

## Practical Theology and Publishing

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The purpose of this paper is not a literature review of current thinking in the field of Practical Theology nor is it a mapping of its current trajectories. Neither is it a lament about the current trends in the publishing business. My purpose, rather, is *to facilitate your own consensus building about what Practical Theology is and what it can constructively contribute to theology as a whole*, because until this lack of clarity is rectified, there will only be minimal publishing of books in this area. I offer this paper not as a scholar in Practical Theology, but as a scholar trained in religion (including theology), depth psychology, and ethics and an editor of a major religious publisher in the United States.

### Introduction

While there seems to be a consensus that there is such a thing as Practical Theology, there is considerably less consensus about *what* it is. According to Michael Christensen, most theologians identify themselves as Historical, Constructive, or Systematic; not as Practical theologians. Practical Theology is viewed, rather, as a less rigorous (i.e., less important) discipline, and, in many places within the academy, a marginal one—a rather insulting attitude, but real none the less.

"What is missing, I think, is a real grasp of what Practical Theology is **apart** from method," says Kenda Dean. "We all say that it **is** something else—and we can squeeze 'goods' like Christian education, pastoral care, ethics, spirituality, and homiletics out of it—but to name what it is seems to elude us." Kenda goes on to say that "I'm always trying to bring people outside my department on board with what-is-practical-theology (even colleagues in other departments, if they're honest, don't get it)—it looks like a catch-all at worst, or maybe a method, at best—but few of them recognize it, really, for making a distinct theological/epistemological contribution of its own."

One effect of this lack of consensus is that Practical Theology is not taught in seminaries as one course, but as a part of several different courses with various foci

that are increasingly not required for students. Because of an ill-defined and diffuse market, along with the current trend in seminary course offerings, practical theologians/perspective authors who want their works used in academic settings are having a difficult time getting published--the potential sales figures are too low. The fact that local church pastors typically do not buy anything with the word theology in the title only further complicates the matter. For publishers who have to put up \$10,000 per book before it is even printed, the risk on return is often too great. The field is then further marginalized, and its professors have difficulty meeting tenure requirements.

This lack of consensus further marginalizes voices from the international community because they do not have a guaranteed audience within the American academic community. Publishing Houses are businesses that operate within the confines of national law. Abingdon Press, for example, is an imprint of the United Methodist Publishing House which is an American company. Distributing books to other countries is both a risky and expensive proposition. It is difficult enough to make money on a book by a renowned author with outstanding credentials from a well-known publisher; it is nearly impossible to make money on a book by an unknown author with uncertain credentials even from a well-known publisher.

For the purposes of this discussion let us look at two questions. (1) How can this confusion be clarified and consensus brought to the field of Practical Theology? (2) What does Practical Theology contribute to theology anyway? Until these two questions have satisfactory answers, there will be little published in the field of Practical Theology.

To help focus the discussion with regard to the first question we will look where a major schism and fragmentation occurred in the field of Practical Theology—with the work of Don Browning. Then we will look at criteria for method in Practical Theology in an effort to build consensus, and finally we will look at specific contributions that Practical Theology can make to theology as a whole. It is my hope that by focusing on a common vision of the positive contributions Practical Theology of various kinds can bring to theology as a whole (what difference it makes), you as practical theologians will come closer to a common understanding of what you contribute to the Body of Christ. This can increase your audience and give you a

better chance to be published. My professional conclusion is that in order to gain greater clarity, Practical Theology must reclaim a revised understanding of itself as a Theology of Ministerial Practice. My own perspective reflects my bias toward a method that uses the hermeneutical spiral and that is grounded in process theology and as lived within that part of the Body of Christ known as the United Methodist Church.

### **What is Practical Theology?**

In his article, *Practical Theology, Protestant*, in the *Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling*, (Rod Hunter, gen. ed, Abingdon Press, 1990), Ed Farley details the history and the then-current status of Protestant Practical Theology. Farley recognizes three operative definitions of Practical Theology. The first is the historic field of study of *clergy activities* covering the responsibilities and activities of the pastor (preaching, liturgics, pastoral care, Christian education, church polity, and administration). The second is an area, or discipline, within *clergy education* that critically reflects on the current life and activity of the church. The third area, or discipline, centers on *Christian practice* that brings to bear theological criteria on current individual and corporate social action. We can see from Farley's definitions that the distinctions between the three are not altogether clear. I submit that the three can also be viewed as an historical progression. As such, they represent the academy's (and church's) progressive awareness that the world is becoming increasingly diversified and pluralistic and that Christianity, generally in the West, is becoming increasingly marginalized. What is important to note is the confusion surrounding the term "Practical Theology" and its variety of uses. And despite what we might wish, there is also confusion between the terms "Pastoral Theology" and "Practical Theology."

### **Where Consensus was Shattered—The Work of Don Browning**

The practical fields are in crisis. According to a recent e-mail from Don Browning, they are fragmented and do not relate to each other; their relation to the rest of theology is not clear, and their relation to norms and contexts is unclear. Unfortunately, it was probably an unintended consequence of Browning's own work, for example, his *The Moral Context of Pastoral Care* (Westminster Press, 1976,) that contributed to the fracturing of the field of Practical Theology. His beginning point was arguably theological, but his ending point, or where Practical Theology was suggested to lead us, was ethical discourse leading to personal and social

transformation. His work affirmed the use of social science and confirmed the identity of specialized pastoral counseling outside of the institutional church. While this no doubt related to the issues within pastoral care and counseling at that time, it also moved the locus of discussion away from theology as it related to an ecclesiological tradition.

Rebecca Chopp says Browning's 1982 book, *Practical Theology*, tended to be fundamentally neo-Kantian in approach and "applied" a theological position in relation to other disciplines. "Empirical data were often, though not always, brought in to verify or modify theological positions," Chopp continues. "This approach allowed theology to be integrated with other disciplines. The driver, I think, is that practical rationality is modeled philosophically."

What Browning was looking for was a means to bring divergent groups together; although he also reflected on the then-current problem in pastoral care; i.e., how to bring various psychologies into conversation with theologies. Browning eventually concluded that divergent groups cannot meet around issues of theology because the differences and motivations are just too divisive. Rather, what we should look to are behaviors; that is, *what* people do, not so much *why* they do things. Hence, groups might be able to have meaningful dialogue and find agreement about differences if they could agree about the ethics involved. Browning used homosexuality as an example. Rather than looking at the theological issues, said Browning, we should recognize that for some homosexuals, living with a partner of the same sex was more moral than living a life of insufferable loneliness.

This is not to say that Browning does not have a strong concern for the church as demonstrated in his book, *A Fundamental Practical Theology: Descriptive and Strategic Proposals* (1996). But his commitment to and high valuation of philosophy and social science for practical theology is telling. He seems to want to approach human problems "from above"—from principle. This is helpful in some regards particularly for academics, but less so for persons like pastors who need help with the messiness of life. While he includes the latter, according to Rod Hunter, Browning "very much subsumes it." And I would add, that in so doing he also devalues it. When faced with a book-buying decision which kind of book will pastors

buy? They buy books that meet their need, not those that devalue what they do.

Browning's work and, to a lesser degree, Donald Capps' work, shifted the beginning point of Practical Theology. Browning focused on measurable behaviors (using social sciences) and worked backward to theological or philosophical premises. However, an unintended consequence of Browning's work was that he helped make theology more irrelevant to everyday life. After all, his work was grounded in philosophical, not theological, ethics. Browning succeeded in refocusing Practical Theology because of his stature in his field, the institution he represented, the persons he enlisted in his project, his persuasive argument, and the fact that he was published.

After Browning's work became accepted academic fare (especially in more liberal institutions), Practical Theology could never again simply be the activities clergy did as they pastored a church. Nor am I advocating a return to that understanding. But given the lack of consensus and confusion among *Practical theologians* about what Practical Theology is or should be, I submit we reclaim a revised definition of Practical Theology as a Theology of Ministerial Practice. My preference for Theology of Ministerial Practice is in part because 1.) It is what most people think Practical Theology is anyway. 2.) This designation presents itself clearly as a viable umbrella for all of the, so-called, practical disciplines, thereby increasing the audience potential. 3.) It does not have the political freight or Western philosophical baggage that the term Practical Theology has. 4.) The term "ministerial practices" can include both lay and clergy thus better reflecting who the Church is especially in places like Africa (Tapiwa Mucherera, Asbury Theological Seminary). 5.) In a post-modern world ministerial practices are obviously socially located, varied, and adaptable.

### **Method**

As with many disciplines, a number of methods and theoretical approaches are possible for Practical Theology. But in any case it is important that the starting, connecting, and ending points (telos) are clear. I don't need to rehearse the methods that are currently being used, but I will list a few popular ones. The revised correlational method popularized by the so-called Chicago School, the action-reflection-action method, and the hermeneutical circle (or spiral), all have their

proponents.

### Criteria for Practical Theology Methods

You may think that I am harping on clarity too much, but clarity like perfection is something we grow toward. Methodology in Practical Theology must be precise; it must be cogent. Below are some criteria that methodology must subscribe to in order to be understandable as theology.

- 1.) If Practical Theology is truly to take its place with other types of theology, it must begin with theology.
- 2.) Likewise, its telos must also be in theology. Examples of a theological telos are that God is revealed, human values and character in individual and corporate living align themselves with the Reign of God, and how we think about Christian living in a world with non-Christians. These first two topics are a paper in and of themselves, but suffice it to say that even Seward Hiltner did not fully work what beginning and ending with theology can mean. He did try to flesh out his vision, however, by working through the practical dimensions of, for example, Paul Tillich's theology. What I mean by beginning and ending with theology is that both points say something about God and our relationship with God. There is much work to be done.
- 3.) The method must allow for interdisciplinary conversation with the sciences and social sciences or risk total irrelevance.
- 4.) Practical theology method must provide an adequate umbrella for all ministerial (whether lay or clergy) practices such as preaching, pastoral care, Christian education, etc.
- 5.) There needs to be compatibility between the method and the theology used. By this I mean that if one uses a process theology, the method must likewise be a dynamic system with structural feedback mechanisms for example.
- 6.) Given we live in postmodernity, the method must be socially located.
- 7.) From a publisher's point of view, the method must be **jargon free** and understandable.
- 8.) The ultimate audience for Practical Theology must be the Church; not just other practical theologians.
- 9.) Practical Theology must take its rightful place as a recognized sub-branch of

Theology in the academy. To achieve this, Practical Theology must show how it enriches and contributes to theology as a whole to gain political clout, hence a stronger voice and a broader audience.

### **What Practical Theology Contributes to Theology**

Practical theologians must show that individuals and the Church can gain unique theological insight from practicing or living one's faith, because as professionals, they realize that some knowledge can only be derived from doing. For example in both the sciences and social sciences, no matter how well you know the textbook, or how well you listen to the lecture, new learning always takes place in the lab. Nobody wants to be operated on by a doctor who has only read the book and looked at the anatomy pictures. In fact the lab is where novelty happens and is noted. Anybody who has ever dissected even a worm in high school biology knows that your worm looks different from the textbook worm. What practice in the lab reveals is the amount of variation that can be present and still fit the rubric. We learn the limitations and scope of the theoretical concepts. Peggy Way once told me that the practical theologian's lab is the church.

Recognizing novelty that leads to new insights and eventually to new theory comes only with experience and practice. One has to be familiar enough and skillful enough with the tools of the trade whether transference, moral development, or scalpel to recognize novelty when it serendipitously happens. Otherwise, we are left thinking we made a mistake or didn't understand the theory. Through the novel insights that come from practicing faith, Practical Theology can introduce new possibilities for theory to theology. It is the feedback mechanism, if you will. It is also the engine for change, because novelty cannot be resisted forever. Novelty is the luring of God into God's future.

Further, there are many types of learning beside intellectual that come from practice. I play the violin. I may have a piece of music memorized, but if my fingers don't know the piece, I don't know it. After years of practice, my fingers know without my telling them how far to shift, where to go on the fingerboard, and what bowing to use. I can't think of all those things while trying to interpret the music. Those skills

have to be so much a part of me that I am free to do what I really need to do, i.e., play the piece by following the conductor. Believe me, following the conductor always involves the introduction of novelty into the situation. I have to be alert enough to see the difference between the conductor's variation of the score and a novel rendering of it. What I am saying is that what I know comes via many avenues, my body being one of them. Through practice I learn more about who I am and what I am capable of becoming. Likewise, learning to live, work, and play together as the Body of Christ helps me know who the Body of Christ is and what we are capable of becoming. Practical theology tries theology out and validates it in the everyday world and by so doing the church can better fulfill its ministry to the world.

In practicing one's faith, one's relationship with God grows in increasing depth and scope resulting in one's individual and corporate participation in the Reign of God. One grows in stature and wisdom; one moves with sanctifying grace. While more could be said, I especially want to underscore the place of wisdom that only comes from practicing one's faith within the faith community. While I am not the first to make some of these claims, I want to underscore their importance. What Practical Theology offers theology is wisdom—wisdom to know when, where, and with whom God is working in the particular, messy, realities of living. Wisdom tempers the use of principles and norms. Practical Theology is a gateway through which wisdom enters theology. As we all know, wisdom is more than intellectual word games. Wisdom comes from experiencing how things get played out in the world. The Bible was correct to say that one's wisdom reflects one's relation to God. Lastly, wisdom is easy to spot because it always reveals truths tempered with justice, mercy, and humility.

The gifts that Practical Theology offer theology say something about God and our relationship to God. They say, for example, that God fully participates in the particularities of experience. God continually offers the possibility of reconciliation, redemption, and salvation to God's creation; and that by meeting God face-to-face while practicing one's faith in the world, one is changed, and perhaps God is changed as well.

I would be happy to know what constructive contributions you think Practical Theology can offer theology. I eagerly await your discussion.



## **Conclusion**

With greater clarity about what Practical Theology is and what it can constructively contribute to theology, Practical theologians will have greater exposure in the academy and, consequently, greater publishing opportunities.