

Basic questions

by [John P. Burgess](#) in the [March 24, 1999](#) issue

*Edited by Ronald F. Thiemann and William C. Placher. Why Are We Here? (Trinity, 166 pp.)*

The 11 distinguished theologians-friends from Yale graduate school days-who contributed to this volume are convinced that many Christians want to think about their faith and that theologians have done too little to assist them. While not every reader will be persuaded that these scholars have chosen or framed the questions just right, their essays are winsome examples of the joys-and challenges-that await anyone who is willing to "do theology."

For a number of years, William C. Placher has been telling us that theology is not simply an academic discipline but an activity to which every Christian is called. His own work has often sought to bridge the gap between the academy and the church. In this collection, he has enlisted the assistance of an all-star cast: Kathryn Tanner, David Dawson, Thomas F. Tracy, J. A. DiNoia, Bruce D. Marshall, James J. Buckley, Michael Root, William Werpehowski, George Hunsinger and coeditor Ronald F. Thiemann. Several teach at major educational institutions. All have helped to shape contemporary American theology.

While the authors represent a variety of denominations and points of view, their volume is remarkable for displaying a shared vision. In emphasizing the distinctive language of the Christian faith-in particular, of biblical salvation history-the essays resonate, not surprisingly, with the theology of the "Yale school." But the authors do not wear this label prominently. The reader is more apt to recognize their debt to Augustine and Pascal; Luther and Calvin; Vatican II and the World Council of Churches' *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* document; and other classics of the Christian tradition.

The writers ask such questions as, "Why are we so indifferent about our spiritual lives? Why do the innocent suffer? Why go to church? What does my faith have to do with my job? Is there life after death?" Three themes emerge. First, God is gracious. God has created us not because God has need of us, but because God simply takes

delight in us and the whole of creation. God's desire for relationship with us is finally stronger than the evils we perpetrate or suffer. The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ are the decisive and ultimate expression of God's love for us.

Second, our participation in God's cosmic drama of salvation gives our lives their deepest meaning. Through worship, we rehearse our place in this drama. As we encounter Christ through Word and sacrament, we become aware of our unique, personal identity before God.

Third, we respond to God's grace. We teach our children to embody the virtues of joy, faithfulness, patience and wisdom. We see our vocation as an opportunity to glorify and respond to God in gratitude. We commit ourselves to the unity of the church, knowing that the Eucharist mediates Christ and our life together in and with Christ. We live in praise and thanksgiving.

These shared themes pull this book together and make it more than a theological sampler. Each essay benefits from the internal coherence of the collection as a whole. Together, they offer a synthetic, ecumenical vision of life before God. They do not simply restate doctrine but demonstrate its capacity to illumine our lives. These essays preach! In addition, several offer a helpful introduction to current theological debates on such topics as the uniqueness of Jesus Christ and the concept of hell. Others are particularly insightful exercises in theological method-showing, for example, how a theologian might make sense of the question of whether or not angels exist.

Despite their stimulating content, the essays may not be entirely accessible to a wider audience. They assume basic biblical and theological knowledge. And their tone sometimes seems a bit too safe, too self-assured. Only a couple of the authors reveal their personal, existential struggles to comprehend and live by the insights that they have won from scripture and the theological tradition.

In his introduction Placher notes that the authors have not tried to answer every question of faith, or even the most important ones. These questions are just a starting point. One suspects, however, that the writers' social locations make more of a difference than they acknowledge. While several are ordained, all work in academic and administrative settings. Had a group of theologically articulate, working pastors written the essays, other questions-perhaps of equal or greater interest-might have emerged.

The meanings of such words as "God," "salvation" and "communion" seem clear to Placher and company. Yet precisely these terms pose difficulties for many people, who may ask whether there really is a God, or why they should believe that this God cares for them. Other key issues seem noticeably absent: How do Christians live their faith in a pluralistic world? How do the sciences affect our ability to understand traditional Christian language? The key link connecting the ideas in this book to a wider audience, both in and outside of the church, may be pastors, who will find here a wealth of ideas for how to think more theologically in their own sermons, counseling and teaching. The essays convey the excitement and joy that the authors find in thinking about the Christian faith.