

PREPARING FOR THE STANDARD ORDINATION EXAM IN THEOLOGY PREPARING FOR THE STANDARD ORDINATION EXAM IN THEOLOGY

The theological competence examination differs from the other ordination exams in vastness of the terrain from which its questions may be drawn. Unlike the polity exam, for instance, which draws from the very limited corpus of material contained in the Book of Order, the theology exam can draw from virtually any area in the Bible, in Christian tradition, and in contemporary life both in and outside of the church. Given this broad scope, it is likely that candidates taking this exam will face questions involving issues that they have not previously had a chance to think through in detail. For this reason it is essential in preparing for the theology exam to have mastered not only certain foundational areas of knowledge, but also certain skills. Candidates need to possess the ability to think theologically.

WHAT SKILLS ARE REQUIRED?

1.) Making connections. In assessing readiness for ministry, the theology exam asks candidates to make connections between the theology they have learned and developed in seminary on the one hand, and real-life situations on the other. Candidates may be asked to make such connections in two directions: (1) From Christian faith to contemporary life: What are the implications and practical relevance of a particular doctrine? What difference does it make that Christians confess this particular belief? (2) From contemporary life to Christian faith: What are the theological issues at stake in a particular real-life scenario? How does Christian theology illuminate our understanding of a particular situation or set of issues?

2.) Interpreting the Reformed tradition. Candidates will be tested on their ability to function as competent interpreters of our church's theological heritage, particularly as it is reflected in The Book of Confessions. This means that candidates will need a basic, working knowledge of the confessional documents, a sense of the major themes and scope of the Reformed faith reflected in them, and an ability to articulate practical implications of the heritage and make connections with the contemporary life of faith.

3.) Doing Christian ethics. Particularly in the "Application to Ministry" section of the exam, candidates will sometimes encounter questions focusing on either practical or theoretical issues in Christian ethics. Because candidates are unlikely to be able to think through in advance all the possible ethical issues they might have to deal with in this section of the exam (or in the ministry for that matter!), it is important that they have in mind some basic hermeneutical approaches for bringing the scriptures to bear on ethical questions as well as some general strategies for ethical thinking in a Christian context.

PREPARATION STRATEGIES

The theology exams in recent years have been more practical than academic in character. The focus of the exams has been on the candidate's ability to think and reflect theologically rather than to cite extensively from the theological literature, ancient or modern. Should this pattern continue to hold in the future, Inquirers/Candidates will be much more likely to be asked to present their own understandings of a theological issue rather than to discuss or compare the views of prominent theologians.

Focus on Thinking Skills. This means that as you prepare for the exam, your time will be much better spent learning to do your own theological thinking rather than trying to memorize reams of material about what various theologians had to say on topics x, y, and z. Reading ancient and contemporary theologians can be helpful preparations, but a lot depends on the way you approach such reading. A helpful strategy might be to first do your own thinking through a doctrine or topic of theology and then once your own views are sketched out to look over the shoulder of other theological writers, as it were, and see how they approach the same topic. How does their organization of the material compare with yours? Do they include important topics in their discussions, which you have left out? What sort of practical connections do they make with contemporary life, and how do these connections compare with the ones you have made?

Do they provide any helpful insights for dealing with questions, which remained problematic in your own account? Using other theologians as guides and teachers to help stimulate and clarify your own thinking on a topic will help to develop skills you need to function as a theological thinker in your own right, and give you the flexibility you need to think through issues on your own which you have not encountered in the work of others.

Practice Making Connections. A helpful study strategy might be to work through the major heads of doctrine (traditional topics of theological discussion). In developing a list of such topics, you might consult the more comprehensive confessional documents or a standard work of systematic theology. For each topic, use the method described in the preceding paragraph: try to do your own thinking about the content and relevance of this particular doctrine, and then use the work of other theologians, or the confessional documents to clarify and enrich your own thinking. Such a procedure will provide you with a solid core of well-thought through material spanning the heart of the Christian faith, along with valuable practice at doing your own theological thinking.

When it comes to developing skill at making connections in the reverse direction (from contemporary life to the theological tradition) there is no substitute for simple practice. Candidates preparing for the exam (to say nothing of pastors, who are called to be the theological interpreters of the congregation's life!) should work to develop a reflective theological awareness, which views the situations of everyday life in the context of Christian faith. In the situations which you face from day to day in the church, in your seminary community, in relationships with others, get in the habit of thinking about the theological dimensions of everyday life. What are the large issues at stake in the way people approach the tasks and challenges of daily living? What resonances are there between ordinary life and the great affirmations of Christian faith? What difference does it make to approach a certain situation as a Christian believer? How would you approach life differently if you were not a Christian? One way to facilitate such habits of thought is by a regular program of reading and prayerful reflection—on the text of the Bible especially, but also on the confessions and on the other theological and ethical writings. Many times you will find that the passage from Matthew, which you prayed over this morning, or the selection from the situations you face in everyday life. Developing habits of ongoing theological reflection will equip you with skills necessary for the taking of the exam, and far more importantly for the enriching and deepening of your work as a minister.

Learn about the Reformed Tradition. Many of the questions on past ordination exams have asked candidates for a specifically Reformed response to particular questions. For this reason candidates need to develop some idea of the characteristic themes, approaches, and preoccupations of the Reformed Tradition. A reflective reading of *The Book of Confessions* will certainly go a long way toward helping you acquire a “feel” for what is distinctive about classical Reformed theology, and there are also available a number of excellent guides and introductions to the Reformed Tradition which you may find helpful. Seminary professors or Presbyterian pastors can help you locate such resources if you are not sure where to find them.

It is worth noting that questions have sometimes appeared on past theology exams asking for a “Reformed” approach to topics for which there is no distinctively Reformed approach to the particular issue in question. A helpful strategy is to simply substitute the word “biblical” for “Reformed” in the question at hand. Such a substitution is quite in keeping with our tradition’s self-understanding as “Reformed and always to be reformed according to the Word of God” (*Reformata semper reformanda secundum verbum dei*).

Practice ethical thinking. Candidates will be in a much stronger position going into the exams if they have developed some facility for doing theological ethics. Most seminaries offer a number of courses in Christian ethics, which can be quite helpful in this regard. If you have not had a course, your seminary library or theology department ought to be able to recommend a good introductory textbook in Christian ethics, which will help with the basics, along with some journals, which deal with ethical issues.

Here again, the object is to be able to make coherent connections between Scripture, the church’s faith and real-life situations. There is much to be said for gaining practice at doing your own thinking. You might pick a contemporary issue to analyze and think about how you approach the task of bringing the church’s faith to bear in your analysis. Then look over the shoulder of a theological ethicist who is dealing with the same issue and see what you can learn from his or her approach to the topic.

Practice writing some questions. Many candidates have found it helpful to go back to old copies of the ordination exams and to practice writing out answers to one or more of the questions, using the same amount of time as allowed in the actual exam. A few practice runs of this type will help you get comfortable with the one-hour questions format, which the exam utilizes. You might seek out a seminary professor or pastor or other colleague to look at the answers you produce and talk with you about their strengths and weaknesses. As in other areas of life most of us get better with practice. If you don’t have access to back copies of the exam check with a local Presbyterian seminary your CPM chairperson, or the offices of the Presbyteries Cooperative Committee in Louisville.

Taking the Exam. The following are some general suggestions for writing the exam, many of which are simple common sense. Keep in mind as you are writing the exam that two separate readers must agree that the exam deserves either a passing or a failing grade and that readers come into the process very much on your side and hoping that you will do well.

Be organized and coherent. A great many of the failing grades on the theology exam result from a simple failure to respond to the question asked in a manner that is straightforward and clear. As with any essay exam, you are well advised to take some time before you begin writing to organize your thoughts. You might consider developing on a sheet of scratch paper a short working outline that responds clearly to the issues addressed by the question. A shorter answer that is clear, succinct, and well organized will nearly always do better than a longer one, which is rambling and lacks focus.

Make sure you answer the question that is asked. Double-check before you begin writing to make sure

you are providing what the question asks for. Sometimes a question includes a setting or scenario simply as an aid to stimulate your thinking about a particular issue, other times it requires a specific response to the scenario itself. Sometimes the question will ask for a pastoral response to persons in the scenario, other times for a general theological discussion of a particular issue. If the second part of the question asks you to draw from your answer to the first part, make it clear to your readers how the two are connected. If the question asks specific citation from The Book of Confessions, be sure to provide them. If the question asks specifically for a response directed to a six-year old, take care to answer in terms, which would be understandable to a young child. In short, make sure you are clear about what the question is asking for before you begin to write!

Do not try to second-guess the theology of the graders. Some candidates expend a great deal of energy worrying about what particular approach to a question will be compatible with the theological orientation of the graders, especially if the question focuses on an issue that is a source of controversy in the church. This is not necessary. Your task for passing the exams is to articulate a coherent point of view writing the Reformed heritage and to defend it adequately. This means your task for passing is simply to articulate a coherent point of view and defend it adequately. At some point in your candidacy process a judgment will be made regarding your orthodoxy, but the group which does that will be your home Presbytery and its CPM. They are the ones you should keep in mind if you are worried that some of your views might be seen as entirely acceptable in some parts of the church.

While the vast majority of exam readers are extremely conscientious about dealing fairly with points of view, which differ from their own, it is nonetheless wise policy where possible to avoid giving gratuitous offense. Flagrant use of gender-exclusive language, for example, would likely be perceived as offensive by some readers, as might consistent reference to the deity as a “goddess”. While graders will do their best to be fair and evaluate your exam on its merits, common sense suggest that you will be in a better position if you can avoid making them needlessly angry.

Do not assume too much expertise on the part of your readers. Readers vary in the amount of recent exposure they have had to theological discussions. In general you will be much better off if you do not assume you are writing your exam to be read by seminary professors! Keep in your discussions straightforward and clear. There is nothing wrong with using technical vocabulary, but if you are going to use it, make sure you define the terms for your readers the first time they appear. You will probably be well served if you picture as your target audience an intelligent and reasonably well-informed adult education class.

Do not panic. There have been occasions in the past when the theology exam has included clearly impossible questions: “Pastor, why did God let my child die this way?” Asking a candidate to solve the problem of evil in the course of an hour-long essay is an absurd assignment -- except for the fact that nearly all ministers can expect to face such questions before they have been in the field for very long, and when it happens they are going to have to come up with some kind of response! Should you be faced with one of these impossible questions on an exam, take a deep breath and try not to get rattled. Remember that all other candidates taking the exam and all the other ministers facing similar questions in the field are in the same boat as you before this issue. Use your common sense and theological training and pastoral instincts to do the best job with it you can. Exam readers will know full well that this is an impossible question, and nobody is going to be expecting miraculous solutions to problems, which have puzzled Christians for centuries!

Another source of panic is occasionally provided by the wording of certain questions, which will include phrases like this:

“Drawing upon your understanding of Scripture, classical and/or contemporary theology, respond to . . .”

Some candidate’s worry that this means graders will be evaluating their answer with a checklist, looking for appropriate Scriptural citations along with a discussion of the views both ancient and modern theologians. Such is not the intention of this wording! Readers are instructed very clearly that the intention of such phrases is permissive: their intended meaning is, “draw upon whatever resources are available to you and seem appropriate.” Citing the thought of various theologians on an issue can sometimes be helpful and impressive, but it is not required by this wording.

Be both pastorally sensitive and theologically substantive. In questions, which require you to respond directly to persons or practical situations, your pastoral skills will be evaluated along with your theological abilities (make sure you check carefully what the question is asking for!). What you should be striving for in such situations is a complementary union between the two - - they are not opposed to one another! Neglecting either aspect can get you in trouble: a response which totally neglects theological issues in favor of an exclusive concentration on peoples’ feeling will not be seen as adequate by the graders. By the same token, a response, which totally disregards the personal and practical dimensions of a situation and tactlessly clubs people over the head with citations from The Book of Confessions , however theologically appropriate they might be, will also be viewed as an inadequate response. At the end of the day graders will be asking: (1) Did the candidate adequately address the theological issues raised by the question? (2) Did the candidate handle the situation in a manner which leaves me feeling comfortable about the prospects of him or her serving as pastor to a group of people I care about?

A Final Word

A candidate making use of this document should remember that the advice and preparation strategies contained in it are suggestions only. They are not official dictates of the ordination exam committee, nor are they magical techniques guaranteeing success on the exam.

Other successful approaches are possible. What this document does represent is the advice and reflection of a group of people who have been involved for a number of years in the writing and grading of the theology exams, and who have devoted considerable time to preparing students for it. Our final word to candidates would be: Use this document when it seems helpful, and ignore it when it does not. We wish for you the best possible experience in taking the ordination exams!

Theology Task Group
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