



THE SALVATION ARMY INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL COUNCIL

TOOLS FOR THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

▶ SEVEN PRACTICAL STEPS



LIVING LIFE GOD'S WAY: TOOLS FOR THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

INTRODUCTION

All those who follow Jesus are, to some extent, theologians.

Many people would not describe themselves in this way, but consider these questions:

- Do you spend time in personal reflection and prayer, thinking through what God wants you to do in your life?
- Do you grapple with different Bible verses when faced with a particular problem?
- Do you discuss issues in your community and wider society with other Christians?

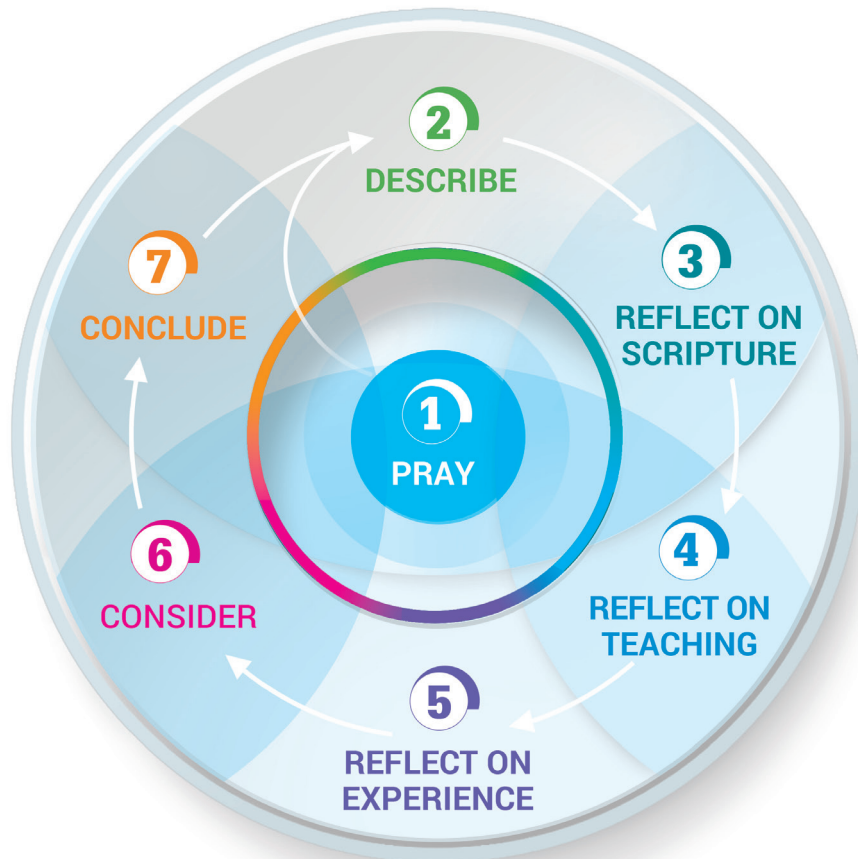
These all evidence the work of a practical theologian.⁷ Theology is not just for the classroom – it takes place in the home, in the street and in Salvation Army corps and centres every day around the world.

This kind of theology is the work of a lifetime for every Christian as we try to understand what God is doing amongst us and to think carefully before we act. The key question is not *whether* we do it, but *how* we can develop and sharpen our own practice of theological reflection. Below are seven practical steps designed to help you – but before you begin, it is important to consider two things:



⁷ In the wider field of theology, 'practical theology' is recognised as a discipline which connects wider academic reflection with everyday life and Christian practice.

- 1 Theological reflection is an ongoing cyclical process, not simply a set of steps to follow. If we were to illustrate it, here's what it might look like:



As you can see, the aim is to go on a journey of discovery. You may find yourself rushing onwards only to realise in time that you need to go back a step or two. Or you may spend some extra time focusing on one aspect in particular. That's okay – life is messy, and so is theology! Even when you feel like you're getting to the end, you might discover that a whole new set of questions may have arisen and you are embarking on a brand new journey. Since Christians are called to follow Jesus throughout their whole lives, it's good to get comfortable with the idea that God is always teaching us something new.

- 2 Theology is always best done in conversation with others. Of course, there's lots you can do on your own, but as we read in Proverbs 27:17:

Iron sharpens iron, and one person sharpens the wits of another.²

As you set out on your journey of theological reflection, think about who would make good travelling companions and encourage them along with you.

²New Revised Standard Version

SEVEN PRACTICAL STEPS

STEP 1 PRAY

Begin with prayer. Whether on your own, with a friend or a group, spend time asking God to give you guidance. Prayer should accompany every step, but make sure to prioritise it.

STEP 2 DESCRIBE

Spend some time describing the situation, the issue or event you would like to reflect on. Identify the most important elements you are keen to explore and write them down. Ask yourself: what is the key question I am seeking to answer? See if you can sum it up clearly and concisely. If you are working in a group, ensure that everyone is in agreement before you move on.

STEP 3 REFLECT ON SCRIPTURE

Explore what the Bible says about what you have described. Take some time to consider verses, stories or themes that connect with the issue. Cross-reference Scripture to see what the Bible says as a whole, being careful not to focus only on verses that support preconceived conclusions you may have. Be as comprehensive as you can and remain open to challenge. Make notes of your findings.

You may like to refer to the International Theological Council document *Tools for Interpreting the Bible*.

STEP 4 REFLECT ON TEACHING

It is unlikely you are the first person to explore this subject. Recall and research what others have written and taught.

Ask yourself:

- What do I know about Salvationist faith and practice that relates to this question?
- Have I read any Christian literature about this, and what did I learn?
- What have Christians said about this in the past – what does our tradition teach us?
- When have I heard teaching about this, and what did I hear?
- Are there particular songs that we sing that connect with the issue?
- What else have I read and heard that informs me about this? Intentionally broaden your sources to explore scientific, technological, arts and other material, asking what you can learn from these sources. Don't be afraid to explore different perspectives – there is a wealth of material to be found online, from podcasts to video lectures.

Sift through the material discerning what is helpful and what is limited. Try to identify general principles and themes that are relevant. Note them down. →

The Salvation Army has a series of International and Territorial Positional Statements on various issues. Likewise, Salvationist perspectives are published regularly through publications such as *The War Cry* and *Salvationist*, whilst *The Handbook of Doctrine* is a guiding document for all Salvationists. See the list of further resources on the final page if you wish to dig deeper.

STEP 5 REFLECT ON EXPERIENCE

Spend time exploring and examining what your own experience tells you about this issue. Use these questions as a prompt:

- Why is this important to me?
- Where have I noticed God in this?
- How have I experienced the values of the gospel being promoted or undermined with this?
- When have I felt hopeful and joyful, unhappy or disappointed in regards to this issue?
- What are others in my family and community saying about it?
- How does my culture, social status or tradition influence my thinking? Does it assist or make it difficult?

If you are in a group, try to allow everyone an opportunity to speak and listen carefully to what each other says.

STEP 6 CONSIDER – IMPLICATIONS AND APPLICATIONS

Draw together the different reflections you have had through steps 2-5 and note where there is agreement. Summarise briefly what conclusions you have come to and whether there are questions that still remain. This is a good time to check out and test your conclusions with others you trust. You may need to return to earlier steps – be as thorough as you can.

Consider the implications of what you have discovered and any action you may need to take. This could include: further research, conversation with spiritual leaders in your corps, space for prayer, or a decision to start or stop doing something.

STEP 7 CONCLUDE – RECOMMENDATIONS TO SELF

- Write down your discoveries
- Find someone to hold you to account for what you have learnt
- End with a prayer of gratitude



DIGGING DEEPER – FURTHER RESOURCES

The Salvation Army International Theological Council Website:

<https://www.salvationarmy.org/doctrine/>

The Handbook of Doctrine:

<https://www.salvationarmy.org/doctrine/handbookdoctrine>

International Positional Statements: www.salvationarmy.org/isjc/ips

Tools for Interpreting the Bible:

<https://www.salvationarmy.org/ihq/news/inf070619>

Faith-Based Facilitation: <https://www.salvationarmy.org/fbf/home>

Pallant, Dean, *To Be Like Jesus! – Christian Ethics for a 21st-Century Salvation Army*, Salvation Books, International Headquarters, London, 2019.

