoxies of their faith. By entering a faith community, one has accepted this package. Accordingly, whatever the package contains is regarded as adequate for a faith journey and requires no further investigation. Satisfied that they now have their Theology, the package is placed upon a shelf, becoming part of the furniture of their new spiritual reality. By listening to key preachers and teachers on a Sunday, one gains access to the key theological answers needed to be sustained through the week. Occasionally, life may offer a challenge or a query, in which case the answer is either contained within the box, or added by a qualified teacher, leader or author.

Received theology becomes manifest wherever ‘adequate theology’ is associated with accepting a set of established truths, whether those truths are a church doctrine, an academic method or detached philosophical observations. For this project, church-based theologies are the focus of discussion and will be concentrated on over other kinds, but it must always be kept in mind the broader ways in which received theology may be active in the world. Received theology, as I describe it here, is not a specific set of doctrinal beliefs, but is rather the attitude by which any kind of doctrinal beliefs are embraced.

b) A second feature of received theology is the symbiotic interdependence of its practitioners with received traditions and texts whether they are a scripture, science, or philosophy. Received theology is reliant upon texts for its identity and authority, while simultaneously serving to elevate that text above all others. Not only does one’s received theology contain a specific list of what might and should be read—it also explains how it should be read or heard and what, ultimately, should be understood from reading it.78

c) Thirdly, we can identify received theologies through the tremendous weight given to authority figures within traditions—pastors, preachers, and authors who shape reading lists and determine suitable texts. It is the kinds of theology that the Whiteheads write about when they note that ‘we have been familiar with a church in which an individual authority (whether Catholic pope, Episcopal Bishop, or Methodist pastor) reflected on and made decisions for

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78 For protestant Christians, this often begins with the Bible but can broaden to include respected and well-known authors. For example, C.S. Lewis is widely quoted as authoritative in some evangelical traditions. For those from Catholic traditions, we might consider Papal authority as such a text.
the believing community’. For those operating with received theologies, such leaders are imbued with enormous authority to define and identify key theological truths. This extends into the personal realm in some cases, with pastor reserving the right to censor films and books that church members could access. Under such leadership, church members are not trusted to either (i) judge the value of media for themselves or (ii) to stand morally or spiritually resolute if such media is found wanting. In this type of theology, an authority figure is given the power of leader, interpreter and theological expert, while the congregation is regarded as weak and theologically vulnerable. The role of the congregation in this circumstance is to accept and faithfully enact the teachings that they receive in an act of ultimate disempowerment. In the confronting but important words of Ken Blue:

In Jesus’ day, the knowledge of the law of Moses was power. The Pharisees knew Moses’ teaching by heart and knew how to teach and apply it. They were the experts. From this lofty position of power they looked down on the “mob” (as they called them), which they said was cursed because “it knows nothing of the law” (Jn 7:49). So for these ecclesiastical abusers of the first century, the seat of Moses functioned in much the same way as leadership titles, academic degrees and church offices do for today’s spiritual abusers.

By nurturing or allowing unexamined theologies, we render congregations vulnerable to such spiritual abuse, a vulnerability that may only be addressed through an education that decreases the ultimate authority of such figures.

d) The automatic dismissal of the Other is the fourth feature of received theology. As media and communities external to our own must be subjected for approval to the texts and teachers of our own traditions, those Others who operate from scriptures and worldviews foreign to our own also become objects of suspicion. They may be dismissed as heretics (in the eyes of fideists), traditionalists (to the Imagination of Resistance) or shallow (to the academic pursuit of knowledge). Received traditions guard their own theology of ‘possession’ or ‘reception’ to the denigration of another.

The fundamentalism we earlier acknowledged as a possible consequence of fideism is thus possible for all manner of theologies and beliefs that have large-scale followings. In their short definition of the term fundamentalism, Sweet, McLaren and Haselmayer usefully

79 Whitehead and Whitehead, Method in Ministry, 5.
observe that ‘Fundamentalists are found in two subspecies: liberal and conservative.’ Their statement establishes that diametrically opposed theological traditions may nevertheless operate out of the same theological mode. As long as any theology claims an absolute authority and spiritual superiority in the world, it remains capable of becoming a received—or even fundamentalist—theology.

Received theological consumers may not think of themselves in terms of the points that I have outlined above. However, that is precisely the danger of received theology. It can leave uncritical people open and endangered to those who are malicious, power-hungry or are themselves ignorant. Those who follow received theologies are imbued with inherent biases or suspicions, without realising that their judgements are actually a consequence of cultural and traditional assumptions or the product of someone else’s culturally embedded musings. While texts and leaders have an important role to play in our faith development, such a role is not absolute and must be subjected to a greater accountability. There must be room for questioning in faith, and thus there lies a need educate our churches on how to question well, in order guard against abusive systems. As Sedmak suggests, ‘Doing theology is a matter of being sensitive to concerns and of asking the right questions.’ If we can help all Christians to ask good questions, we help all Christians move towards a working theology.

VII. Working Theologies

Working theology is theology as a verb. It is ‘faith seeking understanding’ as an action. It is theology on the move, marked by the four key descriptors identified at the end of Section V above. These descriptors identify working theology as (i) self-critical, (ii) focused on the reality and foundation of God through the person and teaching of Jesus, (iii) embedded within a community of faith with an awareness of the world, and (iv) active in the sense that it is a process, rather than a noun to be possessed. We must help the community see, as David Brown so clearly expresses, that:

...theology is not about picking up a number of facts which can be held in isolation, like the dates of the reigns of the Kings of England; it involves seeing interrelations between

81 Leonard Sweet, Brian D. McLaren and Jerry Haselmayer, A is For Abductive: The Language of the Emerging Church (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 131.
82 Sedmak, Local Theology, 2.
interlocking ideas and link-ups with a particular way of life before real understanding can be reached.\textsuperscript{83}

As Clemens Sedmak explores how to do theology at a local level, he looks to Jesus for a model that profoundly identifies with the notion of faith seeking understanding, the ‘good process’ of working theology. He writes:

Jesus can teach us how to do theology. Jesus teaches us (1) to reappropriate our tradition, (2) to do theology as if people matter, and (3) to base our theologies on our relationship with God. Doing theology is a way of following Jesus. It is a ministry. It is not an end in itself, but a means that serves a higher goal. Theology is to be characterized through the service it renders. It serves the kingdom of God.\textsuperscript{84}

We must educate Christians in participating in this kind of theology—where our tradition helps rather than hinders our love and action for God, and for the people God created. This is not to indoctrinate Christians with some sort of ‘package of belief’, but to equip and infuse them with theology as a process that helps to daily re-engage with and listen to the God whom our theology must ultimately serve.

Edward Farley offers a description of theology as an ‘…interpretative or thinking activity determined by Gospel (sic), the concern for truth, and a response to the present situation.’\textsuperscript{85} He notes that theology denigrates when these three elements are not all present. The notions of working and received theology follow a similar line of thinking. Theology denigrates into received theology when any of the crucial elements of! faith, query, community and action are missing. More hopefully, received theology may become working theology when such elements are restored. Acknowledging that two elements of working theology (a community of faith and assumption of the existence of God) are givens when we talk about theology in a church context, the challenge for making theology accessible is primarily about ensuring the integration of the two important concepts absent from received Christian faith: self-critique, and the active processing of one’s own faith.

\textsuperscript{84} Sedmak, \textit{Local Theology}, 43.  
VIII. Toward a Working Theology

When Stone and Duke speak of *embedded theology*, and Placher of *implicit theology*, they helpfully identify the passivity of received theologies.\(^8^6\) Passivity permits a theological response ignorant of the motives, implications or consequences of faith-influenced decisions. A most important element in transforming received theology into the more dynamic concept of working theology thus lies in changing the conception of theology from its ‘passive noun’ form to an ‘active verb.’ Instead of theology being the metaphoric box of knowledge, theology becomes the process by which the box of our orthodoxies is opened, emptied, searched, explored, tested, played with, celebrated, kept, added to and even discarded.

One of the two elements I have discussed as necessary for working theology to be realised is the active processing of faith. This is depicted diagrammatically in Figure I as an idealised shift along an axis from a passive mode to an active process.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Passive Mode</th>
<th>Active Processes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unintentional</td>
<td>Intentional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embedded</td>
<td>Deliberative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implicit</td>
<td>Explicit</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A theology nearer to a passive mode is in danger of becoming a fatalistic approach to theology. It is theological ‘cruise mode’. Reality ‘is how it is’, and little effort is expended attempting to express or articulate this state of affairs. The more active theologies are where faith is specifically thought about and articulated. An active process diverts emotional and physical energy into wrestling with and expressing faith. The more active theologies require conscious thought, a conscious deliberation on what one believes.

However, I do not think an active/passive process axis is a sufficient point of comparison to fully discern the distinction between a working and received theology. Theology that is active in process may still be implicitly assumed in content. One can have a processing theology, yet still be lacking the essential ingredient of self-critique that I have previously identified as

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necessary for working theology. Thus the need to move from an ‘accepted’ theological content to a ‘critiqued’ theological content makes up a second axis, as displayed in Figure II.

At one end of this axis are those who are happy to accept the content of the beliefs they have received on conversion or initiation. For them, content is assumed and what they have been taught is regarded as complete. At the other end of the axis, there are those who explicitly challenge the content of their theological environment. In an active theological mode, a critique of content leads to theological growth, helping theologians generate a theology that is dynamic and relevant to their age and location. Alternatively, a ‘passive critique’ would lead to the destructive rejection of previously held notions without any attempt at personal reclamation or revaluation.

The challenge we are presented with when talking about generating working theology is twofold. We must ensure that theology not only critiques its content and assumed norms, but that this critique is done in a proactive manner. The combined axes of this twofold challenge may be represented diagrammatically as in Figure III. In Figure III, the horizontal axis represents the issue of content: does a theology critique or accept a given teaching or idea? The other represents the diametrically opposed positions of process: passivity v activity. Working theology is realised when theology is both active and critiquing. Received theology finds expression when content is unchallenged and unprocessed. Laid out in this manner, this diagram highlights the challenges of the task ahead. The process of making theology accessible is ideally a movement from the bottom left to the top right of the diagram. However, there are ‘shoulders’ to this pattern of movement, the bottom right and top left fields.
The top left field is where processing is active, but the content remains the same. Opportunity for growth, change or exploration is neglected in favour of creatively re-expressing familiar and comfortable beliefs: using a ‘new wrapping paper’ on the same old package of theology. Theology that neglects to enhance capacity for critique leads into the field of apologetics—the practice of considered, explicit rationalizing of an assumed faith. It is not necessarily any more creative in its outcome or response than the received theologies, except that it may go to extensive lengths to define and defend what its passive counterpart already accepts. Such theologies might explicitly identify and state one’s belief, or argue for a certain mode of belief, but do nothing to enhance the daring creativity required to contextualise theology for one’s own time and culture.

The top left field may also represent what I describe as ‘popular theology’. It is the popularised distribution of commonly-held beliefs through novels, self-help books, bible study guides or other media, creatively describing and tacitly expressing as fact an assumed belief that resonates in the wider community—much like the Left Behind series did for pre-tribulationist eschatological theory, or Dan Brown’s Da Vinci Code did in deconstructing historical Christianity for society at large. It is in the realm of apologetics and popular theology that contemporary authoritative texts (including music, teachers, films, etc) emerge. Such texts can be regarded so highly that they often generate mass-followings of their own from people who are struggling to identify and articulate their own beliefs. This leads those already in a received theological paradigm into deeper dependency on others for direction and inspiration. They find a ‘new foundation’ in the teachings of a new leader.
Alternatively, in the lower right field we may find the consequence of theology that critiques previously held belief, but does not do so in a proactive or creative fashion. Opening the box and finding the contents wanting, the ‘passive critique-er’ walks away in disgust or disillusionment, sliding from the notion of constructive critique into destructive criticism. In this field, a person may feel like they have ‘lost their faith’. A summary diagram is thus presented as follows in Figure IV:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Apologetics, Passive Mode</th>
<th>Working Theology, Active Process</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inherited or received content is readdressed, but any creativity is focused on ‘better’ articulation of pre-assumed principles</td>
<td>Theological content is considered inadequate, but is actively engaged with through new and interesting ways of thinking.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theological content is inherited and assumed. Minimal level of engagement, as the ‘status quo’ is deemed sufficient</td>
<td>Theological content is questioned and viewed as inadequate. As a result, it is rejected, without attempt to redeem or revalue it</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The challenge for working theology is to help others undertake the journey and leave the familiar location of received theology behind, without getting ‘caught’ in the possibilities of apologetics or rejected theology. While the temptation may exist to ‘land’ in the first alternative location made available to an emerging theologian, the true value of theological engagement is discovered by pushing through challenge to the creativity, hope and promise offered by a working theological paradigm.

A resonant tale is found in the story of the Israelites as they approach the Promised Land. Fleeing from Egypt, the Twelve Tribes were promised a fertile ‘land of milk and honey’ where they could exercise their covenant with God freely and independently (Ex 3:7). Despite the assurances of God being with them through signs and symbols, the Israelite tribes grumbled. They doubted the path on which God was leading them. They grumbled in times of hunger and fear, and their fearful grumbling led them to baulk at the threshold of the Promised Land. Repeatedly expressing a desire to turn back or settle elsewhere, the Tribes’ lack of faith leaves them stranded for a further forty years in the wilderness (Deut 1). It is
only when the Israelites finally found strength to overcome their fear of the giants awaiting them in Canaan that they could leave the seductively familiar location of the wilderness behind them. Confronting their concerns, they discovered the rich, fertile, divinely provided land that had been waiting.

X. Finding the Promised Land

Helping the people of God find a theological world of promise involves building focus and resilience against the distractions that can lure us away from our ultimate destination. It also involves courage to see out the journey of discovery that we are all called to, navigating obstacles of tradition, doubt and fear in order to travel back to Jesus Christ, whose teachings are the foundation of our faith. This leads us next into two significant questions: What are the places of fear and grumbling that might turn Christians away from such a journey? How do we help them navigate these places, and to find their faith intact on the other side? Such questions lead this study to its next phase as an exercise in primary research that asks members of a middle class, evangelical church about their perceptions of theology and the journey on which it may take them.
Chapter 3: Introducing an Allegory

In Chapter 1, I opened with an allegory detailing my faith journey. In this allegory, I shared the image of a theological life begun on a ‘beach’, a safe shore of boundaries, community and security that marked my early church upbringing. As I explored my surrounds, I began to step into ‘the shallows’ of theological discovery, a journey that became frightening and uncertain when I encountered overwhelming waves of doubt and questioning. I emerged from this scary place into an area I called ‘the deep’, that place beyond the chaos in which I could explore God from a whole range of angles. I then reflected on the questions that brought me to this point: why was this my experience, when it was not that of so many others? Can or should it be the experience of others?

‘The beach’ seems to be a popular place for many people of faith, and many of its images reflect what we may have described as a received theological paradigm: a body of people content with the status quo and with the boundaries and safety of a uniform, clearly defined theology. Others are dipping their toes into the shallows of the theological water. They are not yet completely sure how to handle the diversity of theological life forms they might discover there, and are undecided on whether to engage deeper or to retreat to a firmer place of safety. Others still are navigating the breakers, wondering if their faith is about to slip away in raging waves of uncertainty and doubt. A further group are like myself, having felt like they have pushed through periods of doubt and chaos, and are content to explore the deep world of the ocean.

In the pages that followed this allegory, I posited that a ‘beach faith’ of received theology is an unhealthy and dangerous paradigm to reside within permanently. It needs to be moved away from in favour of a working theology. I am particularly concerned with taking the experience of ‘the deep’ back to those on ‘the shore’, helping Christians to engage in a good theological process of self-critique and process: where unhealthy theological assumptions may be brought into question, and traditions may be examined and released as we delve deeper for the Kingdom truth of Jesus.
I am profoundly aware of the issues in both critiquing and preferring theologies in such a manner. There is a danger and risk of both arrogance and insensitivity. Yet it is a critique that I believe is demonstrated, justified and explained as I have explored multiple definitions of theology to establish a framework by which any theology might be critiqued. I have stated that it is not the content of a theology that is at issue here, but the process by which theological content is examined and used that matters.

The allegory of the ocean—both a place of continuity and a place of change—was an important one for me as I began to think about some of the issues to emerge in this thesis. I wanted to address issues of faith growth and transition, but equally wanted to avoid a concept as clearly defined as ‘Stages of Faith’, the term used by James Fowler in his engagement with similar issues. Faith to me has a largely organic component about it. Ideas and elements come and go, like the movement of waves and the various curiosities they wash up on the beach. We sometimes change our level of engagement with the waters, going deeper in some times and circumstances, moving to where it feels shallower and safer in others.

While I do ultimately demonstrate a greater level of personal comfort with ‘The Deep’, there is no denigration or dismissal of those who claim to have a ‘simple faith’ here. Neither am I asking all Christians to become academics. Rather, the intention of this allegory and accompanying study is to encourage Christians to own their beliefs for themselves, anchoring their faith in the person of Jesus Christ rather than the Christ of the Reformation, the Nicene Creed, Paul, Peter or the Gospels, their local minister, a famous international author, or myself. It is about giving people tools to see the Christ on the ‘other side’ of the texts and traditions we receive: the Christ who brings the dynamic Kingdom of God as a changing, challenging, confronting and confusing force in our world. This is a challenge made difficult for us in an age when ancient texts are the only accounts we have about Jesus. Yet difficulty does not make the challenge any less worthwhile. The Kingdom was never quite defined for Gospel communities two thousand years ago. The ongoing challenge for us is to discern and listen to those teachings even though we cannot fully define them for ourselves.

The challenge of examining different places of faith, without wanting to be dismissive of them, is one that Fowler grapples with and acknowledges when writing of Synthetic-Conventional faith.

It would be a mistake to think of the movement from one faith stage to another as analogous to climbing stairs or ascending a ladder, for two reasons: (1.) It unnecessarily locks us into a kind of “higher”-“lower” mentality in thinking about the stages, when the real issue has to do with a successive progression of more complex, differentiated and comprehensive modes of knowing and valuing. (2.) The stair or ladder analogy, further, might lead us to think of transition as a matter of the self clambering from one level or rung to another, essentially unchanged.88

I here note the danger of entering a similar ‘deeper-shallower’ dichotomy to the ‘higher-lower’ that Fowler wishes to avoid, and acknowledge that differences are likely more semantic than philosophical. The potential to generate ‘hierarchies of faith’ is a tension that needs to be acknowledged and wrestled with. We do need to acknowledge that some people are unable to transition due to mental or emotional limitations. However, those who do not exit earlier stages such as a Primal or Intuitive-Projective faith in Fowler’s model are left vulnerable to exploitation and abuse as they enter a much more cunning and mature world. We may safely say that those who don’t progress and learn to swim in deep water are at greater risk of drowning. It is thus a matter of responsibility to find ways to assist those who are able to transition, and responsibly care for those who are not.

Everyone has to start somewhere, and the beach is a relatively safe learning ground for a world of faith. It is from the beach that one learns to swim, where one’s family can watch over your shoulder to make sure that you get a good grounding before striking out to more risk-filled areas. If it was not for Sunday school and youth groups, I may never have encountered Jesus at all.

However, if I remained on the beach I would be robbing myself of the chance to grow, to experience challenge, and to meet with the diverse richness of the theological faith-world on offer. On honeymoon at the Great Barrier Reef in 2009, I took the option of snorkelling on the outer reef, only a few hundred metres from where the sea floor drops away over two kilometres. Had I not overcome my apprehension about diving into the ocean several kilometres from land, I would have missed out on experiencing one of the world’s great natural wonders. There is a time for learning in safety, and there is a time to walk (or swim) towards maturity. To remain content in a received theological paradigm when we have the

88 Fowler. Becoming Adult, 57.
It is well to start with a safe Christianity that teaches us about Jesus, but inevitably we must be led to balance our beliefs about Jesus with the radical teachings from Jesus. We must be willing to grow and move to deeper, tougher places. Hebrews 5:11-14 offers a confronting challenge to the believer at this juncture.

About this we have much to say that is hard to explain, since you have become dull in understanding. For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic elements of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food; for everyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is unskilled in the word of righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, for those whose faculties have been trained by practice to distinguish good from evil.

The author of Hebrews is tough on those whose experience of Christian living should have brought them into maturity. The opportunities for growth were there, yet they were not seized upon or applied. To require milk rather than solid food when one should be moving towards a maturity of faith and discernment was deserving of scorn. It is interesting to note the ‘basics’ that Hebrews calls its readers back to: ‘the word of righteousness,’ participating in God’s justice for the world. To become skilled in righteousness, we must throw our focus back to discerning the Kingdom of God in the world.

I. Asking Questions of the Allegory

The allegory is my experience of faith, and one that explains a theological journey from a received to a working theology. That journey is what enabled me to move away from milk and on to tougher fare. As I returned to my reflections upon this allegory, I began to wonder whether it might be a journey that others also could participate in. I believe it is important to give others the chance to critique this story, and offer their own perspectives on the difficulties associated with theology.

In seeking out the voices of others, I returned to a church that I have previously had involvement in. I needed a small sample of others who had not entered formal theological education and could add a non-academic voice to this study. Such voices would complement
and contrast with the professional voices examined to this point. The notion attempts to take seriously what the Whiteheads describe when they refer to *The Sense of the Faithful*. The write, ‘This category, which refers to the sense of faith residing in the Christian community, can be interpreted as the Tradition alive in the contemporary experience of the minister and the community... experience as a source for theological reflection in ministry.’

In the interest of some degree of objectivity, I asked two pastors at the church to suggest the names of a number of people who may be interested in being interviewed, with strong enough conversational English skills to be able to grapple with the allegory. From that list, I worked in conjunction with my supervisor to select six people, divided evenly on the basis of gender and between three over-thirty year olds and three under-thirty year olds. The sample was not intended to be representative of the entire church community, but rather to extract some qualitative data that would enrich the study and subject of this discussion with the people it is ultimately intended to serve—those outside of the theological academy. This component of my study thus took on elements of action research, as I returned to a church I had belonged to for a period of time and knew quite well, to invite the thoughts and participation of those I had previously ‘churched with’. The following process summarised from Ernest Stringer resonates particularly with my intentions in this research.90

1) My role as researcher was as a catalyst: to enable those ‘outside’ the academy to ‘speak into’ questions regarding their role and engagement as theologians.

2) My role as researcher is not to impose change on the Christian world outside the academy, but to stimulate people to change by addressing issues that concern them. In the case of this study, it involved exploring how they view theology and where they stand in relation to it.

3) ‘The essence of the work is process—the way things are done—rather than the result achieved.’91 The process of conversation and ensuring the genuine voice of the interviewees is as significant as any particular outcome or result of the research.

90 These five points are drawn and adapted from Stringer’s summary of an action research process in Stringer, *Action Research*, 23.
4) ‘The key is to enable people to develop their own analysis of their issues.’ As noted below, it is important to give each participant freedom to play with and make the allegory their own, define theology and identify key issues for themselves.

5) It is important that participants expressed themselves from where they are, not from where I think they ought to be. In the context of this interview, this meant allowing participants to interpret the content of the allegory however they wished. This led to very constructive conversation.

In line with the action research values identified above, the process of the interviews was designed to help the participants be as objectively critical of both theology and the allegory itself as possible. I de-personalised the allegory so that participants could critique it without knowing they were critiquing my own story. I identified four theological locations (the beach/shore, the shallows, the breakers and the deep) and attempted to describe them as valid, independent ways of doing theology and faith in their own right, although there was such narrative flow that each reader could identify some sort of movement from the shore towards the deep if they wished. By writing each story positively, I aimed to give each participant the freedom to identify with any ‘faith place’ that they liked, and could add to, alter, change or comment on the way they saw themselves as interacting with the ‘flow’ of the allegory without embarrassment.

I gave participants a copy of the allegory a number of weeks before I interviewed them, informing them that each interview would go for around an hour and would be based on the story. In my initial questions, I asked for responses to the allegory: How did they respond to the reading? Was there anything they would have changed, or would they like to propose a different allegory? Where did they see themselves within the context of the reading? Did they wish they were somewhere else? Why or why not? What were the advantages or disadvantages of where they saw their theological/faith reality as being located? What were the challenges they saw with going ‘deeper’? If they wanted to go ‘deeper’ into the theological waters, what could help or facilitate in this process?

92 Stringer, Action Research, 23.
93 See Appendices.
A key concern raised in the proposal stage of this project was that I was asking participants to respond to my allegory that used my language, thus limiting the range of response and creating a potential power imbalance between researcher and participant. I created these guiding questions in order to give opportunity for objection, alteration and questions on the participants’ part, giving ample opportunity to change the direction or take control of the allegory if they wished. It was heartening to see participants take the allegory, make it their own, or dismiss it in favour of alternative images.

Participants generally responded positively to the allegory, however, and found the picture a helpful one to work around in discussing theology in non-academic terms. All engaged in a solid dialogue, with constructive alternatives to the allegory offered by the one participant who rejected it. In the next few pages I introduce the participants, identifying their origins and contextualising the interviewees in their life and faith contexts. I then grapple with the observations and solutions they shared about the allegory and theology in Chapter 4: Exploring Theology Together.

A) Melissa

Melissa is a single woman in her early twenties who has been heavily involved in her church in recent years. She divides her work time between casual and church-based employment. She grew up in the church, ‘in a family where I’ve always known God and experienced God through them.’ Melissa initially describes her faith journey as a process of ‘...making it personal for me.’ She details a journey of her initial Christian faith as one anchored in her relationships with friends and family. Through disappointment and broken relationships, Melissa describes for herself a time in which she was ‘broken away from my friends and having to live on my own, and then experience the world and what that has to offer.’

In this period, Melissa realised that ‘...the world is not what I want….I didn’t enjoy that and there was no good in that whatsoever, and yet God would use that to say: “well obviously that’s not good, come back to me”’. This experience led Melissa into a renewed faith marked by a belief that God esteemed and valued her personally. Yet there is a fear that threatened to undermine the basis of her faith—the concern that God may not love her individually. She

94 References to ‘Melissa’ are a pseudonym, as are all following interviewee identities. Quotes are drawn with permission from ‘Melissa’, interviewed by author, Melbourne, VIC, September 2008.
spoke of ‘struggling’ with the notion of reverting back to a God who might only love the world at large. She felt as though such a depersonalised God would lead to the erosion of faith.

Melissa puts this fear of God not loving her specifically down to either a subconscious low self-esteem or satanic influences. Her faith experience is polarised as a battle between the world as a secular place of struggle, low self-esteem and potential demonic influence on the one hand, and an engaged personal God who guides her in correct decision making out of love on the other. She believes that the ultimate experience of God’s love will be when she feels like she has a clear line of communication with God, in the way that she perceives others also communicate with God.

If I desire good things… particularly things of the spiritual gifty things—like prophecy or just the visions or words or just experiences of God—if I desire those sort of things why is it that I haven’t got them already?’ And for me, I can’t see anything bad in having them so I’m wrestling with God, saying: ‘why is it?’ And he’s told me it’s not (an issue with) me so—I guess I’m fighting with disappointment in God…

This ‘absence of gifts’ in turn leads Melissa to feeling inferior to others who do have them. ‘You know,’ she says, ‘…they look like they have almost a perfect relationship with God and because I see it I expect that I can have the same.’ When asked about the allegory, Melissa said she related best to the picture of faith as ‘crashing waves that can sweep you off your feet.’ When asked about what made faith feel like that for her, Melissa began outlining these disappointments and unfulfilled expectations that made her feel ‘stuck,’ as well as just ‘not knowing’ stuff ‘beyond what my mind can understand.’ The other side of the waves represented a place of calm which was ‘just a nice place to be.’

Melissa wanted that deep place as a place of security, and felt that in the present time her faith is drowning because she ‘does not have what she desires from God.’ Melissa defined theology as ‘learning the Bible in way, way, way more depth than what we do at church and learning about how to interpret it and understand it in different ways.’ She describes her own theology as limited, and says what she experienced of it is more what she’s observed in other people, speaking of her Grandfather as ‘the Bible King… he just seems to know and understand how it all fits together and he’s just read so much it’s just ingrained in him.’ She leans towards theology basically as a grasp of knowledge, but also acknowledged its role in forming faith:
Part of me thinks that theology builds faith and I think that’s true to an extent, but I think also theology makes you question your faith as well… which I don’t think is a bad thing at all… I think that’s what builds faith when you question what you believe and why you believe it. But I think there’s a part of me that almost fears theology because the more you learn the more questions you have and that’s inevitable so something I’ve been struggling with and talking a lot about with a friend is ‘is it better to live in ignorant bliss or is it better to live with more questions?’ So I think theology definitely—definitely—impacts faith, and I think ultimately it’s for the better but it can seem like it’s for the worst.

Melissa thus identifies a tension in theology: the challenge it offers to an easy faith (‘ignorant bliss’) or to have one’s faith informed by questions. She identifies the ‘fear’ of theology as a discomfort surrounding the unknown. This for Melissa is the essence of the theological struggle. This struggle is most active for her in the third part of the allegory, the breakers. It is...

When you start questioning things like that, it can feel like you’re drowning in your faith because there’s just so many things hitting you. And you’re like: ‘do I remain faithful to what I’ve been taught or do I remain faithful to God?’ And where is the line between the two? And what is of God and what isn’t? And what’s been misinterpreted and how do I know that I’ve got the right interpretation because I’m really just another person wandering along?

B) Steve

Steve is a married man on the late side of his mid-twenties who says that he ‘probably thinks a little too much.’ He is a scientist, and is particularly keen on discovering truth in science and his faith. He likes to question, and ‘question everything, even the more fundamental things of our faith... I can question a lot of things and not be too worried about where my questions are going.’

Steve states that he grew up as a ‘traditional-type Christian.’ He ‘always believed. As a child going to Sunday school you just hear what it is and you believe it, with a lot of friends who believed it. And a lot of positive experiences come along with Sunday school and church and... so it was easy to believe that.’ This early faith world was expanded through friendships with questioning people. ‘I’ve got a good friend who liked to challenge me in a lot of my faith and that has caused me to be more theologically sound in what I believe, not just believe because this is what I believed as a kid, but actually think about it a lot more.’ Steve describes his theological world as expanding through a variety of experiences and encounters.

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95 Interview data comes with permission from ‘Steve’, interviewed by author, Melbourne, VIC, September 2008.
...through youth group you get a small glimpse of theology. It’s very small but you get experience along the way. Then also with preaching…I had a great preacher…I liked his theology, you know. Whether he’s right or wrong…I liked it and I could identify with it and (it) encouraged me to challenge a lot of my thinking. So to begin with youth group was very primitive and then into church where it started to get a bit more sophisticated. But mostly I’d say reading books…various books on theological topics is where I’d get most of my theology.

Steve describes friends and his brother as a particular influence in teaching him to question. For Steve, there is no fear in questioning but it does lead to loneliness. Identifying himself as someone who is out in the deep, Steve makes some enlightening observations

I wouldn’t put the ocean (as) a place of wonder. Okay, it is a place of wonder, but it’s not necessarily all good. It’s good to challenge and I’m happy to challenge where I’m at and I love asking the fundamental questions and not rock my faith, but…it’s a little bit lonely out there. There are few other people that want to do that, and if you are out there, often you are with people who are happy with their faith, and you’re not where a lot of people are... All this stuff in theology, in the end of the day, so much of it is meaningless—like in terms of how we live our life. So much of it doesn’t change how we live our life, and if we get caught too much in thinking about God I think we can forget to live with him. Which has been my experience. It is not so great to get so caught up in it. As I said, it is the Deep, it is a long way to the sand, a long way to where God is.

In terms of definition, Steve sees theology as a ‘head knowledge’ understanding of God, how God has interacted with us and who God is. This compares with—but is not exclusive to—faith, which is the notion of ‘trust and acceptance of God.’ With faith, Steve can comfortably challenge the head knowledge without the fear of the unknown that Melissa identified. He acknowledges that for some people there is a real fear and uncertainty about challenging long held theological notions. However, Steve also recognises the ultimate limitation of any conception of God. Out of this limitation, he suggests that if we can encourage people to realise that we are ‘wrong’ (or limited in our understanding) about God, then perhaps all people would be encouraged to ‘...delve deeper... and just acknowledge from the outset that we’re not right.’

C) Pete

Pete is approaching his mid-twenties and grew up in a church different to the one he is presently attending. This church upbringing gave him what he calls ‘a base foundational belief in God, as a child.’ Pete then made a conscious decision ‘to follow Jesus’ at a concert when he was 14, after which point he entered a mentoring relationship with his youth pastor. After a time, he got to a stage where he ‘had nothing to do with God,’ a time in which he

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96 Interview data comes with permission from ‘Pete’, interviewed by author, Melbourne, VIC, November 2008.
‘partied and stuff.’ He still believed in God but just wanted to do his own thing and did not care about the consequences. This led to what Pete describes as some ‘big mistakes’, which led him back to his faith. After this time he found his current church, joining a small group of people his age that supported him in his faith journey. This group gave him the chance to engage with some of the questions that he encountered on his faith walk.

Settling in to his faith, Pete went to study at what he describes as ‘Bible TAFE,’ a place where he felt like he began to engage with theology on a basic level ‘...so you’re not writing thousand word essays but you do cover things like the canon of the Bible.’ Pete’s time at this institution solidified the faith he had begun rediscovering, and helped him to be content with not knowing all the answers to the questions he had previously sought answers to.

Theology for Pete is ‘studies about how people view God and different opinions or thoughts/ideas they have about God and how he works and who he is.’ It is also a process of ‘interpreting scripture I think and how that that’s interpreted and applied.’ Pete associates theology with scholarly books, but wonders whether it could also just be a conversation about God. The struggle for Pete with theology is that it ‘can do his head in’ when core values are open to questioning. He wonders why scripture is so open to various interpretations. He

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97 TAFE stands for Technical and Further Education, an Australian education institution focused on training people primarily in technical vocations such as hospitality, construction and tourism. They teach up to advanced diploma level, and are sometimes a step between secondary education and university.
therefore struggles with theology because he struggles in forming opinions and is unsure how to determine where the truth is in a theological debate. He states

I can just see the valid arguments each way and so I can’t choose or decide which I think is right. And again that comes back to just accepting that but um yeah its weird just like it seems there’s an emphasis on truth and on finding the truth and on absolute truth but it seems like such an unrealistic concept sometimes when there’s so many different ideas.

**D) Dean**

Dean is a single man in his early forties. He has a doctorate in science, and sees his faith as ‘becoming his own’ in high school. He likes to ‘explore’ churches and has a curiosity about theologies other than his own. He questions a lot, but also acknowledges there are theological areas he won’t touch (or doesn’t need to anymore). Dean has a sharp critical mind, and was the one to propose an alternative allegory for our discussion.

Dean describes having a church background, while being shaped in a family environment solidly grounded in tertiary education (*particularly* science). Dean says that this created a background of ‘questioning, exploring, probing something, poking something and seeing how it works.’ His Christian faith became his own when he was around sixteen and a half, even though he had attended church and youth group ‘all the way through high school.’ He details the moment he came to faith:

… about half way through Year 10 (I) prayed to the God I didn’t believe in at that stage to prove himself. It was an idea that… I heard it in a sermon somewhere. So it kind of appealed to me at the time… seemed to be a bit of a winner and quite an experiment really. You know, either God was who he claimed to be and there would be some sort of… something would happen, or God wasn’t who he claimed to be and nothing would happen. The result of that was probably 6-12 months later. It was a—I come from quite a thinking background—it was an experience, it was a feeling, that really came quite suddenly that was kind of for me interpreted as kind of the presence of God.

Dean describes his faith journey since as a process of maintaining what he calls a ‘scientific aspect’ to his faith. ‘So if God is still all he claims to be then a little bit of probing, a little bit of questioning, a little bit of pushing the envelope won’t be a problem. He’ll be bigger than any question that I could ask.’ Dean speaks of the importance of having a group of people to journey, learn and discover with, and normalise the process of asking questions. It is

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98 Interview data comes with permission from ‘Dean’, interviewed by author, Melbourne, VIC, November 2008.
important for Dean that his ‘probing’ is done in the context of community, and identifies someone alongside to encourage questions as helpful.

Dean has some beliefs he feels that he has questioned enough and does not need to ‘probe’ anymore—the notion of a loving God, and ‘some sort of judgment’ in the afterlife. That does not mean that he has stopped questioning: those points merely define the parameters of the world in which Dean explores his faith.

Dean rejected the allegory as a way of describing the tensions in faith and theological exploration. He felt that the ocean-type metaphor inferred too much of a preference for one type of theology at the expense of another. Instead, he proposed and developed an alternate allegory of a city with many suburbs. ‘Faith’ was the city at large, while suburbs represented different theologies in that city. He expressed that good theological process is active when there is movement and exploration between different suburbs. ‘A studying of theology would be more like a bus tour with a guide to see different regions of this understanding.’

E) Janet

Janet is a thirty-something married mum with a humanities degree.99 She had no religious upbringing due to attitudes in her family: ‘My mum was quite anti-religious. Not an unspiritual person, but very strongly against religion.’ Janet’s mum was equally a woman who read a lot and encouraged Janet to read. Says Janet, ‘there’s a whole realm of alternative literature that I read as I was growing up because I was instilled to deepen my understanding of the universe and how it all fit together.’ Janet was brought up to think and grapple with ideas. Her ‘coming to faith’ experience was thus what she called ‘quite late,’ stating ‘I wasn’t raised in a church, I wasn’t raised by a Christian family and for me these experiences of discovering God were powerful ones and it was one that was really the antithesis of an intellectual process.’

For Janet, faith was something that happened counter-intuitively to her upbringing, as it was experientially and emotionally based. Yet Janet never lost the ability to critique the experiential faith that she was discovering. Through her husband, Janet felt invited to

99 Interview data comes with permission from ‘Janet’, interviewed by author, Melbourne, VIC, November 2008.
question and probe around the edges of her faith without being forced to accept another’s conclusions.

Unlike so many Christians before him, he gave me an invitation to consider things, rather than supplying an answer that was all neatly tied up with a bow… you know he’d ask questions and he would be happy to share his views but he wasn’t doing it because this was the only view.

Thus while she encountered God in the midst of a powerful series of both exhilarating and traumatic non-intellectual experiences, Janet has always felt free to intellectually question in her faith and is not afraid to challenge the existence of popularly accepted notions such as ‘the devil’ or ‘hell’. She believes her professional and academic training has strengthened this capacity within her, allowing her to continue to question, confront and explore. She identifies ‘theology’ and ‘religions’ as the doctrinal aspects of a religion, distinguished as something different to the lived experience of faith. Janet correspondingly feels that she can query her religion without undermining her faith.

When asked about the allegory, Janet said she most identified with the fourth image of the ocean depths, although was attracted by the notion of the shallows as a place of questioning and playing with ideas. One thing that Janet did feel was missing in the picture was people who do not yet have a faith experience and ‘haven’t even got to the beach yet. They haven’t figured out there is a beach…it’s the people who don’t fit into any of these categories because they haven’t yet formed a relationship with God.’ Janet suggested that there was perhaps more than one beach—different approaches towards the same ultimate truth, thus inferring that people on all beaches perhaps needed to learn to strike out from their respective shores a little more.

F) Gayle

Gayle is a woman in her late thirties and is pregnant with her second child.\(^{100}\) She is an analyst and by nature feels compelled to ask questions. She has grown up in church contexts, but always felt like she asks questions that make trouble. It is this propensity towards asking questions that makes Gayle feel like she is in the fourth picture of the allegory. This is where Gayle feels she has always naturally fitted. She does not believe a journey took place to get her there. Although she views the beach part of the allegory as a ‘simple faith’, Gayle

\(^{100}\) Interview data comes with permission from ‘Gayle’, interviewed by author, Melbourne, VIC, March 2009.
believes there are good things in such a faith that she may be missing out on because of her natural predilection towards the deeper waters of questioning.

Gayle finds repetitive teaching boring, and thus looks to questions as a way of exploring new angles and helping faith remain interesting. Citing examples of various groups in which she has asked questions of the traditional reading of a biblical text, Gayle speaks of a high point in her life when she was part of a home group of people who were ‘capable’ of questioning and engaging with ideas.

Having endured health struggles and having friends who have suffered through major illness, Gayle has an impatience for people who throw about simple or easy answers that do not offer a substantial engagement with the questions and affairs of daily life.

I mean it is all nice words, but what does it really mean in practice? What does it mean really when you’re sleep deprived and have got a toddler running around and all that kind of stuff. Another thing I get frustrated with in church is the nice platitudes “Just give it all to God”…but what does that mean? What does that mean practically, emotionally, what does that mean about what I think about a situation, what does that mean about how I react in a situation, what does that mean when the whole house is in chaos?

Gayle sees theology as the ‘philosophy of Christian faith,’ connected with how we interpret and understand our faith identities. She believes that people avoid formal theological study because it ‘intellectualises’ faith. While such study brings life to those who like to question and critique, it threatens those who thrive in ‘the warm and fuzzy stuff.’

II. Limitations

The six interviewees above were deliberately selected from a middle class evangelical church. They are not a representative sample of the church, but they do serve as representatives of non-academic voices who form our discussion about theology. While there is a split in male/female subjects with no particular intellectual, theological or spiritual bias required, limitations appear in the fact that my interviews required good conversational English speakers. In using an allegorical narrative as the basis of my interviews, I required people who could grasp the allegories contained within a written story with some clarity, before proceeding to offer their interpretation of it. Four of my six interviewees were university educated. In this selection, we are likely limited to people in a particular faith demographic, even though their individual journeys each have something unique to share in
us. In Fowler’s terms, we encounter those from Synthetic-Conventional faith through to those with a Conjunctive faith. We have excluded younger people and thus the likelihood of Primal and Intuitive-Projective faith. We also perhaps miss the perspective of those who may be more comfortable beyond the immediate community of the church, on the journey towards a Universalising faith.  

However, it is most important to recognise that tertiary and non-tertiary educated participants alike offered valuable engagement in our discussion on Making Theology Accessible. Every participant gave important insights into the issues surrounding theology: perceptions, problems, and solutions. So having outlined the journeys of the interview participants, we now turn to the observations and thoughts that they contributed.

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101 Fowler. *Becoming Adult*, 63-68.
Chapter 4: Exploring Theology Together

I. Perspectives from the Church: What is Theology?

In Chapter 2 I grappled with definitions of theology as proffered by professional theologians. As I investigated the term ‘faith seeking understanding,’ good theological process emerged as a combination of belief, discovery, questioning and life journey. It was therefore interesting to discuss what the interviewees perceived theology to be.

Melissa identified theology as ‘learning the Bible in way, way, way more depth than what we do at church, and learning about how to interpret it and understand it in different ways.’ To Melissa, theology was about knowledge and depth of learning. Likewise for Steve: ‘it’s just more of a head knowledge, and how God has interacted with us I guess and who God is.’ The same attitude can be glimpsed in Pete’s initial response, although he then broadens his definition. Pete’s immediate thought was of ‘scholarly books and things,’ but he comes to recognise that ‘it could be just learning any new thing about God or seeking him in a variety of ways.’

There seemed to be a general agreement among participants that theology was an academic or scholarly pursuit related to knowledge. Janet maintained that theology was ‘formal study… probably more focused on religion and the study of the Bible.’ She saw theology as attached to knowledge of the religious tradition, something distinct from faith. Janet says that ‘questions about what’s in the Bible and what the Ten Commandments said aren’t questions about somebody’s faith, they’re questions about religion and to me theology is a deeper study of religion.’ Faith is something else for Janet as she refers to the experiential and emotional aspects of her conversion experience: ‘in a sense I’ve actively resisted formally studying it (theology) because of how God approached me and it was suspending all of that intellectual interest and knowledge and critical thinking.’ However, Janet recognises a communicative value in theology, stating ‘I suppose the goal is to understand the connection between religion and faith so that you can share it with others.’
Dean had a more integrated notion of theology and faith interacting together, stating that ‘my faith and my beliefs and my ideas are all this kind of mass,’ and resisting the idea of distinct definitions of the terms. He did note that ‘the faith end of things is more where I have to trust things are true, the theology knowledge bit is things I kind of know are true.’ However, this did not mean for him that theology was simply knowledge: ‘not theology so much in terms of ‘what one studies in a bachelor of’, but more like a shorthand for a package of beliefs or understandings about God and the world and those sort of things.’

Resisting the proposed allegory as identified in the previous chapter, Dean suggested an alternative image of faith as a city, with received theologies as particular suburbs within the city. Dean acknowledges that people hold a range of views, without prioritising a particular type of theology over another. Gayle likewise sees theology as a range of philosophies and interpretations of Christianity:

Isn’t theology just how we understand it all? It’s the study of God—literally ‘ology theo’—so I suppose it’s the philosophy of Christian faith, and how we interpret it all and understand it, and that could be anything, you know its different for different people… different ways of interpreting what is the ultimate truth.

Dean was the only interviewee to outline a description of theology as a process, describing it in his allegory as ‘like a bus tour with a guide to see different regions of this understanding.’ For Dean, theology as a process best happened when people had a chance to visit and view a range of theological suburbs in order to gain a balanced theology. If a common ground could be found between the ocean allegory and Dean’s, it would be of the importance of movement. Staying in the place you came to faith is not a helpful one. We need to explore and learn.

II. The Seashore

My faith is like a seashore, like standing on a beach.

It’s a good, safe place to be. I love the experience of being part of a community where so many others see what I can see and feel what I can see and feel. We share an experience of God, and face the challenges of life together. Faith on the beach means security – something I can be sure about. With the others on the beach, I learn how to avoid dangerous places and activities. Like using sunscreen on a beach, others help me protect myself so I don’t get burned. Lifesavers are there to keep me accountable, helping me to not get swept away by the dangerous ocean. It is good to have flags and some boundaries! I know that if I swim between the flags, I’ll always have someone there looking out for me. Faith is like the seashore, standing on the beach, and if I do my bit to follow the guidelines and the signs then my faith will remain strong, and I can be secure in where I am.102

102 Interview Allegory, Part 1. See Appendix II.
The above section is drawn directly from the preparatory material from the interviews, and is one description of what a beginning faith in my church might look like. It was a representation of some of the emphases I experienced in my upbringing, born of encounters with Sunday school teachers, youth leaders or media that accentuated ‘correct’ belief and practice. I encountered people who taught with passion and conviction what good evangelism was, showed videos on creation science, would remind teenage boys to seek purity, avoid pornography and highlighted the importance of believing in God and being sorry for sins to avoid the torments of hell. There was a general emphasis on good behaviour and belief for our physical and spiritual health. They were not negative messages in themselves, but they collectively imparted a message that ‘healthy’ faith was focused around correct behaviour.

The seashore's purpose in this allegory was to generate a sense of the place where many of us are nurtured and grown in our churches. In that place, we have the choice to stay safely within the boundaries that are created for us and our community, or to explore questions beyond the spiritual paradigms we are given. It is a place full of people, as the most accessible and easiest to understand type of theology available. Guidelines are clear, ambiguity is absent.

None of the participants particularly identified with the beach as their location, and I recognise that this part of the allegory may have come across as too negative or limited for any participant to want to identify with it more fully. However, all participants had some interesting observations to make about the seashore. It elicited a number of comments.

Melissa thought that the seashore was a place where people who didn’t have questions about faith would feel comfortable. People who did not do well with ambiguity would feel safest on the shore, or in the shallows. Conversely, she implies that questions are the things that draw people out into the theological deep.

If I didn’t have questions then I would be happy to splash around or be safe on the sand. You know, no doubts or everything that I told was the truth... I would just have my faith and have God and have people around me who believe the same thing and it would be safe and secure.

Likewise, Steve’s propensity towards questioning led him to disassociate from the seashore. ‘I like to question everything, even in the more fundamental things of our faith....So I don’t
identify myself as the seashore.’ Steve does however acknowledge a place in his early upbringing that resonates with the allegorical presentation of the seashore above.

I always believed as a child going to Sunday school you just hear what it is and you believe it, with a lot of friends who believed it. And a lot of positive experiences come along with Sunday school and church and all of that, so it was easy to believe that and easy to be on the beach.

He believes that those on the seashore have a theology, ‘its just that they don’t think about it that much.’ This fits with a notion of received theology, where theology is present, but not exercised or challenged. The reasons for this are clear for Steve: ‘I think if your parents have encouraged you to believe a certain thing for all your life, that’s hard for people to change their viewpoint.’ Steve is in two minds about whether or not questioning one’s belief is a good thing or not, for while he likes to question, he also acknowledges the need for simplicity in faith:

Christ said that those who come with a childlike faith, that’s what the kingdom of heaven is for and I think… I know for me I can get caught up with a lot of these ideas and things that distance me from a relationship with God… like my thoughts about who God is distract me from being—having just faith with God, coming with a childlike faith. So that can be difficult as well.

Gayle likewise had conflict about the wrestle between intellect and simplicity, feeling like the shore was too easy and too simple but, not having ever felt like she was on the shore, wondering if she was missing out on something by not identifying with it:

The shore, the way it is written here is safe... kindergarten kind of stuff. Yeah I can do some things at university but I’m missing some of the kindergarten stuff in a way. And I tend to be very suspicious of some things, some simple faith, but I have to keep telling myself there are actually good things to it, and maybe I should be a bit more like that. But unless its complex I don’t trust it, in a way.

A compromise between questions and simplicity for Steve is found in the quality of people leading those on the beach: ‘As long as they’re being led by good people, there’s nothing wrong with that. They can live with God quite well, so that’s good.’ As we see later, ‘good people’ for Steve include pastors and teachers who grappled with theology as professionals, but are open and honest about the wrestles that they have in coming to their theological conclusions.

Pete felt a resonance with the aspect of the seashore that described community, ‘where others can see and experience what I do. I love that about Christianity being part of that community.’ However, Pete was not so sure about the notion of safety in that community
setting. ‘I don’t think my faith is always safe. I think there is an element of danger or excitement involved.’ There was a sense where Pete wanted his faith to take him to adventurous places, both spiritually and physically, and did not feel like the seashore encouraged that. Dean had the same notion, which led him to seek out an alternative allegory.

What I read into the first one… is that you haven’t gone particularly far, you haven’t explored particularly far and you’re here because it’s safe. So kind of a one-off or fairly small exploration of faith I guess is what I understood from the seashore.

In Dean’s alternate model, the equivalent to staying on the beach was to hold to the same theological suburb your whole life, being discouraged from ever exploring anywhere else, or only travelling where church leaders command, all marks of received theology.

There are some churches, some church leaders where departure from a particular, reasonably defined set of doctrines doesn’t seem to be particularly encouraged. That deviation from a fairly rigid set of doctrines is something that is… it’s a lack of faith if not outright ‘stepping off the one true path’ kind of deal. I think there are also certain churches where I think the role of the church leadership is as the only travellers or at least the… only people who are allowed to drive the bus. They choose where the bus goes and everyone just sits in the bus and just follows them I think—on whatever route—whether its long and meandering or only through particular suburbs. There are certainly some churches where only certain people can drive the bus and it only has a very set route. People are not encouraged to get off.

Dean recognised some significant dangers to this kind of model, noticing that if ‘the bus driver’ (ie, pastor or controller of theology) has an accident, the people are left lost, injured and without leadership. This evokes memory of cases in churches where sexual morality is stressed by the leaders, only for the church to fall in disarray when the leaders are found to have been indulging in the actions they have so publicly condemned.

It is interesting to note the importance of leadership that both Pete and Dean emphasised when talking about those with limited inclination or ability to engage in theological querying. Another disadvantage of a limited theology identified by Dean is the limited perspective offered of God and the diversity of expression, much like my experience of the Barrier Reef.

If the bus only goes set routes, then there’s a richness of other places to visit that people have missed out on, other aspects of God that they haven’t seen…so that there’s some very beautiful parts of their own suburb that they will have missed out on. That could enhance their life in the suburb, by knowing that it’s there and visiting it more often, or even moving closer to that bit.

When Janet was asked why she thinks people do not step away from the seashore to explore the wider wonders of the theological world more often, she had a few suggestions. She saw comfort, simplicity, familiarity and a sense of certainty all as reasons why people did not want to grapple with questions within their faith.
They know the rules, they know what’s expected, they have a very comfortable understanding of their faith. Lots of other people share their understanding. They probably attract other members of the congregation who share similar views, have small groups that all agree… and it’s a comfort for people to have their experience of God in a way that they can experience… I think it provides certainty for people. It provides a way of them interacting with God that they feel secure, that they feel they know where the boundaries are… I think people get busy and I think people get lazy and I think people get complacent and I don’t think its enough. I think they need to be just a bit independent exploring what it means.

This laziness was something that Gayle also found problematic with a ‘beach type’ faith. She felt that the image of a beach represented a stream of Christianity where simple answers were given out that offered no grounding in the realities of life. Gayle needs her faith to be ‘more concrete’.

How do I react to my son when I get up in the morning and find out he’s decided to make scrambled eggs for breakfast and they’re all over the kitchen floor. That kind of thing, ‘coz for me, that is critical. If you don’t have that, the platitude means absolutely nothing and is worse than useless, it’s detrimental. ‘Coz some Christians… I don’t know, maybe they’re shore dwellers or whatever… throw those platitudes around too easily, without being able to explain what it really means in a given situation.

However, Gayle does not want to condemn those who do not question like her, ‘that works for them, it wouldn’t work for me, but it works for them and I respect that. To them God is God and God says this so you just do it.’

Janet offered a strong critique of the kind of person she saw as standing on the beach as ‘a description of people who have been in a church all their lives and feel very comfortable in their niche and happy to go where they’re led.’ This critique she attributes to growing up outside the church, and therefore not having the strong relationships that would attach her to more widespread community beliefs.

I wasn’t raised in a church so I haven’t grown up with these concepts. So I come to them as an adult with formal education in philosophy and social theory and I think I possibly come with a more critical-intellectual framework – not critical as in negative but critical as in being able to distinguish components, and I don’t find comfort in being a sheep.

This forms an interesting point of consideration in dialogue with Steve’s comments regarding questioning the faith of his parents. In a community where conformity is expected and hoped for, room to question in a critical framework is hard to find, and would carry huge associations of guilt—much like Dean’s bus driver who discourages his passengers from exploring anywhere other than his own route.
III. The Shallows

*Faith is like the shallows, where the land meets the sea.*

It’s an interesting place, a place for the curious. The water brings a whole lot of new things to discover. Like rock pools filled with fish and seaweed, crabs, and driftwood and anemones, in my faith there is always something new to learn about. Faith in these shallows is a bit more isolated than the beach – I mean, I’m still on the beach, just like everyone else. But I sometimes like to play on a different part of it. I like to get away from the flags and the crowds, and explore things for myself. Sometimes, though, I’m not sure if I should be poking around in these ‘other places’. Some of the things in them seem dangerous or scary. I need to be careful not to get bitten. But I think faith in the shallows can be exciting. There are some really beautiful things to learn about here. But like crabs in real rock pools, I think you’ve got to learn the right way to deal with new ideas, to make sure you don’t get hurt.103

The shallows were that place where I first tentatively began asking questions that were new, exciting, but destabilising for the faith I had grown up with. How do we know Moses wrote the first five books of the Bible? Why do denominations do baptism and communion differently? Did God really command the Israelites to wipe out all those people? Why do women have their heads uncovered in church when Paul commands otherwise? These initial questions about practice and Biblical content were like the beginning of a rolling snowball. Each question displaced a little more snow, gathering momentum and leading to bigger questions. Why do we give the Bible the singular authority that it has when so many people were involved in its creation? Who says we have to have communion at all? What does faith in Jesus actually mean?

Two primary themes emerged in ‘shallows’-related discussion with the interviewees. One was the importance of relationships with diverse others in pushing and challenging one’s beliefs. For tertiary educated scientists Steve and Dean, questions did not generate from a void—they emerged through conversation with friends and colleagues. They began stepping away from the shore (or suburb) of their upbringing when they realised that questions coming from outside of their churches could not be answered simply. Says Dean:

> One of the things that stopped me moving into the Christian suburb somewhere near my parents was a perception from the outside that the Christian worldview was rather narrow, that it was… a little brittle… asking the wrong sort of questions was met with hostility rather than with an interest in exploring

Similarly, for Steve ‘ideas were challenged by people outside the church as to why I can believe that… I guess that’s where that challenged me to think more about what I’m

103 Interview Allegory, Part 2. See Appendix II.
believing, and you can start to progress and go further out to the ocean.’ Both men’s comments resonate with an important aspect of faith seeking understanding: openness to Other. Rather than denying or refuting the questions, the questions became a launching point for further exploration of their truths.

The second theme to emerge from the shallows was the importance of proceeding slowly and with caution. Pete liked the idea of learning new and different things, but related to the statement regarding learning how to deal with potentially dangerous ideas. ‘I guess you can see that in things like Mormonism, Jehovah’s Witnesses and other… where the thinking becomes so skewed it’s heretical.’ In this, there seemed to be agreement about a gentle entry into theological engagement: travelling with caution, so one does not get overwhelmed too quickly. So Melissa states:

On the shore and even in the shallows you might get a taste for theology but its still so new that it doesn’t impact your faith like it doesn’t make you feel out of place or scared… it doesn’t do that but when it hits here—when you actually start thinking theologically—then I think that’s where you get more waves.

Dean emphasises the merit of starting slowly recommending that people try not to grapple with too much too early, highlighting the importance of encountering small differences of opinion first:

Maybe smaller questions definitely when you’re new to faith… when you’re living in a smaller suburb, then small excursions to particularly safe places but—excursions nonetheless—as getting that kind of idea in place might be helpful… that travel isn’t just for theologians or church leaders.

IV. The Breakers

Faith is like the crashing waves that can sweep you off your feet.

It is a scary place to be, and I’m not sure if I can survive it. I thought I was with everyone else, enjoying faith on the safety of the beach - and then events came along that I can’t really explain. Like someone dashed by a wave and caught in a tide or a rip, my faith has carried me away from the safety of the shore, out from between the flags, away from the shallows or the rock pools, and I’m struggling to hang on to any sense of ‘normal’. Things don’t make sense any more – I can’t feel the sand beneath my feet. I’m kicking out, and I’m trying to survive, but faith isn’t safe – I don’t know if I can breathe! Where the sand of the seashore was once a place of safety, now it is a distant memory. I don’t think I can go back… I don’t think I want to go back! But I can’t stay here, caught in the rough and tumble of the ocean. I can’t see a way back, but I can’t see a way forward. Is this where my faith drowns?

104 Interview Allegory, Part 3. See Appendix II.
Dean’s assertion that ‘travel is not just for theologians’ leads us into a discussion of the breakers, a place of struggle with theology and self. It is a place similar to what Janet Hagberg and Robert Guelich, exploring Fowler’s stages of faith in an evangelical context, describe as ‘The Wall’.

The Wall invites us to integrate our spiritual selves with the rest of us. And that involves facing our own and others’ demons. We must face that which we fear the most, and that is why it is so unsavory, and why so many people only enter the Wall under duress. At the Wall we are usually asked to embrace our illnesses and addictions and to relinquish that which we’ve clung to or which we worship. We encounter oceans of unresolved grief covered by anger, bitterness, martyrdom, hurt or fear. The Wall is a place where we confront the desire to deny or disguise the inner self and begin to mentor the truth self—the self God intended for us—and recognize the meaning of our shadow.

The reasons for our aversion to ‘the Wall’ or the Breakers can vary, and part of my questioning in this area was to discover what shape such struggles take. Janet suggested that people refrain from tackling the Breakers out of laziness. Likewise, Steve suggested that people ‘can get tired of thinking of a question or something and they’ll want to just go back to the seashore.’ Melissa alluded to fear, the feeling of being out-of-place or scared. Dean implied some sense of the average Christian being daunted by the task ahead, that sense that theology is only for professional theologians. When asked for his thoughts about getting involved in ‘asking questions,’ tradesman Pete gave the following response:

I guess maybe it’s a personal thing in... well for starters I’ve got like a pretty shocking memory and I’m not... I don’t consider myself academic at all. I have a very short attention span and I don’t have the patience or the mental capacity to sort of read into and remember the deep arguments and the different points. If I maybe even want to read up on stuff I usually forget it after a while, you know what I mean? So I guess personally I definitely see the merit in scholars and people who love that stuff and like their gifts of knowledge and wisdom and stuff to spend their lives thinking and debating and stuff, but I guess more personally I guess I just don’t see that as my area.

It is interesting that Pete’s response to the notion of asking questions led him to refer to his perceived lack of academic ability, even though formal study had not been mentioned at all to this point in his interview. Asking questions for him meant ‘deep arguments and different points’. For Pete, leaving the big questions to the scholars comes down to a sense that ‘questions’ are not his task—they are too overwhelming to tackle. Domination of theology by the words and discipline of professional theologians has left Pete with a sense that questions are too out of reach and best left to the better equipped.

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Another perspective on obstacles to theology was fear. Having named fear as a reason that people might not do theology, Melissa was asked what she thought people were afraid of:

I think it is to do with the unknown. The more you learn the more questions there are about who God is and why he does things. (It is also to do with) different interpretations, and have we believed the wrong thing all along? And changing ideas of what you believe or the way in which you live it out…when you start questioning things like that it can feel like you’re drowning in your faith because there’s just so many things hitting you.

Ambiguity and uncertainty are the great challenges for Melissa. The more that key elements of faith and belief are questioned, the more one has to release safe and secure conceptions about God. This fear of ambiguity was also the obstacle mentioned by Gayle, who latched on to the language of the allegory.

There is a lot more unknowns, and there is a lot more ambiguity in that. In the allegory you are floating on in the ocean with the bottom nowhere near your feet, and so you just get taken along with it. Whereas the shore and the shallows, you know where you are, you know where you stand, to some degree you are in control of where you stand. It’s more ambiguous.

Melissa’s own story leads to an illustrative hypothetical situation. Melissa was emphatic that the central element of her faith lay in the notion that God loves her individually, rather than just as one of the community at large. She was so insistent of this notion that Melissa believed suggestions to the contrary were possibly planted by the Devil, attacking her faith. If God was anything else, Melissa seemed to suggest her faith would erode. She was already struggling with the prospect that God might not love her because she did not have certain spiritual gifts she desired.

It would have be interesting to find out Melissa’s thoughts regarding God’s individual love for people from other contexts, such as children in Africa or a bushfire victim. What would happen for such a faith faced with the prospect of an individual-loving God who allowed immense suffering in others? This is the type of question that initiates a snowball effect in faith, as logically the questioner would be led to reevaluate a theological understanding of God’s love that underpins her entire faith. While many would suggest such questioning is what enables us to build a stronger faith with better understanding, this type of situation demonstrates well the fear that would hold people back from explicitly asking questions. If we do not ask, we are not forced to reevaluate our beliefs.
Like Melissa and Gayle, Janet also identified fear as an obstacle to theology. Rather than a fear of ambiguity however, Janet identified a fear of change. What she described seemed to be change that challenges an adjustment in lifestyle:

You know what if God asks you to go and be a missionary… in Cambodia? You know that’s a huge thing, and I think the people who would be open to God’s call he calls to be extraordinary, and I think people just don’t have the courage to be extraordinary. They like their life the way it is. It’s neat, it’s predictable, they have an income, they have a house, they have a family, they know where their kids are going to school, and its easy. Coming to church, listening into a church, thinking ‘oh, isn’t that great and going home.’ And for some people it stops at the door on Sunday, that’s all they think about it.

According to Janet, many people are not prepared to have their lifestyles change as a result of opening up to God. Instead, theology is ignored, making no impact on their lives or decisions through the week. ‘That’s such a shame,’ she says ‘and I think that’s where Christians get their reputation for behaving poorly.’ Janet also believes that other Christians do earnestly listen to the challenges that come. They ‘take it on board and really try and live it every day of their life… but they’re still stuck on the beach. They’re living that active faith, but they’ve been in comfortable places a while.’ Thus while some are open to change in practice, it is still a comfortable, received theological model open to potential misleading at the hands of an abusive or ignorant leader.

The waves that deter people from theology are twofold, centered on the notions of incompetency and fear. The notion of incompetency is a self-perceived lacking of skills, feeling ill-equipped or ill-gifted to grapple with theology. Incompetency could also relate to Janet’s identification of laziness, people who simply have no motivation to question. Fear centers around threats to a faith paradigm, or threats to a lifestyle. A response to a limited theological process thus needs to take seriously the matter of (a) empowering people with self belief that they are competent as they are, academics or not and (b) making the step into theological waters less scary. To make theology accessible, such solutions must be devised to these ‘theological breakers’.
V. The Deep

Faith is like the ocean, a place of wonder.

It is an incredible world, bigger than I could have imagined. Faith is alive and well out here, drifting in the deep blue sea. Now the rough waves have lessened, there is so much beauty out here; away from the boundaries and lifeguards, the crowds, and the sunscreen. There are so many things to do out here. Like scuba instructors on those holiday cruises, others have shown me how to truly explore the ocean! Not to just look at the vast, scary horizon from the safety of shore, but to dive down, to taste the water, to see new and amazing, and dangerous, and wild things. There are almost no boundaries! I mean, there is some sand, if you dive down deep enough. The same sand that I stood on upon the shore is the same sand that lies on the ocean floor. The same God then remains God now… I just see it all from an amazingly different angle. God on the land is the same as God on the ocean floor. I wonder if that same God can be found on other shores too? I’d like to find out.106

The Deep was the most well-received allegorical image, raising the possibility that I allowed too much of my own preference to come through the story, despite my intention to represent all ‘places’ in the allegory in an equally valid light. Nevertheless, a strength of action research is that interpretation of the allegory was at the mercy of the community I work with, and the interviewees did not hesitate to critique or give a different meaning to my own intentions. For example, I’d intended the deep to represent that place where theology was most active. The calm was finding contentment in ambiguity and not knowing. Yet Melissa, for example, saw the notion of calm as a place where the questions themselves would erode, and ambiguity—a source of fear for her—would disappear.

This ‘out in the ocean area’ it’s a place where I’m able to hear Him (God) easily, I can sense His spirit with me everywhere I go even though I know that it’s there now, I would feel it and I would deep inside of me I would know it’s true. It’s not just a head thing, it’s a full body and heart and soul knowledge of God being ever-present and being able to hear Him and know His call on my life and know how to follow Him. That’s the intimate relationship and that’s ultimately what I’m searching, for is that intimacy.

Pete likewise liked the sense of ‘bigness and beauty’ written in the final part of the allegory, but was drawn to the sense of community in the first, the seashore. His ideal faith location was a combination of these aspects. It is interesting that Pete commented on the community aspect of the seashore, as this was something that Steve was also drawn to in his more thorough critique of the allegory. Steve identified himself in the deep because he thrived on asking questions, but observed that ‘we’re also away from a lot of people, and so I was thinking that with these positives of being free to question and being free to think about we’re away from where a lot of people are at.’ Steve felt that the further you were drawn by

106 Interview Allegory, Part 4. See Appendix II.
questions, the further away from your community you felt, identifying a loneliness that comes with theological endeavour.

Noting that sand in the allegory was God, Steve made another significant observation that I had not initially intended in the allegory. He felt that the deeper you went into the waters, the further away from an immediate sense of God you felt:

If water was the theology then you’re a long way to the sand. If you have someone with, say, like a childlike faith where they’re on the sand and on the seashore, you know, there’s not much distance between them and God. They’ve got this simple faith and they are just able to believe God but when you’ve got someone who’s very concerned about theology there’s often a big gap between actually getting to God and this whole mass of water in between. So I thought although its positive, I thought there’s also some negatives.

Steve’s engagement led him to ask where Jesus would be in the allegory.

I’m not sure if I’d put him out in the ocean, or if he’d be out in the ocean. I thought that he would be more where the people are… so, well he would be a good swimmer and he could go back to the shore.

His observation was most profound, touching on the central challenge and purpose of this thesis. Where should someone with a good theological approach be orienting themselves? Do they rest content, knowing that they have reached their promised land? Or are they then called back to the shore to serve as guides? If so, how does one grapple with the types of honest challenges Steve identifies?

You come across someone who is keen to talk about (theology). It’s great because you can throw out your ideas and start challenging what you believe, and you gravitate towards these people because there are a lot of other people who wouldn’t want to go there, and it’s hard to… its sort of a little bit lonely out there in the deep ocean.

And elsewhere:

It is a place of wonder, but its not necessarily all good. It’s good to challenge and I’m happy to challenge where I’m at and I love asking the fundamental questions and not rock my faith, but… it’s a little bit lonely out there - there are few other people that want to do that, and if you are out there, often you are with people who are happy with their faith, and you’re not where a lot of people are… you’re not where the people are. All this stuff in theology, in the end of the day... so much of it doesn’t change how we live our life, and if we get caught too much in thinking about God I think we can forget to live with him, which has been my experience... It’s not so great to get so caught up in it. As I said, it’s the deep, it’s a long way to the sand, a long way to where God is.

In conclusion to these observations, Steve mentions that he wants to be out in the freedom of the deep, but does not want to be so ‘out there’ that he feels isolated or stuck there. ‘I have to temper that with the other things I need to be working on.’ Interestingly, although he read the
final picture in a manner much more similar to Melissa, Pete made a comparable observation to Steve. Both Pete and Steve resist the notion of letting questions become so central that they lose the joy of faith, previously identified as a danger of ‘thin’ theologies.

I guess if you get caught up in the debates or different theologies or doctrines too much I think it can get unhealthy, but if you’re just sort of sitting back (it) doesn’t matter really much as long as we all follow the same God we love Jesus and live like him, its alive and well and things are good.

Janet was another one for whom the ocean represented a sense of calm that God is in control, whatever other doubts or thoughts one might have. Contrary to Melissa, however, Janet did not see that sense of God’s control as an absence of questions. Rather, she was comfortable with a faith-based abandonment to the will of God, while theological questioning was an interesting sideshow.

To me those questions are about religion, and it doesn’t matter if I never resolve them. It’s interesting, and the debate is always fun. And I’ve decided theological study I think would be really interesting, and would be guaranteed to deepen my relationship with God through deeper understanding of those issues, but I don’t think it would fundamentally change it.

Gayle clearly located herself within the deep, ‘just because I’m that kind of person’ who, like Dean, Steve and Janet operates quite critically. She acknowledges that the deep is ‘more ambiguous’. But Gayle feels she can cope with ambiguity out of a belief that God is still there in the more challenging moments of her faith journey.

I find that okay though because I think that… I like the challenge, I like the mysteriousness, and I think I’ve been blessed with this absolute certainty, deep down right to my core that God is in control and he knows what he’s doing. I’ve never ever doubted that. Sure, there’s circumstances and you don’t know how they’re gonna come out, and you’re fearful of how much it’ll hurt along the way… but there’s that deep down certainty that God knows better than I do.

This does not mean there are no questions. Gayle mentioned her love of asking tricky questions in small groups. But she approaches these questions with an attitude captured in a quote she remembers from a film.

‗Just be comfortable with not knowing, or just be comfortable with the fact this makes you uncomfortable‘. And that’s okay… with some of these questions it’s well I don’t know, I’m happy to admit that I don’t know. I want to research it and find out but in the mean time I’m happy that I don’t know…

Across the interviews was a contentedness with a God who is in control of all things. Many of the interviewees were happy in an ambiguity of knowledge and a freedom in questioning described by the final picture of the allegory. But like Steve’s critique of the deep, this notion
of comfort carried with it questions about orientation and purpose. When are questions good
and healthy, and when do they begin to lead you away from your faith? In the words of
Melissa: ‘Do I remain faithful to what I’ve been taught or do I remain faithful to God—and
where is the line between the two?’ Pete likewise articulated the struggle of many people
daunted by theology.

Some of the big questions can be hard. It does my head in sometimes like why scripture is open
to various interpretations and if it is God’s revelation to us and stuff, why is it so open to
different ideas? I guess I struggle because I really struggle in forming opinions in theology and
sort of what side of the fence I’m on in some things ‘coz I can just see the valid arguments each
way and so I can’t choose or decide which I think is right.

A scripture ‘open to various interpretations’ is a challenge for people who want certainty.
Pete despairs that ‘there is no absolutes... for every single different opinion there is evidence
and arguments and stuff for both sides from smart, well-read, respected people and even
normal people so it’s hard.’ Knowing which opinions are correct and how to balance faith
with a lack of certainty is difficult and painful for those not used to critical thinking. This was
an issue especially for Dean, who witnessed the loss of a friend’s faith when she questioned
without supports in place.

Too many things that she’d held onto were suddenly in question and for her the whole...her
whole faith very rapidly collapsed in on itself. A whole heap of things that had been
foundations were suddenly not looking quite as solid as they had been, and so the combination
of so many foundations looking a bit cracked in the end meant that the whole thing for her
collapsed.

VI. Issues with Theology: Collective Insight from the Interviews

Using the collective viewpoints of the interviewees, some general conclusions about a range
of ‘push and pull’ factors may be drawn. Firstly are the ‘pull’ factors that draw people away
from wanting to engage with theology. Theology is perceived to rely on knowledge as a
complex process, suited to people with the time and ability for study, and equipped with the
capability to understand difficult language and concepts. This makes it difficult for people to
access or attempt for a number of reasons. Hesitancy to engage with theology may extend
from a sense of incompetency (‘I am not mentally capable of doing theology’),
tiredness/laziness (‘doing theology requires more energy or time than I have’) or fear (‘I am
scared of the potential changes to my faith paradigm and/or lifestyle that will occur if I think
about this more’). There is an attraction towards received theology of the shore because of its
simplicity.
An introduction towards working theology would therefore address these fears by becoming clear and understandable. It will not necessarily depend on formalised study for its transmission, as working theology is not about content as such. Instead, working theology will normalise the processes of questioning and exploring faith in clear, everyday language, as something that may be learned and practiced as part of everyday life.

A second significant area of observation from the interviews notes the ‘pull factors’ related to community. People may be drawn towards the shore because of its community, and the relationships that are formed, found and maintained through the bond of common belief. While the deep is attractive to some because it is a faith that has no fear of questions, it comes with a sense of isolation from one’s home community, a feeling of distance from God, a loss of certainty and orientation, and a lack of surety regarding where to ground one’s faith decisions. A transition to working theology will thus ensure that people can engage with questions as a community. Working theology cannot be a journey of isolation, and requires that significant attention goes to pastoral care of people as they engage with its questions. A transition to working theology also takes into account the sometimes fragile nature of people’s faith, and considers pastoral care as an integral part of the education process.

A third area of insight from the interviews identifies the push factors that usher people away from the shore. The shore is recognised as potentially dangerous when a teacher or preacher keeps his or her congregation to a particular way of thinking, without exposing them to other voices. People will also naturally begin to move away from the shore when they encounter other voices. These voices may cast new light on previously unquestioned practices, and find them wanting. The dangers of the shore are perceived to be decreased when ‘good people’ are leading those who reside there. An introduction of working theology will thus ensure that church leaders are proficient in its practice, and that church members are exposed to a range of differences in opinion. For theology to become accessible, responses which address such concerns as these commonly identified issues are required. In the final chapter, I explore these conclusions more fully, identifying some possible ways to make theology accessible.
Chapter 5: Conclusion – Responding to the Challenge

A key challenge identified throughout this thesis has been the matter of making working theology recognisable as a life-giving, everyday task done for and by everyday Christians, in everyday language with everyday application. This involves developing a missiology of theology. While there is an established field focusing on a theology of mission, our processes of sharing good theological process in the dress, language and customs of the modern church are wanting.

Post-modern evangelical mission seeks to make an impact within the parameters of a given culture. It borrows from, acknowledges and listens to the value-laden expressions and cultural norms of the community in which it wishes to take root, without compromising on its own core purposes. For western missionaries in non-western countries, this has meant a change in practice from the late twentieth century. Moving away from a paradigm of cultural imperialism where western dress, language, tradition and culture were considered synonymous with Christianity, missionaries now adapt more comfortably to clothing, language, customs and even rituals of the communities in which they serve, recognising that embracing diversity in practice does not necessarily mean compromising the message of Christ.

The academic community should endeavour to follow suit; to speak, dress and practice good theological process in languages, customs and rituals that have significance for the day-to-day faith of so many people in the church. Yet while doing so, it must be clear on those things that cannot be compromised for good theological process: an active questioning of beliefs grounded in the consciousness of God’s people. With these core demands in mind, we may consider the question of medium: by what means is such a process to be conveyed? Looking for a ‘grassroots theology without settling for the lowest common denominator,’ Banks establishes some useful criteria.
It is important that it be ‘user-friendly.’ Not a theology ‘made-simple’, a ‘discount’ theology such as we so often find on the shelves of Christian bookstores, but a theology that is accessible to the thinking believer. While it will need to draw from the deepest theological and other academic wells, it should employ imaginative and meditative means to convey its message.\footnote{Robert Banks, ‘Theology’, 76.}

Theology demands guidance from the academic world to ensure its content is not simplified, but the manner of academic contribution should be balanced with consideration for the needs, abilities and popular imagination of those it is to serve. It is about balance between conscience and instinct, thought and practice. Recalling Rees’ quote that people do theology differently in words, thoughts, deeds and emotion, we are reminded that the conversation about educating the church at large in good theology is more than a conversation about sharing big concepts simply.\footnote{Frank Rees, ‘Enabling Congregations’, 7.} It is also about living and sharing big concepts with those who may not be able to conceptualise. It is an important reminder, and one that Stanley Hauerwas articulates well when he interrupts an essay on religious education with a comment regarding the place of mentally handicapped people within the church. The quote is lengthy, but highly significant:

While I have nothing against the study of Scripture and theology, I think our emphasis in that respect has tended to make us forget that the way we learn the story is by learning gestures as simple as how to kneel. More troubling, such an emphasis excludes in a decisive manner a whole group of people from participation in God’s Kingdom, for what does one do with the mentally handicapped?... I am not suggesting that they represent some bottom line or minimum criterion which must be met for religious education. On the contrary, I am suggesting that they offer a clue about the centre of the task of Christian education and why it is that the church as such is Christian education. If faithfulness is our task, if it is through faithfulness that we rightly learn to hear, tell and embody the story, then the mentally handicapped are a crucial and ever-present reminder that such is the case.\footnote{Stanley Hauerwas, ‘The Gesture of a Truthful Story’ in Stanley Hauerwas, \textit{Christian Existence Today: Essays on Church, World, and Living in Between} (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1988), 108-109.}

Hauerwas makes the point that theological education is not just about lessons, classes or study guides. Rather the church by its very essence is responsible for drawing its participants into good theological practice in all its forms. We cannot underestimate the value that liturgies, our manner of welcome, our songs and the arrangement of our furniture have in shaping the theological identities of those who turn up week after week. As Hauerwas states:

\begin{quote}
I would contend that everything the church is and does is “religious education.” Put more strongly, the church does not “do” religious education at all. Rather, the church is a form of education that is religious.\footnote{Hauerwas, ‘Gesture of a Truthful Story’, 101.}
\end{quote}

\footnote{Hauerwas, ‘Gesture of a Truthful Story’, 101.}
There will always be people incapable of grappling with the questions implied by theology. Allegorically speaking, some people are physically unable to swim while others have an unassailable fear of water. These non-swimmers must then be carried along by the community around them. This puts all the more importance on leaders of faith communities as those who take responsibility for carrying more vulnerable church members. Much comes back to those who teach and lead congregations, one of the key factors identified by Steve as necessary for making theology accessible.

I. Transparent Leadership, Humble Teaching

In the previous chapter, Steve posited that it was reasonable to be on the beach as long as there were ‘good people’ leading there. Dean identified with caution leaders who limited congregations to particular doctrines and did not help them with a broader exploration of faith. It is with a similar sentiment that leaders of religion are so harshly cautioned in the New Testament. Aside from Jesus’ various proclamations of woe to Pharisees, James 3:1-2b says that ‘not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. For all of us make many mistakes.’

According to Steve, the attitude of overconfident church leaders has had a major impact on the theological development of congregations when it comes to asking questions of their faith. People find themselves guided towards the rigorous self-belief of fundamentalism.

I think where we’ve got problems is when you have a narrow theology and someone’s leading and preaching, you can just ingrain a poor theology, theology without integrity into a congregation of people and that’s where you can have just fundamentalism. And really that’s where I think a lot of danger associated with not going out into the ocean is. So I think it is important for those in leadership to be able to tackle theology and to question and to approach their thoughts with humility and to encourage others to question.

Preachers are those who most regularly offer spiritual guidance in a popularly accessible format. Janet, Steve and Gayle all identified sermons as central to their learning and choice of church. Yet so central is the sermon in the life of believers at large, that Steve was quite concerned that people’s absolute belief in the truthfulness of a Sunday sermon was limiting their opportunities to think, question and grow for themselves in their relationship with God. He felt it would be healthier if people could recognise the limits of their knowledge. However, he thought that could only take place if leaders acknowledged their own limitations.
How do we encourage people to know that they’re wrong? How do we encourage people? I think maybe as leaders, when preaching is involved—to come at your ideas about God and come at preaching or anything with a lot of humility. And you hear a fundamentalist preacher or something will get up and say ‘this is how it is, this is how it is’ and I don’t think it’s helpful. In fact I think that encourages a lot of people to just accept and not question because this person in leadership is so confident about what they know that it’s not even popular to challenge or anything. Whereas someone who comes with humility and questions rather than tells... would keep on trying to question God, question who God is. I think if we come with humility in that regard—and as leaders we approach theological topics, and just God with humility, and we ‘question’ rather than ‘know’ what he is—then it would encourage other people to do the same.

A significant responsibility rests on those in teaching and leadership positions to keep learning. There are always newer translations of scripture, emerging issues in contemporary society, and thinkers who cast a whole new perspective on traditionally held beliefs. Groome suggests that a good ‘litmus test’ on the relationship between church and the academy is the degree to which a sermon demonstrates some consideration of various investigations into questions of faith. He observes that ‘only in rare instances does one hear a sermon that reflects the contemporary state of theological consciousness or biblical research for the pastoral context.’

Confidence in theological investigation will emerge in congregations when those with pastoral and teaching responsibilities acknowledge that their initial qualification or ordination is only part of a life-long formation process. Knowledge and wisdom do not arrive with an appointment to ministry, but rather through a humble commitment to hearing the living, dynamic voice of God. This may well mean that a teacher is led to openly retract something they have previously taught as they learn a new viewpoint, or even acknowledge that their ideas require further thinking. A personal illustration emerges from recent experience. At the 2009 Parliament of World Religions I had the privilege of joining twenty young people in meeting with the Dalai Lama, religious leader of Tibetan Buddhism. Evidently a wise and respected individual who is treated with enormous deference by his followers, His Holiness would nevertheless always answer a question immediately with ‘I don’t know.’ He would pause, and only after considering for a moment would he offer a thought that clearly came from his own reasoning. His attitude of careful consideration left room for a partner in conversation to also form their own viewpoint. While respect and station were given him by others, he purportedly only ever claims to be a ‘simple Buddhist monk’, one among many seeking truth.

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Theologies grow, change and move, even for highly qualified and knowledgeable people. Churches will only become comfortable with this notion when it is demonstrated as normative by those who are seen to know and have authority. This involves more ministers revealing the processes that go into writing their sermons and forming their theological viewpoints, demonstrating that a sermon presents ‘one’ viewpoint, but not the only one. As Steve comments, ‘there needs to be insight given to the context, arguments and thought patterns behind their conclusions, in teaching lessons... and the consideration of viewpoints of others.’ Thus Don Browning makes an important claim as he writes: ‘Not all seminary students need become professional ministers, but all ordained ministers also should be practical theological thinkers and actors.’112 This is a problem when, as Farley notes, that ‘absent in present imageries of the ‘good’ minister is the minister-as-teacher. The minister is not expected to actively teach the skills of textual interpretation, the narrative and doctrinal tradition.’113

There is arguably limited use for preachers and leaders who are not open to good theological process themselves. Responsible leadership balances a conversation between circumstance, tradition, scripture, opinion and learning in order to lead congregations in the same processes. As Farley claims:

The church leader then has a special theological responsibility to facilitate (religious) education in the congregation. In addition to being a preacher, liturgist, counsellor, 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.114

This leading role of the pastor as leader and facilitator of theological endeavour is well acknowledged by the interviewees as an important aspect of bridging the gap between the congregation and theological investigation. Janet refers to the sermon being a jumping-off point for further enquiry. Steve recognised the importance of ‘someone teaching, to challenge their theology, to continue to question and be able to encourage those around them to question’ but balances this with ‘Encouragement... to package it (the questions) down in a good way to encourage them.’ Dean also offered an astute observation with reference to his own allegory.

112 Don S. Browning, ‘Practical Theology and Religious Education’ in Mudge and Poling, Formation and Reflection, 96.
113 Farley, Practicing Gospel, 136.
114 Farley, Practicing Gospel, 13.
If other people aren’t properly equipped and trained before they go (theologically) exploring, then they’ll never find a (theological) home, or there’s a serious danger that they won’t return home or that they won’t live anywhere happily ever after. They’ll be wandering for a while. So the role of teachers of theology, the role of church leaders, the role of theologians is to equip people before they travel, write the guidebooks, accompany people on their bus tours or their hiking tours.

If churches are to take seriously their role in discerning the voice of God, they will require that leaders guide them in the task of working theology. Yet who instigates such a requirement? This is an important issue for a denomination such as the Baptist Union of Victoria. Ministers are rightly called and appointed by the community through a process of spiritual discernment. However, self-governing congregations do not always require ordination, accreditation or the ongoing training of ministers. Accordingly, ministers may be appointed over children, youth, worship (music) or small groups without a grounding in how to do theology for themselves, let alone lead those in vulnerable states. This also applies to ministers who believe that they, having been ordained, have little more to learn from the academic world.

Victorian churches are now legally required to have duty-of-care policies in place regarding workplace safety; a required number of employees possessing first aid certificates, or ‘working with children’ checks for those with authority in playgroups and Sunday schools. Yet it is intriguing that the spiritual welfare of the same children may be released to well-meaning people who do not necessarily have the particular skill set to teach or lead in this area ‘safely’. To suggest more stringent measures for church employment would challenge important Baptist tenets of self-government and freedom of interpretation, yet at what point does a duty-of-care in responsibility exercising one’s office supersede idealism?

The starting point for a Baptist church is likely for a community itself to conclude that a given standard is needed for its teaching leaders. Yet the paradigm-shifting educational opportunities that may generate such a standard are unlikely to come from a pastor that a community appoints, pays for and can ultimately dismiss. It is a vicious cycle, and one that will only be unravelled through some kind of intervention from resources external to a congregation. I consider this issue further in Resources below.
II. Companionship on a Journey

Loneliness was identified as a challenge to working theology. The more that interviewees had asked theological questions, the more they felt isolated from the faith community in which they had been brought up. It is thus not coincidental that most interviewees identified some type of companionship as essential for grappling with the challenges of theological struggle. As Melissa stated:

I think definitely someone else to swim with, and I think it would better if they were someone who had been there and they’ve swum back knowing how to get back through the waves but… someone to just journey through it with you and every time you drown can help bring you back up I think is important.

People want to know that they are not alone when their theological paradigms are challenged. For Melissa, one important aid is simply having someone to swim the journey with her, to ensure that whatever questions get asked, she will not drown. On one level, the question raised by Melissa is related to resilience; helping people anchor their faith in ideas that are less susceptible to ‘swamping’. However, the other important element raised here is a justified caution. Query can lead into dangerous and frightening territory. Those who know how to navigate that territory therefore need to help lead others through it safely. When Dean was asked about important preparations for engaging others with theological discovery, he made the following observations:

Some of the more fundamental ones are (sharing the knowledge) that going on the bus tour (of other theological areas) is fine… the bus is well equipped. It’s not going to break down and strand you somewhere. Having an understanding of… maybe understanding that there is a world out there so maybe some slide shows about some of the exotic and the scary or the more dangerous places to visit that they will experience…. So that if they suddenly find themselves in somewhere a little bit scary or exotic, … if people start to feel that they’re getting lost, that it’s okay to say ‘I’m getting lost’ and somehow can ask to be retrieved. Or at least, that getting lost is… ‘okay’ is not quite the word I’m looking for, but if you feel that you’re starting to wander, if you’re starting to get lost, rather than to panic that somehow there are support structures and that there are…. so that’s okay, you’re allowed to be lost for a little while, if that helps.

The notion of a theological tour guide is essential. Someone to brief Christians for entry into ‘uncharted’ waters, to lead them in difficult places; someone who will keep an eye out as they explore the wide open sea, and debrief them about traumatic experiences along the way. No one wants to enter scary places alone, but a great degree of confidence in exploring can be found through the provision of a safety network—a qualified leader and a supportive community. Pete talks about the importance of a ‘safe environment in the small group to sort of explore theology...where people feel comfortable to ask... anything.’ Gayle also
emphasised the importance of a small group of people to journey and talk with, speaking highly of a previous group she was in. Dean himself expresses:

In the expanding of my horizons I’ve been with a group of people who were willing to both encourage me to push the boundaries a bit further but also in terms of either go with me or at least keep in touch with me to see how I was going on my explorations… there was a combination of them also pushing their boundaries at the time between us developing the skills or the equipment to go a little bit further.

However, a clear emphasis was placed by participants on the right type of small group. Gayle was emphatic that they needed to think in the right way, and be open to discussion, and not just accept simplistic answers. Janet had concerns that small groups intended for learning became nothing more than social occasions for likeminded people, and suggested that diversity was important for fruitful learning together.

Lots of groups are very homogenous somehow; they get together with people their own age, their own sex, who have the same views, and to me that’s not a discussion group, that’s a cup of tea. The groups that I really enjoy are the ones where you have a different view, and occasionally they can be very frustrating, but the benefit is huge, because it really encourages all of us to think about how we got to hold those views and whether they follow Jesus’ examples.

Some important conclusions may be drawn here regarding companionship. Firstly, people are willing to journey and explore if they feel there are adequate support relationships in place. If there is an assurance that they will not be left to swim alone when faith becomes scary, they will be more willing to tackle those scary places.

The difference between theology and other academic disciplines is the intimate manner in which it relates to people’s faith. This difference must be taken seriously by whichever institutions teach it. A starting place would be the intentional development of pastoral and peer support programs for students engaging with formal theological study. This might ultimately mean an addition to the standard lecture-tutorial-homework format of theological education, expanding it to include small group debriefing times for students to air faith concerns, struggles, questions and discoveries. Such support programs would give some confidence to prospective students that they were not going to ‘lose their faith’ at college, but explore it in a loving, caring environment committed not only to education, but the development of the person’s whole spiritual being.

Stepping away from the academy and into the church, it is important to highlight that people want to learn with co-travelers. If they are exploring new ideas as a community and
encouraged to offer their own thoughts into a broader discussion, then they are much more likely to embrace discoveries as theirs, both individually and communally. This in part returns to the type of leadership they are given in a church, and what kind of environment is fostered by those who are perceived as ‘knowing’. But it also depends on the resources available for facilitating an environment conducive to doing working theology together. This is a significant issue that I shall discuss as a separate point below.

Thomas Groome’s notion of a ‘Shared Christian Praxis’ offers a helpful model for churches and colleges wanting discussion, journeying, thought and faith to coalesce. He outlines a series of components that lead towards ‘Christian education by shared praxis. They are; 1) present action, 2) critical reflection, 3) dialogue, 4) the Story, and 5) the Vision that arises from the Story’. For the purposes of Making Theology Accessible, Groome’s model allows for the possibility of shared journey and discovery in the following ways. Firstly, we consider what we are doing as Christians, ‘putting on the table’ how we operate and what our faith community is on about. We then consider why we are doing what we do, asking whether our actions are Christian absolutes or whether we may consider alternative ways of being. This brings in the critical component of dialogue, where we ‘tell and listen’ of our concerns, our hopes and our thoughts in a given situation. With dialogue comes the important conversation partner of ‘the Story’, our memory and record of the way God has acted and revealed Godself in the past, through scripture and encounter with God’s people. Drawing these elements together, we then consider the Vision. We imagine and envision how we may act into the future, as a consequence of our reflection and conversation together.

These steps, emanating from Groome’s ‘Shared Praxis’, form a clear and relatively simple process for meeting and discussing together. Yet the work in which they are written is, symptomatically, academically complex. In order for such concepts to become embedded in the popular psyche, academic theologians need to speak into the world of popular literature in a language that everyday Christians will understand.

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III. Resources

Farley writes that ‘Theology may be egalitarian, but at the same time, it has a rigorous, disciplined aspect. There are no shortcuts here.’ Farley’s claim initially sounds harsh and may seem to support a theology of academia, but it sits well with much of what I have argued to this point. I have outlined requirements for good theological process that does have its demands, but I have also identified that the demands are quite simple. They require a believer to commit to learning and growing, but this can happen in a variety of ways. In agreement with the rest of Farley’s phrase, ‘this does not mean that the believer must become a scholar in order to interpret or think.’

Even non-academic learning, however, often means reading books. Next to sermons, available literature has had a key role to play in informing the popular Christian imagination. Gayle named authors as influential in her journey, and Steve generally felt that ‘...various books on theological topics is where I’d get most of my theology.’ Pete found the discovery of commentaries and ‘ways to research opinions’ at his Bible TAFE to be particularly useful for gaining insight.

Yet if we have already raised concerns regarding sermons that do not allow room for questioning, we must also comment on the kinds of theology to emerge from the books and other resources that are currently most accessible for Christians. If available resources do not challenge and provoke one’s thinking, then the choice to remain in received theology cannot be surprising. As Steve states:

You are told this is what God is like… these simple stories…and if later on we don’t start to challenge that then its very easy to just believe what we’ve always believed—which might be good, but it doesn’t progress our theology.

Accessible Christian resources for Melbourne have generally come from one of two major Christian retailers. In the first months of 2010, the ‘top ten’ book positions in these stores were held by a mix of literary genres. A glance at these ‘best selling’ works proved illustrative of the issues associated with many popularly accessible resources.

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116 Farley, Practicing Gospel, 8.
117 Farley, Practicing Gospel, 8.
William Paul Young’s *The Shack*, is a book that has generated much recent discussion, and it held the number one position in both stores. It is a book which asks some questions about suffering and evil, presents aspects of God in a feminine form, and could be described as a form of working theology. In the interviews, Steve drew attention to some other popular resources which also ask questions.

Rob Bell and the Nooma DVDs—I think they’re a really good medium to get people encouraged to develop their theology because they’re really well presented, they’re easy to digest, but it gets people thinking and challenging what they believe. So I think that’s a really great medium to particularly get younger people into thinking about theology and going deeper.

Yet despite the emerging popularity of Nooma-type resources in some circles, *The Shack*’s position at number one on the bestseller shelves proved an anomaly. Next to a handful of novels and biographies, self-help books dominated. On one store’s website of top 10 selling books, self help books included Stephen Kendrick’s *The Love Dare* at number 2, whose blurb includes the phrase ‘It's time to learn the keys to finding true intimacy and developing a dynamic marriage. Take the dare!* It included Gary Chapman’s *Five Love Languages* at number 3, encouraging readers to ‘learn to speak and understand your mate's love language’. Max Lucado’s *Fearless* was at number 8, exhorting readers to ‘envision a day, just one day, where you could trust more and fear less. Can you imagine your life without fear?’

None of these books contain anything particularly malicious, and they might all have been useful reads. However, the intriguing aspect is that these are the key sellers for people seeking out Christian literature in a store that strongly markets itself around its Christian materials. It is the most accessible reading for non-academics wanting Christian resources. Yet a number were not particularly religious, biblically grounded, or orientated around Christ’s life. Rather, they were marketed on upon their usefulness, results, popularity and mass appeal, often anchored on statistics from the American market.
However, at number 10, Emerson Eggerichs’ *Love and Respect* appeared less benign and remarkably bold. Although to help was still its intent, its blurb asserts an ultimate authority to it audience:

Explain marriage the way God intended. In this groundbreaking book, Dr. Emerson Eggerichs introduces the revolutionary message of biblical respect from Ephesians 5:33 (sic) that has revived and energized marriages across America.

A wife has one driving need - to feel loved. When that need is met, she is happy. A husband has one driving need - to feel respected. When that is met he is happy. When either one of these needs isn’t met, things get crazy. Love and Respect reveals why spouses react negatively to each other, and how they can deal with such conflict quickly, easily and biblically.  

The blurb generates appeal to its audience by anchoring the book in a biblical foundation ‘Each of you, however, should love his wife as himself, and a wife should respect her husband.’ Following this statement, the other claims made in the blurb cause some concern. It suggests that solutions to marriage issues revolve around a simplified, single-versed theology promising ‘marriage as God intended.’ Also difficult is its promise to solve conflict ‘quickly, easily and biblically,’ and the belief that ‘happiness’ is the end goal of marriage. All of these claims authoritatively speak to those without critical capacity; appealing to God as the ultimate creator of the text and thus giving the author divine authority. It does nothing to help people think through or wrestle with the issues, but instead offers a ‘quick fix’ consumer solution.

Long time bestseller *The Purpose Driven Life* by Rick Warren was listed at number 7, and has a promise as equally bold to *Love and Respect*. ‘This book will help you understand God's incredible plan for your life. 22 million copies in print’. The actual introduction to the book is even more audacious (italics mine):

This is more than a book; it is a guide to a 40-day spiritual journey that will enable you to discover the answer to life’s most important question: What on earth am I here for? By the end of this journey you will know God’s purpose for your life and will understand the big picture—how all the pieces of your life fit together. Having this perspective will reduce your stress, simplify your decisions, increase your satisfaction, and, most important, prepare you for eternity.

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122 The quoted verse is actually Ephesians 5:32. Ephesians 5:33 as cited in the actual blurb is incorrect.
*The Purpose Driven Life* lays claim to a spiritual authority unmatched even by the claims of the Gospels. While the Gospel authors do their best to lay down the truth about Christ as they have come to understand it, *Life* guarantees a ‘spiritual journey’, an understanding of God’s purpose for one’s life, as well as several side benefits. It makes un-makeable promises, cushioned in references to scripture (up to fifteen versions of it, depending on what verse best suits the author’s interpretation), leading the unquestioning Christian to ‘rest’ their faith in the stress free, simple, satisfying ‘gospel’ it has to offer.

A final, equally confronting blurb on the bestseller list at number 5 was entitled *His Princess #01: Love Letters From Your King* by Sheri Rose Shepherd. Its publisher’s blurb is also included here, demonstrating a disturbing trend in the most popular books:

> This beautiful four-colour book opens the eyes of women to see themselves the way God sees them. Many don't even know that they are daughters of the King - chosen to be His Princess. Somewhere between childhood and adulthood, they trade in their fairy-tale dreams of being cherished for a tarnished identity fashioned by their own insecurities and the mixed-up messages of the media. Now, these tenderly adoring letters written from God's perspective demonstrate that every woman is beautiful just the way she is.125

Any book claiming for itself to speak from God’s perspective lends itself to the category of received theology, and needs to be rigorously examined. At best the book is a well meaning but uneducated attempt at helping Christian women feel loved and self-confident. At worst, it is using God’s name in vain in an attempt at generating an income.

I have intentionally detoured through this top-ten summary because it is crucial to recognise what people are presently accessing when self-motivated into additional Christian education. What we find is overwhelmingly self-development and pop-psychology that has no particular Christian relevance. Much of it is received theology at its most destructive; promising easy answers, appealing to and asserting its own divine authority, guaranteeing that theological solutions can be produced on demand and depriving the reader of the space or need to ‘work out their faith’ for themselves. It is related to an issue that Ian McDonald identifies.

A fast moving society demands quick, if not instant, answers to problems... there is the pulpit text: often treated in isolation and sometimes a virtual pretext for homiletic musings rather than a furthering of biblical understanding.126

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One historical aspect of faith for many communities has been a quest for truth. However, this quest for truth has somehow been twisted into a quest for surety. We hope that we have found ‘the answer’ and may comfortably go about our life knowing that all subsequent answers are just a short trip—or a forty day spiritual journey—away. Melissa identified something of this when asked about aids that might help her ride out the harsher theological waves for the calm of the deep that she hoped for.

Something to do with the core ideas of what you believe. The things that you know are true, regardless of what other things are being washed around, but having something that you hold on to… like a surfboard or something that you’ve got with you that doesn’t leave but helps you get there (beyond the breakers).

People want something to hold on to, and popular materials often appeal to this want. They promise quick and easy faith answers that allow neither time or space for context or concern. Many modern small-group Bible study materials still consist of an age-old format more akin to reading comprehension: read a passage, and then answer leading questions by filling in a provided blank space. Yet McDonald suggests that the Bible itself does not allow for quick or simplistic answers.

Reading is an act of commitment to the text. To encounter the Bible is to allow ourselves to be drawn into the discourse, to be challenged by it and to be changed by it. It is to read it as a contemporary message, as a Word addressed to us. In short, it means to read it in the context of personal and practical concern.¹²⁷

Few popular Bible studies prompt the reader to ask their own questions, present a range of viewpoints for a reader to chose from or simply yet systematically explain the context behind passages, chapters and books of the Bible. Yet the seeming lack of demand for working theological alternatives calls for responses to some significant questions. How might the Bible, Gospel and working theology speak to the concerns of people without ‘selling out’ to the ‘lowest common denominator’ that Farley refers to earlier in this chapter? How can theology meet people in such a way that their expectations and hope for ‘a core’ to believe in are met in a culturally sensitive way, yet continue to lead them in grappling with the Gospel in an ongoing, living conversation? How can we give people assurance on their journey, without promising a singular surety that is not itself Biblical?

We are called to address these issues by offering an alternative family of resources. Such resources must grapple with the same concerns that appeal to the ‘popular’ market. They

must be missiologically clothed in the same type of contemporary production standards that demonstrates validity to a modern consumer society. Yet while the gloss of such materials may seem familiar to an audience more comfortable with received theology, their centre must be radically different, helping normalise the process of questioning and revisiting questions for a new age. Books celebrating martyrs who died for proclaiming their received theologies would be complemented with biographies of faithful Christians who have lived in doubt. Instead of providing ‘the Biblical answer’ to marriage, books could lead people through the numerous struggles in the Bible of those who have survived marriage in a variety of culturally complex circumstances. Instead of promising life’s most important answer to its singularly most important question, books could lead Christians through forty days of testing, leading them in facing the fears and uncertainty that come with questioning and seeking understanding for oneself. Instead of anchoring one’s faith in orthodox statements about Jesus, more resources could be anchored in what Jesus’ himself was about: what he taught, who he met, how he responded to others, how he changed, and how he came to reinterpret and even discard the dearly held teachings of previous generations.

This is not to say that such materials have not and are not being written. However, their significant voice has struggled to be heard alongside their louder ‘received cousins’. This quietened voice of working theology needs to be intentionally amplified. The issue of the type of resources produced thus incorporates consideration as to how such resources are produced, as the requirements of such an endeavor are sizeable. Gerd Theissen published socio-historical commentary on Jesus’ world in novel form through ‘Shadow of a Galilean’. Whitley College’s Ross Langmead has contributed several songs about social justice and other underrepresented concepts in Christian song. Yet overall success in breathing a dynamic movement of working theological materials into the popular imagination will be a collaborative challenge for many, and needs to intentionally support writers and artists in such endeavors.

For working theology to be fully realised in popular Christian culture, a greater number of intentional translators and negotiators are needed; people who are comfortable with working theology, but are also gifted in communication with their contemporary world. This means that theological colleges need to do more than focus on the academic education of people

who want to learn theology. They must also devise programs catering to those who will give those thoughts contemporary, accessible expressions in ways that may appeal to the church at large.

IV. Theological Translators

A significant gap exists for Christian education in this area of creative theological transmission. In terms of content we are well served by the historical disciplines of church history, systematic theology and biblical studies, balanced with practical and pastoral disciplines. Yet there is limited practical focus on equipping people for the output and sharing of ideas through media beyond sermons for the church, or research papers for the academy. If working theology is to be made accessible and if the voice of working theologians is to be amplified into the world of popular, contemporary Christianity, then this is a task that needs addressing proactively and urgently.

To contextualise this task, we return to the framework established earlier in this thesis for identifying good theological process. It was marked by four elements: (i) faith in God (guided through the life and ministry of Jesus, practiced among the community of faith for the world), (ii) coupled with a seeking of healthy questioning and self-critique, (iii) actively striving as a verb, (iv) moving toward a greater understanding of the God in which one has faith. I suggested that a good theological process would help people walk the fine line from a received theology to working theology, resisting the temptation to drift into apologetics or popular theology (theology actively engaged yet without active questioning) and disillusionment (theology that is questioned and rejected without active engagement).

Working theological resources could thus be any type of resource that leads people to these ends: seeking out understanding in a faith community, centered on the mission of Jesus.

The gap we seek to fill must infuse this kind of working theology into study guides and easy-to-read commentaries, perhaps translating ‘working theological lectures’ into a common-use twelve week Bible study series. Working materials could take the form of self-help books in how to do working theology, preparing Christians to explore ‘other suburbs’ safely, or teaching them how to build supportive networks as they ask questions of their traditionally held notions. Working resources could record and present conversations with people from
other traditions, presenting them without negatively prejudging the content of their beliefs, allowing people to see the ‘good’ that may emerge through conversations with Other.

A translation of working theology would include an ongoing generation of songs with contemporary styling for a modern audience. These songs would challenge the extremes of burdened-sinner and feel-good lyrics that have dominated the last two decades of popular Christian ‘worship’, and call Christians back to the foundation of the mission, life, purpose and action of Jesus Christ in the world. Working theology could be expressed through video media creating films to provoke discussion, short courses, liturgy and prayer books, generating accessible resources for every category of popular Christian literature while promoting questions rather than answers, a faith journey rather than a faith event.

Again, none of these ideas are particularly new. They have been done before, and are being done as this thesis is researched and written. However I propose that at an institutional level, both academically and ecclesiastically, we need to intentionally seek out, integrate, commission and engage creative communicators, to voice working theology through relevant media for their own generations and communities. This needs to become part of the very fabric of our institutional identities, embracing a vision of good theological process actively shared with the wider church, by the wider church.

In the same way that received theology leans towards the temptation to rest on the findings or revelation of the past, a key danger for working theologians lies in resting on the achievements of those who have previously made attempts at bridging the gap between academy and church. There is a contentedness that comes with celebrating the creative efforts of a few individuals, a temptation to deny the need for sustained re-engagement with an ever-changing society. Yet working theology will stagnate if it cannot find ways to re-communicate with the people it is intended to serve. The task of translating theology will never be finished. The most theologically astute song written in the most contemporary musical style will eventually become ignored as outdated by future generations, simply because it no longer speaks in the same musical language that they are used to hearing. The reality is that the impact of creative resources will only resonate for a short time before the questions, needs and trends of the community at large move. Deliberate, creative re-imagination is a must.
This is why we must begin imagining theological bodies devoted not only to the education of theology, but to the creative theological output of materials that will share working theology simply and accessibly with the church at large. This is where professional theologians must facilitate and participate, leading in a way that sacrificially serves the people of God from whom it has been borrowed. It could partially begin through allotting time for ‘non-academic’ writing on a scholar-by-scholar basis, or through appointing specialist authors to ‘translate’ academic works into contemporary layperson’s language that summarises concepts, questions and challenges for church groups to work through together. However, such ‘translations’ would also need to be creatively shaped into other kinds of resources. This would require theologically enabled people proficient in music, speaking, imagining, writing, playing and creating to foster a cultural environment for Christians to personally and freely explore their faith with the infinitely creative God of Christ.

It is an intriguing and inspiring possibility to consider. What would theological colleges begin to look like if class rooms adjoined art and music studios? Or in the room next door to ‘Bible 101’ was a subject was devoted to the theological critique of contemporary film? Or a subject was offered on song-writing for churches? Could we imagine the simple value of learning a musical instrument in a theological environment, or the possibilities created by offering a music sub-major in a theological degree? Or for those who do not read and write so naturally to join the choir of such an institution, or participate in practical hospitality classes? Can we imagine the possibility of creative writing diplomas offered at a theological institution, with streams in Bible study writing or novelisation? Could theological institutions create or partner with a publishing arm to publish the creative efforts of their students? Could teaching subjects be offered, equipping students to lead others through the process of creative investigation? Such a notion is bold and daunting, yet I believe some expression of it must be found. The academy is struggling to find a way to speak and the church is finding it hard to listen, so perhaps a new language is required.

V. The Road Ahead

When I have spoken to pastors about the intention of this thesis, I have described it in several different ways: how to make theology accessible, how to make good theology popular (without making popular theology), how to take the fear out of theology, how to help people
ask questions about their faith without losing it. In several cases, I have been met with the
same response: ‘when you find out, can you let me know?’ I have sensed genuine interest and
anticipation of the outcome, yet that interest is permeated with a sense of resignation to the
belief that that no such solution exists.

The sense of resignation corresponds to the enormity of this task. It is not a task to be
achieved through the willpower of one individual in a church, although a gifted individual
with a strong connection to a congregation may open new ideas one step at a time. Rather
than being realised in a few individual churches, however, the task of making theology
accessible requires the concerted action of those with power and motivation to intentionally
act on a faith-wide scale. It is a task that would require considerable effort, planning and
struggle. It would require a commitment to publish not for profit or prestige, but out of
pastoral and spiritual concern for the welfare of the church. The prospect is daunting, and yet
that is the nature of working theology. It calls us to struggle with issues that sometimes feel
too big, to ride out the waves that threaten to submerge our hope and faith for a greater
possibility. There is no single answer book or forty-day process. The simplest part of the
answer is that we must intentionally commit to finding an outcome, and that may not be so
simple at all.

Received theology has the lead in capturing the popular imagination. Conversations with
pastor friends reveal increasing levels of Biblical illiteracy in churches and minimal
engagement with texts. Churches are struggling in numbers. When they are not struggling,
they are growing through the arrival of disenfranchised Christians seeking a more resonant
theological alternative to their previous church. Reliance on the viewpoints and perspectives
of others will only increase until those who have a grasp on working theology focus their
attention to resourcing a healthy culture of Christ-centered Christian curiosity.

This is the task that professional theologians must take on. A working theological culture
must emerge as an everyday, normalised aspect of faith in the church community, shaped by
theology expressed in everyday, recognisable terms for pastors and the communities they
serve. Once a working theological culture becomes part of church life, so will theology
become an accessible, living and breathing part of an individual Christian’s vocabulary—
normative, intuitive and free from associations of books, brains, boredom and fear with which
it is presently held.
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Appendix I: Participant Information and Consent Form for Interview Process

THE MELBOURNE COLLEGE OF DIVINITY
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Making Theology Accessible: Empowering Christians to do their own Theology.

Dear Participant,

My name is Nathan Hunter. I am currently in the process of writing my Master of Theology Thesis, “Making Theology Accessible”, through the Melbourne College of Divinity. In this project, I hope to find the best way to help people do theology for themselves – learning to grapple with hard or tricky questions about God, the Bible and faith, without needing to go to a College to do it! As part of this, I’d like to gather some opinions from those in church congregations on how their views on faith and theology are formed, challenged, and grown.

You’ve received this form because you’ve demonstrated interest, in response to the suggestion of pastors at your church, in becoming involved in this research. As someone involved in a church, journeying through faith of your own, it is my hope that you will provide some helpful insights into what develops faith and theology in those who don’t necessarily consider themselves ‘academic’ theologians. Thank you for your willingness to consider this project, and for taking the time to read through the form below in preparation of your involvement. My contact details, if you would like to discuss anything related to this research are attached.

Before the interviews take place, I will ask you to do some pre-reading of a story (less than two pages) included with this form, before the interview date. At the interview, I will ask a few questions that will have you reflect on the pre-reading, consider how your faith has grown and changed over time, and what has brought about those changes. The interview, which shall be recorded, will take up to an hour.
I will take away the recording, and type the interview into written form. I’d then give you a summary of this interview, to make sure you are represented accurately. You would then, as outlined in the statements below, have a window of time to ask for changes to the written record.

Finally, in the weeks after your initial hour long interview, I’d like to bring you and the interviewees together for a two-hour group follow-up session where we could talk about theology together. I will not be revealing the specific contents of your interview to other participants in this gathering – we will instead talk about some of the general experiences the group shared in the interviews as a whole.

In the interviews, I will particularly be looking at how and why theological change takes place. Your responses will be used as quotes and references to illustrate how some people understand theology and grow in their faith. Your responses will also help me think about what other areas of research I need to consider.

While your responses will form a vital part of this research, so does your privacy and welfare. The interview process should be non-threatening and relatively casual experience, but if you find the interview at all threatening, you can ask me to change my line of questioning, and/or bring the interview to a close. In addition, an external facilitator is available for debriefing after the interview if you need someone to talk to.

The interview process will do its best to keep your identity confidential. This means that after your interview is recorded, the only people who will hear it in its unaltered form are myself and, if needs be, my examiners. As your interview is transcribed (typed by me) into written form, anything that can directly identify you or people you know (such as names and addresses) will be altered, with pseudonyms (made-up names) used instead. Sections of this altered interview may be quoted within my final publication. Both the altered transcripts and the recorded interview will be kept as password-protected computer files while I conduct my research. They will further be stored at the Melbourne College of Divinity for five years before being destroyed.

You may freely withdraw from the research at any time before the interview takes place, and up to four weeks afterwards. After the interview takes place, you will be presented with a summary of the transcript for cross-checking within two weeks of your interview, and can clarify or change anything that is of concern. If these concerns are not met to your satisfaction (i.e., through further changing non-essential details to ensure privacy), you will have four weeks to freely withdraw your participation from the date of your interview.

In sum, the requirements for your participation in this project are;
a) Reading and signing two copies of this three page document
b) Reading the accompanying two page story for discussion.
c) An hour long interview
d) Reading a summary of my transcription of this interview and communicating any changes/clarifications with me.
e) A two hour long follow up session with the other interview participants.

This totals around 6 hours of participation, spread over one month. If you have any further questions that I can answer, please contact me using my details on Page 1 or, for someone external to myself, to MCD Administration, (03) 9853 3177. If you have complaints or queries I have not answered to your satisfaction, you may contact the Liaison Officer, MCD Human Research Ethics Committee: phone (03) 9853 3177, email hrec@mcd.edu.au.

I am looking forward to your involvement in this project! If you consent to the conditions outlined here, please sign on the next page.
I (Participant) have read and understood the information above, and any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction.

I agree to participate in the research project *Making Theology Accessible: Empowering Christians to do their own Theology*, recognising I may withdraw from the data collection part of the study at any time, and may also request that no information arising from my participation is used up to four weeks after the completion of my participation in the project.

I agree that information provided by me or with my permission during the project may be included in a thesis, presented at conferences and published in journals on the condition that neither my name nor any other identifying information is used.

Researcher’s Name: ______________________
Signature: ______________________________ Date: ____/____/____

Participant’s Name: ______________________
Signature: ______________________________ Date: ____/____/____
Appendix II: Allegory used in Interview Process

Faith as an Ocean: A Reflection

*My faith is like a seashore, like standing on a beach.*

It’s a good, safe place to be. I love the experience of being part of a community where so many others see what I can see, feel what I can feel, smell what I can smell. We share an experience of God, and face the challenges of life together. Faith on the beach means security – something I can be sure about. With the others on the beach, I learn how to avoid dangerous places and activities. Like using sunscreen on a beach, others help me protect myself so I don’t get burned. Lifesavers are there to keep me accountable, helping me to not get swept away by the dangerous ocean. It is good to have flags and some boundaries! I know that if I swim between the flags, I’ll always have someone there looking out for me. Faith is like the seashore, standing on the beach, and if I do my bit to follow the guidelines and the signs then my faith will remain strong, and I can be secure in where I am.

*Faith is like the shallows, where the land meets the sea.*

It’s an interesting place, a place for the curious. The water brings a whole lot of new things to discover. Like rock pools filled with fish and seaweed, crabs, and driftwood and anemones, in my faith there is always something new to learn about. Faith in these shallows is a bit more isolated than the beach – I mean, I’m still on the beach, just like everyone else. But I sometimes like to play on a different part of it. I like to get away from the flags and the crowds, and explore things for myself. Sometimes, though, I’m not sure if I should be poking around in these ‘other places’. Some of the things in them seem dangerous or scary. I need to be careful not to get bitten. But I think faith in the shallows can be exciting. There are some really beautiful things to learn about here. But like crabs in real rock pools, I think you’ve got to learn the right way to deal with new ideas, to make sure you don’t get hurt.
Faith is like the crashing waves that can sweep you off your feet.

It is a scary place to be, and I’m not sure if I can survive it. I thought I was with everyone else, enjoying faith on the safety of the beach - and then events came along that I can’t really explain. Like someone dashed by a wave and caught in a tide or a rip, my faith has carried me away from the safety of the shore, out from between the flags, away from the shallows or the rock pools, and I’m struggling to hang on to any sense of ‘normal’. Things don’t make sense any more – I can’t feel the sand beneath my feet. I’m kicking out, and I’m trying to survive, but faith isn’t safe – I don’t know if I can breathe! Where the sand of the seashore was once a place of safety, now it is a distant memory. I don’t think I can go back… I don’t think I want to go back! But I can’t stay here, caught in the rough and tumble of the ocean. I can’t see a way back, but I can’t see a way forward. Is this where my faith drowns?

Faith is like the ocean, a place of wonder.

It is an incredible world, bigger than I could have imagined. Faith is alive and well out here, drifting in the deep blue sea. Now the rough waves have lessened, there is so much beauty out here; away from the boundaries and lifeguards, the crowds, and the sunscreen. There are so many things to do out here. Like scuba instructors on those holiday cruises, others have shown me how to truly explore the ocean! Not to just look at the vast, scary horizon from the safety of shore, but to dive down, to taste the water, to see new and amazing, and dangerous, and wild things. There are almost no boundaries! I mean, there is some sand, if you dive down deep enough. The same sand that I stood on upon the shore is the same sand that lies on the ocean floor. The same God then remains God now… I just see it all from an amazingly different angle. God on the land is the same as God on the ocean floor. I wonder if that same God can be found on other shores too? I’d like to find out.