

A Time of Prayer: Consider

December Edition

Backgrounder: How was Jesus' theology incarnational? And what does that say to us? ¹

In his book *Doing Local Theology: A Guide for Artisans of a New Humanity*, Clemens Sedmak presents “fifty theses” about why and how followers of Jesus need to interpret God faithfully yet in a way that embodies their own time and their own place, just as Jesus did in his public ministry. In this sense, the church, the Body of Christ, is incarnated afresh in every local context. What follows is an all-too-limited selection of Sedmak’s “thesis statements” deemed especially relevant for illustrating this point, along with brief summaries of his arguments.

THESIS 1: Theology is an invitation to wake up: to be mindful and attentive. ²

Sedmak doesn’t define the term “theology” in the formal sense of the study of the nature of God and religious beliefs. Moreover, he doesn’t assign “doing theology” to any one group of people. He argues, in fact, that theology is about life, and doing theology is part of living a responsible life. And the most important enabler for doing theology well, according to him, is to wake up. Waking up is about going to the roots of matters. Waking up is not the privilege of scholars. In fact, being awake in a world full of wonders is the privilege of children. Doing theology in the spirit of children means seeking God in all things, being aware of God’s presence, listening to God’s voice, and being attentive to the signs of the times. We can do that only if we wake up.

THESIS 11: Jesus’ life is described as a human existence within a certain local culture. He was rooted in the religious traditions of his time and place. Jesus’ life is described as a sequence of face-to-face actions on a local (especially rural) level. Jesus is, however, also described as a person challenging local cultural standards and raising a universal claim. ³


Sedmak argues that the gospel writers went to great lengths to describe Jesus’ “situatedness” in local life because they knew how essential that was to understanding Jesus and the shape of his ministry. Jesus was rooted in a local culture, expressing himself in the local language, using local experiences and local images in his parables. Jesus was doing theology “in the village.” Jesus’ life was a life full of local encounters. As a woodworker, Jesus belonged to a social class even below the peasants, since woodworkers did not own land, and Jesus’ disciples were also countryfolk. Yet this “localness” of Jesus did not prevent him from challenging his society’s traditions, and there is a contrast between the ordinary life of Jesus within his local culture and his public ministry. He challenged the local contexts of his time to transcend the village, to refound the village, to discover differences and alternatives, as Jesus had a universal claim, crossing the threshold of his local culture.

What can we learn about doing theology from this paradox between the universal saviour and the provincial teacher, Sedmak asks? He suggests we can learn that theology has to be rooted, that we

¹ Excerpts from: Sedmak, Clemens. *Doing Local Theology: A Guide for Artisans of a New Humanity*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2002. The summaries written are largely abridged versions of the arguments presented by Sedmak in the pages indicated for each thesis. For ease of reading, his words are presented as prose rather than separated into citations.

² Clemens Sedmak, *Doing Local Theology: A Guide for Artisans of a New Humanity* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2002), 1-3.

³ Clemens Sedmak, *Doing Local Theology*, 23-26.



as theologians have to be rooted in a village, in a community of reference, but that we must not consider our village the ultimate norm. Appropriating the local tradition is a creative act that asks us to uncover its true concern rather than merely follow its external form.

THESIS 14: Jesus did “situational theology.” He had an eye for detail, the small things and the “little people.” Jesus used occasions to do theology, and he respected the dynamics of particular situations. We could see this as an invitation to do “leaflet theology” rather than “book-length theology.” ⁴

Sedmak looks closely at Jesus’ actions detailed in the gospels and argues that Jesus seems to encourage local theologies that rise to the particular circumstances. For example, apart from the few gospel references to Jesus’ teaching in synagogues, Jesus was flexible in doing theology; he changed his pastoral approach according to the situation, using gatherings on mountains, personal encounters on the road, and people’s requests for healing as opportunities for teaching and preaching. We could say that Jesus reacts to local needs; his theology is “user oriented,” although he was not willing to sell his ministry for the sake of demonstrating something. Jesus also did not impose ready-made theological categories on people. Rather, Jesus is depicted as a person who listened and perceived rather than talking and judging. He did not react to the situation with a general judgement but with an unexpected and unprecedented response. Jesus’ situational theology, Sedmak argues, encourages us to do theology “unencumbered by baggage,” that the particular situation rather than the full “backpack” of prefabricated notions should serve as a source of theology.


THESIS 17: Jesus talked about the criteria for good theology. The most obvious criterion is the criterion of the good fruit, but he also saw this fruit coming from modest beginnings. Jesus taught that the full variety of good fruits came from a variety of sources or ministries (theologies). Jesus did theology according to the criteria of sustainability, appropriateness, empowerment, and challenge. ⁵

There are many varieties of trees in the orchard of God’s kingdom; this is true for ministries and theologies, Sedmak argues. Expanding this analogy, he observes that whether apple, plum or cherry trees, they need different kinds of soil, have different flowers, and there are better and worse ecological conditions for a particular tree. This is an invitation to accept a plurality of theologies, a richness of the many ways of doing theology. Jesus confirms this openness, for he considered his mission and the mission of John the Baptist as complementary missions in the common task of building the kingdom.

In the context of this plurality of ways of bearing good fruit, however, Sedmak suggests that Jesus’ approach to doing theology highlighted four cross-cutting dimensions for fruitful ministry. First, it is obvious that Jesus was interested in the *sustainability* of his mission. That is why he sent his disciples out in the first place; that is why he spoke about the kingdom as the ultimate goal, challenge, and task; and that is why he encouraged endurance and strength. And in the present age, the church (after Christ) clearly realizes and acknowledges the claim of sustainability. Actually, the very foundation of the church is the idea of the sustainability of Jesus’ mission. Second, with respect to *appropriateness*, Sedmak notes that when Jesus sends out his disciples, he tells them to become rooted in the local culture as much as possible. They

⁴ Clemens Sedmak, *Doing Local Theology*, 29-31.

⁵ Clemens Sedmak, *Doing Local Theology*, 35-41.



should not arrive with read-made tools and concepts; instead, they should first assess the situation and accept the local quality of life. Jesus was *the* model of incarnation and inculturation. Third, Sedmak observes that Jesus' efforts to *empower* his followers can be seen throughout the gospels. For example, the images Jesus used to describe the responsibility of people are images of empowerment (salt of the earth, light of the world, fishers of men). He called people to mission and encouraged his apostles. Again and again Jesus made it clear that it is the faith of the healed person that has brought about healing; he empowered the people he healed to live their lives. Finally, Sedmak underscores that Jesus makes it clear that good theology *challenges* local cultures. This is the criterion that talks about the counter-cultural force of the message of Jesus. Jesus was not absorbed by the local culture. He did not totally surrender to the local culture. Jesus challenged people to take a different look at reality, and a movement must maintain a substantial sense of difference and considerable tension with the environment if it is to prosper.

THESIS 9: Many different images capture the work of a theologian. The idea of local theologies can be expressed through the image of the theologian as village cook. Doing local theology is like cooking with local ingredients.

Sedmak uses the image of cooking to highlight how we are called to be creative in our local theologies and he expands on the analogy by comparing doing local theology with cooking and the product of local theology with food:

- we eat because we are hungry (we do theology out of hunger and thirst)
- food is to be served (theology has a service function)
- food is necessary but always found within a cultural context (doing theology is natural but always takes a particular cultural shape)
- food nourishes and energizes (theology empowers)
- sharing food can be a purpose in itself (like sharing theological discussions)
- sharing food ties a community together (theology is community-building)
- food is, next to language, the local cultural product *par excellence* and each cultural family has its favorite recipes (local theologies have particular nuances and particular flavors).

He concludes that cooking, just like theologizing, takes place at a certain time, within a particular context. Cooking, just like doing theology, can be learned by way of courses and books – but good cooks, just like good theologians, do not always follow the recipes; they create recipes of their own, know how to cook without a book, know how to utilize locally available ingredients. Cooking can be creative without end.