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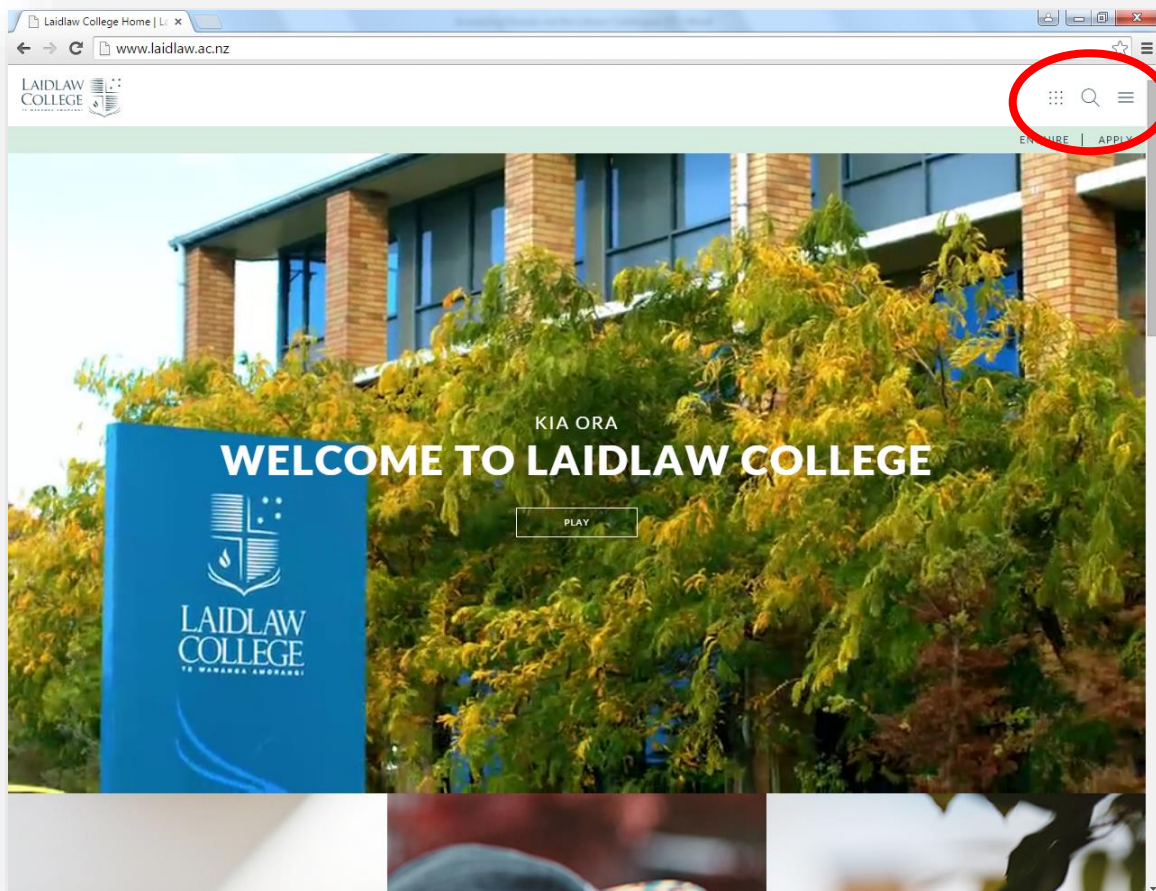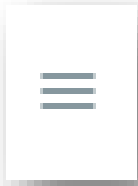
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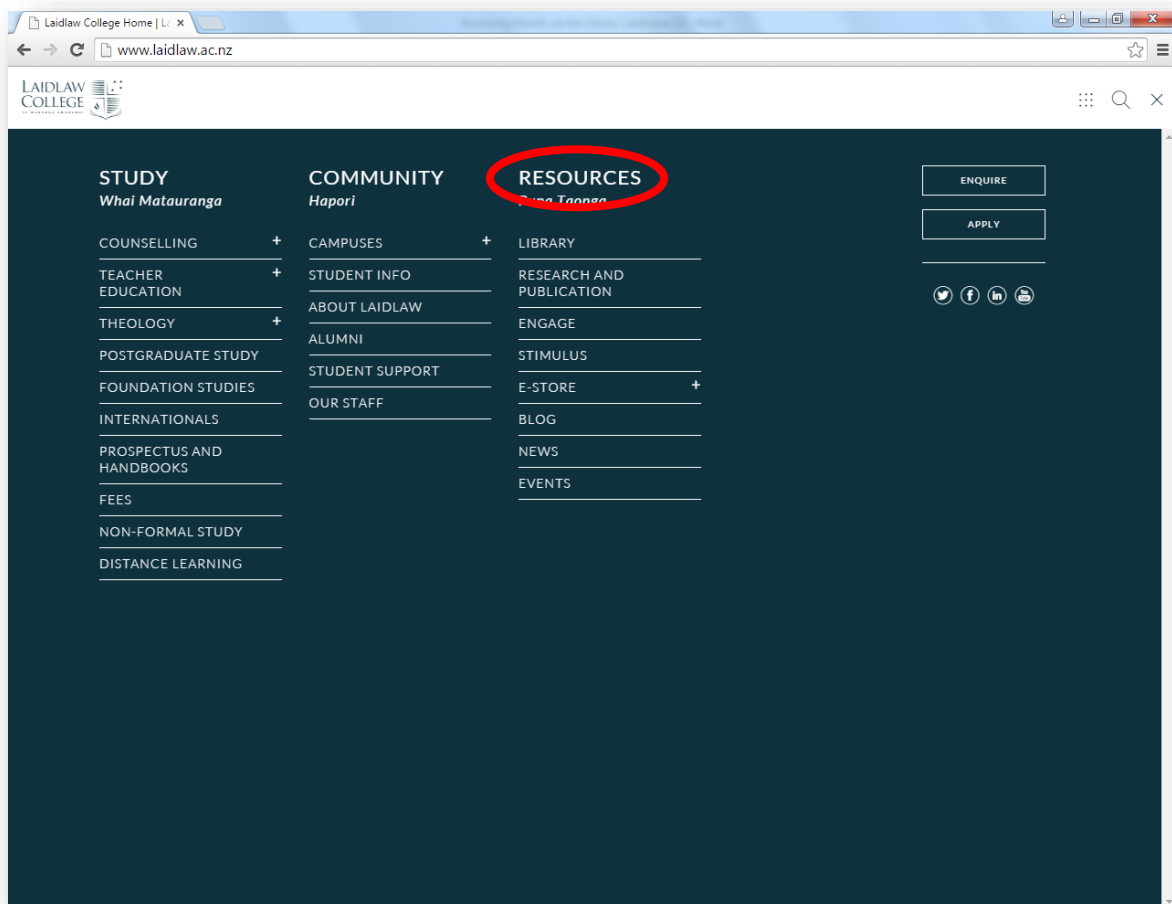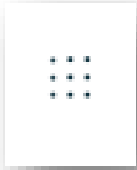
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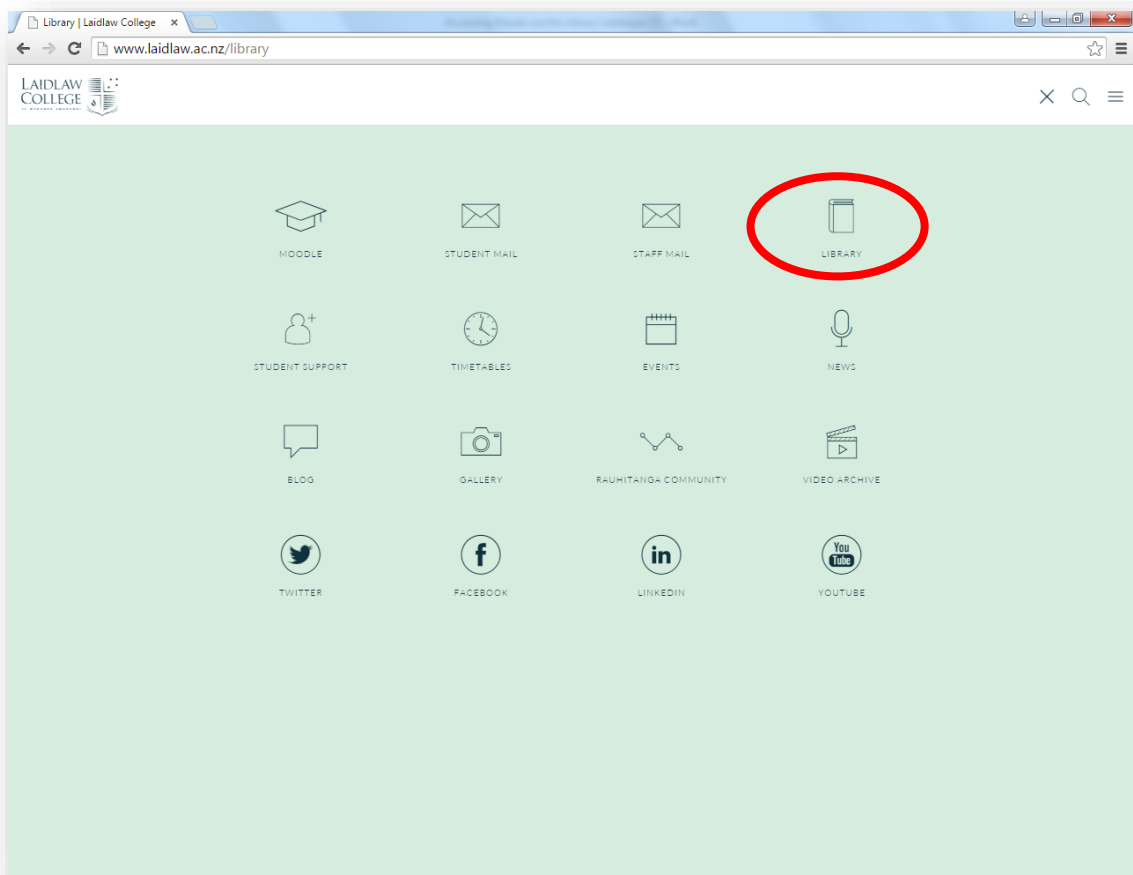
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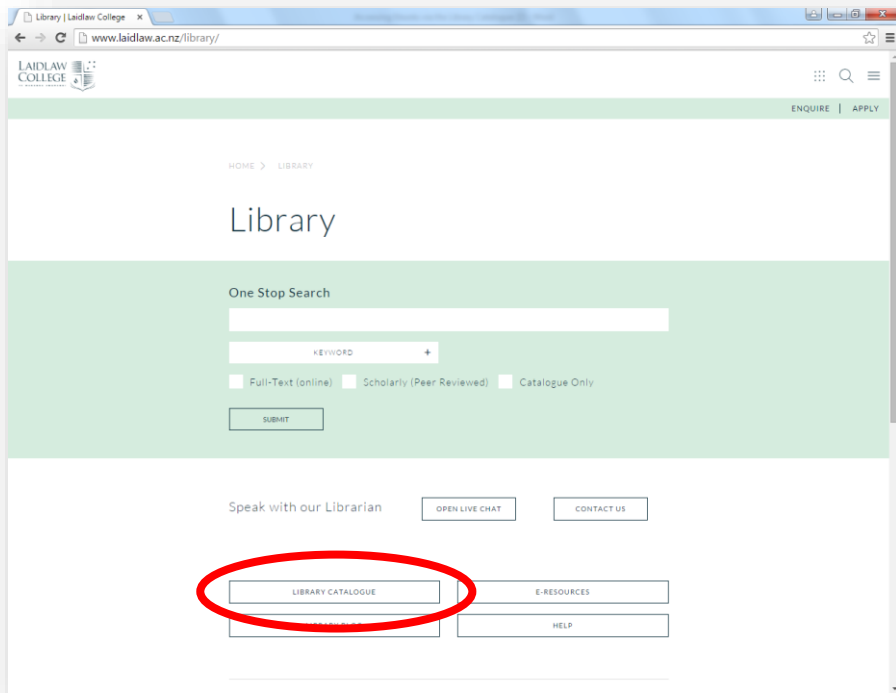
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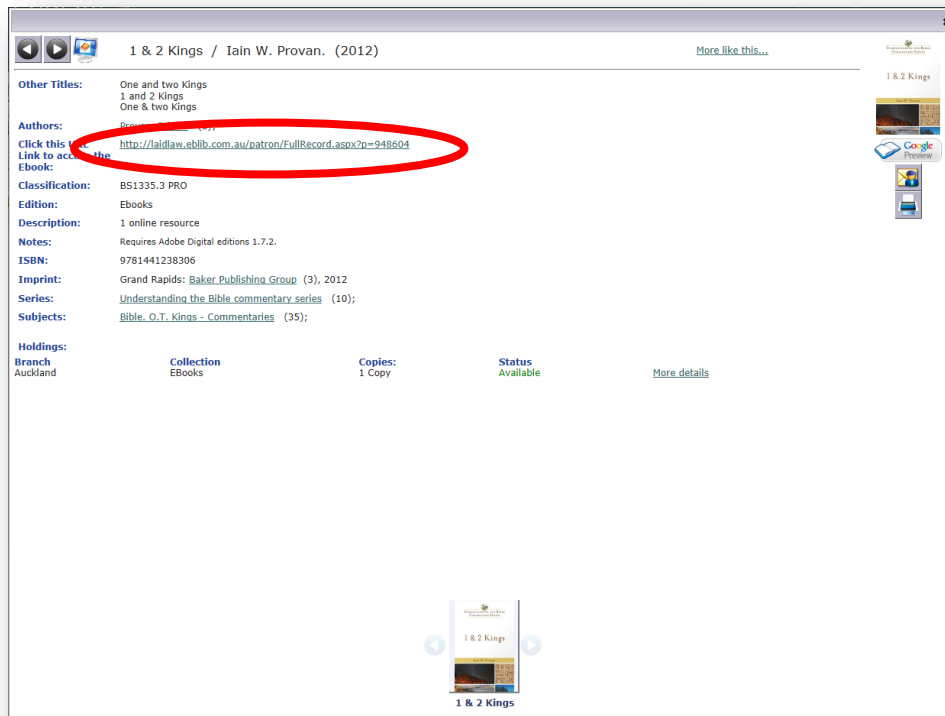
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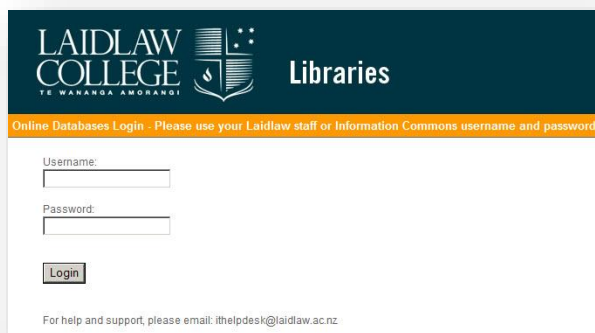
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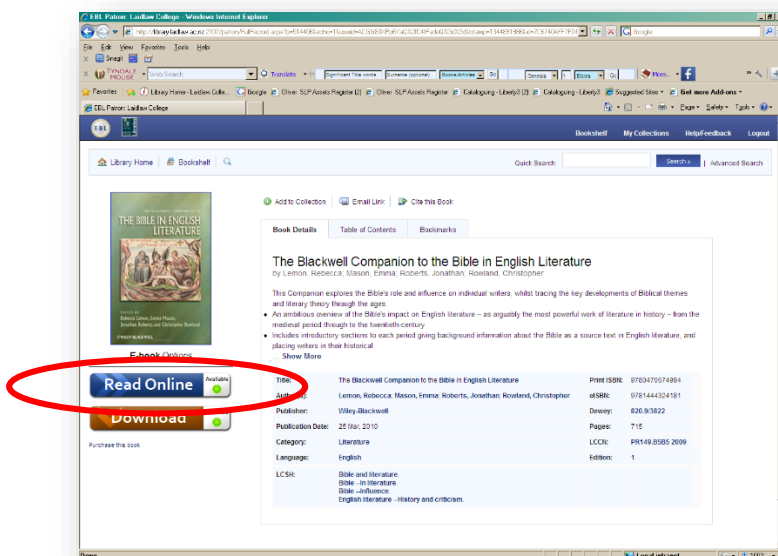
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Chapter One: Why Do It At All?

Theology is about God. It is about that which is most worth living or dying for. For practical purposes then, theology deals with those things which are most important in our lives.

We use the skill of theology all the time — either well or badly.

Many people nowadays think of "theology" as something beyond them. It seems to be too difficult, or too abstract, or it's better to leave it to the experts. Somehow, somewhere, someone has misled them. Theology is no more difficult than any of the other life-skills that we can and need to acquire. Those who think that it is too difficult have been cheated— or perhaps it is just that no one has ever shown them how.

Acquiring the skill of doing theology does take some effort. It also needs some time set aside for it. But given a willingness to spend some time and some effort, it is not only possible but relatively easy. The only really difficult part of it is that it may, and very likely will, finish up changing our lives. Life may never be the same again. That is something we need to be prepared for when we take up doing theology.

In any case, none of us really has any choice. This is because we all do theology anyway. We do it every time we make a moral decision, every time we decide one action is more worthwhile than another, every time we make a stand on anything, every time we make a commitment. All these decisions and stands involve, whether consciously or unconsciously, a theology of what is most important or valuable or urgent in human living. It is not a question then of whether or not we do theology. It is a question of whether we do it fairly badly or whether we do it fairly well.

Moving From An Implicit To An Explicit Theology

We need to keep moving our theology all the time from an implicit to a more explicit state.

Most of our theology is carried out implicitly. We make our decisions based on what we think at the time is the most appropriate action to take. But often we are unsure just why such a decision was made in such a way. If we were lucky enough to have been brought up by almost perfect parents and relatives, if our schooling placed a high value on morality and practised it, and if our cultural environment also puts a high value on truth and justice, then the chances are that such an implicit theology will serve us quite well. Without having to think about it too much, we may very well be making good moral decisions anyway. Our implicit theology may thus be in good working order.

Unfortunately, however, for most of us our families have not all been perfect, and our schooling and cultural environment is not all permeated by justice, truth and love. The implicit theology that we have absorbed from them is likely to contain a lot of holes and a lot of distortions. It is the recognition of this incomplete and distorted condition of our implicit theology that gives rise to the search for a more explicit theology.

Our decisions about the worth and the goodness or badness of our actions become more explicit when we look more carefully and more critically at what we do and what is done to us. Explicit theology is thus a way of becoming more reflective and more self-critical about what we do and what we undergo.

We never do this all at once however. Our theology does not leap suddenly from being all implicit to being all explicit. It is a process which takes place over time, sometimes fast and sometimes slow. We do it bit by bit and are never quite finished. But at any point we can see that progress has been made and we never want to go back to the way it was before. We do theology in an explicit sense, rather than simply live out our lives with good intentions, when we begin the journey across this dimly lit borderland from an almost completely implicit towards a much more explicit theology.

Christian Theology

If theology is the skill by which we make our decisions about good and bad, about what is worthwhile and what is worthless, then there are many kinds of theology. There are in fact many different bases upon which people make their life decisions. Most obviously there are many religions. Islam provides a different basis from that of Hinduism, or Christianity, or Taoism. This still leaves open the question of whether some or all of them might ultimately be worshipping the same God and of whether they may come to the same ethical conclusions.

Of the many kinds of theology, we focus here on specifically Christian theology.

There are also many philosophies and ideologies which offer bases for life's fundamental attitudes and ethical decision making. Some of these refer explicitly to God and some do not. Even where they deliberately refrain from speaking of God or deny that there is a God, they may still be like theology in that they provide a basis for life decisions. Much less explicitly, economic and political policies, medical ethics, judicial systems, industrial practices, environmental management and all such important aspects of human social life are expressions of underlying, usually implicit, theologies. One of the very important things that an explicit theology does is to try to render public and obvious the implicit theologies which underlie our personal lives and our social institutions whatever the derivation or the denomination of those implicit theologies.

In order to do theology explicitly however, we have to be very explicit about the basis on which we do that theology itself. We cannot do theology explicitly if we conceal the Islamic, or Buddhist, or Christian, or existential, or Marxist basis for that theology. And the results may very well come out differently depending on which of these is in fact the basis for making our evaluations.

What I shall attempt to do here is to work through a way of doing theology that is explicitly Christian. In making this specification we acknowledge that there are other ways of doing theology, and that there are other kinds of theology. Christian theology is based primarily on the Christian scriptures as a special source of divine wisdom. The way a person or a community comes to accept that one source of wisdom is sufficiently reliable to be the basis for a life commitment is not something we can deal with here. A reliance on the Bible is a stance already adopted before we enter into the process of doing Christian theology. Similarly one might place reliance on the Quran, or on the traditions of the ancients, or on Reason, or on private revelations, or on social consensus, or on the authority of scholars. Should we want to re-examine that basic reliance itself, we would have to use a different process and a different starting point from the one we are using here. That is a question which would have to be dealt with elsewhere.

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Theologies Done Elsewhere

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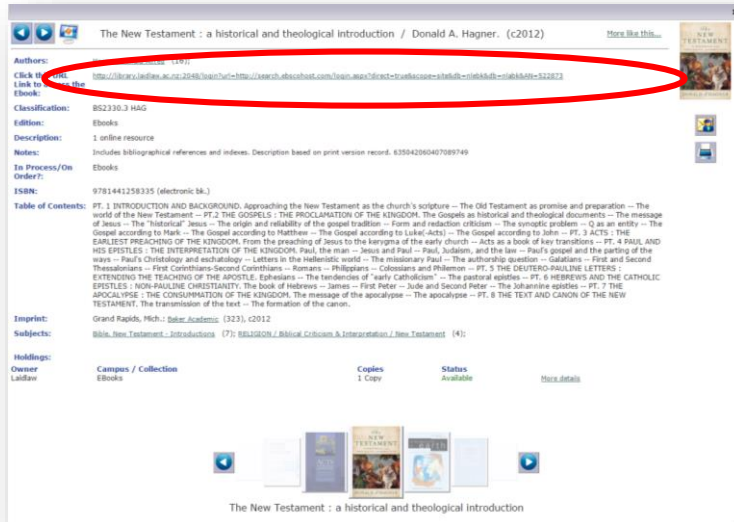
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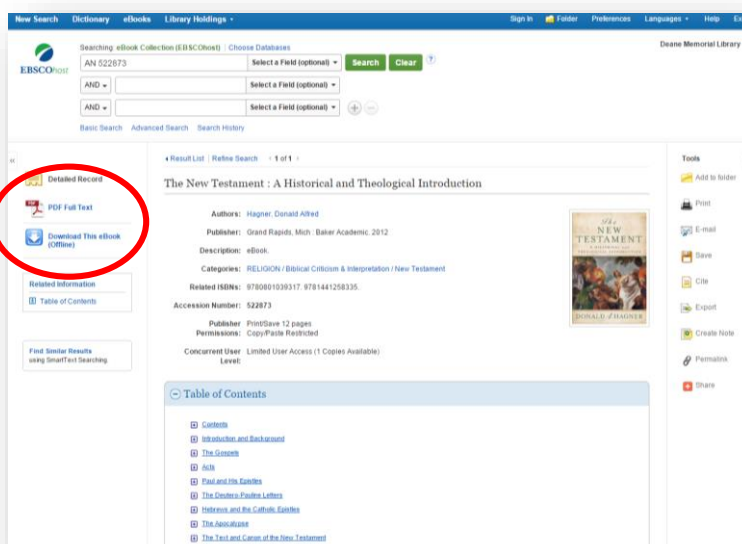

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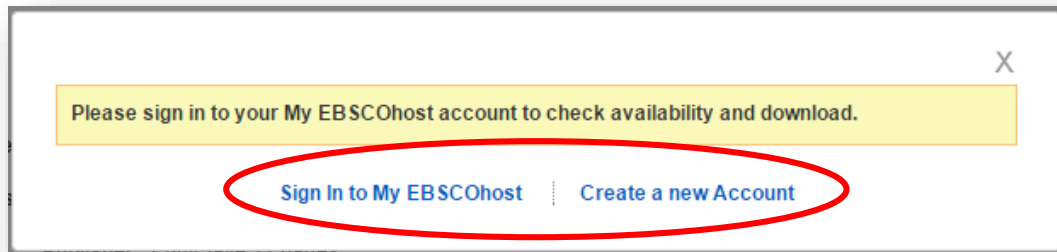
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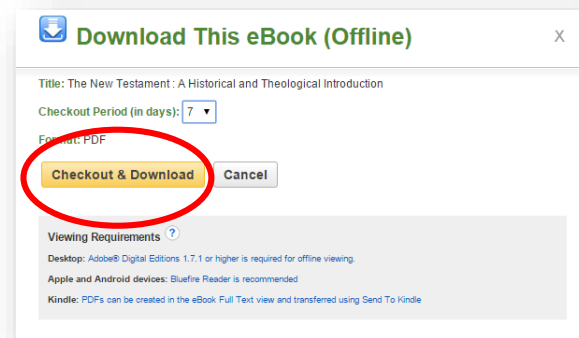
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Adobe Digital Editions - Doing Theology Ourselves

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◄ Library

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In any case, none of us really has any choice. This is because we all do theology anyway. We do it every time we make a moral decision, every time we decide one action is more worthwhile than another, every time we make a stand on anything, every time we make a commitment. All these decisions and stands involve, whether consciously or unconsciously, a theology of what is most important or valuable or urgent in human living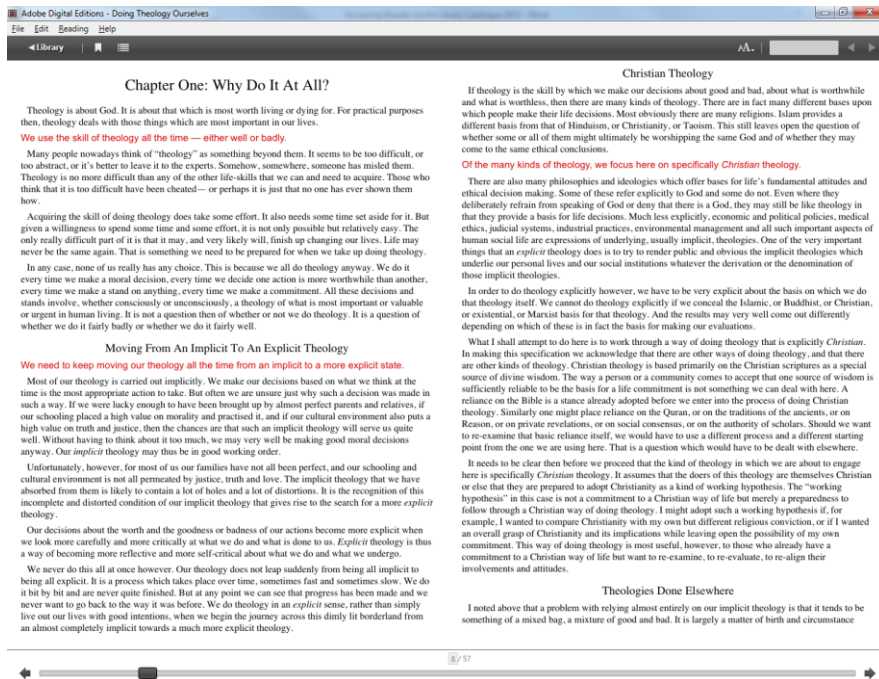. It is not a question then of whether or not we do theology. It is a question of whether we do it fairly badly or whether we do it fairly well.

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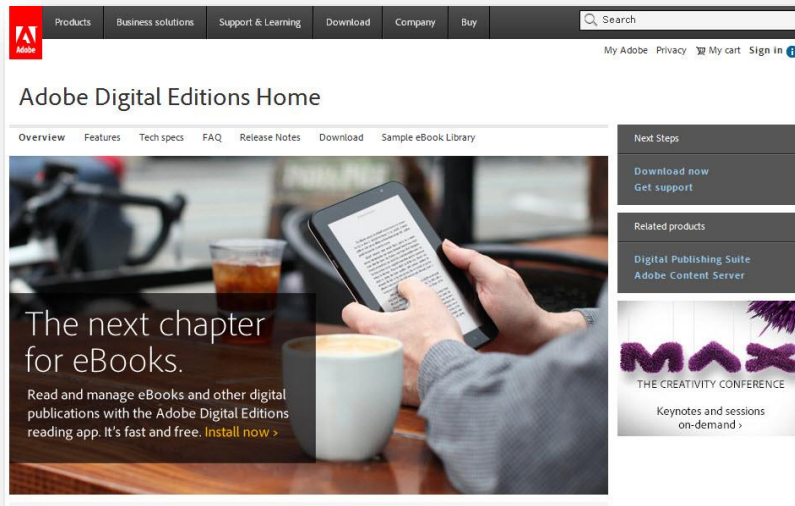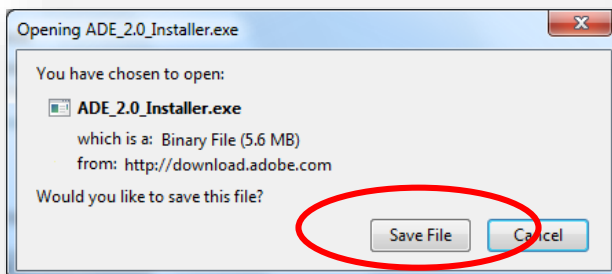

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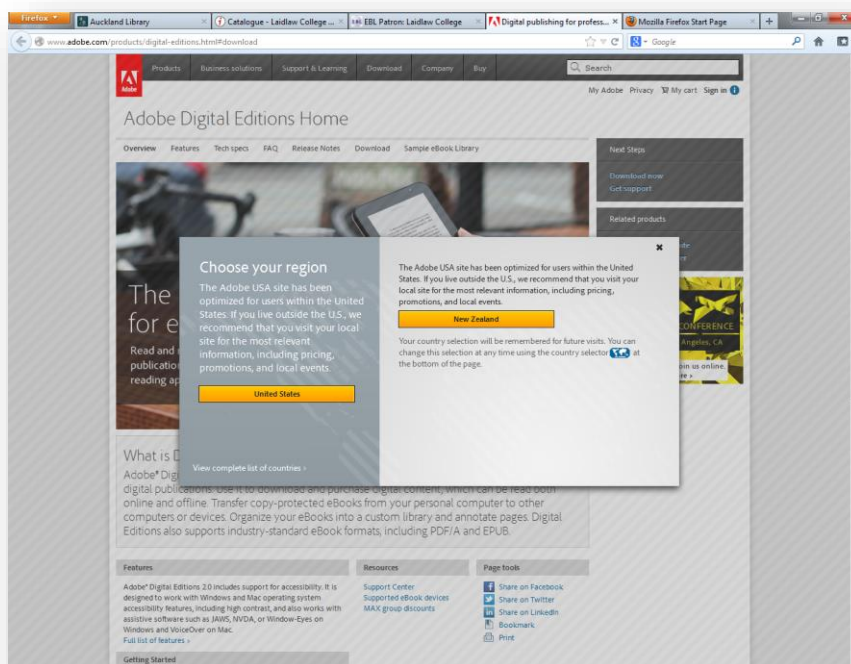
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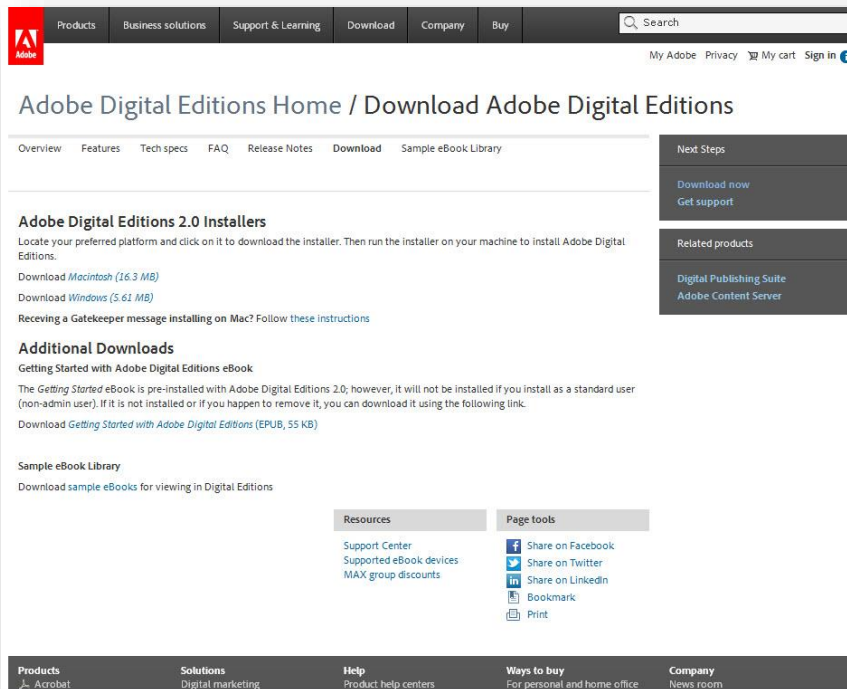
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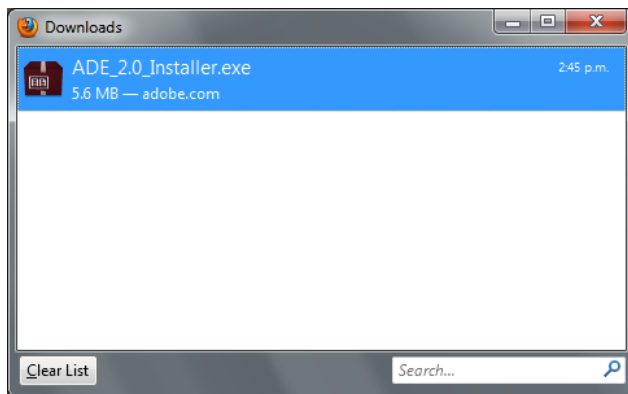
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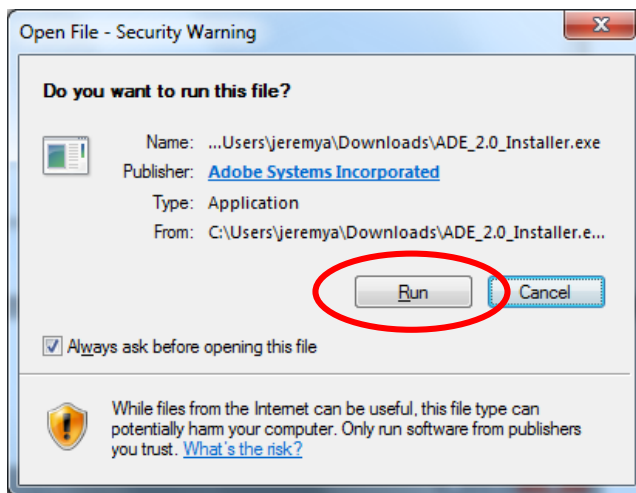
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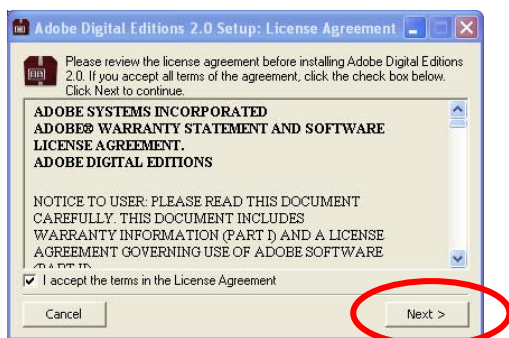
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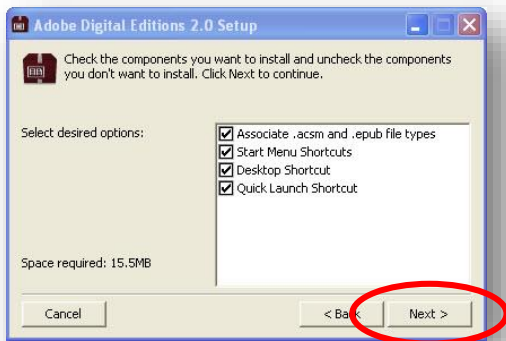
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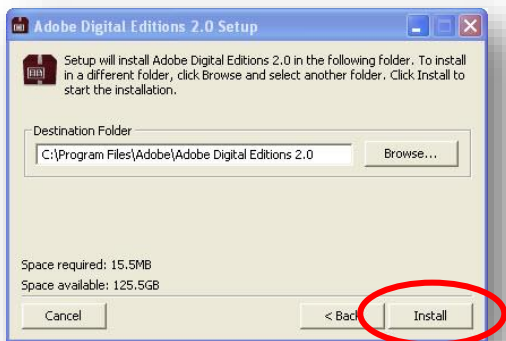
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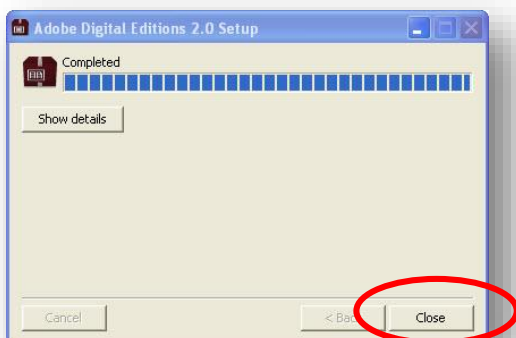
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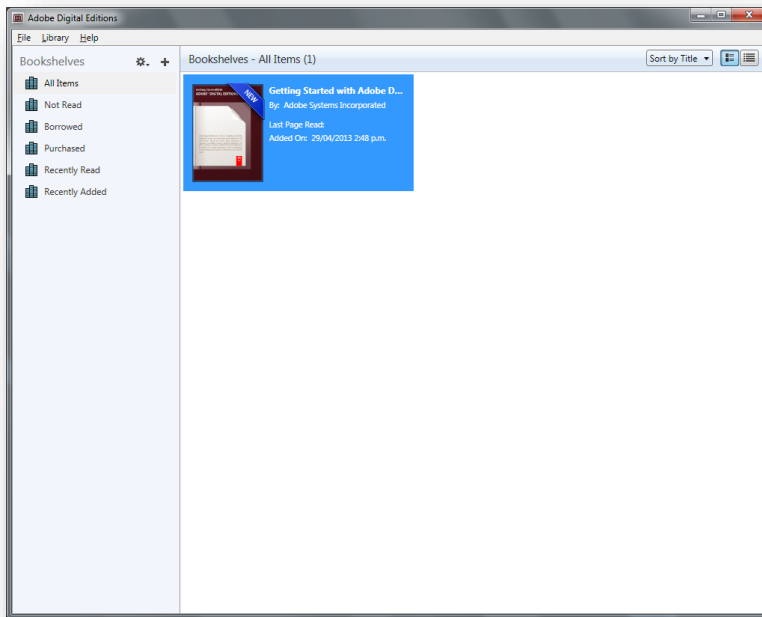
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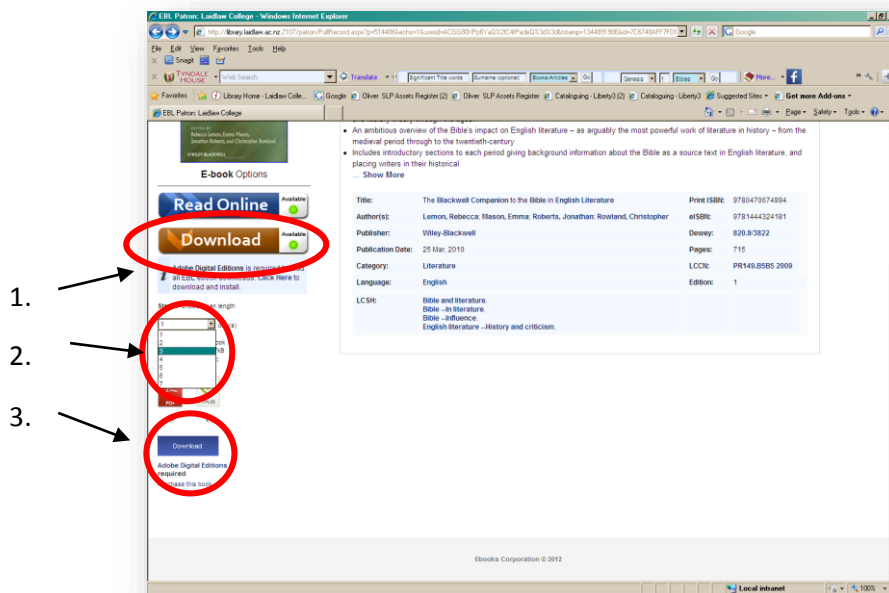
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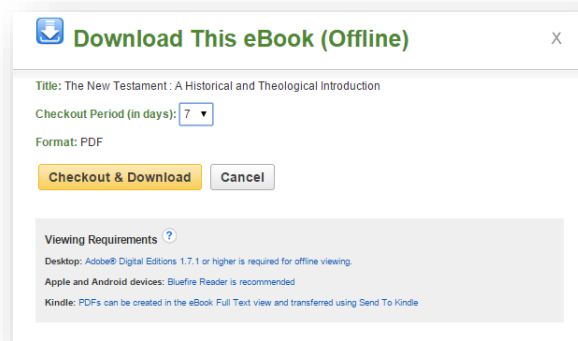
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