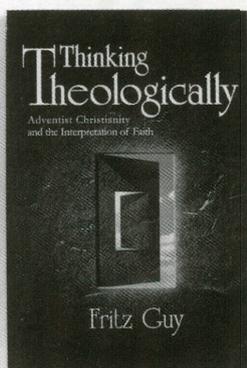


# If... Then! Theology

*Thinking Theologically: Adventist Christianity and the Interpretation of Faith.* By Fritz Guy.  
Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 1999.

*Reviewed by Glen Greenwalt*



The first time I remember hearing Fritz Guy in a discussion, I was coming down a narrow flight of steps from some hidden-away restaurant in New York City that tourists had not yet discovered. He was in an animated conversation with John Brunt and Harold Weiss, our guide on this excursion. This moment was one of epiphany for me; I have never forgotten it. I believed at that time I was seeing Socrates revived. What has impressed me even more in subsequent years is Guy's Christ-like compassion, not only for the "Church," but also for members of the body of Christ who hold positions that often differ radically from his own. So I choose as my models to expli-

cate Guy's theology Socrates of Athens and Jesus of Nazareth.

Guy's theological method, whether intentional or not, is Socratic. Like Socrates, Guy seeks to engage us ordinary believers in a process of thinking carefully about what we believe so that our beliefs stand still and don't move about like the statues of Delphi, or in theological language, are not blown about by every wind of doctrine.

The first step toward ordering any set of beliefs is to define the elements clearly. Socrates taught us that the exercise of giving many examples about something is not the same as defining the thing itself. Beauty is not identical with women nor is strength identical with horses, however rare homely women or weak horses might be. Likewise, Guy teaches us that theological thinking is not identical with collecting proof texts, counting votes of popular opinion, or even fostering archaeological research and doing sound biblical exegesis—which are mainstays of the theological enterprise. Rather, thinking theologically is a process of "thinking as carefully, comprehensively, and creatively as possible about the content, adequacy, and implications of one's own religious life" (4).

In the language of Socrates, theological thinking is a therapeutic of the soul. Theological thinking is not ordered—at least in the first place—toward knowing a great deal or of mastering the skills of persuading others. It is directed first and always toward aligning one's own self with what is genuine, proper, and true. As such, theological thinking is more a quest than an outcome. To care for one's soul is to ask questions about the truth, its validity, and its implications for our own personal beliefs, not to gain any sort of external reward, but so that our own lives can be whole and healthy. Far from being impractical or dangerous, then, theological thinking is essential to the life of the Church, for the Church, like the polis, is the soul writ large.

Second, Socrates encouraged his interlocutors to draw careful distinctions. The work of good thinking is akin to that of a butcher. A good thinker needs to cut clear, sharp distinctions at the natural joints of things. No one cleaves ideas better than Fritz Guy. Guy's book is worth buying just for the memorable distinctions he draws.

As we know from church history, theologians have long been associated with conflict within the church, either as agents of heresy or as the guardians called upon in time of crisis to defend what has always been believed. However, seldom has the rank and file of the church or the church's administrators appreciated the creative importance of theological thinking in transferring faith from one generation to another. It is in his role as creative thinker that Guy makes his greatest contribution to the Church.

By his insightful distinctions among "orthodoxy," "heterodoxy," and "heresy," Guy offers one of the most profound ways that I have ever read to describe the boundaries of a religious tradition. Like poetry, the sum of the power in Guy's distinctions is lost in translation, so let me quote at length just one of the truly memorable distinctions that fill Guy's book. The following passages help refine what Guy means by thinking theologically.

It is important to note that the words "orthodoxy," "heterodoxy," and "heresy" are not very helpfully used as normative or evaluative terms; they function better as historical, descriptive, and (most importantly) relative terms. Their proper meanings are all determined by the consensus of a particular community of faith, and a community consensus is not identical with ultimate truth. In a theological struggle between orthodoxy and heresy, it is always the case that orthodoxy wins and heresy loses, for the simple reason that it is the winners who decide what is "orthodox" and what is "heretical." Performing the historical task of identifying the "orthodox" view does not accomplish the theological task of identifying truth. (24)

As orthodoxy is essential to the theological identity of a community of faith, heterodoxy is essential to its continuing theological development. (Ibid.)

Furthermore, the three terms [orthodoxy, heterodoxy, and heresy] . . . are properly applied to ideas or beliefs rather than persons. . . . Applied to persons, the word "heretic" is overly broad, excessively judgmental, and usually divisive, subverting the trust that is essential to the spiritual health of a community of faith. But taken together, these terms are another invitation to the whole community to participate in the activity of theology. (26)

Again, as we learn from Socrates, it is the language of health that determines the validity of a theological expression. The life and health of a community is inevitably marked by disagreements, fostered not only by error, but also by the very fact that we are human and therefore limited in our perspectives. The health of a community is measured therefore not by the absence of disagreements. Just because something has always been believed or practiced does not make it the truth. Furthermore, in a healthy community people are capable of distinguishing between ideas and people. Although the Church may reject certain ideas, it remains open and accepting of all people, even those who hold heretical ideas.

By way of Guy's profound distinctions, we are led to a third Socratic element in the pursuit of a healthy soul. Truth is eternal, whereas all human endeavors are finite. Thus, any one of us sees only a part of the truth. The logical conclusion drawn from our finitude is that the search for truth is best pursued



## Proper thinking is ultimately an act of devotion and prayer.

in conversation with others, rather than in isolation. Any time we arbitrarily cut ourselves off from others, we are in danger not only of being blinded by our own hubris, but also of being cut off from knowing the truths known uniquely to those we ostracize.

The demand for conversation is not a liberal tenant of relativism. It is a conservative demand to know and practice the truth. This is perhaps the most important point that I glean from Guy's book. On almost every page, with the passion of a Jeremiah, he appeals for genuine collegiality within the Church. This demand for collegiality is not a matter of laxness. It is rather a "caring for one another's spiritual health and theological growth, a caring expressed concretely in intercessory prayer and in encouraging, helpful words" (44).

Finally, for Guy, as was the case with Socrates, proper thinking is ultimately an act of devotion and prayer. As finite beings, we stand on the boundaries of mysteries. The artist who drew the cover for *Thinking Theologically* captured the very essence of Guy's project by depicting a window within a window that looks out on an infinite sky. As Guy rightfully warns, the chief intellectual and moral danger that faces religious believers is seeking to prove that they and their community are right, rather than standing in the face of the infinite horizon of truth that calls all of their achievements into question. The ultimate end of theology is to help us stand dumb and blind in Light that is too bright to see and too beautiful to speak.

My only criticism of Guy's book is that he does not stand longer in aw(e)ful presence of the Light. I must confess I found little that was helpful in the second half of the book, where Guy attempts to bridge the boundless divide between the Infinite and the finite, between God and the world. This is not because I am a postmodern relativist who questions all rational systems. Rather, it is because I found too many rational gaps in Guy's arguments as he seeks to move from the nature of Scripture to its authority, and from the nature, or more properly, the meaning of "God" to some sort of evidential support of God's existence.

I do not have the time or interest to explore what seem to me to be rational leaps in Guy's arguments.

However profound the arguments, I believe that an infinite gap would yet remain between finite knowledge and divine truth. This is not an argument for suspending theological judgments, but an argument that the bridge-building strategy of classical theology—with its attempt to pave a road of reason into the kingdom of heaven—was doomed before it was conceived.

Here, the thought of Socrates and, especially, the thought of Jesus again impress me. Socrates and Jesus both constructed arguments by appealing to their recollection of eternal things in a preexistent life—Socrates in the migration of his soul, Jesus from his presence with the Father. Yet neither Socrates nor Jesus engaged in speculative arguments about eternal things. Rather, each in his own way engaged others in hypothetical thinking derived from his own personal experience as a finite being.

In philosophy, we know this as Socratic Ignorance. With Jesus, I would call it "If . . . Then!" theology. What strikes me about Jesus' teaching is that he turns classical theology on its head. In classical theology, as exemplified in the second half of Guy's book, an attempt is made to show that God exists, that the revelation we have of God is sufficient, and that this revelation demonstrates God to be good and wonderful. This God then becomes the answer to human problems.

Interestingly enough, Jesus—as far as I know—never makes such a case. In classical theology we move from God, to Jesus, to the church, to the anxious and hurting. The perfect answer comes to imperfect people. Jesus, in contrast, addresses the suffering and lost immediately in the midst of their pain and confusion and asks them to think about the implications of their own questions and aspirations, without offering any guarantee of an answer from beyond. Drawing from the immediacy of his own life on the streets with children and beggars—from his strolling through marketplaces where merchants hawked their goods and searched for bargains; from his walks through hot fields where labors and farmers sweated to earn meager livings; and from his attendance at weddings and inns where people celebrated their human joys—Jesus came to know the logic of ordinary life, a logic based not on logical deductions and syllogisms, but on

associations and relationships.

Over and over in Jesus' teaching we find him asking listeners to reflect on the implications of their own lives. First Jesus describes a situation where he expects the listeners not only to recognize the situation, but also to agree on the proper response. Then Jesus asks his listeners why they should think that they, being evil, would know what is right, whereas God, who is good, would not know or be capable of doing as well as themselves—or even better. “What man of you if he has one sheep . . .” (Matt. 12:11); “If a man has a hundred sheep . . .” (Matt. 18:12); “Suppose one of you has a friend . . .” (Luke 11:5); “What father among you, if . . .” (Luke 11:11); “If you then being evil, . . . then how much more will your father in heaven . . .” (Luke 11:13).

Notice, Jesus does not first define God or offer any sort of proof that what he says in fact originated with God. Rather, Jesus appeals to the logic that if broken human beings can perceive what is right and true, then God as the ultimate source of perfection must do as well or better. This is a theology that begins out of human brokenness, and, although it never provides proofs or final answers, does offer hope and confidence.

Nowhere is Jesus' theology of “If, . . . Then!” more powerfully illustrated than in the Gospel of John. When asked to see the Father, Jesus replies, “He who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:8)—a statement that is dumbfounding, given that Jesus can also say of his disciples that they will do greater works than himself (14:12), and that they, too, can experience through him the same unity he has with the Father (17:21). The integrity of Jesus' claims is not made on the basis of his stature as resurrected Lord, but on the basis of his human care and kindness toward others and on the basis of his unbreakable attachment to the Father. It is in the Jesus caring for the hurting and hurting himself—the Jesus whose last words commend his spirit into the hands of one who has forsaken him—that we see God.

All theology ultimately ends in doxology, as Guy exemplifies in his book and life. However, before theology becomes doxology it is theodicy, that is to say, an attempt to explain God in the face of God's apparent absence in the midst of human suffering. Yet

here is the dilemma of theology, for how can God ever be justified in the face of even one suffering creature? If the universe required the death of even one child, would not the cost of the universe be too high? This is the power of Jesus' teaching over the conventions of theology as it has been traditionally constructed. For theodicy to become doxology, it must not defend God in his absence. Rather, it must speak from the midst of suffering people and give voice to their hurt and loss. It may even cry out in complaint. That is what Jesus did. And that is why he made persuasive claims to divinity—not from proof, but from empathy and hope. If a man will lay down his life for a friend, then how much more. . . .

