

Thinking Theologically

April 24, 2022

Series: *Distinct*

Today we begin a new series called *Distinct*.

We'll get into the scriptures later in the message, but before we do I'll need a little extra time to introduce both the series as well as today's topic, which isn't your standard kind of sermon topic— although I hope you'll find it compelling nonetheless. So thanks in advance for your kind indulgence while I take some time to set the stage for what's to come both today and in the weeks ahead.

In the weeks ahead we're going to explore what we refer to as Cornerstone's *distinctives*— that particular mix of values and practices that combine to make Cornerstone— *Cornerstone*.

If you're newer to this church—and praise God, so many newcomers have joined us throughout the course of the pandemic— this series offers you a fantastic opportunity to get some real insights into what makes Cornerstone tick, and how God might be calling you to be a part of it.

For those of you who've been with us for some time now—whether three years or five or ten or twenty five— this series will *reinforce* your sense of what we're about as a church, and hopefully get you thinking and praying about how God might be calling you to engage in the next leg of Cornerstone's journey.

Before I get into the distinctive we'll be looking at today (which I'm really excited about, by the way), let me say a word about why we're doing this series. It's actually a counterpart to a series we did earlier this year called *Start with Why*. In that series, we unpacked different aspects of Cornerstone's DNA— in particular, our Vision, Mission and Bedrock Statements.

If you were with us then, you may recall how we talked about the fact that Cornerstone is in a *liminal* season (along with just about every other church, organization and individual these days). Does anyone remember what liminal means? It means *in-between*.

We continue to find ourselves in an in-between time as a church.

We're no longer where we used to be before the pandemic started, *but* we're not yet where we're going to be once we've fully emerged from it.

In fact, in his most recent leadership podcast, pastor and author Craig Groschel asserts that we are in a *completely unprecedented* season. He says no matter how much experience your organization's leadership team has, they've *never* led through a season like *this* before—

through a global pandemic, and all the uncertainty that goes with it, and all the racial, political and personal tensions it has stirred up, and all the changes it has accelerated.¹

Cornerstone's leadership teams—our Executive Staff Team, our Executive Church Board and Ministry Staff Team—have years and years of combined leadership experience. Heck, even though our Executive Staff Team currently consists of only two rather than the usual three people, Pastor Andrew and I still have about 60 years of combined church leadership experience between us (some 35 years for Andrew and some 25 years for me, because Andrew's OLDER— but for some reason I ended up with all the gray hair). That's a lot of combined leadership experience, right? And yet for all our years of experience, neither of us has *ever* led the church through something like *this* before. We are in unprecedented times, sailing in uncharted waters—and this is true of all other churches and organizations as well. It's not like you can look at another church that has it all figured out and just follow what they're doing, because guess what? They're in the same uncharted waters as well. So the question those in leadership now face every day is, "How do you lead when you aren't quite sure where you're going?"

Because here's the thing— many standard leadership practices don't serve us all that well in a liminal season. Vision-casting and strategic planning for example, aren't nearly as helpful as they usually are, because they're based on assumptions about how the future will unfold. And if these past two years have taught us anything, it's that we're in a period of time when it's exceptionally tricky to make assumptions about the future.

However, one of the most important and helpful things we *can* do during a liminal season is an organizational practice called **tending to purpose**. In an in-between season, it's absolutely vital to tend, to revisit, to focus on— our purpose— our reason for being as a local church.

Which is why tending to our God-given purpose is one of Cornerstone's primary ministry objectives this year. Because staying clear on our purpose will keep us true to the course God intends for us as a church, both now amid the fog of liminal uncertainty, and into the future, when that fog finally lifts.

This *Distinct* series is another intentional effort to tend to our purpose as a church in the midst of this in-between season.

As I said earlier, throughout this series, we'll be looking at Cornerstone's distinctives—the unique mix of values and practices that give us the distinct culture we have as a local church. A few years ago, we articulated the following seven distinctives of Cornerstone, and we're going to unpack them one at a time over the next several Sundays:

¹ <https://www.life.church/leadershippodcast/leading-out-of-crisis-part-1/>

Thinking Theologically

Unity-in-Diversity

God-in-the-Neighbourhood

Biblical Hospitality

Discipleship Pathway

Leadership Development

Team Leadership

You have come to what I'm assuming is the only church in Canada— maybe even the only church in the Western Hemisphere— that is offering on this very day a message on the topic of *thinking theologically*. It's not a super-common message topic, so boy, did you ever LUCK OUT!

As the message unfolds, I'll explain more about what thinking theologically means and why it's such an important Cornerstone distinctive. I would even argue it's the most important, because it's essentially been the gateway to all our other distinctives.

I'll also be sharing with you *two examples* of how the practice of thinking theologically has shaped and is shaping Cornerstone into the church that God has called us to be and become. In the process, we'll be turning to scripture as usual. And at the end of the message, I'll also provide you with a downloadable guide sheet that offers some takeaways and resources to help you grow when it comes to thinking theologically.

But first, let me ask you: **What comes to mind when you hear the word "theology"?**

Let me provide you with some response options. You can choose more than one if you wish. Those in person can respond with a show of hands, and those online can click the buttons in the chat that best represent your point of view.

What comes to mind when you hear the word "theology"? How many would say:

Nothing at all

What is theology, anyway?

Boring

Irrelevant

Interesting

Exciting

Good theology is the stuff of LIFE!

Want to know what my top pick would be among those options? Yeah, the last one: *Good theology is the stuff of LIFE!* I also think it's interesting and exciting. But then again, I'm kind of a theology nerd.

But when many Christians hear the word "theology", they often think of it as the exclusive domain of tweed-jacketed scholars in academic ivory towers.

Many think of theology as boring and dry, far removed from the practical concerns of daily life and ministry.

Many Christians think that theology is unimportant, because all that really matters is that "we just love Jesus and others." That's pretty much exactly what one fellow I met many years ago told me when he heard that I was going to enroll in seminary. He said, "Theology's a waste of time, man. All that matters is that you love God and people."

He was right in saying that all that matters is that you love God and people. When asked what the greatest commandment is,

Jesus replied: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."²

Where the guy was wrong was in saying that theology doesn't matter. Because loving Jesus with all your heart, soul and mind and loving your neighbor as yourself is itself a profoundly theological statement. It's not a statement that assumes that you need to go to Bible school or seminary or get a PhD in theology, but it does assume a life guided by good theology.

Because the fact is, every Christian is a theologian. Everyone in the house say, "I'm a theologian." Everyone online type into the chat, "I'm a theologian." (Some people online right now are like, "Wait, how do you spell theologian?")

To say that every Christian is a theologian is to say that every Christians knows, thinks and speaks about God. That's what the word theology means. In Greek, it's a word (*logos*) about God (*theos*). *Theology*.

And far from being irrelevant, the way we think and speak about God has tremendous implications for the church and its mission, and our personal lives as well.

² Matthew 22:37-40 (NIV)

If what we believe about God is inconsistent with who he reveals himself to be in scripture and in Christ, our very relationship with God will be compromised. Why? Because we won't be relating to God for who he really is!

If what we believe about God's purposes for us and the world is inconsistent with what Bible reveals them to be in Christ, we'll end up living and ministering in ways that are out of alignment with God's actual intentions.

So it's not a question of whether or not we do theology. Theology is inevitable. Rather, it's a question of whether or not we do good, scriptural, Jesus-centred theology.

Now, just before I show you a couple examples of how thinking theologically has shaped and is shaping Cornerstone, let me offer this simplified definition of the practice:

Thinking Theologically

The reflective process whereby we discern how to live our daily lives, do ministry and mission, and engage the culture around us *in a way that is faithful to scripture.*

That's a bit of a mouthful, perhaps, but I trust you can track with that definition. And when you understand it this way, it sounds like a mighty important practice, doesn't it?

Because we want to live our daily lives in a way that's faithful to scripture, right?

And we want to engage in ministry and mission—both personally and as a church—in a way that's faithful to scripture, wouldn't you agree?

And we want to respond to and engage the culture around us in a way that's faithful to scripture, don't we?

More nuance could be added to that definition, but it should suffice quite well for our purposes today. What I'd like to do now is share a couple examples of how the practice of thinking theologically has been a shaping distinctive of Cornerstone since our inception, and how it continues to shape our approach to ministry and mission today.

The first example has to do with:

1. Intentionally Intercultural Ministry.

Cornerstone was planted out of a Chinese church association during a time when the popular outreach strategy for many churches was to get "birds of a feather to flock together."

The technical term for this approach is called “The Homogenous Unit Principle.” Everybody say “Homogeneous Unit...” Nah, you don’t have to say that. But this particular church growth strategy became incredibly influential and was adopted by many thousands of churches back in the 80’s, 90’s and early 2000’s.

The thinking was, if you want to reach more people for Jesus and grow your church, focus on reaching people who are just like you. So ethnic or racial churches should reach people of their own ethnicity or race. And churches of a certain social and economic demographic should reach people of the same demographic. Churches that have people of a certain age should target others in a similar age range. And so on.

And here’s the thing about this strategy. *It worked.* Churches grew in attendance, because sociologically, it’s true that birds of a feather like to flock together. We feel most comfortable and at ease when we’re around people who look like us, think like us, talk like us, live like us and enjoy the same foods that we do.

But Cornerstone went in a very different direction, and set out to plant an intentionally intercultural church. Why? It all came down to looking at the “homogeneous” church growth methodology and asking not, “Does it work?” but rather, “Is it true? Is it faithful to scripture? Is it faithful to God’s redemptive intentions in Christ?” You see, these are the kinds of questions you ask then you’re thinking theologically.

Cornerstone was planted out of the deep biblical conviction that through the cross, God breaks down the walls that divide us, uniting diverse people together into a single family in Christ. What Paul said in Ephesians 2 about the relationship between those of Jewish and non-Jewish background applies to people groups of all types:

Christ brought us together through his death on the cross. The Cross got us to embrace, and that was the end of the hostility. Christ came and preached peace to you outsiders and peace to us insiders. He treated us as equals, and so made us equals... He’s using us all—irrespective of how we got here—in what he is building. He used the apostles and prophets for the foundation. Now he’s using you, fitting you in brick by brick, stone by stone, with Christ Jesus as the cornerstone that holds all the parts together. We see it taking shape day after day—a holy temple built by God, all of us built into it, a temple in which God is quite at home.³

Although Cornerstone’s founding members were almost all of Chinese heritage, they shared English as a common language with the vast majority of people who lived in the exceptionally diverse city of Markham. And so, they decided to buck the trend of the prevailing church growth strategy at the time, and develop a church that didn’t focus only on people of their own heritage, but one where people of all backgrounds would be

³ Ephesians 2:16-18; 21-22 (MSG)

welcome. And by God's grace, some 25 years later, the richly diverse congregation we now have is the result of that. Over 40 different countries of origin are represented in this congregation, and we have people of many different backgrounds, ages and abilities.

So many times, I've stood at the back of this worship hall, looking at our congregation as they worship, and I've been reminded of John's vision in the book of Revelation—a vision of what worship around God's throne will forever look like. John writes:

After this I saw a vast crowd, too great to count, from every nation and tribe and people and language, standing in front of the throne and before the Lamb. They were clothed in white robes and held palm branches in their hands. And they were shouting with a great roar, "Salvation comes from our God who sits on the throne and from the Lamb!"⁴

Not only has thinking theologically profoundly shaped Cornerstone in terms of becoming an intercultural church, but it has also influenced the kind of facility God led us to build.

2. A Community Centre Style Facility

Just as many traditional church buildings are built to reflect theology in one way or another—many older church buildings are constructed in the shape of a cross, for example—Cornerstone Centre was built to reflect the fact that a local church exists not for itself, but for the sake of the greater community where God plants it.

Cornerstone Centre is an expression of what is called "incarnational theology." *Incarnation* is a theological term referring to how God became a flesh-and-blood human being in Jesus Christ. John's gospel puts it this way:

The Word became flesh and blood,
and moved into the neighborhood.⁵

And now that his Spirit indwells us, his church, Jesus sends us into the world to incarnate or embody his presence in our neighbourhoods, as Pastor Andrew talked about last Sunday in his Easter message. As Jesus says in John 21:

"As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you."⁶

⁴ Revelation 7:9-10 (NLT)

⁵ John 1:14a (MSG)

⁶ John 20:21b (NLT)

With this in mind, when it came time for us to consider what kind of church building God might have us construct, the concept of a multi-purpose community centre style facility captured our hearts and imagination.

If you're here in person, the space you're sitting in now has been designed to function as a church building and a community centre at the same time. Yes, it's a space that serves our congregation, but more than that, it's our gift to our neighbours in the greater community, in Jesus' name.

Paul Nixon is a church consultant and author that we worked with closely when we were planning to build this facility. Here's what he wrote about Cornerstone Centre:

It is not just a church building, but a town square, a public space where the church can develop relationships with thousands of nearby people who would never darken the doors of a Canadian church in normal circumstances.

- Paul Nixon

Cornerstone Centre has indeed enabled us over the years to create many relationship-building spaces where the people of this church can connect with those in the greater community that don't know Jesus yet—spaces such as sports and rec programs, community dinners, youth drop-in programs, parent and tot groups, support and recovery groups, large-scale community events such as farmers' markets and fun fairs— the list goes on and on. In the context of such relationship-building spaces, our pre-Christian neighbors meet Jesus in and through us, and often times will then further connect with us as a *worshipping* community and choose to follow Jesus themselves. We've seen it happen many times.

And it all traces back to thinking theologically. Cornerstone Centre is the result of asking, why do we exist as a church? Well, biblically speaking, we exist primarily for the sake of the greater community where God has planted us. If so, then how should that inform the way we build our building?

If you're here in person, you'll see God's answer to that question by taking a moment to just look around you at this place.

Well there you have just two of what could be dozens of examples of how thinking theologically has profoundly shaped Cornerstone's approach to mission and ministry, contributing to the distinct culture we have as a church.

As I said before, thinking theologically is probably Cornerstone's most important distinctive, because it's been the gateway leading to our other distinctives you'll be hearing about in the weeks to come.

Going forward, thinking theologically will be a huge factor in the way Cornerstone discerns its part in addressing issues of racial justice in our society, for example. We'll actually be doing a special consultation with the Tyndale Intercultural Ministry Centre on that issue later this year, and we'll be doing a whole series about it in the fall.

Thinking theologically will be a huge factor as we discern how to welcome and walk with people who identify as LGBTQ+ in a way that is faithful to the teachings of scripture, and faithful to the way of Jesus.

And here's another important one. Right now, thinking theologically is a huge factor when it comes to discerning issues related to "hybrid" ministry, which has to do with way we integrate our in-person and our digital ministries. When the pandemic lockdowns gave us no choice but to do almost all of our ministries online, it actually became an opportunity for us to develop our digital ministries to entirely new levels—livestreaming our worship services each Sunday being just one of many examples of this.

Now, as we re-integrate in-person ministries with digital ministries, we need to be thinking carefully and *theologically* about what that should look like. On the one hand, we live in a digital age, and we're seeking to reach a digital culture—a culture of which most of us are very much a part. In such a context, it would be silly not to have a certain robustness to the digital side of our ministries.

At the same time, we need to be asking some very important questions about our engagement with technology as a church. Is the way we're using technology in ministry faithful to scripture? To what extent does it foster discipleship? To what extent might it hinder discipleship? Is our use of technology in ministry faithful to the way God made us—as embodied, relational persons, created in his very image for community with one another? Is the church actually in a unique position to offer in-person programming that the congregation and the greater community especially need after two years of relative isolation? These are the kind of questions we ask when we think theologically. In fact, Pastor Andrew and I are working on writing a philosophy of hybrid ministry that addresses some of those very questions.

I close this message on this uncommon but important topic by offering you a special downloadable guide sheet (cornerstonechurch.ca/thinkingtheologically) with practical tips and a list of resources to help you grow in the practice of thinking theologically. To access

the guide sheet, just go to the link you see on the screen, or scan the QR code. We also have a limited number of printed copies available in the lobby.

Remember, every Christian is a theologian. It's not a question of whether or not you do theology. Theology is inevitable. Rather, it's a question of whether or not you do good, scriptural, Jesus-centred theology. I pray that you will, and that we all will, more and more. My prayer for you today is that you will increasingly come to appreciate and personally experience that good theology is the stuff of LIFE!