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‘Disciplined wonder’: on the evangelical possibility of reflecting theologically on very good things, as well as the bad and the ugly

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ABSTRACT

This article is adapted from a paper given at the inaugural meeting of the Tyndale Fellowship’s Practical Theology group in 2023. The theme of the meeting was ‘Evangelical Practical Theology?’¹ The essay identifies practical theology’s adeptness at attending to ‘the bad’, and comments on the contribution this feature of the discipline can make to evangelical thought and practice. But it then goes on to ask what resources there are for conceiving and accompanying theological reflection on ‘the good’, and makes some tentative proposals for what such an exercise of ‘disciplined wonder’ might involve.

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Introduction

Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. – Phil. 4.8, NRSV

I am not by background a practical theologian: I studied largely doctrine and ethics, and that is still much of what I teach and write. But as I have moved into theological education, seeking to form students for ministry of various kinds, and into work with post-graduate programmes that serve pastor-scholars and priest-theologians, I have developed a professional and personal interest in practical theology. In doing this, of course, because it is more-or-less ubiquitous within mainstream seminary curricula, I have come to be responsible for something called ‘theological reflection’, and have needed to help students, many of them evangelical, figure out what on earth that something might be, and how it can be of any help.

As I explored the field and introduced it to students, I discovered that practical theology was often very adept at attending to the bad and that which is broken. With the tools theological reflection provided, I could help them in some modest way to structure an enquiry into a moment of pastoral challenge or crisis, or to investigate an obstacle to a pressing cause of justice. Through established patterns of practical theological reasoning, such episodes, situations, or contexts (Osmer 2008) are taken as the ‘experience’ that is

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then subjected to analysis, perhaps in dialogue with a source of wider wisdom from another discipline, engaged in conversation with the resources of Christian theology, and pressed through the process towards some kind of outcome or response (see, for instance, Ballard and Pritchard 2006). Considering evangelicalism in particular, I have found this approach to reflecting on difficulty welcome, and often corrective to the tendency to think about experience in a manner that expresses whatever the academic equivalent is of ‘happy-clappy’. In the first part of this paper, I explore in a little more detail what practical theology might offer evangelical theological reflection in this respect.

Yet what I also came to notice was that it wasn’t quite so clear what it might look like to provide for rigorous practical theological reasoning about ‘the good’. Accordingly, this paper’s second section is a first attempt at figuring out how we might frame that endeavour. Still, because I really do think evangelicalism has a lot to learn from practical theology in thinking about difficulties, let us look first at the sense in which the discipline and its characteristic modes of analysis are very often designed to attend to and address the bad and the ugly.

I. The bad and the ugly

Influential models of theological reflection taught to students typically begin with a problem – a ‘pebble in the shoe’ – and proceed in search of a thoughtful and transformative response. This ‘orientation toward tensions and conflict’ is characteristic of the pastoral cycle, as Pete Ward observes (Ward 2017, 100). The classic cycle approach clearly has its limitations, only one of which I elaborate on here, namely the neglected possibility of reflection on the good. For evangelical and charismatic students in particular, as Liz Hoare says, it can seem ‘beset with bear traps’ (Hoare 2022, 118; see also Collins 2020). But it does undeniably also have merits, not least that it offers a portable framework for exploring the issues that arise perennially in actual pastoral and practical engagement. In that sense, whether formalised in a dreary diagram for an assignment or pursued informally and intuitively as a habit of *phronesis*, it captures a movement of thought that is a deeply necessary element of faithful ministerial practice.

Moreover, ‘pebbles’ and problems can be profound entry points for genuine theological discovery and renewal. One way in which this often happens is as theological reflection notices and excavates what Amy Plantinga Pauw calls ‘the troublesome gap that keeps reappearing in various way between ... beliefs and practices’ (Pauw 2001, 33). As Judith Thompson comments:

Moments ... of personal or communal crisis often seem to provide the triggers which enable individuals and faith communities to recognise the inconsistencies between attitude, assumptions and habits that have become embedded in their patterns of praxis, and the fundamental tenets of the faith they subscribe to. (Thompson, Pattison, and Thompson 2019, 3)

Practical theology, then, can bring a kind of stringent and often courageous scrutiny. Ward writes:

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. (Ward 2017, 68)

You might say that the distinctive contribution of the discipline, especially in its empirical and ethnographic expressions, is that single-minded focus on the question *what is going on?* And especially, perhaps, the implied ‘really’ or ‘actually’ that signifies a more-than-superficial mode of attending; what’s *really* or *actually* going on; what might we be missing? In this way, practical theology has begun to develop and fine-tune an acoustics for hearing the different voices present in a given situation. These include not simply the normative and the formal, but – and here is the unique contribution – the operant and the espoused as well (Cameron et al. 2010, 53–56; see now Watkins 2020). Characteristic of these listening exercises is a sensitivity to moments when the different voices are ‘in dissonance’ (Glenn Packiam’s gloss: Packiam 2020, 24).

Practical theology’s attunement to voices is surely a gift to the Church, and for me it is particularly welcome as it foregrounds a concern to amplify those who are often muted within the Church and society, or, as Jane Leach points out, whose voice is mediated through others (Leach 2007). Practical theology can decentre the usual suspects and alert us to the situatedness of official narratives; it can foster a critical reflexivity about the fact that our speech is always from somewhere, and that this somewhere is for some of us a position vested with more established power than we might like to admit. And hearing from the whole people of God – now *that* is an evangelical aspiration, and by-the-by surely properly charismatic, properly Pentecostal (see for a striking historical reflection Stone 2023).

Listening to voices means, in David Ford’s terms, listening to different ‘cries’, including those of pain and suffering and protest (Ford 2007, 43). I don’t think it’s too much to say that one of the powerful charisms of academic practical theology has been its prophetic ability to direct theological attention to ‘the sores of the body and scars of the soul’ (Conde-Frazier 2012, 239). Might this too be something salutary for evangelical thought and practice? If our operant ecclesiology so often conceives the Church triumphant (*ecclesia triumphans*), then practical theology can help us see that the Church’s form within this world is more like a field hospital (Cavanaugh 2016).

Just so, practical theology directs evangelical attention to scriptural moods and attendant modalities of individual and corporate spirituality which we – ‘Bible believers’ putatively normed by the whole canon – have neglected. To be fair, perhaps we are starting to remember: a new book appears about once a week lamenting the loss of lament, and commending it to us as a contemporary practice and a theological posture. I joke about the frequency, but that is an important endeavour of scriptural *ressourcement*. And in evangelical cultures prone to glib triumphalism and cheap consolation, practical theology can give us the determination and the means to stay with the trouble. We could say something similar, and just as significant, about what evangelicalism is learning and can continue to learn from initiatives that reckon with the theology and psychology of trauma and its pastoral implications.

One more thing practical theology can help us with: it can bring naïve idealism about practices back down to the dusty earth. It can ‘depristinate’ them, as in the genealogical work of Lauren Winner (2018), and it can execute a kind of deflationary empirical enquiry, showing that hi-fallutin’ claims for the formative power of practice often sit light to concrete verification (witness Scharen 2004, or Healy 2000). You might think evangelicals are natively sceptical of practices, anyway, but you’d be wrong. We’re often idealistically (or ideologically) wedded to a lofty view of the efficacy of the ‘right’ kind of preaching and/or

the transformative power of the ‘right’ kind of sung worship (whatever these may be). And many of the more theologically up-to-date in evangelical circles are newly programmatic about the potential of liturgical or spiritual practices to produce the ‘deeply formed life’. Once again, and not just with a sociological or ethnographic scrutiny, but with concomitant doctrinal reminders about the extent of sin and the struggle of sanctification, practical theology can remind evangelicals what we have sometimes known but often forgotten. That is, what Simeon Zahl (2020) calls the problem of stubborn ‘non-transformation’; the fragility of discipleship and the failures of the people of God.

All of this is very important, indispensable even, within the contemporary enterprise of evangelical theological reflection. We are waking up to the empirical falsification of our gospels of glory; we are learning to listen to stories of suffering, to testimonies of trauma; and as we do so we are falteringly moving from anecdote to evidence, and even – please, Lord – from lament to action.² Not that we were not convinced of the seriousness of sin, but we so often construed it in privatised terms, and imagined that overcoming social and ecclesial ills was a matter of purely personal moral improvement. But now, if falteringly, we are finding indelible the marks of Sin’s social manifestation and we can no longer deny its power to warp the institutional as well as the individual. Examples lie readily to hand; they are painfully close to home. Practical theology, then, can keep us looking, without flinching and without sentimentality, at what that scouringly perceptive critic James Baldwin called ‘all the prohibitions, crimes, and hypocrisies of the Christian church’ (Baldwin 1963, 46).

In this way, understood as a form of immanent critique, practical theology serves the unceasing work of reformation – *semper reformanda* – in a Church that so easily grows complacent and a theology that so often justifies its complacencies. As Rowan Williams says, in a properly evangelical statement, ‘Theology is ... called to repeated conversion; and equally its nature is to call the Church to conversion’ (Williams 2017, 16). Practical theology reminds us that theological reflection must not be about cosy consolidation of the status quo, but it must at times serve the Church as an ascetic discipline of what John Webster with the reformers would call *mortification* (Webster 2016). In this exercise of theological reason, the Word of truth is loosed from captivity as the domesticated possession of the Christian community, and free to stand over and against it, sounding the ‘No’ of divine judgment – calling us to repentance, and not just a personal but a corporate repair and reparation.

All of this seems to me very important, which is why I’ve gone on at some length about it, and there is much more here to discuss and to learn. Nevertheless, it’s not everything there is to say about the task of practical theology, and it’s not the only kind of enquiry I want to enable my students to pursue. That instinct leads to my second and constructive point.

II. The good

Alongside this more sharply critical voice and vocation, what can we say about rigorous theological reflection upon ‘the good’? Because the good – the luminous witness of a particular Christian community, say, or the glimpse of gracious divine activity in a moment of social transformation, or a pastoral encounter which becomes an epiphany, or more modestly an initiative in mission that simply goes fairly well – all of this surely invites its own kind or kinds of attending and analysis.

There are certainly a few factors that mitigate against such attending. Perhaps the experience is familiar of serving in a team that can debrief a disaster to death, but when things go well there's a brief 'well done' and no meaningful reflection. (Of course, it is also possible to minister in contexts which avoid difficulty, are conflict-averse, and whose back-slapping or exuberant professions of excitement about what is going on can be an anxious cover for this avoidance.) Maybe to notice any of this is simply to observe a very British set of cultural tendencies. But what I'm after is the sense in which theological reflection, in its role as a kind of structured *examen* upon our experience, can seek to notice consolation as well as desolation. Rather than rushing past these moments, might practical theology help us to slow down, and to receive and learn from what has gone well? There will doubtless be similarities to any structured process of learning from 'best practice'. But I intend more than that; as I envision it here, theological reflection can offer the scaffolding for an essentially receptive *spiritual* practice. This would be something akin to how Mary Clark Moschella depicts ethnography (Moschella 2023), or perhaps how Mark Lau Branson harnesses appreciative enquiry for congregational change (Branson 2004).

At its theological wellspring, enquiry into those things we are grateful for – perhaps surprised by – is doxological, a form of 'praise seeking understanding' (Byassee 2007). But while it must begin as, and all the way along remain, an exercise of gratitude to the giver of all good things, it must also be a 'seeking understanding', an authentic enquiry. That is why I want to suggest we imagine theological reflection on the good as a form of 'disciplined wonder' (Lewis Ayres, speaking of theology's task as a whole: Ayres 2019). Any authentic and heartfelt pondering – like that which is exemplified in Mary the mother of our Lord (Walton 2009) – is an active work of reception. Consequently, the doxological can fittingly be accompanied by a form of theological reasoning that we might call the interrogative: What happened? Why did things happen as they did? Who was involved, and how? What are the wider patterns and drivers of this event, situation, episode? What historical, sociological, psychological factors are at play? And – crucially, demandingly – what qualities of divine action do we discern as expressed here, formed as our imagination is by Scripture and the tradition? And so on, and so on.

This is the 'complexifying' that John Swinton and Harriet Mowat (2006) speak about in their work, and it is precisely the analytical enterprise that practical theology has sought to foster over the last few decades. In that sense, the kinds of modes of analysis that are fitting for reflection on the good will be exactly the same as they would be for reflection on the bad. What is perhaps particular to reflection on the good is that we need to be especially alert to the rose-tinting effect of our 'intuitive sympathies for our context' (Bretherton 2014). In other words, we need to cultivate and exercise an especially vigilant self-awareness, even with the caution that excessive 'scruples' will inhibit an openness to noticing and naming the work of God in our midst. Within this process we are very much helped if it is a shared, corporate activity of discernment and deliberation. As George Hunsinger writes on the verse from the epistle to the Philippians, 'think about these things ...', that I placed at the head of this paper, what we find there is 'Paul's call for *communal* reflection' (Hunsinger 2020, 135). Further, that communal reflection must itself be open to outside voices and foster a collective reflexivity, if it isn't to devolve into an echo chamber and produce groupthink.

Doctrinally speaking, the exercise of theological reflection on the good is animated by a commitment to thinking ‘Christology in the present tense’ – a kind of emphasis on the discernment of ‘the living, acting God in concrete situations of life’ (Root 2014a, 96). This expectation and openness to the contemporaneity of Christ is, of course, not peculiar to evangelicals. But it has marked the most promising evangelical engagements with practical theology (for instance, Anderson 2001; Collins 2020; Lynch 2022; Purves 2010; van Driel 2020) and, as Andrew Root comments, ‘practical theology as a whole could follow evangelicals in giving more attention, both pedagogically and methodologically, to the living presence of Christ in the world’ (Root 2014a, 96). Importantly, wise discernment of divine action in processes of theological reflection is not done in a vacuum, but most perceptive and richest when our imagination is maximally informed by what we are given to know of the characteristics of God’s ways and works in the economy of salvation (Collins 2020).

We also have particular cause to think that reflection on the good will not be an exercise which proceeds straightforwardly with an epistemic certitude – namely, because there is good theological reason to think that the genuinely good will often be hidden. We might associate such caution about confident identification of good human action with the concerns of a theologian such as Karl Barth. It is worth noticing that Barth’s very real sense of the hiddenness of good works is not, as such, the outworking of a pessimistic anthropology; the doctrine of sin has not outbid the doctrines of creation and salvation. Instead, the Barthian contention of hiddenness is animated by a positive claim about the nature of the Christian life, shown best in Barth’s meditations upon Colossians 3.3, ‘your life is hidden with Christ in God’ (McKenny 2010). It follows that portrayal of the good might necessarily be as modest as a pointing towards the ways in which these frail earthly things become by the presence of the Spirit a witness, a parable, testimony, analogy, correspondence, response to the outgoing life of God.

Methodologically speaking, are there modes of analysis and presentation that are especially helpful for reflecting on the good? Within theology more broadly, there are movements towards ‘biography as theology’ (McClendon, 2002) and what Emmanuel Katongole calls ‘theological portraiture’ (Katongole 2017). Womanist theology has been employing these modes of theological work powerfully for many decades (for instance Copeland 2010). More recently, within evangelical, and especially charismatic and Pentecostal practical theology, there has been a movement towards the notion and practice of testimony as integral to empirical attending and theological representation (Cartledge 2017; Collins 2020).

With these approaches, there are resonances with previous ‘turns’ to narrative and community, as well as exemplarism, in broadly postliberal streams of theology in the late twentieth century. These are not without subsequent theological critique, which I will not go into here. But within practical theology more particularly, this effort to render persuasive and attractive accounts of Christian witness takes on a more concrete and empirical challenge and focus. The ethnography and ecclesiology initiative, for instance, is interestingly parallel to a turn within moral theology or Christian ethics, in pursuit of what Michael Banner in *The Ethics of Everyday Life* describes as ‘psychologically and socioculturally realistic’ narratives that can help theology to ‘support the imagination and practice of the good’ (Banner 2014, 7).

Finally, if this has generally sounded like a predominantly ecclesial activity, then that will be cause for concern for the many practical theologians who are eager to focus their theological reflection on events outside the Church and suspect evangelicals of being ecclesiocentric, even sectarian. In this respect, if we are talking about theological reflection on the good *extra ecclesiam*, we might think of the instinct as analogous to perspectives within missiology which align themselves with asset-based approaches to community development (Barrett and Harley 2020). As it happens, commentators on Paul's exhortation to 'think on these things' have sought to identify the 'true, honourably, just, pure, pleasing, commendable' to be pondered as general features of goodness in the world at large, which the Church ought to learn how to appreciate. There is surely something in that. Yet, as Hunsinger comments, concerning this interpretation:

When Paul calls the Philippians to "think about these things" (*tauta logizesthe*), he is not restricting them to a set of received cultural meanings. He expects them to ponder these matters from an evangelical standpoint. They are things that need to be weighed theologically in light of Christ and the gospel. (Hunsinger 2020, 133)

On the one hand, then, it is good that practical theology has developed the range to go beyond the clerical paradigm. It is good that practical theology in an evangelical key can itself be *Practical Theology in Action: Christian Thinking in the Service of Church and Society* (Ballard and Pritchard 2016) and that *Evangelicals Engaging in Practical Theology* means *Theology that Impacts Church and World* (Morris and Cameron 2022). (Again, it can probably learn quite a bit about how to do this rigorously from moral and political theology, often more substantively theological in their analysis.) But if what it means to reflect on the good – to 'think on these things' – is Christologically ordered, then it must never lose its critical faculties of 'normative' discernment, interpreting what it finds in the exercise of a theologically-informed hermeneutics of human experience.

With all those kites set flying, let me return to the more sober note: this is not intended in any way to be a counsel of complacency. Critical theological reflection, and I intend critical in the sense of analytical and evaluative rather than disapproving, cannot and should not foreclose the possibility that we set out to learn from what seems good but also or instead discover that all is not as it seems, that all is not well. We might discover that a church plant which seems to be flourishing – and surely is, in many ways – cultivates expectations of community or lifestyle that perpetuate forms of classism; we might find that a well-intentioned food bank ministry creates disempowering asymmetries of agency and exacerbates shame. In these ways, practical theological reflection on the good may in fact often exhibit a more chastening trajectory than that which begins with a problem; after all, in cycles of reflection that start with a challenge, the process is often designed to eventuate in a transformative outcome – an 'active practice of hope' (Lynch 2022). Again, we have to be clear-eyed about the ambivalences, the ambiguities, and the downright contradictions of what Nicholas Healy calls 'the living, rather messy, confused and confusing body that the church actually is' (Healy 2000, 3). Practical theology in an Augustinian sense enquires about the life of a thoroughly 'mixed body', even as it trusts that at one and the same time within the ecclesiological *simul* of this age the Church is also truly 'the society of God' (Webster 2012).

Anyone venturing even modest claims about the divinely disclosive quality of something which seems signally good must therefore be alert to the provisionality of such

claims. They must be framed tentatively and held lightly. Without exception they must be considered open to revision in the face of evidence to the contrary. A personal example: like many others, I often used to draw on the story of Jean Vanier and the development of L'Arche in my teaching about Christian community. The disclosure that Vanier was a serial sexual abuser must alter radically the way in which I employ such an illustration and think about presenting exemplars in general (for discussion on the legacy, see Shin 2022 and Brock 2023).

There is every reason to think that in practical theology the situations we study and the examples we commend will always be susceptible to radical re-evaluation. Yet even after our disillusionments and the disenchantment of our first naïveté, the exhortation is still there: 'let us not grow weary in doing good' (Gal. 6.9). Nor, perhaps, weary of thinking rigorously and with others about the good, either.

Conclusion

The Latin American archbishop, theologian, and martyr Oscar Romero spoke of the importance of *sentir con la Iglesia*, a 'thinking' or 'feeling with the church' (see Williams 2019, 136–142). We may take this as inspiration and aspiration for the practice of practical theology. In the first place, we are called to a deep solidarity and sympathy for the Body of Christ in its suffering, its struggles – and its shortcomings. Yet besides this, might there not be wisdom gleaned by getting a feel for what is going well, by learning from that which is flourishing: 'if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things'. We can find, in Root's words, 'the ministering act of God' in 'concrete and lived experiences of nothingness' (Root 2014b, 144–145); might we also receive an invitation to contemplate the presence of the Living God in the concrete and lived experience of the good? It may even become, by grace, what R.S. Thomas called 'the turning aside like Moses to the miracle of the lit bush' (Thomas 1975).

Notes

1. The first Tyndale Fellowship Practical Theology study group was held from 3 to 5th July 2023 at High Leigh conference centre and organised by Revd Dr Helen Collins. I am grateful to Helen and other colleagues from this conference for their reflections on this paper and contributions to related discussions.
2. I am echoing here the title of two Church of England reports, *From Anecdote to Evidence* (2014), on church growth, and the hugely significant *From Lament to Action* (2021), on racial justice.

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