



# INTRODUCING PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

Mission, Ministry, and the  
Life of the Church

PETE WARD



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# Introduction

Any introduction to a field of study always has two purposes. The first is to help those starting out in the area to orient themselves and grasp the basic ideas, methods, and writers in the field. The second is to attempt to shape the field of study by drawing attention to certain ways of thinking and by advocating a particular approach over another. While writing this book, I have continually had these two purposes in mind. They represent for me two different audiences. One audience is the general reader. This might be a student taking a course in practical theology, or it might be a practitioner who wants to develop her skills in theological reflection. The other audience is my friends and colleagues who teach practical theology. I want to address these two groups directly in this introduction.

To those exploring practical theology for the first time, I have one or two things to say before we get going. I have tried from the first chapter to present practical theology as something that is already very much part of the life of the Christian community and of the practitioner. Chapter 1 introduces this way of thinking in much more depth, but even if you think you are new to practical theology, you are already an expert in it if you are a part of the Christian community. Just by being a believer and being in the church, you have been introduced to sophisticated and perfectly usable ways of doing practical theology. This doesn't mean you have nothing to learn! The point is that you are not new to this. Also, a field of study like practical theology has a whole host of different writers and thinkers, and as you get into this book you will be introduced to some of these. In several of the chapters I have given samples of the writing and thinking that characterize the academic field of practical theology. My hope is that you will

find some of these ideas helpful and exciting and as a result will explore more deeply by reading these books yourself. That said, I understand that some of the things I talk about will not be helpful, and some of the writers I talk about you will almost certainly disagree with. You are not alone. I don't agree with many of the writers I have introduced in this book. They are not here because I think they are right but because they represent ways of thinking that are important—whether you agree with them or not.

In an academic context, the expectation is that we know the whole field and that we are able to present a critical and well-informed argument for the approach we adopt. This is a challenge when starting out in a new area of study, but I have tried to give some guidelines along the way. Of course guidelines are never neutral, including my own, so I want to signal at the start that I have a particular point of view concerning how we should approach practical theology. If you teach practical theology or you are familiar with the field, then you will be interested in and perhaps a little concerned about the approach I take in this introduction. To lay my cards on the table, both for those who are new to the field and for my colleagues in the practical theology world, I will set out what I think is distinctive in this book and how I am attempting to reshape our discipline.

### **Reimagining the Clerical Paradigm**

In recent years, practical theology has wanted to see itself as not primarily concerned with the training of ministers. Practical theology, it is argued, should move beyond what has been referred to as the “clerical paradigm.” I understand the reasons for this and have some sympathy for this view—for instance, where there is a concern to develop a public form of theology that can speak beyond the church. At the same time, there are problems with the wholesale rejection of ministry and the church as a context for practical theology. The key problem with the rejection of the clerical paradigm is that it leaves practical theology without a clear reference point in practice and, indeed, in the life of the church. So while practical theology need not have as its only role the training of clergy, it does need to be fully rooted in the everyday practice of the Christian faith in the church and in the world.

There is, then, a ministerial and a missional dynamic in the way that I have presented the discipline, and this context takes priority in the way

that practical theology should be approached. The academic practice of theology is therefore located in relation to the ongoing life of the church. Practical theology is and can be done by those with a wide variety of faith backgrounds—or none. Practical theology done outside the context of a Christian community needs to operate in a very different way than what I have set out in this book. My concern, however, has been to develop a way of doing practical theology that is fundamentally ecclesial and theological in nature, and this introduction assumes a particular relation to commitment and practice.

### **Starting with the Everyday and the Ordinary**

The orientation of practical theology toward the mission and ministry of the church is both methodological and substantive. It is methodological because the ongoing life of the church is itself practical theology. Christian believers and ministers come to the discipline already formed as skilled and highly able practical theologians. Students and others who study the discipline, simply by being part of the ongoing life of the church, have absorbed and participated in sophisticated and effective ways of doing practical theology before they walk into the classroom or even before they pick up this book.

Practical theology, therefore, must start by first encouraging students to recognize how they already exercise their ministry and Christian lives by making use of practical theology in their everyday lives. This everyday or ordinary practical theology is not replaced by formal study, but it is enhanced by it. Practical theology must therefore set out to build on, rather than primarily seek to critique, ways of thinking and operating that are common in church contexts. This requires the practical theologian to have close engagement and empathy with churches of all kinds and with the ways individuals in these churches habitually think theologically.

### **Reembracing Applied Theology**

Practical theologians have for some time now presented the discipline as quite distinct from forms of theology that are applied, where “applied” refers to kinds of theology that work from doctrinal or biblical thinking toward the practice of the church. Practical theology, it is argued, reverses

this process by starting from practice and experience and then moving toward theological formulation. This positioning of practical theology is problematic and mistaken for three reasons. First, in the everyday life of the church, most reflection on practice takes place through a deep engagement with the Scriptures. Christian communities have historically renewed themselves, critiqued their practice, and generated ways of witness in the world by reflecting on the Bible in sermons, Bible studies, and personal study. It is simply counterintuitive (and flies in the face of proven experience) to confront students in the classroom with a discipline that says you can only reflect properly when you start with practice.

The second reason I think the rejection of applied theology is mistaken is more technical and academic. Starting points are methodologically problematic. So, for instance, even if we say that we must start by reflecting on experience, the truth is that we have each been shaped already by a community context. This means that we carry into the reflection on experience a theologically shaped perspective. The same observation holds true in relation to what we have called applied theology. So while it may appear that we are starting with the Scriptures, in fact we bring our experience of life and of the church to the Scriptures. Doctrine or experience cannot ever be bracketed out of the equation because we each carry them together within ourselves. The experience of the Christian community and the doctrine of the community are in us and have formed us. This is what I have called the “affective gravitational pull of the Church.”<sup>1</sup> “Affective” refers to the feelings and emotions the church imparts to us. These act as a force in our lives. The gravitational pull of the church is both doctrinal and experiential, and practical theology needs to accept that methods set out in the classroom and in the pages of an academic text are never as clean or straightforward when they are used by people in the context of the church. The affective gravitational pull means that starting points become inevitably blurred.

The third reason I think the rejection of applied theology is a mistake is that the turn to experience as a starting point for theology is a political move that puts practical theology firmly on the liberal side of the debates in modern theology. I will explore this in more depth in the next section.

1. Ward, “Blueprint Ecclesiology.”



## Moving beyond Liberal Theology

Modern theology has a basic fault line running through it between liberal theology, which prioritizes experience over doctrine, and conservative theology, which prioritizes doctrine over experience. Both the rejection of applied forms of theology and the uncritical acceptance of practical theology as distinct because it starts with practice are problematic because these views situate the discipline solely within the liberal tradition. This is a problem not because I would advocate an uncritical conservative approach. Rather, I argue for a collapse of these two distinctions—the liberal and the conservative—into one another. The distinction is therefore artificial.

Arguing that the discipline of practical theology starts from experience is problematic because it prejudices the conversation and effectively outlaws important and constructive theological resources and voices on an ideological basis. I am not objecting here to a critical choice of sources in doing theology, nor am I rejecting liberal theological approaches *per se*. My point is not so much that this position is argued for in practical theology as that it is asserted as the very basis for the discipline; as such, liberal theology is imposed by force or inserted into the minds of students by stealth. I think students need to be introduced to a range of approaches and methods, and then they should be allowed to make up their own minds. Doctrinal ways of doing practical theology need to be considered alongside those that start from experience, and both should be regarded as possible ways of approaching the discipline.

## Expanding the Canon of Practical Theology

In this book I adopt a broad understanding of practical theology. I define practical theology as any way of thinking that takes both practice and theology seriously. This is not really a definition; rather, it is a decision to include within the accepted academic work in practical theology a whole range of material that might not normally be seen as belonging to the discipline. This is again an attempt to reverse the tendency whereby practical theology limits itself to those who have been part of the academic guild. This concentration has come about because practical theologians have felt for some time that they are marginalized in the academy. This has led them to seek to bolster the position of their

discipline by creating a convention that rewards and supports a way of working that continually refers to the key figures within the discipline. This orientation toward a particular canon has been reinforced by academic conferences and journals intended to build the discipline.

I am very much in sympathy with these developments within the discipline. The problem, however, is that even as practical theology has grown, a range of moves toward practice and culture have been made within the wider theological world. I say more about these developments later in the book, but the key insight here is that some of the most exciting and innovative work in practical theology might not actually be done by people who call themselves practical theologians. There is, then, a much larger conversation across the theological world that the academic discipline of practical theology needs to acknowledge and place itself within.

### **Developing a Theology of Practical Theology**

It might seem odd, but I am not sure that practical theologians have spent terribly much time developing a theology of the discipline. One of the reasons sometimes given for this is that starting from experience to some extent precludes a theological prolegomena. But this is actually not the case, because the decision to start from experience, as I have just pointed out, is itself a theological move. So a deep and pervasive theology underlies most practical theology, but it is not usually made explicit. Because it is largely implicit, there is a tendency for this theology to be assumed rather than set out as a position. To avoid falling into the same trap in this book, I have set out a theology of practical theology. My starting point has been to explore the nature of theology as the knowledge of God. I argue that knowledge of God is distinct from other kinds of knowledge because God cannot be known in the same way that we know about other things. Knowing God is participatory in nature. In other words, the practice of theology is sharing in the life of God.

### **Encountering God in Prayer and Worship**

The theological approach to practical theology that I advocate assumes a relational engagement with God as the basis for knowing. Specifically, I see practical theology as situated in an ongoing and regular encounter with

God through prayer and worship. These practices are not simply the field for research and study; they are also the very basis on which that study is made possible. The reason for this is my understanding of practical theology as a discipline that takes both practice and theology seriously. Taking theology seriously means fostering a continual relationship with God. Worship and prayer is the basis for practical theology because it enables a theology that is relational and that starts with encounter and wonder. Worship, then, is not simply affirmation of belief; it is the encounter with what is beyond theological expression. Worship engenders a knowing and not knowing that develops humility as well as a confidence in the practice of theology.

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# 1

## Practical Theology as the Ordinary Life of the Church

“So what kind of theologian are you?” asked the US immigration officer with my passport in his hand.

“A practical theologian,” I said.

“I didn’t think any theology was practical,” he replied.

I was not sure if this had to do strictly with security, but I spoke my mind. “I like to think that all theology can be practical.”

He smiled in a way that seemed to imply I was clearly deluded, and he let me into the country.

Whatever the immigration officer thought, there is such a thing as practical theology—with its own distinctive theories, methods, and literature. This book is a guide to this field. In the 1950s one of the key figures in the contemporary development of practical theology in the United States, Seward Hiltner, talked about a “pastoral perspective” in theology. What he meant was that there was a way of seeing that came from pastoral practice.<sup>1</sup> The pastoral perspective, he argued, gives a distinctive shape to theological study. So while there are the traditional theological disciplines of biblical studies, church history, Christian ethics, and systematic theology, there

1. Hiltner, *Preface to Pastoral Theology*. Hiltner said there were other perspectives that come from the practice of the church, but his main focus was on pastoral ministry.

is also a way of doing theology that arises from and seeks to inform the pastoral practice of the church. Those who adopt this pastoral perspective do biblical studies and systematic theology and so on, but they do them in a distinctive way. They foreground the questions and issues that come out of their ministry. So the pastoral perspective involves a kind of theology that tries to critique and inform the pastoral practice of the church.

In more recent times, there has been a tendency to downplay the link to pastoral ministry. Practical theology, it has been argued, should never be the sole preserve of clergy, but Hiltner's suggestion that there is a pastoral perspective makes a great deal of sense. This perspective is not limited to professional clergy or to pastoral ministry; it is much broader than that. It is a perspective that comes from the practice of faith in all its forms and with all its questions and challenges.

### Theology and Practice

Saying that all theology can be pastorally oriented or practical is one thing; working through what this actually means is another thing entirely. It is, for instance, quite possible to turn this assertion on its head and say that Christian practice itself is inherently and profoundly theological. If theology can be practical, then practice is also theological. Practical theology is situated in this web of interrelated possibilities and issues. The truth is that the word "theology" itself is complex. When we try to combine theology with practice, things become even more complicated. Complexity is not necessarily a problem to be solved; it is just the way things are. Rowan Williams says that the theologian always starts "in the middle of things."<sup>2</sup> Being in the middle means that there is no defined starting point or clear methodology for theology. We are simply where we are. Most significantly, every believer is situated in the life, thought, and practices of a community. Theologians learn to think about God by sharing in a communal conversation that characterizes church. So while practical theology may be complex and at times hard to pin down, a clue to making any sense of it lies in what it means to be in the middle of the Christian community.

American practical theologian Bonnie Miller-McLemore identifies four uses of the term practical theology. Practical theology, she says, is an aca-

2. Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology*, xii.

demical discipline among scholars, and it is an activity of faith undertaken by believers. Practical theology is also a method for thinking and a subject area in a curriculum. These different “enterprises,” as she calls them, are distinct. They have different audiences and ways of operating, but they are also interconnected. So while practical theology refers to the activity in the church in which believers “sustain a life of reflective faith in the everyday,” it is also a specific method or a way of understanding theology in practice.<sup>3</sup> This method shapes the way that practical theology is taught as part of the curriculum in theological education.

Each of these ways of understanding practical theology suggests a different location, from congregation and community to daily life, and from the library to fieldwork and the classroom. These four understandings, says Miller-McLemore, are not to be seen as mutually exclusive. They are connected and interdependent. Together they show the range and complexity of practical theology. “Practical theology is multivalent. It appears in a broad array of spaces and places.” Yet although it is clearly a discipline within the academy with related methods and curriculum, the ultimate purpose of practical theology, she says, lies in the pursuit of an “embodied Christian faith.”<sup>4</sup> Practical theology in its different shapes and forms finds its basic orientation in the life of the church. It is never an end in itself. So while it may have the usual kinds of academic expectations and ways of working, it is always operating in relation to the ongoing life of the Christian community. Practical theology has an ecclesial perspective and purpose.

Rowan Williams’s sense that theology always starts “in the middle” supports the idea that church is a key starting point for practical theology. Theological thought, he suggests, operates in three different ways: celebration, communication, and critique. Theology begins as celebration. To celebrate, says Williams, is to make use of language to express, in the deepest and most profound way, the richness of God. Celebration is seen in liturgy, in hymn writing, and in preaching, but it is also present in theological writing. Celebration is seen in the writing of Dante or the poetry of the fourteenth-century English peasant William Langland. It is in conventions of Byzantine iconography, and it can also be seen in some

3. Miller-McLemore, *Companion to Practical Theology*, 5.

4. *Ibid.*

contemporary worship songs.<sup>5</sup> Orthodox theology, says Williams, operates primarily as celebration.

Celebration, however, has a tendency to become locked in its own expression. So while there is a rigor and discipline to this work, theology as celebration can become absorbed or frozen in the cross-referencing of symbols and images. When this happens, there is a need for talk of God that attempts to persuade and commend. This is theology as communication.

Communicative theology attempts to “witness to the gospel’s capacity for being at home in more than one cultural environment.” It is a theology that sets out to show how this gospel can emerge from a sustained engagement with complex areas of thought with confidence. Communicative theology can be seen throughout Christian history. It is there in the work of the apologists Clement and Origen as they sought to “colonize” Stoic and Platonic philosophy with the Christian faith. It is there in the early English poetry of the “Dream of the Rood,” which connects a theology of the cross to Germanic themes of the hero, and it is there in more recent times in the work of liberation theologians. Communicative theology, for Williams, “involves a considerable act of trust in the theological tradition, a confidence that the fundamental categories of belief are robust enough to survive the drastic experience of immersion in other ways of constructing and construing the world.”<sup>6</sup>

Complexity and clarity have their respective problems. Communication can oversimplify or get lost in the terms and frameworks that have been borrowed from the surrounding culture. Celebration can become a closed and self-congratulatory system. Critical theology operates as a corrective to these tendencies. In the early church, Williams says, alongside the generation of doctrine was the apophatic tradition, also known as negative theology, which is an approach to theology that emphasizes the mystery of God. Negative theology, says Williams, plays a significant role simply by offering a warning note alongside the elaboration of doctrine.<sup>7</sup> Theology in a critical mode can be either conservative or liberal. It can advocate a reevaluation of doctrine or the abandonment of long-held positions. Critical theology is not necessarily an end in itself; its purpose is, for instance, to generate a better or more nuanced kind of celebratory theological expression.

5. Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology*, xiii.

6. *Ibid.*, xiv.

7. *Ibid.*, xv.



The suggestion that practical theology is evident in the life of the church as celebration, communication, and critique is significant. It introduces the idea that practical theology can be detected and undertaken in a wide range of expressions. So for instance, communicative theology might be seen in sermons and doctrines but is also evident in academic writing, hymn writing, and theater. Celebratory theology is evident in the visual arts, poetry, abstract theological writing, and many other places. Critical theology similarly exists in academic writing, but it can also be found in spiritual practices and contemplative prayer. So Williams does not limit theology to an academic discipline alone but sees it as part of the everyday conversation and communal life of the church.<sup>8</sup>

Williams's understanding of theology offers a nuanced and creative new perspective on practical theology. It expands Miller-McLemore's idea that practical theology exists as four enterprises. So the practical theology that can be seen in the ongoing life of the church might be at times celebration or communication, but it can also be critique. The methods that characterize practical theology might, in turn, be expanded to make room for the ways in which poets, artists, and hymn writers construct visions of God. Practical theology should never be reduced to a topic for an assignment or a thesis for examination. The academic curriculum needs to start by exploring how believers are already and always practical theologians because they are in the "middle." So, while there is a discipline that we call practical theology, with teachers, conferences, and academic journals, these only make sense as they are seen in relation to the church. This basically is Hiltner's point. There is a perspective that comes from being engaged in the life of the church. This perspective for Hiltner is "pastoral"; we might add "missional" or "political," but the point is that these are derived from a location within the Christian community. This is what makes practical theology *practical*, and, more crucially, it is what makes practical theology *theological*.

### Practical Theology in the Life of the Church

Most people, even if they have been part of the church for some time, have never heard that there is such a thing as practical theology. So the

8. Ibid.

first encounter they have with the term comes when they sign up for some kind of theological study. This experience of practical theology as part of formal theological education actually gives a false impression because, as we have been exploring, Christians are already practical theologians simply because they are “in the middle” of the celebration, communication, and critical conversation that are characteristic of the Christian community. Church life makes each of us into wise, skilled, and highly accomplished theologians. This is what American practical theologian Craig Dykstra calls “ecclesial imagination.”<sup>9</sup> Communities and individuals, says Dykstra, have a wisdom that comes from a shared life and history. This wisdom means that before they ever encounter the academic discipline of practical theology, believers are theologians.

At its heart, there is something ordinary and everyday about practical theology. One of the leading practical theologians in the United Kingdom, Jeff Astley, speaks about the “ordinary theology” of believers.<sup>10</sup> From the writing of Bonnie Miller-McLemore and Rowan Williams it is clear that theology operates as a natural and everyday part of the life of the Christian community. Theology at the level of practice is “ordinary.” It is the basic way of speaking and living in the Christian community. Being a part of a church inevitably means that we share in an ongoing conversation about God. By being a disciple, believers are always engaged in trying to make sense of what it means to live the Christian life. So just by being active in the life of the church and by seeking to express a faithful Christian life in communities and the wider society, Christians are doing practical theology. There are a number of practices that can be used to further explore ordinary practical theology in the everyday life of the church. In the next section we examine five of these practices: remembering, absorbing, noticing, selecting/editing, and expressing.

### *Remembering*

Week in and week out, through Bible reading, preaching, singing, praying, and celebrating the Eucharist, Christians remember. Remembering expresses how the church is shaped and formed by the gospel. In worship, the doctrinal and biblical ways of speaking are embodied and lifted up in

9. Dykstra, “Pastoral and Ecclesial Imagination,” 41.

10. Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, 62–63.

performance. Worship is a practical theology, but it challenges any clear divide between practice and theology. A good example of this is the way that many churches sing contemporary worship songs. The lyrics of a particular song may be what Williams calls a “celebratory theology”; in other words, they may be a profound and moving expression of the being of God. They may also be a deliberately communicative kind of theologizing designed to convict and convince.

John Wesley, for instance, saw his hymns as a means to teach the faith. Yet what are obviously doctrinal or theological expressions in song lyrics are transformed in the act of singing. Singing animates and brings doctrine alive. It is not simply that music connects theological ideas to emotions. Something physical happens as we sing. We draw the words into ourselves and we form them with our own bodies. We feel them vibrating in the air as they are made sound by the bodies around us.

Songs and singing build communities in mysterious ways. Community itself exists as a cohabitation with those in the church, but we are also indwelt by the presence of God. Singing celebrates and enacts community. As the community sings, it remembers, and as it remembers, Jesus becomes present by the power of the Spirit. Singing as a form of remembering, therefore, is more than simply a cognitive recollection.

Singing is one of many forms of ordinary practical theology. Australian practical theologian Terry Veling says that theology only becomes comprehensible when we see it as something that indwells practice. “As the Christian community engages in the practices of prayer, study, hospitality, forgiveness,” says Veling, “we begin to deepen our understanding of what the kingdom of God is all about, and what it means to be a people of God.”<sup>11</sup> Veling is talking about the ways in which communities collectively and individually engage in practices of remembering. Remembering is fundamentally about the gospel story. Through prayer, singing, and other kinds of practice, Christians do not simply recall what has happened in the past. The story rises up, envelops us, and takes us into itself. The presence of Christ through the Spirit lifts us and carries us in the story. As this happens, the believer is opened up to the future, transformed by the hope of the kingdom. This kind of practical theology is fundamental and basic to the life of the church. In fact, without it there would be no church at all.

11. Veling, *Practical Theology*, 4.

### *Absorbing*

One of the most influential figures in practical theology, Don Browning, describes the practice of the church as being “theory laden.” “By using the phrase *theory-laden*,” he says, “I mean to rule out in advance the widely held assumption that theory is distinct from practice. All our practices, even our religious practices, have theories behind and within them.”<sup>12</sup> In other words, church life is filled with ideas about God. These ideas, or theories, are embedded in communal practice. Church practice is theological not just in the things that are said but also in the way communities share in the life of God. Eating meals together is theological, sitting in pews is theological, interacting on Facebook is theological. The life of every congregation is distinctively influenced and shaped by particular ways of understanding and seeking to express a theological vision. Churches are theology laden. So just by being part of a community, we start to share in the rich theological story of the church.

Churches are laden with different kinds of theory and different kinds of practice. These differences make up distinctive traditions within church life. By being part of a community, we internalize and absorb these particular ways of being Christian. So we might start to identify ourselves as Baptist, Pentecostal, Catholic, Lutheran, or Anglican. Alongside formal denominational kinds of identity are ways that Christians understand themselves that are more specific. These might include labels such as liberal, charismatic, orthodox, progressive, or conservative. It is not at all unusual for Christians to have a very close identification with a particular tradition. These kinds of identification—and we all carry them with us to some extent—are evidence of the ways in which, through sharing in communal life, believers start to absorb theological perspectives. Our sense of who we are as Christians comes out of what we have absorbed. We are, as Williams says, theologians who start by being “in the middle of things.”<sup>13</sup>

Absorbed theology is theology that has made the shift from something that is external and expressed by others to something that is part of us. So just as we see the life of the church to be theory laden, so we see our own lives as Christians in a similar way. Practical theologian Edward

12. Browning, *Fundamental Practical Theology*, 6.

13. Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology*, xii.

Farley talks about the ways in which theology becomes a virtue or a habituated part of the believer. He uses a term for this that originates with Aristotle: “habitus.” In medieval times, says Farley, theology was understood as something that became a habitus, a knowledge that became a habit, “an enduring orientation and dexterity of the soul, . . . a cognitive disposition and orientation of the soul, a knowledge of God and what God reveals.”<sup>14</sup>

The idea of habitus focuses our attention on the extent to which “theology” is inherently practical. We absorb the knowledge of God, and in turn we find ourselves absorbed into the life of God. We take in theology through our participation in the life of the Christian community, through fellowship, preaching, missional action in the world, singing songs, and the sacraments; as we do so, this sharing takes us up into the life of God. Absorbed theology in this sense is the most basic and ordinary form of practical theology. We live out of our absorbed theology. Practical theology in all of its manifestations starts from this residue within us that has been shaped by the life of the Christian community.

### *Noticing*

The habitus of faith not only shapes practice; it also influences the way believers view the world. Through prayer, Bible reading, worship, and fellowship, Christians develop ways of seeing. A good example of this is intercessory prayer. Intercession is often very personal. Many Christians have prayer lists that act as a reminder to pray regularly for those who are sick or who have particular problems. Believers may differ on how exactly they see the Spirit working or God’s grace having an effect, but this kind of prayer is an everyday and ordinary part of the Christian life. Prayer is an enacted practical theology. In many churches, prayers for healing form a regular part of worship. This can be an extension of the Eucharistic practice of “going up to communion,” or in more charismatic churches, services may end with a time in which people are prayed for by a designated ministry team. These kinds of prayer ministries embody an ordinary form of theology. They perform and make present the practical theology of a God who sees and, above all, cares. Praying for others becomes a way of noticing suffering and hardship.

14. Farley, *Theologia*, 35.

In public worship, intercession combines the personal and the political. Churches habitually pray for the world. We call to mind the images we have seen on the television screen and place them at the feet of God. We struggle to make sense of the senseless, the tragic, and the downright evil. Praying for the world is a corrective to the current emphasis on spiritual experience and “getting the most out of church.” Intercessory prayer acts as a moral compass in Christian liturgy. Praying for those who are in need and for the world in which we live develops habits of seeing. These habits, because they are formed through prayer, are infused with the gospel. In this way, noticing becomes a practical theology that is at the same time a spiritual practice. Noticing and praying, of course, often lead to action. Christians give money and time to charity; they are active in volunteering and in campaigning. All of these practices arise from noticing. Seeing comes from a place “in the middle”—in the middle of the Christian community, in the middle of society, and in the middle of the gospel story.

### *Selecting/Editing*

The Christian life is made up of a range of habits and practices that involve making choices. A good example is listening to a sermon. Listening is not just passive. When we listen, we pick up on things said that are of particular interest or relevance to us. At the same time, we also let some of the things said pass us by. We select as we make meaning out of a sermon. Of course it is not just those in the pews who have selected. The preacher has also made choices in writing the sermon. It is not possible, or indeed advisable, to try to say everything about a passage. The preacher has to focus on what she feels God is saying through the readings. She has made a choice between different possible messages. Selecting what to say or not say is one of the most basic kinds of ordinary practical theology.

Selecting doesn't simply involve us in the details of preaching or the content of a sermon. We make choices that are much larger. If we move to a new town, for instance, we have to choose which church we want to attend. This involves selecting between different options. Then there are all the choices that make up life: what career we might follow, how we are going to bring up the kids, how we should spend our retirement, which charities we should support, and so on. Everyone makes choices in life, and Christians generally try to make choices that are shaped by their faith. Making

Christian choices is a complex matter. We might spend quite some time praying, reading the Bible, and talking with friends when we have to make a particularly significant choice. We might even seek out more specialized help in counseling or through reading Christian books. Some people go to events and conferences looking for help in selecting the “right” thing for them. This kind of selecting is a form of critical practical theology.

Closely related to selecting is the practice of editing. There was a time when editing was limited to professionals in the publishing business. So for instance, as new hymnbooks came out, editors were accustomed to updating the lyrics. Verses that were seen as obscure were left out. In our contemporary context, hymns that use overtly male terms are sometimes changed to be more inclusive. With the digitization of songs and hymns, we are now able to do this kind of editing at a much more local level. We can remove lines, write new verses, and change things around as we see fit. In Christian worship more generally, this ability to manipulate and edit prayers and liturgies has become an everyday occurrence. Gone are the days when there was one set prayer book. Ministers have become accustomed to constructing services from a range of different sources available online. Actually, even where services are formally written down in prayer books, ministers have often edited or given things their own particular style. In Pentecostal and charismatic churches, where the liturgy is more informal, worship leaders also act as editors as they make decisions about what song to sing or as they decide to repeat sections in a song or even improvise their own lyrics as the Spirit moves them. So in different ways, Christians are familiar with the notion of editing.

Fundamental to editing is a sense that things can be done differently. To edit, you need not only a familiarity with the particular source, whether songs or liturgical texts, but also the ability to envision something new. Editors, out of habit, recognize that the way it has been so far expressed or the order in which things have been done in the past might be changed and made not just different but better. This too is a kind of theological reflection. Ministers and those involved in leading worship regularly look for ways to learn more and find different perspectives on their practice. There are a great many training courses and conferences on Christian worship as well as web-based resources and magazines. It is likely that very few of these resources identify themselves as practical theology, but that is what they are.



### *Expressing*

Practical theology as expression includes not only all occasions where Christians talk about faith but also the many ways in which faith is lived. Living the life of faith is often called discipleship, an active following of Christ in the everyday. Being a disciple is complex. It involves business ethics and family life, political commitments and lifestyle choices. Christians differ on what precisely it means to be a disciple. Some, for instance, advocate pacifism, and others serve in the armed forces.

The bottom line, however, is that in seeking to be a follower of Christ, every Christian is *expressing* faith. This is a lived and everyday form of practical theology. It involves choices based on an understanding of the gospel and creative ways of operating in the complex and confusing fields of economic, political, and personal life. One way the idea that life is an expression of the gospel has been talked about is through the concept of witness. Witness encapsulates the notion that Christians are called to express their faith in and through their lives. Witness therefore combines the gospel and the embodied, but it is also relational. There are those to whom believers are called to witness. Expression therefore has two reference points. To be a witness, it is necessary to be faithful to Christ, but there is also a calling to communicate in particular places and particular times.

Rowan Williams makes it clear that theological expression takes place in a variety of forms and genres. Expression is not limited to the sermon or the theological treatise. In the everyday life of the church, there are actually a great many ways in which individuals and groups express faith. An example of this is the different ways we talk about the word “church.” Church in common parlance means a building. You go to church or get married in church. But church also refers to the communal life of a congregation. So we hear people saying how much they enjoy being part of the local church or how much they will miss their church when they have to move away. Here it is not so much the building that is being talked about but the fellowship of believers who meet in that place.

Both church as building and church as community are expressions. They are an everyday and material form of practical theology. Church buildings have a theological language or symbolic code woven into the fabric. Different kinds of churches are different kinds of theological expression, from great cathedrals to small chapels. Yet networks of friendship and



care are, in their way, also expressions of faith. In church buildings we see the expression of architects and artists of all kinds. From stained glass windows to plain white walls, faith has an aesthetic and a sensibility in the physical.

Communities likewise express faith in different ways. Some are highly active in campaigning for justice and politics; others hold rather quiet meetings over coffee and cake. Each expresses a practical theology, an interpretation of what faith means as it is lived out in community.

### Reasons to Do Practical Theology

There are all kinds of ways in which the ordinary life of the church involves people doing practical theology. Alongside the everyday kinds of theologizing are times when individuals, groups, and congregations feel the need to take up the challenge of more focused theological reflection. A study group, for instance, may become a place for the kind of critical theology that Rowan Williams envisages. Conferences on leadership or worship are common in some areas of the church, and these too may help generate a kind of practical theology that offers a constructive critique of the life of the church. As well as these kinds of events, there are more structured training courses and degree programs run by seminaries and universities.

While formal education in practical theology may introduce new ways of thinking or new perspectives, it is important to realize that what happens in the classroom and the seminary grows out of and feeds into the everyday life of the Christian community. This connection to the church is not simply a theory. Students, whether they are training for ministry, working in Christian charities, or members of congregations, bring the church with them. Students are “in the middle.” They are shaped by their communities, and being in the middle means they want to study precisely because of the questions and issues that come out of the everyday practice of faith.

So there are a number of reasons people want to take part in theological study. At the most basic level, there is often simply a desire to learn. It is natural that if faith means a great deal to us, we want to know more. Knowing more does not inevitably take us to practical theology. It is possible to study the history of the church, for instance, apart from any specific faith

commitments, but no study is ever free of interpretative perspectives. Even the decision to try to be objective is itself a kind of bias.

Studying church history is always in some way or another a conversation about ourselves. We dig deeper into our roots, we examine where we have come from, and we research how we have got to where we are. Studying the history of the church in this way is not very far from Hiltner's idea of a pastoral perspective. Knowing more becomes a part of the processes of theological reflection. It helps Christians think deeply about our present situation, and it gives us ways to critique and inform what we are doing as individuals and as Christian communities. What is true for church history is also the case for theology. The desire to know more about the Bible, for instance, often comes out of a sense that this kind of study will make a difference to how believers live their lives. In an academic context, biblical studies does not generally make questions of application and relevance a focus for study. Nevertheless, these kinds of motivations often lie beneath the surface, and hidden and sometimes unspoken assumptions find their way into academic study. Practical theology takes these unspoken motivations and brings them into the heart of the conversation. Valuing practice means that the practical theologian is drawn toward the transformative significance of theological thought. This kind of theological reflection engages with disciplines such as church history and biblical studies, but it does so through the lens of practice.

The desire to know more often comes out of a realization that we do not know enough. It is not at all unusual for practice to get ahead of theory. This could be a simple situation—for instance, being asked to lead a group study on a particular issue. It is more than likely that we will need to prepare in some way to lead this kind of group. Preparation might involve an online search and visiting a few websites. We might read magazine articles or books. In structured courses, we may be expected to use specially written materials. Here again, it is highly probable that none of these resources will identify themselves as practical theology, but the mere fact that they are being used to help a group think about the Christian faith transforms them into practical theology. It is not the specific material but the process of application that constitutes theological reflection.

Not knowing enough occasionally becomes an urgent matter. In a pastoral situation, it might suddenly become essential to learn more about

a particular issue such as drug addiction or eating disorders. For those new to pastoral ministry or leadership in the church, such crises can be quite common. But even those who are very experienced and have professional training occasionally have a sense that they do not know enough. This sense of a gap in knowledge can become particularly acute when someone, for example, has trained as a community activist or as a youth worker and his or her practice seems to have developed in ways that no longer fit with previous theological understanding. This experience is actually common, and it is one of the main reasons ministers and others who are professionally engaged in different kinds of ministry want to return to academic institutions to study theology, and practical theology in particular.

Practitioners often find that they have lost their theological bearings. Losing a theological orientation is not quite the same as losing faith. The normal pattern is that practitioners continue to find their personal faith to be meaningful and helpful, and God is still a reality in their lives. At the same time, they start to become more and more hazy about how this personal faith connects to what they do. A good example of this is the person who trains as a counselor. Suddenly they are introduced to a whole range of ways of helping people. Many of the theories that inform the practice of counseling have little or no explicit connection to Christian theology as it is discussed in church. At first the belief that caring for people is a Christian calling may be enough, but over time many practitioners start to experience unease with where they find themselves. It is like taking an inflatable raft out onto the water. Drifting with the current seems pleasant, but after a while you can find yourself quite far from where you are meant to be. Practical theology is one of the ways that practitioners can look up from where their professional ministry has taken them and find ways to reorient themselves. This might take the form of finding new ways to think about God and the practice of ministry, or it may simply mean finding ways to connect absorbed theology and the tradition of the church to new forms of practice and professional life.

Losing our theological bearings is actually a normal Christian experience. Most renewal movements in the church come out of a sense that previous theologies are not adequate. Often this sense of theological dislocation comes from cultural change. In recent years, for instance, there has been a vigorous debate about the future shape of the church. Some

people have argued that because of changes in popular culture and in society more generally, there is a missiological imperative to develop new ways of being church. Previous patterns of ecclesial life, it is suggested, are locked into older social forms. Changes in the way people relate to their neighborhood, digital technologies, and shifting patterns within the family all seem to indicate that traditional churches based on the parishes or the congregation may need to adapt in significant ways.

Another example of changes that seem to require us to rethink how we practice faith is the experience of globalization. The exposure to 24/7 live news brings the multicultural and religiously pluralistic nature of the world into our living rooms. At the same time, mass migration means that most of us live in communities that are many times more diverse than our parents ever experienced. With a much more developed awareness of the different kinds of faith comes the need to reexamine previous certainties. At the same time, there are changes in society such as the various debates that surround human sexuality and developments in genetics.

These kinds of changes raise theological questions that absorbed or habituated theologies may not be immediately able to answer. At the same time, there is a sense that theology should be able to help us find ways to practice faith in these changing contexts. For those who are confronted with these kinds of issues, practical theology offers a way to look for reorientation and new ways of thinking.

### **The Purpose of Practical Theology**

As my experience with the US immigration officer illustrated, it is a popular misconception that theology has no practical purpose. There is, however, a recognizable truth expressed by that kind of sentiment. Academic forms of theology tend to be highly abstract, and they can often appear to have little relevance to the ordinary lives of believers. But theology at its best, and at its most authentic, is deeply embedded in the practice of faith.

This connection between theology and faith practices does not need to be created by complicated theological methods or by deep theoretical deliberation. Theology at its most basic is talk about God revealed in Jesus Christ. This gospel is always, everywhere, and variously held and communicated in and through the communal life of the church. Similarly, the church, simply through its normal activities, is deeply and profoundly

theological. This is what Rowan Williams means by saying that theology does not have a starting point or a clear-cut methodological framework; it just has to start from where it is. Theological conversation grows out of and flows into the life of the church. By being part of the church and sharing in its life, believers are ordinary theologians. Practical theology, as its name implies, takes both theology and practice seriously. As Miller-McLemore argues, practical theology at its most basic is an everyday part of the life of Christian communities. So as believers share in practices such as remembering, absorbing, noticing, selecting/editing, and expressing, they are practical theologians.

Yet alongside these ordinary kinds of theologizing, there are more formal academic ways of doing practical theology. There is a discipline with academics holding appointments in colleges, universities, and seminaries; there are conversations around methods and ways of structuring teaching. This paraphernalia of academic life, however, finds its natural orientation and purpose in the life of the church. This is what Seward Hiltner called the “pastoral perspective” in theology. The pastoral perspective is not a theory; it comes out of the way that study and reflection arise from the joys and stresses of the practice of faith. So, by owning the reasons we are drawn to study, we move closer to the authentic nature of practical theology.

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## 2

# Practical Theology as Faith Seeking Understanding

Definitions of practical theology are many and various. This will become very apparent as you read the chapters that follow. My own approach is, on the face of it, quite simple. I think of practical theology as a kind of theology that takes seriously both practice and theology. Taking both practice and theology seriously is not so much a definition as a rule of thumb that I use when I am planning a project, reading an academic book, or helping students with their work. In my mind, I am looking for something that is sufficiently practical while also being definitely theological. Taking practice and theology seriously should be obvious with something called practical theology, but the truth is that it is actually quite hard to achieve. It is possible for theology to ignore practice and as a result be almost entirely theoretical. That theology can have a blind spot when it comes to practice is not an unusual insight; indeed, some would argue that this is why practical theology is so important. But there is another common problem that is a little harder to detect. The problem is where something is called practical theology but does not appear on the face of it to be very theological at all. This is often the case, and it results in ways of thinking and writing that are at times more like religious studies, sociology, or political theory. So my rule of thumb is meant to be a

corrective to these two tendencies: the tendency that theology might not really deal with practice (even when it says it does) and the possibility that practical theology can often fail to be theological (even when it thinks it is succeeding).

According to Saint Anselm, theology is “faith seeking understanding.” This classic saying is particularly significant for practical theology because it carries within it a commitment both to the practice of faith and to theoretical reasoning. These two are joined by a third important strand where theological reasoning is understood as taking place within the context of spiritual life and prayer. This means that faith seeking understanding has within it a basic theological DNA that I think sets practical theology off on the right path. Faith seeking understanding therefore helps the task of doing practical theology because it combines a number of interrelated ideas that, when taken together, give a theological and a spiritual grounding to practical theology. Faith seeking understanding offers a theological framework for doing practical theology.

In this chapter I will explore the riches in this classic theological notion. It is, for some, a contentious move to make this connection between practical theology and faith seeking understanding. Some want to see practical theology as an academic discipline that should not be bound by particular forms of confession or religious commitments. While I respect that many within the discipline of practical theology understand their academic work in this way, it is not my approach in this book. Reasons for this arise from the particular kind of knowledge that theology implies—namely, that theology is the knowledge of God. It is this knowledge and its particular character as that which combines the practical, the theological, and the spiritual into a single whole that situates practical theology within the church and the life of faith.

## Faith in God

There are different understandings of practical theology. Some of these perspectives will be explored in more depth in the chapters that follow. While I accept that it is possible to do practical theology from a variety of religious perspectives, my own approach is situated in the Christian tradition. Adopting faith seeking understanding is my way of offering an approach to practical theology that takes theology seriously.



Practical theology as faith seeking understanding finds its primary orientation in the being of God. Faith is the perception of who God is, but it is also and most crucially a perception of what is given—given in the sense that it is gift, a work of faith in the believer, but also given in the sense that it is prior to faith. Indeed, the being of God is the condition for faith. So God, who is the creator of all things, of necessity exists before faith and precedes all forms of knowing. Practical theology seen as faith seeking understanding therefore starts from the realization that faith is faith in God. As a result, any kind of understanding that is sought is the understanding of God. This means faith is understood specifically as faith in God.

I advocate faith seeking understanding, then, as a way of orienting practical theology with the knowledge that within the Christian community there are a variety of different and competing ways of thinking about God. This variety of perspectives is evident, for instance, in the way theologians think about God as Trinity. Some want to replace the traditional language of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit with less gendered terms such as Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. God, it is felt, is not “he,” and terms such as “fatherhood” and “sonship” support patriarchy. This is not the place to discuss the merits of either perspective. I mention this dispute because it illustrates a key dynamic in all theology. Theology is faith seeking understanding because all theological expression is to some extent provisional.

Theology is provisional because understanding God is not like other forms of understanding. This comes from the realization that God is not known in the way that other things are known. God is infinite, hidden from direct view, and ultimately beyond understanding. God is known only through God’s own self-revealing. This is seen first and foremost in Jesus Christ. Christian theology is, therefore, the attempt to express the truth of Jesus Christ (the revelation of God) in human terms. Practical theology is the extension of this practice of expression into concrete, social, and cultural forms. Human expression is provisional, but God is not subject to or conditioned by understanding. The reality of God comes before and is beyond all expression and all knowing. This is precisely why theology is faith seeking understanding—expression is always to some extent culturally specific and subject to reinterpretation. This is the case even as God is beyond and not conditioned by human understanding.

## Faith Is Given

Knowing God is a work of the Holy Spirit in the believer. Faith seeking understanding makes this clear because it is only by faith that we share in the life of God. This is why faith is a gift as well as a human response to the divine. Practical theology understood as faith seeking understanding is oriented in such a way that knowing comes out of a relationship that exists for us before we even start to seek understanding. This relationship is the very basis for knowing. Faith seeking understanding is the continuation of that relational life. Faith, then, is not a departure point for practical theology but a characteristic of the way that practical theology is conducted. Practical theologian Ray Anderson has called this “Christopraxis.” Christopraxis refers to the enterprise of practical theology as the ongoing work of Christ in the world through the power of the Holy Spirit.<sup>1</sup> For Anderson, the call to think theologically about practice is a missional sharing in the life of God. This echoes much earlier ways of thinking about theology as a mystical and salvific practice.

For the Greek fathers, theological knowledge conveyed the very life of God. Theology was not a theory but a mystical knowing and being known. This does not mean that it was anti-intellectual or theoretically simplistic; rather, it was understood as a way that the theologian shared actively in the life of God. It is mystical and spiritual in and through the processes of reasoning. For Origen, writing in the second century, knowledge of God was a spiritual rationality. True knowledge, in Origen’s thinking, is communicated by God, and the “supreme instance” of this communication is the gospel. This “true” and “spiritual” knowledge is rooted in a mystical dialogue of encounter. “The knowledge of God,” Origen says, “is God’s bosom in which he places and holds all the God-minding persons as if they were his gold which he keeps in his bosom.”<sup>2</sup> Origen’s understanding of theology as a spiritual practice suggests a kind of practical theology based on an intimate encounter with God. It is an embrace or a mystical cradling close to the heart of God.

Faith seeking understanding carries within it the idea that the practice of theology is a relationship of trust and dependency. This is the recovery of more traditional ways of practicing theology within the Christian

1. Anderson, *Shape of Practical Theology*, 29.

2. Quoted in Dragas, *Meaning of Theology*, 17.

community. Theology here is a mark of belonging. We do practical theology because we are people of faith embraced by God. We are already in a relationship with God through Christ and through the work of the Holy Spirit. Faith seeking understanding describes what it means to be on the journey with God to continue to share in Christopraxis.

Yet as people of faith, we are seeking to gain further understanding. Faith is not a static position but a dynamic relational involvement in the life of God. Faith, then, is the fluid energizing that gives rise to the desire to seek understanding. This motivation comes from the life of God within the person setting out to do practical theology. Talking about practical theology as faith seeking understanding is, therefore, a way of accepting that knowledge of God is only possible within the relational dynamics of believing. This is a theological frame for practical theology that comes from who God is and what it means to know God.

### **Faith, Knowing, and Creation**

One objection to the approach I am suggesting is to say that while faith is key for salvation, practical theology is more concerned with practice. Practical theologians are interested in practical topics such as psychology and counseling, or leadership and church management, or politics and community development. These kinds of concerns, it could be assumed, require a different approach, one that draws on the social sciences, management theory, or political science. In response, I would argue that a theological approach to practical theology should avoid dividing knowledge such that theology sits apart from more secular or scientific ways of knowing. It should be emphasized that the interdisciplinary character of practical theology is not at all in dispute by advocating faith seeking understanding. The real issue is not with the utilization of insights, methods, and theoretical frameworks from disciplines other than theology but with the way that these are understood.

Faith seeking understanding does not just relate to the personal belief of the one doing practical theology; it also has significance for knowledge itself, whatever its source might be. As a result, it is important that interdisciplinary forms of practical theology require a theological approach to knowing. This way of thinking emphasizes that God precedes not only faith but also knowing and knowledge itself. This perspective has a long

history in Christian tradition. An example is the Latin motto of the University of Oxford: *Dominus illuminatio mea* (the Lord is my light). The motto is taken from the first verse of Psalm 27, and it reflects a centuries-old theological understanding of knowledge. “The Lord is my light” is a reminder that reason, learning, and knowing find their source in the knowledge of God. The light that illuminates understanding and reason has its source in God, so all knowledge has its origins in the light of God. Such an approach does not just apply theology to social science; rather, it takes theology as the basis for true science, history, social science, and every form of human reason. Theologically, knowledge and reason have their origins in God because of creation. In the Letter to the Colossians, the writer sets out a vision of the universe where all things find their origin, redemption, and fulfillment in Christ.

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross. (Col. 1:15–20)

Faith seeking understanding recognizes that both knowledge and knowing find their source in Christ. This comes from the relationship that everything created has to the being of God. There are important consequences with this kind of theological approach to reasoning. With its focus on practice, practical theology will almost inevitably be interdisciplinary. This means that different academic disciplines and kinds of reasoning and theory will generally be used alongside theological ways of thinking. Faith seeking understanding is a way of ordering knowledge theologically such that all things, including academic disciplines, are regarded as having their origins in Jesus Christ.

### **Faith Seeking—Knowing and Not Knowing**

Faith as a starting point for practical theology does not imply that belief is somehow set in stone. Faith is not a clear and defined set of doctrines,

or at least it should not be taken solely as such. Doctrine and theology play their part, but they are situated in the dynamic that accepts that there is more to be understood. Faith seeking understanding orients practical theology toward a more dynamic and fluid approach to faith. Faith seeking understanding therefore carries within it a paradox. Faith, on the one hand, suggests something that is known—known about God and known about life in relation to God. This understanding can undergo theological formulation. It can be expressed and examined. On the other hand, the fact that this faith is seeking understanding also embraces a kind of mystery. Faith is something that is to be explored and further understood. Knowing and being known by God is therefore something that can develop. Development, however, takes place out of what has been experienced. The relationship of faith between God and the believer forms the starting point for further exploration.

Faith, then, is not an end point. The reason for this lies in the object of faith. Theological understanding is never comprehensive. As I have already said, knowledge of God is always to some extent provisional because God is infinite and beyond understanding. Faith, then, is a place of knowing and being known that accepts that it is limited. At the same time, the impulse to know more and to delve deeper into God and how God is at work in the world shapes practical theology as a way of seeking. This seeking, however, takes place in and through faith. It is dependent on the work of God through the Holy Spirit in the one who is seeking. Anselm makes this clear when he speaks about the task of the theologian.

Come now, insignificant man, leave behind for a time your preoccupations; seclude yourself for a while from your disquieting thoughts. Turn aside now from heavy cares and disregard your wearisome tasks. Attend for a while to God and rest for a time in him. Enter the inner chamber of your mind and shut out all else except God and whatever is of aid to you in seeking him; after closing the door think upon your God. Speak now, my heart, where and how to seek you, where and how to find you. If you are not here, Lord, where shall I seek you in your absence? But if you are everywhere, why do I not behold you in your presence? Surely you dwell in light inaccessible.<sup>3</sup>

3. Anselm, *Proslogion* 1.

These lines come from the start of Anselm's *Proslogion*, written in the late eleventh century and originally titled *Faith Seeking Understanding*. The idea that theology starts with prayer and contemplation gives significant insight into how Anselm understood faith seeking understanding. Here the theologian is dependent on God for the act and process of theologizing. *Proslogion* is an extended argument concerning the existence of God. In it Anselm develops the ontological argument, which, in short, is the argument that God can be said to exist because humans carry in their minds the idea of "that than which no greater can be conceived." This knowledge, Anselm argues, demonstrates that such a being exists. This argument has been variously received and developed, but what is interesting here is that in what is a philosophical discussion concerning the existence of God and the use of reason in theology, Anselm starts with prayer. His prayer, however, seems to accept the existence of God even as he is rationally wrestling with this reality.

There has been a long-standing tradition in the Christian church that prayer is part of the theologian's calling. Toward the end of the fourth century, the monk Evagrius of Pontus said that the theologian is the one who prays truly, and the one who prays truly is a theologian.<sup>4</sup> Here theological reasoning and the practice of Christian spirituality are seen as mutually enriching. Practical theology seen as faith seeking understanding also holds together the practice of faith because the act of seeking understanding involves throwing oneself on God. Thus prayer is a kind of spiritual discipline that is fundamental to practical theology. The reason for this is that knowing is not something that takes place apart from or outside of God. Knowing arises from faith even as that faith is recognized as needing to be developed and further understood. Faith seeking understanding is an attitude that turns to God to be taught.

Seen in this way, practical theology is an act of faith where the act of seeking is actually a desire to be taught. So the theologian is one who by faith is taught how to seek. This is a journey of the heart that requires us to learn, through prayer, how to search for God and how to find God. Faith seeking understanding suggests that practical theology is best seen as a deep and enduring spiritual practice. The basis for seeking lies not primarily in theological method, although this will have its place, nor does

4. Evagrius of Pontus, *Chapters on Prayer* 60.

it lie in particular forms of reason or theory, though these also will have a place; rather, it lies in an orientation toward God. Such an orientation arises from prior theological and faith commitments, but it is on a path toward further understanding and exploration. Even this act of seeking is a dynamic that comes from faith. Knowing takes place within the divine life through the work of the Holy Spirit.

### Faith and Understanding as a Way of Life

Faith is always embodied and communal. One way to illustrate how this works is to look at ideas of culture. Sociologist Peter Berger spoke about the three dynamics of culture in relation to individuals. Culture, he says, is first experienced as something external to us.<sup>5</sup> We learn language and customs as part of the social reality into which we are born. Culture therefore has a reality outside of us to which we need to become accustomed. Without learning how things work, we are not able to operate as individuals in society. Culture, however, does not stay outside of us. Processes of education and socialization mean that what is external becomes internalized (Berger's second dynamic). These processes are so profound that internalized cultural forms merge with our own sense of ourselves such that it can be very difficult to imagine ourselves apart from this internal cultural conditioning. The third dynamic is the point at which the individual, through his or her creativity, contributes to culture more widely. This expression comes only as a consequence of the culture as an external reality and then as a socialized form of internal identity. This three-stage cultural dynamic can be used to illustrate how faith seeking understanding takes place.

The Christian faith is always handed down to us. Faith is a communal deposit. Whether we come to it through being born into a Christian family or through conversion, the cultural forms and expressions of faith will always be external to us. This cultural expression of faith has a social reality that is prior to our own believing. One way or another, then, we are born into faith. This insight is an important corrective for practical theology. It guards against any tendency to put theological reflection in a historical vacuum. Theology—and here practical theology is no exception—takes

5. Berger, *Social Reality of Religion*, 13–15.



place in relation to the ongoing life of the Christian community and the cultural expression of that community both in the present and over time. As Christians, we are inheritors of the faith. We become Christian and live as Christians in a community that is not simply in the present but also in the past.

Tradition, however, is not unified or univocal. There are different voices and opinions within the wider Christian community. We carry this varied tradition with us as identity. I belong to the Church of England, which means that I have been shaped by a particular expression of the faith. This is conveyed to me by the words we use in worship, the buildings we meet in, and the ways that Anglicans think and make decisions. If I had been raised as Christian in an independent church or in the Roman Catholic Church, the tradition that I would have inherited and been shaped by would have been different.

These differences are not simply denominational in nature. Christian traditions shift and alter between cultures and in different contexts. This insight has become more important in practical theology with the rise of contextual theology, such as Latino/a theology (or Dinka theology in India or the development of African and Asian theology). But focusing on the differences between denominations or contextual theologies does not tell the whole story. Alongside the variety, Christian tradition has significant continuities. The Bible is, for instance, a common source for Christian theology and thinking, whatever the church or cultural environment. The centrality of Jesus Christ is also a continuity, as is the use of bread and wine in worship.

These continuous elements, while they are interpreted in very different ways, are still a sign that the Christian tradition has both unifying and diverse aspects within it. We think out of, from within, and sometimes over and against these traditions. This work of connecting and reconnecting over the centuries is a way to work with ideas from the past and reconsider how they have influenced the present for both good and ill. This work is important because every community and each individual believer has been shaped and formed by church tradition.

Composer Gustav Mahler is often credited with saying, "Tradition is not guarding the ashes but fanning the flames." In other words, tradition has a place in theological thinking because it is alive and continues to be made alive. Practical theology has a vital part to play in fanning the



flames by continually making connections between the voices of Christian communities and thinkers in the past and in the present-day life of the church. Tradition, by making use of voices not simply from the present but also from the past, thus offers ways of thinking and reflecting that draw on the wisdom of the church over the ages. These perspectives are a creative source for thinking in new ways. This approach to tradition sees the wisdom of the historical church as a treasure trove that is there to be rediscovered and made use of in the present. Tradition also is there as an authority in the Christian church.

In this chapter I have used Anselm as a guide for how we should think theologically. Of course there is no self-evident reason that Anselm should be used in this way, other than my own sense that what he is saying has significance. I am influenced in my choice of faith seeking understanding as a definition of theology because it is an approach to thinking theologically that has been part of the Christian church for almost a thousand years, but this in itself does not give this idea merit over any other. In other words, the present-day practical theologian makes choices about what to use and what not to use. It is through these choices that tradition evolves and is made fluid.

Tradition is often seen as being something of a problematic idea in practical theology. Many argue that theology as it has typically been practiced has marginalized and ignored particular groups. This is a key insight. No idea of tradition can be introduced without recognizing that traditions are constructed by those who have power. As a result, the Christian church has, for instance, prioritized male voices over female. Similar issues of power are seen in the marginalization of people of color and those who are economically and socially disadvantaged in society. This reality does not negate the basic point that tradition shapes both faith and understanding. It does, however, create a discussion around what should be emphasized and what should be downplayed in tradition. This debate is important precisely because tradition is central to thinking theologically and to our sense of ourselves as theologians and as part of the Christian community.

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# 3

## The Gospel and Practical Theology

“I went to the crossroad / fell down on my knees.” This is how blues singer Robert Johnson sang about his mythical encounter with the devil in “Cross Road Blues.”<sup>1</sup> The song forms a central part of the legend that attributes Johnson’s miraculous guitar playing to a Faustian pact he made at the crossroads. Johnson’s virtuosity on the guitar is undeniable, and it has inspired a whole generation of rock and blues artists, but Johnson’s pact with the devil plays into a wider narrative in African American culture concerning profane and secular forms of music. In *The Spirituals and the Blues*, theologian James Cone explores the relationship between the explicitly religious music of the African American church, known as the spirituals, and the music of the juke joints and bars, known as the blues. Cone rejects the idea that there is a divide between sacred and profane in these two forms of black music, arguing that both should be regarded as religiously significant because they speak of the historic experience of longing and oppression among African Americans.

The spirituals offer explicitly theological themes, drawing on biblical material and the language of the church, but they do this out of the

1. Robert Johnson, “Cross Road Blues,” recorded November 27, 1936, released May 1937, on *Ramblin’ on My Mind*, Vocalion, 10-inch 78 rpm.

experience of slavery and oppression. The blues speak of the yearning and paradox of African American experience. Cone's point is that these two musical forms should be read together rather than in opposition. It is not at all the case that one is sacred and the other of the devil; rather, they are two sides of the same coin. As Cone puts it, "Black music is unity music. It unites the joy and the sorrow, the love and the hate, the hope and the despair of black people; and it moves the people toward the direction of total liberation. It shapes and defines black existence and creates cultural structures for black expression."<sup>2</sup> Robert Johnson's "Cross Road Blues" exemplifies the experience of marginalization among African Americans at the start of the twentieth century. "Standin' at the crossroad / I tried to flag a ride / didn't nobody seem to know me / everybody pass me by." Some argue that the lyrics of the song do not really support the idea of a meeting with the devil, yet in the popular imagination this notion persists even when the first verse so clearly sets the whole experience within an explicitly Christian spirituality. Johnson says he fell down on his knees and "asked the Lord above 'Have mercy, now / save poor Bob, if you please.'" This observation takes us deep into the complexity of the blues, where spirituality and the experience of despair, sex, and booze coexist. This complex mix, however, is also echoed in the spirituals, where biblical themes carry dual meanings linked to resistance and escape for slaves.<sup>3</sup> Cone's reading of the spirituals and the blues comes from his understanding of the Christian gospel as liberation. Yet it is important to note that for Cone, the spirituals and the blues combine theological and biblical themes with the experience of life for African Americans. The gospel is evident precisely when these elements are held together, and this perspective offers a significant orientation to practical theology.

Theological work in the modern period has been characterized by a divide between theologians who prioritize doctrine and revelation and those who emphasize human experience as the source for knowledge of the divine. These positions have given rise to what have effectively been two opposing camps in theological work. On the one side is liberal theology, which has developed an agenda of adapting faith to the experience of contemporary life. On the other side is conservative theology, which has

2. Cone, *Spirituals and the Blues*, 5.

3. *Ibid.*, 4.

focused on the interpretation of Scripture and the formulation of doctrine.<sup>4</sup> Modern theology can therefore be seen as a debate between the liberals and the conservatives. In between the two extreme positions are approaches that attempt to link or correlate theology and experience.<sup>5</sup>

This way of thinking about theology gives rise to a kind of mental map in which there is a straight line. At one end are experiential forms of theology, at the other end are doctrinal forms, and in between are a variety of correlational positions.<sup>6</sup> The mental map is important not simply because it shows a range of intellectual positions but also because it is a clue to the energy and emotions at stake in debates about theology. This energy comes from the deep belief held by those in opposing camps that what they are talking about is a theological truth. In other words, they have adopted their position in the belief that it gives them access to the theological truth of Jesus Christ. The gospel dimension to these positions is that they indicate the truth about God and Christ in human experience.

This dimension is what lies at the heart of James Cone's work on the spirituals and the blues. The African American experience, for Cone, carries a deep spirituality, and it therefore reveals an encounter with God. Cone then exemplifies an experiential (or liberal) emphasis in his work, and this leads to his understanding of the gospel as liberation for those who have been and are being oppressed. This perspective shapes how he approaches both the blues and the spirituals. It is an orientation that comes from how he understands the gospel in relation to experience. Cone's work is an example of how the gospel (and our understanding of it) fundamentally shapes contextual and practical theology.

I am using the idea of gospel here to speak about encounter with God and how that encounter is understood and communicated. The gospel understood in this way describes what is at stake in the choices we make as practical theologians. In this chapter, I explore the centrality of the gospel understood in this particular way through the work of two influential practical theologians—Bonnie Miller-McLemore and Andrew Root—who conceive of encounter with God, and hence the gospel, in quite different ways.

4. Stanley Grenz and John Franke have called this “foundationalism” (*Beyond Foundationalism*, 4).

5. See Tracy, *Blessed Rage*.

6. Ford, *Modern Theologians*, 2.

## Experience as the Site of Theological Inquiry

Bonnie Miller-McLemore is the editor of one of the key recent texts in practical theology, *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*. Her work exemplifies the move within practical theology toward practice and human experience as the key field of inquiry. She sees her approach as disrupting the accepted methods and subject matter of theological inquiry. Practical theology, in contrast to biblical and systematic theology, pays attention to what she calls “the living web.” Practical theology has been shaped, she argues, by the conviction that the living human document is a valid text for theological study, comparable to traditional texts of Scripture and doctrine.<sup>7</sup> Practical theology, then, is fundamentally oriented toward the everyday and the lived expression of communities. She explains the function of practical theology in this way:

Its greater aim is to foster richer material understandings of embodied theology so that those who practice ministry and pursue lives of Christian faith will have a greater sense of their theological and religious vocation. Practical theology has always been and remains far more than an academic endeavor. It has been about returning theology to the people. As a discipline, practical theology is indeed secondary to the work and practice of most Christians and scholars. But as a way of faithful discipleship and as a way of doing theology in daily life, it is fundamental to Christian faith and to all areas of theological study and practice.<sup>8</sup>

Miller-McLemore’s study of children and child-rearing reexamines culturally received notions of childhood and the role that Christian tradition has played in shaping these conventions. She argues for a revisionist understanding of childhood and parenthood as a prelude to changes in practice.<sup>9</sup> She draws on a feminist-maternal theology to reexamine the experience of childhood. This theology, first developed in her book *Also a Mother*, pays close attention to the experience of women as they engage in mothering and uses this as the basis for theology. There are four main premises for a feminist-maternal theology. First, it gives a privileged voice to the marginalized, which is extended to include women and children.

7. Miller-McLemore, *Christian Theology in Practice*, 1.

8. Miller-McLemore, “Five Misunderstandings,” 26.

9. Miller-McLemore, *Let the Children Come*, xx.

Second, it challenges the “contradictory demonization and idealization of children and women’s bodies in the acts of bearing and raising children.”<sup>10</sup> Third, it enriches the debates about Christian doctrines such as love, sin, and grace by paying attention to the unequal relationship between adult and child. And finally, it stretches claims for justice and liberation beyond a call for sameness and identity based on the adult male. So Miller-McLemore’s work is based on the view that God is revealed in and through the mundane and that liberation occurs in the commonplace: “in the embodied lives of children.”<sup>11</sup> “Many feminist theologians have not only thought about children; they have acted as primary caregivers. Women may be enabled to hear children precisely because they have stood where children have stood, at the intersection of society’s contradictory outward idealization and subtle devaluation of childcare and children.”<sup>12</sup>

There is a theological blindness to children. “The presumed subject in theological treatises across the centuries has been the white European or European-American male adult.”<sup>13</sup> But children and childhood have become more central in Western societies.<sup>14</sup> Children confound accepted models of spirituality and theology. So, for instance, the Methodist practical theologian James Fowler’s stages of faith privilege the adult final stage.<sup>15</sup> Miller-McLemore writes,

Knowing children challenge these conventional views and suggest the need for an expanded understanding of spirituality that embraces the whole of family living in all its beauty and misery. Their spirituality takes shape in the concrete activities of the day-to-day and the varied contexts where children and adults live together (e.g., playing, working, eating, talking, learning, fighting, reconciling, arriving, departing, and otherwise making a home). This is not to say that children rule out the importance of silence and solitude as part of the Christian life or that there are not important cognitive markers of faith’s development. Rather children demand a widening of the circle of faith to include them more fully. Children actually exemplify a wisdom that somehow emerges in the chaos itself. In other words, children encourage us to reconsider ways in which spirituality for both children and

10. *Ibid.*, xxxi.

11. *Ibid.*, xxxii.

12. *Ibid.*, xxi.

13. Miller-McLemore, “Feminism, Children, and Mothering,” 7.

14. *Ibid.*, 9.

15. *Ibid.*, 15. See also the discussion of Fowler below in chap. 6.

adults takes shape in the midst of everyday rituals, practices, and habits that shape daily life.<sup>16</sup>

At stake in this move is a redistribution of power in terms of theological expression. The shift in power for Miller-McLemore is manifested primarily as a local concern.<sup>17</sup> As a result, she foregrounds everyday and localized activities such as what people wear, how they manage finances, and how they sing hymns. Quoting Charles Marsh's work on civil rights in Mississippi, she argues that this approach means that it is possible to inquire into the ways that people and places become "theaters of complex theological dramas."<sup>18</sup> Theology, she argues, "is more like liturgy. It is the *work of the people*, praising, arguing with, and turning to God in many contexts for diverse purposes."<sup>19</sup> Miller-McLemore describes her approach as a "low sacrificial Christology, high incarnation, non-creedal, non-patriarchal view of God."<sup>20</sup> God, she argues, can be "found anywhere God chooses. And I think God sometime favors trees and children."<sup>21</sup> Practical theology in the work of Miller-McLemore has moved beyond the idea of correlation between theology and experience or the study of beliefs and practice. Rather, she sets out to redefine what constitutes theological knowledge and pursues a theology that she argues is consequently inclusive and for the masses. Practical theologians, she suggests, are those who are "preoccupied with everyday concerns that evade and disrupt traditional categories, doctrines, and loci in theological and religious study."<sup>22</sup>

### Divine Action as Christopraxis

Miller-McLemore's work exemplifies a particular understanding of the knowledge of God, and hence it is a particular understanding of the gospel and how it is expressed and perceived in people's everyday lives. She prioritizes specific kinds of experience over doctrinal formulation. Andrew Root takes a diametrically opposed position. His work is also gospel focused,

16. Ibid., 15–16.

17. Miller-McLemore, *Christian Theology in Practice*, 4.

18. Marsh, *God's Long Summer*, 3, quoted in *ibid.*

19. Miller-McLemore, *Christian Theology in Practice*, 2.

20. Ibid., 19.

21. Ibid., 20.

22. Ibid., 18.



but his understanding of how God is encountered is markedly different from that of Miller-McLemore. Practical theology, Root argues, should be focused on divine action.<sup>23</sup> He is critical of practical theology, particularly as it has been practiced in the United States, and argues that the discipline has been very successful in analyzing and describing human action and experience but has largely failed to talk about divine action. The focus on the lived and embodied that characterizes much practical theology has meant that it has tended to be drawn to dialogue with philosophy, the social sciences, and empirical research. Divine action, however, has been regarded as being “impractical.” By contrast, Root sets out to show that the work of God in the world touches people’s lives and leads to transformation. The work of God “is not impractical, but rather is a deeply practical and lived reality, [and] people do have distinct experiences with God that they believe are concrete, lived, and *real*. These very experiences direct their lives in formative ways, moving them to do one thing or another in their embodied practical life” (CP, x). These experiences connect people to a reality that is beyond them. This is a transcendent realm that has become real and makes a difference in life.

Practical theology, Root says, should adjust its attention to take account of the experience of God in people’s lives. Unfortunately, the discipline has tended to downplay divine action, and this has led to what he calls a “theological deficiency” (CP, x). “Practical theology has rightly started with people’s experience, but because it has been blind to the possibility that people have *real* experiences with God, it has neglected to wade deeply into conceptions of divine action that would move practical theology further toward unique theological contributions.” Central to Root’s project is the notion of evangelical experience. By “evangelical” he means more than simply the experience of contemporary American evangelicals. He is appealing to a sensibility that goes back to the Reformation. This kind of experience is modeled by Martin Luther. As Root puts it, “By ‘evangelical experience,’ I mean the centrality of the commitment to a God who comes to us, calling each of us to confess our sin and follow the Jesus who lives” (CP, xi).

Root’s understanding of experience is drawn from the theological concept of ministry. He suggests that Christ continues to minister in the

23. Root, *Christopraxis*, ix (hereafter cited in text as CP).

world through the work of the Holy Spirit. Root refers to this continuing ministry as “Christopraxis,” a term that he draws from the work of his former teacher Ray Anderson. Christopraxis is the “criterion for practical theology itself, because it is the continuing action of Christ in the world” (*CP*, 90). This perspective is not simply a doctrinal position; it is also an experiential reality. Root illustrates this by drawing on a series of interviews in which his respondents shared their experience of God working in their lives. “People experience a real sense of God’s action, of the praxis of Christ, and this experience is not simply intellectual or religious, but also personal and spiritual” (*CP*, 91). The work of Christ in the world precedes doctrinal formulation or theological reflection. It is the ministry of God’s being coming to humanity. This ministry is God giving God’s self to humanity, and as a consequence, humanity might then be with God (*CP*, 94). God’s being is a dynamic or moved being that is revealed in ministry toward humanity. Theology comes from encountering the ministry of God.

At this point, Root draws on the work of German theologian Eberhard Jüngel. Jüngel develops a theological approach to ontology—that is, the being of God. Who God is—God’s being—he argues, is God’s becoming. In other words, as Root puts it, God is to be understood through the way that God ministers in the world. This perspective is fundamental to practical theology, first because theology is derived from the being of God as it is experienced through ministry, and second because “practice” is defined by the work of God in people’s lives (*CP*, 95). Practical theology for Root is not primarily a discipline focused on interpreting human experience; rather, it is a field of study oriented toward the work of Christ in the world. So for Root, “Practical theology is the need to interpret the ‘where’ of Jesus Christ in our experiences of the now” (*CP*, 99).

Central to Root’s argument is the conviction that there is a pattern that determines how the work of God can be discerned in the world. This pattern he calls “death-to-life” and “life out of death” (*CP*, 104). As a lens to see the work of God, this pattern comes from the being of God revealed in the world. “The divine and human are associated not through practices, culture, or even doctrine, but through death . . . and it is God’s ministry to enter death” (*CP*, 105). To know God, then, is to die; this theology of the cross lies at the heart of Root’s approach to practical theology. To encounter God is to be judged as being dead, for this is what we are. “We

are weak, broken, and have no way of saving ourselves.” It is only out of death that grace can be experienced. “Grace is the human experience of God’s being as becoming in the ministry of bringing life out of death” (CP, 107). This work of God, Root argues, is to be understood through the Reformation doctrine of justification by faith. Jüngel uses this doctrine as a lens or an interpretative framework for practical theology (CP, 121). Justification is to be seen not so much as a legal concept but as a relational dynamic that operates between divine action and human action. So Root says, “I turn to justification as a way to embrace and explore human experience as the location for the encounter with God’s own ministry of being in becoming” (CP, 123).

Root regards justification as the overarching doctrinal framework for understanding and perceiving the action of God in the world. This incorporates creation, where the Word brings forth being out of nothingness. Human sin is read as the denial of creaturely condition, the search for actuality rather than the acceptance of creaturely nothingness (CP, 128). The incarnation is the action of ministry in the world. Sin enters the world through the denial of the nothingness of humanity and the search for an actuality apart from God. Justification, by contrast, is the possibility to return that reinstates the position of being created out of nothing. This comes through God’s “own act of ministry” (CP, 130–31). Supremely this comes through the death of Christ on the cross, where he enters nothingness, thereby bringing about salvation through his own perishing. “In the incarnation and crucifixion God’s Word becomes flesh, reversing original sin, for as creation fell when creature tried to become creator, so now the Word that is God, the Word that creates out of nothing, the Word that is the Creator becomes creature” (CP, 131–32). This movement of ministry is the love of God for the world. Through the perishing of Christ on the cross, nothingness is turned into possibility. The resurrection turns human perishing into new life. “The resurrection turns perishing into possibility; it makes all concrete lived experiences of perishing the location of God’s being as becoming and therefore paradigmatic to practical theology” (CP, 133).

### Gospel—a Way of Seeing

Bonnie Miller-McLemore and Andrew Root represent two significant but contrasting voices in practical theology. Miller-McLemore emphasizes the

experience of those marginalized in society over formal doctrinal formulation as the source for theological insight. This is a classically liberal approach to theology. Root, on the other hand, works from a predetermined doctrinal position based on justification by faith. From this theological understanding he develops a lens to view the lived practice of faith. This is a traditionally conservative position. Miller-McLemore and Root therefore can be seen as coming from opposite ends of the spectrum that has shaped the modern theological landscape. Yet while there are quite fundamental differences between these two practical theologians, these differences come out of a desire to speak about the work of God in the world. Put in my terms, they both orient their work around the gospel, but they understand this gospel in different ways.

For Root, the gospel is articulated explicitly in specifically doctrinal terms. Justification by faith becomes an interpretative tool that Root says offers an insight into the work of God in the world. Thus he can talk about the paradigm of death to life and life to death that is the mark of divine action. Miller-McLemore's approach is less clearly articulated, but it is nevertheless a theological understanding of the gospel that shapes her approach to practical theology. For Miller-McLemore, it is in the experience of motherhood, in everyday life, and in particular in the context of children that God is most vividly present. It is important, however, to note that Miller-McLemore is also interested in divine action in the world, and she sees theological insight as developing out of this perception of the divine. Her work is focused on children and motherhood precisely because this is her understanding of the good news as it is made evident in the lived and the experiential.

I have talked at length about these two practical theologians because their work exemplifies one of the central issues in practical theology: What is the gospel? The answer to this question is fundamental in practical theology because our understanding of the gospel creates the lens for practical theology. "Gospel" as I am using it here is more than doctrine or theology. Gospel refers to the work of God in the world and how this work is understood and experienced. Gospel is much more than a message about Jesus Christ; it describes the life sparked by this message. Gospel is therefore different from theology. A theology is an abstract set of ideas. Gospel combines an understanding of God with the embodied and committed lives of individuals.

Gospel, then, requires an investment. But investment is not simply a social or personal action of Christians and communities. The gospel also includes divine action in the church and the world. This is why it lies at the heart of practical theology and why different understandings and experiences of the gospel shape practical theology in different ways. Practical theology is a way of reasoning about how the work of God in the world is experienced and understood. Doing practical theology thus cannot be separated from a consideration of the gospel because this forms the lens that fundamentally shapes how it is to be conducted. In the next section I will develop an understanding of the gospel that can shape practical theology. In John's Gospel there is a clue to how it is possible to move beyond the mental map of modern theology that divides approaches between liberal and conservative.

### John's Gospel and the Gospel

The debate within practical theology about divine action has pivoted around two opposing positions: the liberal, which argues that divine encounter is understood in and through experience, and the conservative, which prioritizes doctrine. So far I have argued that these are in effect different ways of understanding the gospel. John's Gospel, I want to suggest, gives an alternative perspective that can be used to reframe the conversation, collapsing the differences between these two opposing camps.

In John's Gospel, the truth is a person, not a set of doctrines or an experience. So when Jesus says "I am the way, and the truth, and the life" (John 14:6), he seems to wrong-foot our expectation that the truth will be something we can grasp intellectually and make sense of with rational processes, whether as doctrine or indeed as an account of experience. Truth is embodied in the person of Jesus. This shouldn't be a surprise. We have already been told in the opening chapter of John's Gospel that Jesus is the one who was with God and who came from God. He is the Word.

Yet, interestingly, Jesus as the truth is linked in this "I am" saying with the way and the life. Way and life both carry the sense of something that is in process—that is, an embodied experience in the world. Life is something that is lived out, and a way is something that you journey along. The truth appears to be not so much something that we find out but something

that takes us on a journey. Yet this journey and this life are also identified with Jesus. The “truth” is not something that is capable of being neatly defined. In fact, it seems that in John’s Gospel being puzzled is part of being on the *way* and of experiencing the *truth*. Trying to make sense of things is therefore essential to the *life*.

This dynamic can be illustrated by looking at Nicodemus’s encounter with Jesus in John’s Gospel. Meeting Jesus and hearing him speak was no guarantee of understanding. In fact, encounters with Jesus in John’s Gospel were just as likely to confuse and provoke misunderstanding as understanding. When Nicodemus comes to him, Jesus seems determined to confuse and perplex. Nicodemus is a Pharisee and a leader of the Jews (John 3:1). He visits Jesus by night, perhaps because he wanted to keep his interest in the controversial teacher discreet. He says, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God” (John 3:2–3).

Just as at the cleansing of the temple, the question of Jesus’s identity and authority is framed around signs, but Jesus doesn’t get into the discussion in quite the way that Nicodemus expects. He doesn’t affirm or indeed seem to welcome Nicodemus’s apparent confession of faith. Jesus responds by saying that “no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” It is not possible to enter into God’s kingdom “without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit” (John 3:3, 5–6).

Nicodemus is even more confused by this response. He is taken by Jesus to the edge of a deep mystery of new life in relation to God. The idea of being “born again” has become a key identity marker for many Christians. We think we know what we mean when we talk about being born again. This certainty, however, passes over the deep mystery that Jesus opens up to Nicodemus, that salvation involves the work of the Spirit bringing a completely new life into being.

It is in this context that John speaks about the love of God and the gift of the Son in verse 16. John 3:16 has for many become the archetypal biblical summary of the gospel: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” John places this saying in the context of the conversation with Nicodemus about being born again by the Spirit. Belief therefore is deeply connected to the inward work of God in the believer.

The gospel in John's Gospel, then, has a twin dynamic. The gospel message of the way and the truth and the life finds its origin and content in the person of Jesus Christ. This means that theological expression of the gospel depends on a close correspondence to the person of Jesus Christ revealed in the Scriptures. So when we ask what the way is, or how to live the life, or how to find truth, the answer is Jesus Christ.

Doctrine, then, is always relative to the rich and deep complexity of the Word. At the same time, the truth of Jesus Christ is apprehended by personal transformation, being born again of the Spirit. In other words, belief is never simply the acceptance of doctrinal formulation about Jesus Christ. The truth is not understood or indeed accepted as fact, because this truth is a person, Jesus Christ, who comes to us through the work of the Spirit.

### Gospel-Based Practical Theology

The most important decision that anyone setting out to do practical theology has to resolve is, what is the gospel? In this chapter I have shown how two practical theologians deal with this issue and how their understanding of the work of God in people's lives shapes how they approach their work. Bonnie Miller-McLemore and Andrew Root represent two ends of the spectrum in practical theology. As such, I think they represent what might be called a liberal and a conservative voice in the discipline.<sup>24</sup> The liberal voice emphasizes experience over doctrine, and the conservative prioritizes doctrine over experience. These two different approaches are well-worked theological ways of operating, and they can be a little like tramlines or ruts in the road, in that they can capture the way we go about doing practical theology. Whichever line we get drawn into seems to determine the way forward. It is also important to see that these ways of thinking carry deep conviction. They arise from firmly held views about how God works in the world, and as such their advocates adhere to them as gospel.

24. I argue this with the realization that both Miller-McLemore and Root might object to the way I have presented their work. I think they would argue that they want, in their different ways, to overcome the liberal/conservative divide. I would accept that perhaps they do not represent the extremes of the two ends of the theological mental map as I have represented them and that each seeks to develop a connection between theology and experience. They are then both perhaps more correlational in approach, albeit at different ends of the correlational spectrum.



The gospel orientation, however, suggests an important corrective to the polarized divisions between liberal and conservative. Using John's Gospel, I have argued that the gospel, while it may be expressed as doctrine, is never simply ideas. The gospel is Jesus Christ. When we as Christians try to express our faith, it is always an attempt to frame in words something that is beyond expression.

This does not mean that all theological expression is pointless. In fact, the opposite is the case. The point is that as we speak the gospel we are speaking of a truth that is a person. This means that claims to be able to see the work of God cannot come from doctrinal correctness or sophistication but from relationship with Christ. Doctrine might attempt to clarify or express this perspective, but it is not a place from which to generate security, because the truth is not an idea or a way of reasoning but a person.

The same kind of dynamic is also operative in relation to the experience of faith by the believer. Here the gospel is also relational, and rather than providing a sure place for reasoning, it simply opens up mystery. The wind can be felt, but ultimately we don't know where it comes from or where it goes. Becoming a creature born anew is an experience, but it cannot be the sole basis for reasoning or rational inquiry into the work of God. Rather, the experience points to the relational presence of the Holy Spirit in human experience.

A gospel perspective is basic in practical theology because the gospel speaks of how we understand God to be at work in the world. I recognize that each of us may have different ways of thinking about the work of God. My intention is not so much to argue for one way of understanding the gospel over another; rather, I want to point out, on the one hand, the possible limitations that come from opting for either the liberal or the conservative line and to point toward, on the other hand, the need for these perspectives to be held together.

Each of us will need to take a view on the relationship between experience and doctrine and where we place the emphasis. This is important in the first instance when you are doing your own work, but it is also important when you are reading the work of others. So if you are reading a book or an article by a practical theologian, the most important question to ask is, how does this person conceive of the gospel? Both the liberal and the conservative positions ultimately reduce the complexity of the gospel.



The relational dynamics that I have introduced from John's Gospel do not in themselves solve the problem of the divide between experience and doctrine. But as I have argued in the previous chapter, every expression of the gospel will fall short of the truth of Jesus Christ. This does not mean we should not try to express this message or indeed take it as a guide to develop practical theological insights. What it means is that we will need to continually return to Jesus Christ as he is seen in the Scriptures to regulate and revise how we are speaking and thinking. This is precisely what is meant by "faith seeking understanding."

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# 4

## Practical Theology and Lived Theology

One of the most exciting new developments in practical theology is the energy that has been generated from theology as it is embodied and lived by individuals and in communities. This is an emerging field of study in which different and competing ideas and theories are used to describe a shared phenomenon.<sup>1</sup> Here I will focus on three main approaches. The first will be the idea of lived religion, drawing on the work of David Hall, Meredith McGuire, and Robert Orsi. The second will be Jeff Astley's concept of ordinary theology, and the third will be the four voices of theology theory that has been developed by Helen Cameron and her colleagues in the ARCS (Action Research: Church and Society) project.

1. The move toward the ordinary in practical theology is part of a much wider turn to the subject and to practice in the study of religion. But as with any emerging areas, this turn has led to a contested field of different terms. In the 1980s, Grace Davie introduced the idea of "common" religion (see Ahern and Davie, *Inner City God*, 32). At the same time, Robert Schreiter spoke about local theologies (*Constructing Local Theologies*). In the history of religion, writers such as Karen Louise Jolly explored different aspects of "popular religion" (*Popular Religion in Late Saxon England*). The term "popular religion" was also shared by those in religious studies and by Roman Catholic theologians (see, e.g., De Luna, *Faith Formation and Popular Religion*, and Maldonado, "Popular Religion," 3–11). For a more recent work in this area, see Gortner, *Varieties of Personal Theology*.

What these different ways of thinking have in common is the notion that theology as it is expressed and lived in ordinary communities coexists with and in part depends on—but is also at times in tension or even in contradiction with—more institutional or formal kinds of theology. This means that in a congregation, for instance, there may be the official theology that is expressed by the minister or by the worship, and then there may be a whole range of different personal theologies that individuals live their lives by.

Exploring the relationship between these different kinds of theology has become the focus of a variety of exciting research and writing projects across the theological and social scientific disciplines. If practical theology is a way of thinking that takes seriously both practice and theology, this area of the lived or ordinary and embodied is one of the most important places to give our attention to, because it is where practice and theology are most fundamentally and organically interconnected.

This chapter, therefore, charts an understanding of practice and theology. At the end I argue that the idea of lived theology (as distinct from lived religion, as we will discuss below) brings the three approaches together in a way that can help those of us working in practical theology.

## Lived Religion

The idea of lived religion has its origins in French sociology. It has been taken up by a range of scholars working in the study of religion, where it has been developed as a cultural or ethnographic approach to researching and understanding religious practice.<sup>2</sup> Lived religion is closely linked to the notion of practice. David Hall speaks about practice as the choice that individuals take to act. Lived religion is akin to the idea that culture is enacted or performed through practices.<sup>3</sup> This means that lived religion needs to be understood as something that is incomplete and provisional. To quote the French sociologist Danièle Hervieu-Léger, it is “fluid, mobile, and incompletely structured.”<sup>4</sup> Religion that is lived is not set in stone or circumscribed; rather, it is on the move. As Robert Orsi says, “All religious ideas and impulses are of the moment, invented, taken, borrowed, and improvised at the intersections of life.”<sup>5</sup>

2. Hall, introduction to *Lived Religion in America*, vii.

3. *Ibid.*, xi.

4. Hervieu-Léger, “What Scripture Tells Me,” 22.

5. Orsi, “Everyday Miracles,” 8.

Research into religion can therefore never be simply a discussion of ideas or doctrines. Lived religion requires that time is taken to pay close attention to the experiences of ordinary believers and how they live their lives in relation to religion. Beliefs, it is argued, must be “activated” and made alive by people if they are to be understood for their true significance. It is in this context that the theologizing of individuals should be understood.

Theologies are generated in a range of different venues—in the streets, in homes, in churches—and they operate in relation to formal and informal conceptions of God. This means that there is a dynamic and ongoing relationship between, on the one hand, theology that develops and exists as part of everyday experience and, on the other hand, the influence and power of religious authorities.<sup>6</sup> Lived religion is therefore characterized by what Orsi calls hybridity. In other words, religion in the everyday is quite likely to be a mixture of different and even contradictory perspectives. Hybridity points to the ways in which, for some individuals, different religious practices and perspectives can coexist. So, for example, a Christian minister may also practice Buddhist meditation, or a charismatic Christian might go on an Ignatian retreat.

Hybridity is common in lived religion in ways that seem incoherent at the level of formal or theological thought. This is then a cultural approach to theology that takes account of how religion and culture embed the religious person and community in history. Orsi’s approach recognizes that culture is not something that religious communities are “in” so much as something that is necessary to express their identity and develop their way of life.<sup>7</sup> It is this cultural perspective on religion that structures how practices should be understood.

Working in sociology of religion, Meredith McGuire has further developed the conception of lived religion. McGuire is concerned to make a distinction between an understanding of religion that prioritizes the perspectives of what she calls “official spokespersons” and one in which “religion and spirituality [are] practiced, experienced, and expressed by ordinary people.”<sup>8</sup> Lived religion has developed as a way of speaking about religion that is not primarily cognitive or doctrinal in orientation.

6. *Ibid.*, 11.

7. *Ibid.*, 16.

8. McGuire, *Lived Religion*, 12.

As a consequence, religious belief is not to be seen primarily as something to do with a person's mind or thinking. Religion is rather a close mix of belief and practice, and this mix functions in a social setting.<sup>9</sup> Religion, according to Robert Orsi, is "the practice of making the invisible visible, of concretizing the order of the universe, the nature of human life and its destiny, and the various dimensions and possibilities of human interiority itself, as these are understood in various cultures at different times, in order to render them visible and tangible, present to the senses in the circumstances of everyday life."<sup>10</sup>

This approach to religion means that belief is encountered and experienced in bodies as well as in ideas. As a result, religious rituals and practices become central to the analysis because these make the invisible present in embodied experiences. Practices are ways in which individuals and communities become connected to the spiritual. McGuire argues that lived religion, because it is based on practices rather than ideas or beliefs, does not necessarily have to be logically coherent or consistent. Instead, it demands what she calls a practical coherence. In other words, it has to form a logical whole for the participant, but this logic might appear to be irrational or even superstitious to the outside observer.

Lived religion may not accord with the ways that formal belief is constituted by religious institutions; in fact, the idea of consistency in belief might be much less of a priority for ordinary believers than it is for academics or for professional ministers of religion. Most people, McGuire observes, are not very interested in achieving consistency between "their wide-ranging beliefs, perceptions, experiences, values, practices, and actions." Lived religion is much more likely to be characterized by complexity, apparent inconsistency, heterogeneity, and a basic untidiness around the range of practices and ideas that people find helpful in their daily lives.<sup>11</sup>

### Ordinary Theology

Lived religion as a concept has developed primarily within the social sciences. At the same time, there has been a growing interest in practical

9. *Ibid.*, 13.

10. Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth*, 73–74.

11. McGuire, *Lived Religion*, 16.

theology in what has been called ordinary theology.<sup>12</sup> Ordinary theology is a theory of personal or individual theology that was first developed by practical theologian Jeff Astley.<sup>13</sup> Astley defines ordinary Christian theology as “the theology and theologizing of Christians who have received little or no theological education of a scholarly academic or systematic kind.”<sup>14</sup> The focus of interest is on what Astley calls the “God-talk” of believers—a way of describing the kinds of theological reflection that are characteristic of Christians who have not participated in theological education.<sup>15</sup>

Cognitive reflection for Astley is not a denial of the importance of practice; rather, it arises from the opaque and hidden nature of religious experience. He argues that it is difficult to infer beliefs from practice. One reason for this is that there is rarely a one-to-one correlation between beliefs and their expression in action. Hence he argues that “different theologies may undergird the same practice, and we must be cautious about imputing to people’s practice a theology that they would not themselves claim to hold.” Ordinary theology therefore focuses on listening to what people are saying. The focus on people’s God-talk is important because it is hard to discern the theology that is implicit in what people do. “However hesitant, inarticulate and unsystematic is a person’s ordinary theology, it is easier literally to hear than is their practice. Practice speaks ‘very loudly,’ of course, as we say; and often ‘more loudly than words.’ But it does not speak *in words*. Inferring people’s theology from their practice may sometimes be our only recourse; but it is rather a different sort of activity from describing, understanding and analysing what they say.”<sup>16</sup>

Ordinary theology is transmitted in different ways than those usually associated with the university or the seminary. It is the theology that all believers start with and learn first.<sup>17</sup> Ordinary theology is passed on by acts of prayer and worship. It is learned in Bible study groups, in Christian fellowship, and through the everyday experiences of life in the home and in

12. See Christie, *Ordinary Christology*; Village, *Bible and Lay People*; and Cartledge, *Testimony in the Spirit*.

13. Astley, *Ordinary Theology*; Astley and Christie, *Taking Ordinary Theology Seriously*; and Astley and Francis, *Exploring Ordinary Theology*.

14. Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, 56.

15. Astley, “Analysis, Investigation and Application of Ordinary Theology,” 1.

16. *Ibid.*, 5–6.

17. *Ibid.*

the community.<sup>18</sup> Ordinary theology is a lay theology, says Astley, because it is shared by the whole people of God. This is the theology that runs like a thread through people's lives, and it exists in the web of relationships that constitute communities.

Astley and coauthor Ann Christie argue that this kind of theology matters because it does work for people.<sup>19</sup> Technical language and terms are generally not very useful in everyday contexts, and as a result, ordinary theology does not make use of complex or highly abstract concepts. This does not mean that there is no depth or profound insight to be found in ordinary theology. The seriousness of ordinary theology is a "feature of personal avowal rather than of scholarly learning."<sup>20</sup> Academic theology is the preserve of the scholarly few and as such is a minority interest compared to the vast majority of Christians who live their lives out of and through ordinary ways of thinking theologically. Ordinary theology is therefore primarily a working theology, and as a result, it is not a slight or inconsequential topic. Ordinary theology really matters to people.<sup>21</sup>

Ordinary theology is important, Astley argues, because the church needs to know how believers habitually think and how they receive the ongoing teaching ministry of the clergy and other ministers.<sup>22</sup> This means that every minister, teacher, or pastoral worker in a church needs to be familiar with the ordinary theology of the people with whom he or she works in the local community. Success in ministry necessitates a thorough understanding and ability to relate to ordinary theology.<sup>23</sup>

The focus on ordinary believing requires a turn toward empirical methods in theology because there is no other way to uncover this phenomenon. Ordinary theology and lived religion share this imperative to adopt empirical forms of research and inquiry.

### The Four Theological Voices

The four theological voices method of research has been developed by the ARCS team (Helen Cameron, Deborah Bhatti, Catherine Duce, James

18. *Ibid.*, 1.

19. Astley and Christie, *Taking Ordinary Theology Seriously*, 6.

20. *Ibid.*, 6–7.

21. *Ibid.*, 7.

22. Astley, "Analysis, Investigation and Application of Ordinary Theology," 2.

23. Astley and Christie, *Taking Ordinary Theology Seriously*, 5.



Sweeney, and Clare Watkins). The team developed its approach while working with churches, Christian NGOs, and organizations in the United Kingdom. The methodology is based on sustained empirical research that sets out to work with these partners to facilitate theological reflection. In *Talking about God in Practice*, the authors introduce the different theological voices that become evident through a careful examination of the practice of the church. These voices are mixed together in the everyday speech and action of communities, and as such they form a rich and living “whole.”

In seeking to understand how theology is intertwined with action, they have developed an interpretative typology that helps them to identify different strands of theological communication in the life of the church. They see the voices typology as a “working tool.” The tool is developed around the notion that in the lived practice of the church there are four theological voices: operant theology, espoused theology, normative theology, and formal theology.<sup>24</sup>

Cameron and the ARCS team argue that the fundamental starting point in the kind of research they do needs to be the realization that the practice of the church is theological. As Clare Watkins puts it, “Practices are bearers of theology.”<sup>25</sup> This means that theology is somehow embodied in the practice of the church. Operant theology is the theology that is evident in how people act and embody faith. Operant theology is not generally something that is easily explained or described, they argue; rather, it needs to be uncovered and discovered by believers themselves because operant theologies are often slightly hidden from view or taken as “just the thing that we do.” It is only when they are subjected to attention and reflection that these everyday ways of believing reveal their theological nature. The four voices method of analysis has come about because the researchers have found in their work with churches a particular tendency for there to be differences between the theology that is evident in practice and the theology that people articulate. Their term for theology that is articulated is “espoused theology.”

Espoused theology is the theology spoken by the members of the church or organization. Cameron’s team observed that among the churches studied, belief and believing appear to operate in a way that enables and occasionally supports subtle and at times confusing differences between what is stated and the underlying operant theology that works out in practice.

24. Cameron et al., *Talking about God in Practice*, 49–56.

25. Watkins, “Practical Ecclesiology,” 169.

Espoused theology has its roots in the wider tradition and expression of the church. In other words, “Espoused theologies come from somewhere.” Churches and believers develop their espoused theological understandings in relation to the ongoing teaching and theological understanding of their churches. So the theology that people speak about in relation to their practice is drawn from Scripture or liturgy or other theological and spiritual writings, as well as experience.<sup>26</sup>

The third theological voice, normative theology, is therefore used to show how these varied sources are often utilized as a guide and a corrective alongside practice both by communities and by believers. Here again it is possible to observe interesting and sometimes contradictory relationships between the normative voice in a community and the espoused theology of individual believers.

The final voice identified by Cameron’s ARCS team is formal theology. This refers to the contribution academic or professional theologians bring to understanding the practice and the life of the church. This voice, however, is deeply entwined with the other three theological voices. Espoused and normative theology draw to varying degrees on formal theology.<sup>27</sup> A good example of this is the way that ministers continue to find inspiration from their studies at college when they preach or the extent to which believers engage with academic theology in their personal reading or when they attend Christian festivals and events.

The normative theology contained in the liturgy of the church is often influenced by the wider academic conversations that make up the formal theological voice. Alongside this embedded formal voice is a particular role that the ARCS team sees for academic engagement with practice. Academic theology offers a critical perspective on the lived expression of the church. It is able, when it is at its best, to “shine a light” on the actions of the church and the state of believing.

### Introducing Lived Theology

Lived religion, ordinary theology, and the four theological voices, while they are distinct and different, all describe a phenomenon that is crucially

26. Cameron et al., *Talking about God in Practice*, 53.

27. *Ibid.*, 55.

important for practical theology. It is essential that we can give an account of theology as it is lived and experienced if, as practical theologians, we want to effectively and accurately reflect on the Christian community. These three approaches together offer important insights that should shape how we do practical theology. While they are very different, they can be combined to generate a way of working and seeing the life of the church, and indeed the wider society, that should be at the heart of how we approach practical theology.

Lived religion in some ways downplays theology as an adequate description of religious experience. In the place of doctrinal descriptions favored by religious institutions, lived religion focuses on individuals and groups as they engage in rituals and practices. Theology is not completely bracketed out by this approach, but it is seen as a part of this embodied and performed cultural environment. In other words, it is not given a privileged place as a form of overarching explanation.

Ordinary theology, by contrast, argues for theology as the key to understanding practice. Here, the focus is definitely on the speech of believers and the ways that they reason and understand using doctrinal formulation. Practice, it is argued by those who advocate ordinary theology, can only be understood through the words of those who participate. Observation cannot in and of itself take us into the minds of participants.

The four theological voices approach situates the expressed or espoused theology of ordinary believers in a more nuanced web of theological expression. It suggests that theological expression is not limited to speech but can also be found in actions. This kind of operant theology can be implicit, and ordinary believers may not be aware that it exists. Moreover, as opposed to the ordinary theology perspective, the four voices approach traces the ways in which both espoused and operant theologies exist in relation to more formal and normative voices. So instead of isolating ordinary theology as distinct and separate from more academic or formal kinds of theology, the four voices approach looks for the interrelationship of theological forms of expression that exist around communities and religious practice.

Despite the differences between these ways of conceptualizing the lived nature of religious practice and theology, all three have a valuable contribution to make. I am therefore suggesting a term that should be used

for this combined approach: “lived theology.”<sup>28</sup> Lived theology combines significant perspectives from lived religion, ordinary theology, and the four theological voices. This combined way of talking about theology as it is lived in communities needs to be at the heart of any form of practical theology. In the final part of this chapter, I will discuss the contribution that lived theology, as I have conceived it, can make to practical theology.

### *Lived Theology Shapes Us as Practical Theologians*

I have already discussed the way that faith seeking understanding means we are all shaped by our experience of the church. Lived theology is a way of giving expression to this as part of an overall approach to practical theology. Because we are all formed as theologians by the communities of which we are a part, lived theology has a powerful influence on how we approach practical theology. Lived theology is operant in us as a way of selecting and making decisions, and this dynamic is something that everyone brings to practical theology. As a result, lived theology directs our attention in such a way that it influences what we think and how we see things. This means that our viewpoint is to some extent already shaped before we start to do practical theology. This does not mean that the process of theological education will not influence how we think. The point is that as we learn, there is a process of developing and growing the theology that we already carry with us. There may be occasions when new insights and perspectives cause us to revise our thinking in fundamental ways, but our lived theology is the baseline for this process.

### *Lived Theology Is the Starting Point for Practical Theology*

It is almost impossible to do practical theology well without first reflecting on our own lived theology. There are a number of reasons for this. Most glaringly, if our lived theology shapes the way we look at life, then we need to give some time to reflecting on how exactly this works for each of us. This kind of self-examination might not be easy. The four voices approach makes it clear that there are several layers of theology at work in communities. These layers are also part of the makeup of each of us individually as believers. So we might have operant theology

28. “Lived theology” is a term that has also been adopted by Charles Marsh, Peter Slade, and Sarah Azaransky; see their edited volume *Lived Theology*.

that shapes the way we act and react. This kind of theology might be implicit in the things we do, and hence it can be hidden or obscured from our view.

Alongside our operant theology will be the theology that we speak and own. This theology will also be a part of our selves. The ordinary theology perspective suggests that this spoken theology is likely to be our primary and most deeply held perspective on life. I would add that this deep or inherent ordinary theology almost certainly combines the operant and the espoused. Lived theology shapes the way we pray and the way we choose to live our lives. Thus it is essential to spend time reflecting on our own lived theology when we set out to do practical theology, since it has such a deep influence on how we think and act as Christians—not only day-to-day but most crucially when we are in the process of trying to reflect theologically as practical theologians.

### *Lived Theology Is Performed*

Every Christian community carries within it a vibrant lived theology. Lived theology is enacted within the everyday practices of religious life and embodied in the way that individuals make and remake themselves through sharing in a religious world. There is, then, a fundamental performative element to lived theology. It is not simply spoken as an explanation; it is acted out, and this practice means it lives. Practical theological method must therefore be shaped in such a way that it is able to pay deep and close attention to the performance of theology in Christian communities and in the wider society.

### *Lived Theology Is Complex*

Within Christian communities, lived theology is multilayered. Lived theology exists in practices and religious rituals, but simultaneously it is also found in the way that individuals and groups think about these phenomena. Practical theology needs to pay attention to the various ways that thought and action coexist and have a deep interactive relationship with one another. To further complicate this picture, there will often be a number of different theological understandings that are part of the lived theology of any one Christian community. So there may be different formal theological accounts, there may be varied institutional accounts, and then there will be

the many theologies that individuals express and make operant. All of these constitute lived theology in any one context.

### *Lived Theology Can Be Contradictory*

The multilayered nature of lived theology is further complicated by the fact that individuals can and in fact are quite likely to hold conflicting and contradictory theological perspectives. The reason for this is that we do not generally systemize our thoughts; rather, we develop them in relation to the events of life. One of the consequences of this way of generating lived theology is that we do not normally worry much about consistency or coherence. Lived theology is primarily concerned with doing what is right and being faithful in particular circumstances.

### *Not All Lived Theology Is Good*

Practical theology is essential for the church because communities from time to time generate forms of lived theology that are problematic. Lived theology is part of the cultural flow of society, and as a result it can easily develop in ways that, for instance, exclude groups or facilitate privilege or support modes of thinking and operating that disadvantage particular groups in society. Lived theology, even when it is problematic or mistaken, will not simply be a set of doctrines or ideas; it will be woven into life and practice. It is a living cultural environment. This means that the theological task of understanding and then offering insight and correction that practical theology sets out to do is far from straightforward. Lived theology is charged with emotions and commitments, and making changes requires more than ideas alone. Practical theology, then, is the discipline that seeks to help churches as they strive to be faithful in the lived theological environment.

### **Paying Attention to Lived Theology**

In this chapter I have argued that practical theology is first and primarily the discipline of paying critical attention to lived theology. In the ongoing lives of communities, lived theology exists as the thread that runs through the multiple layers of expression from the formal and institutional voices to the more implicit and individual kinds of theology that are carried

in actions and gesture. Practical theology has the task in the church of examining and expressing the dynamics and patterns that exist within lived theology. The purpose in paying attention to lived theology is first to understand; second, to draw attention to what is going on; and third, to help communities as they seek to alter patterns that might be unhelpful or problematic. All of these roles for practical theology necessitate a theory of how practice and theology interact in lived communities. My suggestion for this kind of theorizing has drawn on the three notions of lived religion, ordinary theology, and the four voices methodology. I concluded by setting out how these three theories can be combined as lived theology and how this can inform and shape the way we approach practical theology.

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# 5

## Practical Theology as a Conversation about Practice and Theology

Practical theology has its origins and purpose in the local church, but it is also an academic discipline. At its heart this discipline is a conversation. This conversation is complex and multilayered, but essentially it is about one thing: method. The methodological issue that dominates practical theology is carried in its name. How is it possible to talk about theology and practice? “Theology” and “practice” have one thing in common. They are words that are difficult to pin down. As I have already suggested, theology can exist as different genres and operate in different voices, modes, and locations. Practice might, in contrast, appear to offer a more certain and concrete area for study. Unfortunately, this is not necessarily the case. Practice, as we have seen in the previous chapter, is related to the lived and hence to questions of culture, context, community, and identity.

In this chapter, the methodological issues that lie at the heart of the discipline of practical theology will be explored through a survey of key thinkers within the discipline. Each section will introduce the ideas of different practical theologians and how they have approached doing practical theology (i.e., how both practice and theology should be taken seriously).

The idea of conversation in the discipline of practical theology is used to indicate that there are really quite different approaches to these central issues within the discipline.

I divide this chapter into four sections: “Practical Theology as Ministerial Education,” “Correlational Approaches to Practical Theology,” “Practical Theology as Interpreting Action,” and “A Return to Theology and Tradition.” Each section conceives of practical theology in a different way. If you are new to the field, this can be quite confusing, but the key issue here is how practice and theology connect. What you need to ask as we explore these theories is, What approach to theology and practice do I find most helpful?

### **Practical Theology as Ministerial Education**

Practical theology as a theological discipline owes its origins to the education of ministers. As a result, reflection on the practice of leadership and the various roles and functions of clergy has been one of the most fruitful areas within the discipline. Traditionally, practical theology, as it deals with ministerial education, has been divided into different fields of study. These in turn have become rich areas for research and theological reflection in their own right. So theological discussion of preaching, for instance, has grown into the field of homiletics, teaching has developed as Christian education, and in recent years there has been the development of the field of youth ministry. The study of evangelism has given birth to the disciplinary area of mission studies. Mission studies has come almost full circle and is now at the center of conversations about the future shape of the church. Pastoral care has been one of the most significant areas within practical theology. The study of worship also has evolved its own separate disciplinary area known as liturgical studies. Added to these is the area of church organization and administration, which has become something of a boom area with fields such as congregational studies, church development, and church growth, not to mention the more applied aspects of ecclesiology.

So practical theology as ministerial education has generated an extraordinary range of writing and thinking. Perhaps as a result, reflection on the practice of ministry has led to creative and significant insights that have moved the discipline of practical theology in important ways. At the

center of these have been methodological perspectives on how theology and practice relate to each other. In the next sections we will explore the contribution that ministerial education has made at a theoretical level through the writing of three practical theologians: Clement F. Rogers, who was a lecturer and then professor of pastoral theology at King's College, London (1906–32); Seward Hiltner, discussed briefly in chapter 1, who taught at Princeton Seminary (1961–80); and Craig Dykstra, who served as senior vice president for religion at the Lilly Endowment (1989–2012). Both Rogers and Hiltner talk about reflection on ministry as pastoral theology rather than as practical theology.

In the United Kingdom, the view of pastoral theology as relating to the discipline of educating for ministry has been quite common. In the United States, however, pastoral theology is typically thought of as describing theological approaches to pastoral care and counseling. These disparities about names are significant because they indicate the extent to which practical theology is an evolving and sometimes confusing conversation.

### *Clement Rogers and the Science of Ministry*

Published just before the outbreak of the First World War, *An Introduction to the Study of Pastoral Theology* offers a vision of what Rogers speaks of as a positive science of pastoral ministry. What he means by a science is the possibility that through a diligent and attentive engagement in the practice of ministry, clergy could begin to establish rules and principles for the effective operation of their calling. Rogers defines theology as the science of human relations with God. Practical theology is the area of theology that explores the social expression and mediation of these relationships.<sup>1</sup> The starting point for pastoral theology is the willingness to be fully engaged in the practice of ministry. As Rogers puts it, “We may begin in our own parishes and by hard, disciplined thought try to make our work effective, searching out by what spiritual laws the healing of souls may be furthered, so we may fight the powers of evil in heavenly places and not as those that beat in the air.”<sup>2</sup>

Pastoral theology is a calling that requires involvement and action. It is a service of humanity and of the church. Ultimately, to do pastoral

1. C. Rogers, *Introduction*, 36.

2. *Ibid.*, 34.

theology, says Rogers, is to be a priest.<sup>3</sup> He explores this priestly element in relation to the different subject areas within pastoral theology. The first area he calls “devotion,” which deals with the range of ways in which humanity is drawn into a relationship with God—what Rogers calls the “underlying laws of worship and the inner life.”<sup>4</sup> This includes the study of worship and liturgy, but it also involves ascetic theology and Christian art. Ascetic theology explores the spiritual disciplines of the individual. “Christian art” is Rogers’s term for all of the different cultural expressions of faith.

The second area covers both the content of “Christian truth” and the means by which this is communicated. Communication includes the science of preaching (homiletics) and the science of education. Rogers groups these together with apologetics and mission studies under the term “evangelization.”

The third area is practical duty. This covers ethics, canon law, the study of church polity, and “practical work,” including the moral education and the philanthropic work of the parish. These three subject areas within pastoral theology relate explicitly to the role of the parish priest. Devotion is “connected with the work of a clergyman as Minister of the Eucharist. Evangelization gathers all of those areas that link to ‘a clergyman’s duties as Evangelical and Minister of the Word.’ The area of Practical Duty is symbolized by the role of the clergy as Ministers of Baptism.”<sup>5</sup>

Pastoral theology, Rogers argues, is a practical science. As such, it combines learning from theoretical sources and learning from participation in ministry. He champions the minister as a reflective practitioner—that is, someone who learns while doing. He points out that many of the principles and the rules that govern the science of ministerial practice are yet to be discovered, and he encourages his readers to go out into the parish and set about learning as they are doing. To this end, he suggests a range of simple research methods such as keeping a regular journal of pastoral encounters, asking questions of the congregation about their experience of the service and particularly of preaching, and, especially in the early years of ministry, taking time to visit neighboring churches in order to learn about the variety of ways in which worship takes place.

3. *Ibid.*, 43–45.

4. *Ibid.*, 214.

5. *Ibid.*, 214–15.

Rogers also points out that the social scientific disciplines of psychology and sociology have much to teach the minister, and these should also be used to form theories of practice. Alongside knowledge gained from practice is that gained from the traditional theological disciplines of biblical studies, patristics, doctrinal study, and church history. Each of these has its own internal method and focus and should not be confused with pastoral theology. But “every theological question,” says Rogers, “has its pastoral side.”<sup>6</sup> Theological, moral, and ethical principles are developed through traditional theological study, and then comes the question of how these are to be worked out in practice in the church and wider society. This is the subject area of pastoral theology.

### *Seward Hiltner and the Pastoral Perspective*

We briefly discussed Seward Hiltner in chapter 1. Hiltner’s *Preface to Pastoral Theology* was published in 1958 and has been widely recognized as one of the modern classics of practical theology. Pastoral theology, says Hiltner, is a formal branch of theology that arises from the study of “Christian shepherding.” Shepherding comes from the word “pastor,” and it describes the function of the minister, but it also includes the study of those functions.<sup>7</sup> At its heart, shepherding is a perspective. “The term ‘perspective’ enables us to think of the subject, or shepherd, as having and exercising an attitude or point of view or type of feeling that is basic to him [or her] and not just something tacked on.”<sup>8</sup> So pastoral theology is the branch of theology that brings this perspective to bear on all the operations and functions of the church and the minister.

The purpose of Hiltner’s study is to develop “conclusions of a theological order from reflection on these observations.”<sup>9</sup> Shepherding is not the only perspective that arises from the practice of ministry. There are also the functions of teaching and communicating the faith, along with all the operations connected to the organization of the Christian community. These in turn, says Hiltner, have their distinct and separate perspectives.

Pastoral theology is an autonomous field of theological study that has its place alongside the other theological disciplines. It is distinctive, says

6. Ibid.

7. Hiltner, *Preface to Pastoral Theology*, 15–16.

8. Ibid., 18.

9. Ibid., 20.

Hiltner, because it is operation-centered or function-centered in contrast to biblical studies or systematic theology, for instance, which are “logic-centered” in their method. Logic-centered disciplines include questions that relate to practice, and their findings have practical implications, but operation-centered forms of study, such as pastoral theology, are distinctive because their findings and theories emerge out of reflection on events, acts, and practices from a particular perspective. Pastoral theology organizes knowledge into a system of thought, but it does so through the lens of its particular interests.<sup>10</sup>

Pastoral theology, Hiltner says, is “an operation-focused branch of theology which begins with theological questions and concludes with theological answers, in the interim examining all acts and operations of pastor and church to the degree that they involve the perspective of Christian shepherding.”<sup>11</sup> This field of inquiry involves the study of practice, but it also requires the generation of theological perspectives from the Bible and other theological texts. So theological insight within the pastoral perspective moves both from theological texts and their application and from practice and experience toward theological expression. These two directions of flow are not oppositional; both contribute to pastoral theology.

### *Craig Dykstra and the Ecclesial and Pastoral Imagination*

In *For Life Abundant*, coauthored with Dorothy Bass and published in 2008, Craig Dykstra focuses on the practices that shape the minister and the congregation. He calls these practices ecclesial and pastoral imagination. Imagination describes the innate, habituated ways that ministers and communities live out the Christian faith. This kind of wisdom only emerges through years of practice.

Ecclesial imagination is a way of seeing and being that comes about as Christian people share together as a community in the knowledge of God and seek to live an “abundant life.” What results is a kind of wisdom that shapes the lives of disciples. Abundant life is expressed in daily ways of seeing and being both inside and outside the church. Ecclesial imagination is a distinct way of looking that is different in content and in quality from the dominant culture that surrounds the church. People in churches,

10. *Ibid.*, 20–21.

11. *Ibid.*, 24.

Dykstra claims, have a way of speaking that is slightly different from the conventional forms of wisdom. They are open to one another, they invest in young people, and they tend to be more generous with their money.<sup>12</sup>

Pastoral imagination is fundamentally related to the imagination of the Christian community. Each gives rise to the other. The intelligence and insight carried collectively in churches inform and shape ministers. This learning takes place almost unwittingly as ministers and congregations live with each other. Pastoral imagination, says Dykstra, is similarly organic in its development. Pastoral imagination is developed and grows through the many activities of ministry done with faithfulness and with integrity.<sup>13</sup> “Every day pastors are immersed in a constant, and sometimes nearly chaotic, interplay of meaning-filled relationships and demands.” The activities of ministers vary from preaching and teaching to dealing with the fabric of buildings. On top of this, they have to respond quickly to a range of complex and unpredictable pastoral situations as they arise. It is the unique combination of all of these different challenges that forges the intelligence and wisdom of the pastor. As Dykstra puts it, “Life lived long enough and fully enough in pastoral office gives rise to a way of seeing in depth and of creating new realities that is an indispensable gift to the church, to all who are members of it, and, indeed, to public life and to the world.”<sup>14</sup>

Practical theology, says Dykstra, is a vital resource for both ecclesial and pastoral imagination. The purpose of practical theology and of theological education in general is to nurture, discipline, and provide resources to the church and the minister. Practical theology helps to shape the purposes and vision of the abundant life. This abundant life is the “telos,” or end goal, of pastoral imagination.<sup>15</sup> Dykstra draws on Dorothy Bass’s understanding of practical theology as shaped around three questions: “How can, and how do, our lives and our life together participate in a way of life that reflects the life of God, both when we are gathered as church and when we are dispersed into countless disparate circumstances? What is the shape of a contemporary way of life that truly is life-giving in and for the sake of the world? And how can the church

12. Dykstra, “Pastoral and Ecclesial Imagination,” 57.

13. *Ibid.*, 47.

14. *Ibid.*, 50–51.

15. *Ibid.*, 43.

foster such a way of life, for the good of all creation?”<sup>16</sup> These concerns are intimately connected to ecclesial and pastoral imagination. They are the motivating force for the people of God. The challenge for those involved in practical theology is to stay closely enough connected to the lived life of communities and of Christian ministers that the discipline is able to continually act as a nurturing, envisioning, and corrective influence in the practice of faith.

### *Ministerial Education and Practical Theology*

In its origins, practical theology is fundamentally related to the life of the church. This connection means that the education of ministers and also lay people in leadership continues to shape the discipline. Clement Rogers and Seward Hiltner, although they are separated by two world wars and by the historical, cultural, and ecclesial differences between the United States and the United Kingdom, share a basic theological orientation. Both writers see ministerial practice as an organizing framework for theology. There is a perspective that comes from being a pastor and a priest. This perspective is so significant that it can be used to reconfigure the other theological disciplines. So Hiltner and Rogers argue that it is possible to do biblical studies, systematic theology, and church history with different questions in mind.

In the last thirty years there has been a strong tendency within practical theology to reject what is known as “applied theology,” which seeks to apply theological concepts to practice. Practical theology, it is argued, starts with practice rather than by working out a doctrinal or a biblical “theory” that it then relates to life.

Rogers and Hiltner, coming from a much earlier time, offer an important corrective to this rejection of applied forms of theologizing. They suggest that it is possible to work within the traditional disciplines to develop theories and insights. In fact, it is necessary and desirable to do this kind of work, but what makes it practical theology is the “perspective” that comes from being an active minister and believer in the life of the church. In other words, although the student or the academic might be thinking in fairly abstract or theoretical ways, the ecclesial perspective is embodied in the person doing the study. What distinguishes this kind

16. *Ibid.*, 60.



of work as practical theology is that it attempts to foreground the questions and issues that arise from the life of the church—what Dykstra calls pastoral and ecclesial imagination. Communities and individuals carry and nurture habituated ways of approaching practice and theology in the everyday. This attention to practice moves the methodological discussion in practical theology from a relationship between subject areas in an academic discipline to the embodied life of communities.

There is one further and most significant contribution that these three writers illustrate. All three in their different ways are advocates of the use of empirical methods to study practice. Craig Dykstra, for instance, argues for the need to pay detailed attention to how imagination is embedded in practice. Clement Rogers sees empirical research as a way to discover the workings of God in the world. Seward Hiltner talks about the need to pay attention to the life of the church. In particular, his concept of a pastoral perspective arises from his involvement in developing ways of paying attention to the particularity of pastoral encounters that were characteristic of training in pastoral care and counseling in the United States for more than thirty years.

This turn toward empirical forms of knowledge has been a key characteristic of practical theology, but it has not been without its problems. Chief among these is the question of how theological forms of knowledge relate to methods and theoretical insights that have their origins in the social sciences. Academic forms of practical theology have been shaped in many ways by a conversation around how the social sciences and theology might be correlated. The correlation of different disciplines has been right at the heart of the conversation about method within practical theology.

### **Correlational Approaches to Practical Theology**

Correlation has had a deep and an enduring influence on the development of practical theology. The method is most closely associated with theologian Paul Tillich. Correlation for Tillich is the process whereby theological attention is paid to the questions that emerge from human cultural expression. These questions give rise to theological answers that draw upon the richness of the Christian tradition and divine revelation. This relationship of questioning and answering gives rise to a circle of communication. So the “divine-human” relationship is a correlation where “theology formulates

the questions implied in human existence, and theology formulates the answer implied in divine self-manifestation under the guidance of the questions implied in human existence.”<sup>17</sup>

### *David Tracy and a Revised Correlational Method*

The idea that theology was structured around a correlation between human questions and a divine answer was taken up and then significantly developed by David Tracy. Tracy embraced the notion that there were two sources for theological thinking. He calls these the “situation” and the “message.” Where he and Tillich differ is in Tillich’s assertion that the situation must be limited to asking questions for which the answers always come from the other source. This is unsatisfactory for Tracy, and so he offers what he calls a “revised correlational method” where not just the questions from human experience are considered but also the various answers that arise from that situation. The answers are then considered alongside those that come from “the message.”<sup>18</sup>

Correlation for Tracy is linked directly to his understanding of practical theology as the ethical outworking of faith. In *The Analogical Imagination*, Tracy divides theology into three subdisciplines: fundamental theology, systematic theology, and practical theology. These subdisciplines are distinctive in their modes of inquiry, how they understand truth claims, their distinct requirements for faith commitment on behalf of the theologian, and, most significantly, their primary reference group or public.

All theology is public in one way or another, says Tracy, but practical theology has a particular role in this regard. While fundamental theology is primarily oriented toward the public world of the university and systematic to the church, practical theology expresses the engagement of theology with the wider society. It is particularly concerned with the religious significance of social and political movements, as well as developments in culture and in pastoral situations. As it gets taken up in these movements, practical theology becomes oriented around praxis rather than theoretical frameworks. It is this involvement with action that orients the practical theologian toward ethics. “Practical theologies will be concerned principally

17. Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 61.

18. Tracy, *Blessed Rage*, 46.

with the ethical stance of responsible commitment to and sometimes even involvement in a situation of praxis.”<sup>19</sup>

### *Don Browning and a Fundamental Practical Theology*

Don Browning was one of the most significant practical theologians in recent times. He taught in Chicago, where he was a longtime colleague of David Tracy. In *A Fundamental Practical Theology*, Browning develops a complex theory of theological method drawing heavily on Tracy’s understanding of correlation and of practical theology as praxis. He takes as his starting point the ways in which Christian communities are places where practical reason is embodied in communal life. Through practice and through the various forms of symbolic communication, Christian communities carry within them resources for practical reason.

Practical theology is concerned first to understand and describe these aspects of the ethical life of the church and then to offer critical and corrective frameworks to help communities change and renew their praxis. The ethical focus of practical theology is expressed through two questions, says Browning: What shall we do? And how shall we live?<sup>20</sup> With this starting orientation toward the ethical life of the church, he develops his theory of a fundamental practical theology through four movements or tasks: the descriptive movement, the historical movement, the systematic movement, and strategic practical theology.

The descriptive movement centers on the task of interpreting and describing a situation. Browning sees this as a kind of hermeneutic sociology. “Practical theology describes practices in order to discern the conflicting cultural and religious meanings that guide our action and provoke the questions that animate our practical thinking.”<sup>21</sup> A number of questions characterize this movement. These include: What are we doing? What symbols, ideals, and reasons do we use to interpret what we are doing? What are the sources and authorities for what we are doing, and what should we be doing? This last question leads directly into the next task, which Browning calls the historical movement. In this movement, there is a turn toward the texts and the traditional disciplines of

19. Tracy, *Analogical Imagination*, 57.

20. Browning, *Fundamental Practical Theology*, 10.

21. *Ibid.*, 48.

theology—that is, biblical studies, church history, and the history of Christian thought. These theological disciplines, with their different approaches to criticism and knowledge, are used as a “distancing” technique in the service of understanding praxis. As such they are positioned by Browning within an overarching theological method of fundamental practical theology.

The next task brings the different areas of knowledge together. This is the systematic movement. What takes place is a fusion of “the vision implicit in contemporary practices and the vision implied in the practices of the normative texts.”<sup>22</sup> Systematic theology sets out to develop an ordered and arranged view of the various sources—both those from praxis and those from traditional theological texts. Its overall aim is to bring together the general themes from the gospel with the questions that emerge from and characterize the situations in the present moment.

The final task is what Browning calls strategic practical theology. This movement is shaped around four basic questions: (1) How do we understand this concrete situation in which we must act? To address this question, it is required that we have examined individual and corporate histories, including specific commitments that shape action and the systems that support communities and individuals in their praxis. (2) What should be our praxis in this concrete situation? This brings together the results from the first three movements, and it starts to engage specifically with the norms that arise from the review of texts in the historical and systematic movements. (3) How do we critically defend the norms and therefore our praxis in this concrete situation? This involves developing an apologetic for the practice of the community. (4) What means, strategies, and rhetoric should we use in this concrete situation? This involves developing specific plans for the church to engage in praxis.

### *Stephen Pattison and Words That Resurrect the Dead*

Browning’s fundamental practical theology uses correlation, but it structures this within a pattern of analysis from the pastoral cycle. The pastoral cycle will be discussed in depth in the next chapter. At this point, it is important simply to note how Browning’s method and others like it generate a method for practical theology that is structured around specific

22. *Ibid.*, 51.

moves or stages. Each has its ordered place. To follow the method is to transition through these stages.

One of the problems with this approach is that it tends to insulate each of the areas of interest from the others. You have to pass through the one to get to the other. In practice, however, things are always more organic, slightly messy, and mixed up together. So for instance, it is almost impossible to turn off our knowledge of theological texts and the traditions of the church or the material in the Bible as we examine the practice of the church. Indeed, as Browning says, praxis is itself a form of theology in action or a “theory-laden practice.”<sup>23</sup> So the correlation method is probably better understood in more organic and dynamic ways. This is precisely what the British practical theologian Stephen Pattison explores in his approach to correlation.<sup>24</sup>

Pattison comes to practical theology from a background of working with those who are in psychiatric care. In 1981 he published *A Critique of Pastoral Care*. The book was a groundbreaking work in practical theology, giving an in-depth critical analysis of the various secularizing tendencies in the prevailing approaches to counseling and pastoral care. His background in mental health and the world of the hospital and chaplaincy informs Pattison’s understanding of pastoral theology and the way that correlation works in practice.<sup>25</sup> He defines pastoral theology as “a place where religious belief, tradition and practice meets contemporary experiences, questions and actions and conducts a dialogue which is mutually enriching, intellectually critical and practically transforming.”<sup>26</sup>

Pattison argues for pastoral theology as a vivid, dancing, and puzzling practice. It is a vibrant practice that should by rights find a place at the heart of the church and in the world beyond. Indeed, pastoral theology is precisely the place where the theology and the faith of the church come into contact with the thoughts, ideas, and practices of the wider world. What takes place at the point of meeting is a conversation, a dialogue that is designed to bring about insight, critical comment, and transformation. This is a visionary or prophetic enterprise. As Pattison says, “In practicing pastoral theology I look for words that raise the dead, that fundamentally

23. *Ibid.*, 6.

24. Pattison, *Critique of Pastoral Care*.

25. Pattison, *Challenge of Practical Theology*, 12–21.

26. Pattison, *Critique of Pastoral Care*, 227.

change perceptions, that transform people, society and the world because of their symbolic power; words that make a difference.”<sup>27</sup> In biblical theology, the words of God are themselves acts and deeds. In speech, God brings about events and enacts God’s will.

Dialogue is fundamentally correlational, but it is not constructed as a particular method. Pattison resists the development of an abstract series of tasks or moves. Rather, he locates dialogue in the context of practice. For pastoral workers, there is a daily necessity to make sense of what they are doing. Faced with the range of articulate and convincing frameworks for action that secular professionals advocate in the arena of pastoral care, an adequate theology is a necessity. A plausible and communicable explanation of why and how Christians can engage in shared practice alongside others is a necessity. It is fundamentally about the identity of the pastoral workers as Christians in the public sphere. This expression of identity, however, will itself be, to some extent, informed by other practitioners. There is a dialogue that takes place between practitioners and the various theoretical frameworks that inform their practice. Dialogue involves mutual learning in public spaces. “By developing articulate pastoral theology, people are in principle in a much better position to explain themselves to a variety of audiences.”<sup>28</sup> It is conversation that lies at the heart of these kinds of encounters, says Pattison.

Conversation should be both critical and creative. At the most basic level, it involves a three-way dialogue between (1) our own ideas, beliefs, feelings, and assumptions; (2) the ideas, beliefs, feelings, and assumptions of the wider Christian community; and (3) the individuals, communities, ideas, feelings, and assumptions that are present in the situation that we are engaging with.<sup>29</sup> Pattison sees conversation as a flexible and fluid form of theologizing. It can be formal, but more often it is informal. Conversations do not always lead to conclusions or even to defined ways of acting. They are simply a way in which life is enriched and sociality maintained. For Pattison, pastoral theology is like a lake that is complex, rich, and flowing and that can be seen in different ways and made use of for different purposes. Correlation therefore shifts from method toward an organic element in the lived practice of faith both inside and outside the Christian community.

27. *Ibid.*, 221.

28. *Ibid.*, 224.

29. *Ibid.*, 230.

## Practical Theology as Interpreting Action

In recent years practical theology has seen a significant shift toward understanding itself as the interpretation of action. In the 1970s, German theologian Norbert Mette set out this approach to the discipline. Practical theology, says Mette, “must be conceived of as a theological theory of action within a theology that is understood as a practice-orientated science.”<sup>30</sup> This understanding of practical theology locates it within theology but derives its orientation to its area of study ultimately from the social sciences. Central to this approach is a shift away from theology defined as talk about God toward practical theology as the discussion of how communities, through their practices, express their understanding of God. Theology thereby becomes a kind of cultural or sociological study. This theoretical move within the discipline can be illustrated by the work of two practical theologians: Gerben Heitink and Elaine Graham.

### *Gerben Heitink and Theology Mediated in Praxis*

In *Practical Theology: History, Theory, Action, and Domains*, Dutch practical theologian Gerben Heitink sets out a complex theory of practical theology as a theory of action. He defines the discipline as “the empirically orientated theological theory of the mediation of the Christian faith in the praxis of modern society.”<sup>31</sup> For Heitink, a decisive shift toward anthropology is involved in this theoretical understanding. This move, he argues, has its origins in the work of German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher. It is characterized by a shift away from understanding theology as the rational discussion or science of the being and nature of God toward the study of the human experience of God and the Christian faith as a cultural form. Revelation, Heitink argues, is only perceived through human experience. We study humanity rather than divinity or, more correctly, divinity as it is seen in and through human action. Faith itself rather than God becomes the object of study. For Heitink, “Faith is the direct object of theology. God, the indirect object, cannot be the topic of inquiry. God is only the direct object of our faith.”<sup>32</sup>

30. Mette, *Theorie der Praxis*, 9, quoted in Heitink, *Practical Theology*, 102.

31. Heitink, *Practical Theology*, 102.

32. *Ibid.*, 111.

The central task of practical theology is to formulate a “practical-theological theory.” This involves developing a theological understanding of action. Action, says Heitink, is essentially communicative. Actions convey meaning. They are therefore open to be interpreted and read as texts. In the ecclesial context, action exists within the theological framework of the kingdom of God. “It is directed toward the ‘already’ and the ‘not yet’ of God’s kingdom, in the dialectic of anamnesis and anticipation, of remembering and expecting.”<sup>33</sup>

Heitink sees practical theology as the science of the interpretation of the action of the church. Within this framework, he argues that all practical theological questions revolve around a hermeneutical, an empirical, and a strategic perspective. Strategic issues connect to a variety of fields or domains of action. He describes these as operating on three levels. “Micro” questions concern the individual, “meso” questions concern the functioning of groups, and questions that relate to the wider society make up the “macro” level.<sup>34</sup> The hermeneutical perspective orients the study toward questions such as “who does what?” and most importantly “why?” So the inquiry moves toward an examination of intentions and an understanding of the motivations that lie behind actions. Understanding action involves an investigation into the reasons why people and communities act in certain ways. The empirical perspective connects the “who does what” with the “where and when” questions that relate to action. This in turn involves the use of a range of different research methods drawn from the social sciences to help in the understanding of a situation.<sup>35</sup>

### *Elaine Graham and Transforming Practice*

Elaine Graham is one of the leading practical theologians in the United Kingdom. Her book *Transforming Practice* has become a core text in contemporary understanding of the discipline. Pastoral theology, she argues, “is critical phenomenology, studying a living and acting faith-community in order to excavate and examine the norms which inhabit pastoral praxis.” There should be no appeal to theological sources that exist beyond the life of the church; rather, the role of the theologian is to explore and articulate

33. *Ibid.*, 155.

34. *Ibid.*, 214.

35. *Ibid.*, 220–40.



the ways in which communities “order their life” through theologically informed practice and principles.<sup>36</sup>

Communities carry in their practices theological norms and values. So theology is always studied as it is embodied in concrete practices in communal life. Graham reads practice through the notion of “situated knowledge,” which she derives from feminist writer Donna Haraway. Haraway sees knowledge and identity as provisional and changeable constructs, but these have an ethical and moral dimension because they are expressed through embodiment and relationship and in concrete situations (*TP*, 9).

This situated understanding of knowledge leads Graham to challenge the notion that there is any kind of transcendent system of thought available to the theologian or the church that exists beyond practice. “Effectively, gender challenges pastoral practice to refuse any system of sources and norms which lies in metaphysics or beyond human agency or mediation” (*TP*, 141). This is not to say that Christian communities do not have any norms or values but that these do not exist apart from the practices and the lived expression of faith.

The life of the church should not be equated with the “acting out” of predetermined moral frameworks or of doctrinal formulations (*TP*, 11). Rather, the study of religion should focus on the ways in which communities construct particular cultural forms of life and expression. These cultural forms shape themselves and structure reality in subcultural ways that operate as sources of social relationship for groups as well as for individuals. These social constructs carry theological understanding. They mediate the divine in human cultural forms. Pastoral practices are thus the “expression of the Christian presence in the world,” and they should be seen as the “foundation” rather than as the application of theological understanding (*TP*, 111).

Questions of normativity and of authority are not to be seen as being located outside community life and expression, but they are articulated and carried within practice. Theological norms are enacted, says Graham, and embodied in praxis. The community “inhabits” truth claims, and these generate “moral ways of life, story-telling, promoting human development and pursuing gender equality” (*TP*, 139).

36. Graham, *Transforming Practice*, 140 (hereafter cited in text as *TP*).

For Graham, theological understanding is embedded within practice and communal life. The theologian articulates the theological frameworks that are carried in practice and the lived. So for Graham, pastoral theology is primarily a form of interpretation that focuses on the social and cultural reality of the Christian community. Through paying attention to the embodied expression of groups and individuals, an idea of transcendence is developed. Thus, alongside interpretation, the pastoral theologian is able to contribute to the ongoing life of the church by being able to articulate theological frameworks and norms as they are embedded within practices (*TP*, 140). “My vision of pastoral theology,” says Graham, “portrays it as the systematic reflection upon the nature of the church in the world, accessible only through the practical wisdom of those very communities.” Pastoral theology does not operate in a “legislative way” in relation to practice; rather, it works to help the community of faith to find a “critical and public account of its purposeful presence in the world and the values that give shape to its actions.” This means that pastoral theology operates with and alongside communities as they seek to be transformative of society and their own ecclesial life through an ongoing, self-aware, and self-critical praxis (*TP*, 208–10).

### A Return to Theology and Tradition

Alongside the dominant methodological approaches of correlation and hermeneutics has been what might be called a “theological” approach to practical theology. Proponents of this sort of methodological contribution have tended to position it as a corrective to what they see as the erosion of more traditional theological ways of thinking about practice. To illustrate these voices in the conversation around method, I’ll introduce two American practical theologians, Thomas Oden and Ray Anderson.

#### *Thomas Oden and Rediscovering the Classic Tradition*

Written in 1984, Thomas Oden’s *Care of Souls in the Classic Tradition* is an impassioned plea for a change in direction in practical theology. Oden frames his argument with a personal narrative. He explains that, influenced by the work of Seward Hiltner and prevailing trends in the United States, he had for many years sought to understand pastoral care

through a dialogue with psychological theory and the field of professional counseling. After several years of working within these disciplinary fields, he found himself questioning the extent to which the Christian church had lost something fundamental to itself by embracing what were largely secular theories of the self and of therapy.

Oden explores what he calls the classic tradition of pastoral care, arguing that before modern psychological theories, the church had developed its own ways of thinking about pastoral care. This tradition, he says, is in the Pastoral Epistles of the New Testament. It is also in the patristic writings of Cyprian, Tertullian, John Chrysostom, and Ambrose. It is found in medieval writers Hugh of Saint Victor and Thomas Aquinas. It is present at the Reformation in the work of Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Ulrich Zwingli and then in the reflections of Anglican and Puritan thinkers such as George Herbert and Richard Baxter.<sup>37</sup> For Oden, although this is a varied and exclusively male list, it represents a single and developing tradition. This tradition, he argues, is “unified by its Eucharistic center and its concern to embody the living Christ through interpersonal meeting.”<sup>38</sup>

Oden argues that the classic tradition of pastoral care has been all but abandoned in practical theology. To illustrate this assertion, he conducted a review of the texts on pastoral care and counseling, first from the seven most-read authors of the latter part of the nineteenth century and then from seven writers from the twentieth century. Oden found a marked difference. In the nineteenth-century writings, reference was made quite frequently to texts and sources from the classic tradition. In the twentieth-century writings, which included Seward Hiltner, Howard Clinebell, and Paul Tournier, he found not a single reference to earlier Christian writings on pastoral care.

With this insight, Oden then surveyed the twentieth-century writers on pastoral care for the number of occasions they referenced contemporary psychotherapists such as Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, or Carl Rogers. He found that every one of the contemporary works on pastoral theology cited secular psychotherapists with considerable frequency.<sup>39</sup> Oden says that this is clear evidence of the erosion of the classic theological approaches

37. Oden, *Care of Souls*, 27.

38. *Ibid.*, 28.

39. *Ibid.*, 29–31.

to pastoral care within the Christian church. At the start of the twentieth century, a sea change took place. “During these decades,” he says, “we have witnessed wave after wave of various hegemonies of emergent psychologies being accommodated, often cheaply, into pastoral care without much self-conscious identity formation from the tradition.”<sup>40</sup>

The accommodation of psychological theory has meant that Christian approaches to pastoral care have become all but indistinguishable from secular counterparts. There has been a collective and at times a willful forgetfulness of the classic tradition. In many cases, the psychological theories adopted are themselves opposed to traditional Christian understandings of the self. Yet even where more polemical positions have been avoided, Christian pastoral care has suffered from the loss of its rich heritage. Most significantly, this loss has resulted in an inability to reason theologically about pastoral practice.

Oden argues that there is therefore an urgent need for those working in pastoral care to rediscover the theological voices from the past. It is no longer acceptable, he says, for Christian practice to be defined by psychology. The task to be done is to define the field in theological terms. Basic to this project is the need for paying close attention to those premodern authors who constitute the classic tradition of pastoral care. “We must define for ourselves again what pastoral care is and in what sense pastoral theology is and remains theology.”<sup>41</sup>

This turn to theology, however, does not mean that Oden entirely rejects contemporary psychological theory or psychotherapeutic professional practice. Neither does he advocate an uncritical return to premodern ways of thinking. He simply wants to see pastoral theology recover its sense of self in relation to secularizing forces, and to do this it needs to begin to draw upon the wealth of the Christian theological tradition.<sup>42</sup>

### *Ray Anderson and Practical Theology as Christopraxis*

In *The Shape of Practical Theology*, published in 2001, Ray Anderson sets out to offer a theological framework for practical theology. Practical theology, he argues, is a “critical engagement with the interface between

40. *Ibid.*, 32.

41. *Ibid.*

42. *Ibid.*

the word of God as revealed through Scripture and the work of God taking place in and through the church in the world.”<sup>43</sup> Theology for Anderson is deeply and intrinsically practical. It is not necessary, he argues, to find artificial methodological constructs to connect theology to practice. Theology is practical because of Christ. “What makes theology practical is not the fitting of orthopedic devices to theoretical concepts in order to make them walk. Rather, theology occurs as a divine partner joins us in our walk, stimulating our reflection and inspiring us to recognize the living word as it happened to the two walking on the road to Emmaus on the first Easter.”<sup>44</sup> The presence of Christ makes our theology a living theology.<sup>45</sup>

Anderson sees practical theology in christological terms. His term for this is “Christopraxis.” Christopraxis is “the continuing ministry of Christ through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>46</sup> This emphasis on Christ means that practical theology is both ecclesial and missional in focus. Mission, says Anderson, precedes the church. It is the praxis of God in and through the Holy Spirit; resulting from this mission, the church emerges as a sign of the kingdom of God in the world.<sup>47</sup> Mission theology, he says, must be an integral part of practical theology.<sup>48</sup>

With this distinctive theological starting point and orientation, Anderson then engages with the framework for practical theology as it is described by Don Browning. He agrees with Browning that at its heart practical theology is an exercise in understanding and interpreting the practice of the church. But for Anderson this praxis is seen not in ethical terms but through the lens of Christology. Practical theological method is shaped around stages similar to those described by Browning. This starts with the stage of interpretation and then moves to understanding and theological reflection, which leads to developing revised normative ways of acting.

But this whole process, Anderson argues, is profoundly theological. Theological reflection has its origins in the “context and crisis” of ministry. Present-day practice, however, is seen as the work of the risen Christ

43. Anderson, *Shape of Practical Theology*, 8.

44. *Ibid.*, 12.

45. *Ibid.*, 23–24, drawing on Torrance, *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 138.

46. Anderson, *Shape of Practical Theology*, 29.

47. *Ibid.*, 30.

48. *Ibid.*, 31.

through the power of the Spirit. In attempting to correct and inform this praxis, it is necessary to draw upon Scripture. The interpretation of Scripture in turn is also the work of Christ through the Holy Spirit in the church. So both present-day practice and practical theology as an interpretative and normative discipline are christologically oriented and conditioned. Theological reflection, says Anderson, is “the activity of the Christian and the church by which acts of ministry are critically and continually assessed in the light of both revelation and reconciliation of God’s true word.” This truth, however, cannot be separated from personal faith, and personal faith in turn cannot be detached from the truth of God’s being and Word.<sup>49</sup>

### Evaluating Theories and Themes

This chapter has introduced a number of key thinkers in practical theology. They represent what can be a rather bewildering range of ways of thinking about theology and practice. Part of the task we have in working within practical theology is to understand and then evaluate different approaches. I should probably say I don’t agree with many of these writers, but even those I disagree with often have things that can help me. If you are starting out in practical theology, a key task is to map the field and then locate your own preferred approach within it. To help you with this, I want to identify a number of key themes around the relationship between theology and practice that emerge from the diverse range of practical theological writing presented in this chapter.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, practical theologians who were engaged in the education of clergy began to introduce new ways of talking about practice. For Clement Rogers, the practice of clergy and of the church was open to examination. He introduced his students to forms of observation and recording that could inform their practice. Seward Hiltner, writing in the United States forty years later, was also an advocate of a disciplined attention to practice that made use of forms of research that were informed by the social sciences.

This turn toward the social sciences gave rise to exciting and innovative ways of doing practical theology, but it also raised significant

49. *Ibid.*, 55.

methodological issues. Chief among these was the question of how traditional forms of theological thought and knowledge were to relate to practice as it is described and theorized through empirical study. For Rogers and Hiltner, knowledge of pastoral practice develops an orientation or a perspective that gives theological study a particular purpose and direction. This in and of itself was helpful, but it left largely unexplored the question of how a specifically theological form of knowledge, even one that has been oriented toward practice, should be related to social scientific knowledge.

The relationship between social scientific and theological ways of describing and knowing lies right at the heart of correlational theory. Don Browning takes David Tracy's idea of critical correlation and locates it as a central move in practical theology. Correlation delineates a specific stage in practical theology for the church and its practices to be described using social scientific methods of inquiry. Theology similarly is allocated a stage in the way that practical theology addresses issues in the life of the church. The final stage, what Browning calls a strategic practical theology, arises from bringing together, through correlation, social scientific and theological forms of knowledge.

Browning's work has been deeply influential in practical theology, and for many practical theologians correlation has been, to steal a phrase from Browning, "fundamental." Stephen Pattison's dialogical approach shows how, for many ministerial practitioners working, for instance, as chaplains in hospitals or as youth workers, correlation is basically a way of life. This is quite simply because ministers who work outside a church setting must find ways to dialogue with colleagues who bring different professional and theoretical ways of thinking into the work setting. Here the idea of dialogue and mutual enrichment is not only helpful; it is essential.

Correlation has for some time been the dominant method in practical theology. Dominant ways of thinking, however, inevitably attract some criticism. One form of criticism comes from ideas of interpretation. Hermeneutical approaches tend to critique the way theology operates in the correlational method. For Heitink and for Graham, theology is something that should be understood as part of the cultural expression of the church, and as a result, theology should not be situated as an independent and distinctive voice. Theology is always embodied and has a place in the life



of the community. So if it has an authority or a discriminating purpose, this comes from its situation within practices. One result of this move is that theology has no authority in and of itself; it only has this as it is so regarded by particular communities.

This move within practical theology is highly significant. It represents a kind of victory for practice over theology. Practice and how it is understood—that is, through social scientific and empirical methods—appears to have swallowed up theology as a distinct enterprise. It is interesting at this point to consider Craig Dykstra's discussion of the role of practical theology in ecclesial and pastoral imagination. Practical theology, he says, informs, nurtures, and critiques habituated forms of practice. In other words, there is a crucial role for some kind of evaluative assessment and creative envisioning in practical theology. This is very close to the different ways that Rowan Williams talks about theology as being at times celebration, communication, and also critique. The question remains, What are the resources for developing a renewed and refreshed vision of the church, particularly if theology is seen primarily as something located within a community's life?

For Thomas Oden, a return to theological forms of thinking and knowing is an urgent necessity. In a situation in which a distinctively Christian approach to pastoral care has been eroded, the classic tradition represents a corrective voice from outside. Of course, the interesting thing is that from a theological point of view, the church as a community does not simply consist of those who are in church now but also includes those who have gone before and indeed those who are yet to be part of the church. So these texts and various writings are simply the voices of this wider historical community.

For Ray Anderson, however, theological reflection is not simply a distinctive form of cultural communication. Theology and action are a work of Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. This insight introduces a key issue in practical theology: God. For ordinary Christians and churches, talk about God and experiencing God's presence, power, and grace belong together. Talk about God is never an academic exercise. This kind of commonsense aphorism has a significant truth because it is the location of talk about God in an academic context that dislocates theology from the life of the church. On the face of it, hermeneutical approaches to practical theology seem to address this issue by situating theology as part of communal life.



The drawback with this is that it does not take account of the ways in which talk about God within a church context always holds within it the possibility of the transcendent—the occasions where friends are walking together, as Anderson says, and Christ comes alongside and the familiar is turned upside down.

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