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# *Christian Theology in Practice*

DISCOVERING A DISCIPLINE

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## CHAPTER 4

### *Practical Theology: A Definition*

#### BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

So far the chapters in Part I have focused primarily on pastoral theology, understood within U.S. Protestantism as that branch of practical theology focused on pastoral care and counseling. Even though my job title has varied and the area in which I have worked has gone by different names, I have basically served since 1986 as a faculty member in pastoral theology.

Why change the subject to practical theology, then, and include this chapter? The short answer is that in the last five years, editors of two dictionary projects, *The New Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology* and *The Encyclopedia of Religion in America*, invited me to contribute entries on the term. A more complete answer, however, requires mention of two key developments that have shaped my recent work.

In 2003-2004, on behalf of the Graduate Department of Religion at Vanderbilt University, I co-chaired a planning grant, "Teaching for Ministry," funded by the Lilly Endowment, Inc., aimed at creating a new doctoral program to prepare students for seminary teaching. An interdisciplinary group of faculty met bi-weekly for the academic year, reading literature in practical theology and theological education, listening to invited experts, and talking about components of a new program.

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### *Practical Theology: A Definition*

There were times that year and in years since that our department received a grant for a ground-breaking curriculum in theology and practice when I tired of hearing colleagues and newly admitted students ask, "What is practical theology anyway?" I explained, but not always easily or successfully. This is not a simple question, and practical theology is not an easily defined category.

Eventually I came up with a more thorough answer, as the chapter below illustrates. I was greatly helped by a second foundational experience — participation in a consultation on Practical Theology and Christian Ministry that began in 2003, also funded by Lilly. It gathered a group of about twenty scholars and ministers from a variety of disciplines and traditions a couple of times a year for several years. Its most obvious outcome was an edited book, *For Life Abundant: Practical Theology, Theological Education, and Christian Ministry* (Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2008).

Of more significance for me, our work together changed my understanding of practical theology in two fundamental ways. First, discussing each other's research, syllabi, and accounts of ministry re-oriented my view of practical theology's aim. Disciplinary expertise is always highly valued. But its ultimate aim lies beyond disciplinary concerns in the pursuit of an embodied Christian faith. Second and related to this, I gained a clearer picture of the multivalent nature of practical theology. Practical theology as a term refers to at least four distinct enterprises with different audiences and objectives, the two just named (a *discipline* among scholars and an *activity of faith* among believers) and two common uses elaborated below (a *method* for studying theology in practice for theological educators and ministers and a *curricular area* of subdisciplines in the seminary).

In other words, the invitation to write this chapter came at an incredibly propitious time. It was only because of the Lilly consultation that I found myself in a position to write a definitional entry on practical theology and accept an offer in 2008 to edit *The Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, which uses the four-part definition as its organizational infrastructure. As with the idea of the living web, the essay below owes a heavy debt to colleagues. Indeed, each time I read it, I hear the words of others, in particular Dorothy Bass, Kathleen Cahalan, Craig Dykstra, Serene Jones, James Nieman, and Ted Smith.

There were, of course, other earlier influences worth mention. Before I graduated from Chicago in 1986, I benefited indirectly from the birth of a new doctoral program in practical theology and the efforts of Don Browning, one of its leaders, to redefine the term as he worked toward

what became one of his pivotal books in 1991, *Fundamental Practical Theology*. Since the early 1990s I have served in leadership positions in two practical theology societies (the Association of Practical Theology and the International Academy of Practical Theology).

More generally, the first decade of the twenty-first century brought changes that made scholarship in practical theology especially valuable. Vanderbilt's program in theology and practice is not a doctoral program in practical theology *per se*, even though students may minor in the discipline. It includes a range of innovative components designed to engage students from all areas of doctoral study in formation for seminary teaching. However, the discipline of practical theology — its ideas and methods — was absolutely crucial in the program's creation and remains important to its future and the future of graduate study elsewhere. New programs in practical theology and religious practices have sprouted up in the last decade at influential institutions such as Emory, Duke, and Boston University in the United States and the University of Manchester in Britain. Interest in practice has attracted a divergent array of religion and theology scholars. Many people across disciplines are now talking about matters central to practical theology, such as the use of the social sciences to study religious experience, the use of ethnography to study theology, the investigation of material practices, the study of culture as a central category for analysis, and the location of scholarship in its personal and social context. In 2005, for the first time in its history, the largest academic society for the study of religion in North America, the American Academy of Religion, accepted a proposal for a program unit in practical theology, a genuine mark of progress for the field. In short, the time was ripe for disciplinary redefinition.

The benefit of the following definition is its descriptive rather than prescriptive intent. Although I sketch the history of the term, the real contribution of the essay, in my view, is its fourfold definition. I try to describe the varying contexts and ways in which people commonly use the term. Identifying the different uses helps straighten out the confusion when people use the same term for different purposes. I also try to distinguish its use in the United States, other countries, and religious traditions as well as its connection to other disciplinary areas, such as religious studies and systematic theology.

Those who find definition helpful may wonder about the difference between the chapter below and my entry in *The New Westminster Dictionary*, which was written first (and has yet to go to press). Its threefold def-

inition of practical theology as a *field*, *method*, and *activity* of faith does not distinguish practical theology as a *curricular area* (with a variety of subdisciplines) from practical theology as a *discipline* (with a minority of scholars who self-identify primarily as practical theologians). I now find this oversight odd because practical theology as a collection of subdisciplines is one of the most common ways the term is used, especially in Protestant seminaries. But the earlier entry does a better job of exploring what the assorted uses of the term share in common (e.g., a focus on local, concrete religious experience and its transformation). And it says explicitly what I discovered in collegial conversation: Contrary to popular opinion, the plurality of purpose and definition is not a problem. It is a "strength and attribute inherent in the very nature of the term 'practical' itself."



*Practical theology* is a term commonly used in Christian theology for a general way of doing theology concerned with the embodiment of religious belief in the day-to-day lives of individuals and communities. Its subject matter is often described through generic words that suggest movement in time and space, such as *action*, *practice*, *praxis*, *experience*, *situation*, *event*, and *performance*. Its subject is also associated with action-oriented religious words, such as *formation*, *transformation*, *discipleship*, *witness*, *ministry*, and *public mission*. In its focus on concrete instances of religious life, its objective is both to understand and to influence religious wisdom or faith in action. Ultimately, practical theology is normatively and eschatologically oriented. That is, it not only describes how people live as people of faith in communities and society. It also considers how they might do so more fully both in and beyond this life and world.

In its focus on the tangible and local, practical theology joins efforts in the United States to recover the sensate, material side of religion obscured by modern interest in the scientific and philosophical study of beliefs. Where historians and sociologists of religion have begun to examine *lived religion*, those who engage in practical theology investigate *lived theology*, extending interest in rituals and practices to questions about how theology or knowing and loving the divine takes shape in everyday life and how everyday life influences theology. Some practical theologians, particularly in Europe, limit practical theology to a discipline involving the em-

pirical study of religion. But most people value its wider normative aims to enrich the life of faith for the sake of the world.

Catholics in general and many Protestants outside the United States use the terms *pastoral theology* and *practical theology* interchangeably. This is less true for Protestants in the United States, where *pastoral theology* primarily refers to reflection on pastoral care and counseling. Pastoral and practical theology share historical roots but have diverged considerably. Figures such as Seward Hiltner (1909-1984) and Anton Boisen (1876-1965), often cited by Europeans as forerunners of modern practical theology, are seen by most scholars in the United States as dedicated to care and counseling. Although *pastoral* also refers to ministry in general, it is associated largely with the special activity of care and shepherding. The Protestant use of *practical theology* has more affinity with what some Catholics have called *contextual* or *local theology*.

Practical theology has also been contrasted with systematic or doctrinal theology, which traditionally centered on proclaimed beliefs. Although this contrast reinforces a problematic split between theory and practice, it does highlight a difference in emphasis. Practical theology as a discipline has a longer history of attention to faith in the midst of daily life. This difference has come under increasing pressure as practical theologians attend to theory, systematic theologians attend to practice, and people in other disciplines and settings also seek to understand faith in action. Although such nuances in definition have evolved largely within Christianity, analogous interest in lived faith or practiced theology exists in other religions.

### History and Context

Practical theology shares with biblical, historical, and doctrinal theology a common academic trajectory in the German Protestant university of the 1800s that fostered the development of theology as a *Wissenschaft* (science) and field of study increasingly removed from ecclesial and creedal interests. Christian theology in general has never been solely a matter of abstract truths. It has always included guidance for faithful living and attention to obtaining salvation. But with the dawning of the modern era, people such as Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), the father of liberal theology, sought to justify theology as a scientific discipline deserving of a place within the modern university. In an effort to keep pace with the spirit

of the age, theology in Europe and North America became increasingly focused on a descriptive history and philosophy of ideas, distancing itself from religious practice and seeking a systematic coherence and rigor on par with the sciences.

On U.S. soil, this view of theology as objective, critical, and academic rather than evangelistic, experiential, confessional, ecclesial, and practical became institutionalized in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century structures of graduate seminary education. Other traditions besides Protestantism and some religions, such as Reform Judaism, have felt the impact of this development and have adopted similar educational divisions between practical and classical disciplines. Eastern Orthodoxy, Catholicism, and Anglicanism sustained greater appreciation for practice through rich liturgical traditions, development of mystical and spiritual theology, and convictions about worship as the heart of theology. Nonetheless, these traditions have struggled to find a place for practical theology. Ambivalence about practice has deeper roots in twelfth-century scholasticism, the Aristotelian model of theology as a theoretical science that attempted to reconcile Christianity with secular philosophy, and the development of cathedral universities. As the center of theological study shifted from households and small religious communities to large monasteries and then universities, debates over whether theology was a practical orientation to lived faith or a speculative contemplation of divinity aimed at knowledge for its own sake were decided largely in favor of the latter. In Catholicism, practical theology has sometimes been limited to a pastoral and moral theology devoted to ministerial oversight and training priests for the office of confessor.

Since the middle of the twentieth century, however, several developments fostered a climate of unrest and a rebirth of national and international interest in enriched understandings. Key among the influences was the rapid growth in the social sciences, psychology in particular, and their usefulness in understanding experience. With the insights of psychology and case study methods, early pastoral theologians Boisen and Hiltner argued for "the living human document" as a subject of study comparable to written texts and for "operation-centered" theology as deserving a place alongside "logic-centered" theology. Theology emerges out of experience, and practical theology has content not derived solely from historical and philosophical theology. Correlation, understood as a fluid dialectic between human situation and religious message, emerged as an influential method in support of this claim and became a staple in the growth of

practical theology. Critical social theory in Europe in the 1930s and, three decades later, Latin American liberation theology and related developments, such as black and feminist theology, demanded that theology begin with grassroot encounter, address the needs of the oppressed, and work for social change. During the last decades of the twentieth century, philosophy itself took a turn toward the practical among divergent intellectuals, such as Jürgen Habermas, Alasdair MacIntyre, Pierre Bourdieu, and Michel de Certeau, giving scholars dependent on European continental philosophy the language and methods to validate practice as a worthy object of study.

Practical theology has attracted wide attention in recent years through fresh publications, renewed academic societies, new graduate programs, and interest in lived theology among those outside the academy. Its boundaries and horizons are being stretched further by developments in the study of practice, empirical methods, the analysis of power and social location, religious pluralism, and globalization. Practical theology is recognized, like cultural anthropology, "for the delicacy of its distinctions, not the sweep of its abstractions," to borrow Clifford Geertz's words.<sup>1</sup> But its definition quickly moves beyond thick description. Practical theology is ultimately a normative project guided by the desire to make a difference in the world.

### Practical Theology in the Twenty-First Century

As a result of its history, the term *practical theology* gets used today in at least four different ways. It refers to (1) an activity of believers seeking to sustain a life of reflective faith in the everyday, (2) a curricular area in theological education focused on ministerial practice, (3) an approach to theology used by religious leaders and by teachers and students across the curriculum, and (4) an academic discipline pursued by a smaller subset of scholars to sustain these three enterprises.

#### *An Activity of Believers*

At its most basic level, practical theology is performed by those who thoughtfully seek to embody deep convictions about life and its ultimate

1. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), p. 25.

meaning in the midst of ordinary and extraordinary circumstances. Few laypersons actually use the word *theology* to describe this activity. Professing Christians, for example, might talk about this more belief-based or "confessional" practical theology as following Jesus or living out the gospel of love and justice. Professing Jews might say that faith requires *tikkun olam*, repair of the world. Practical theologians in more secular contexts, such as Britain, have argued that this dialogical and largely Christian understanding of practical theology as reflective enactment of faith is useful to all people, Christian or not, who wish to connect beliefs and values to practice and life. It is particularly relevant in public service and educational institutions where religious practices and convictions play a significant role.

#### *A Curricular Area*

Seminary deans, students, and graduates of programs in theological study usually have a more specific meaning in mind when they speak of practical theology. They use the term to refer to a distinct area of the curriculum aimed at enhancing religious life through congregational and public ministry. Practical theology is concerned with religious leadership broadly construed to include not only local congregations but also other forms of social service and public influence. Several subspecialties are conventionally grouped under the rubric of "ministerial" practical theology, such as pastoral care, homiletics, worship, mission, evangelism, leadership, and education. Common commitments to teaching a practice for the sake of ministry unite these specialties. But in many cases, the claims and methods of practical theology as an academic discipline operate implicitly, and faculty may not recognize the broader practical theological assumptions that organize their teaching and research. Even when practical theology does constitute the larger domain within which faculty understand their work, academics are more likely to identify themselves by their specialty as scholars in homiletics or pastoral care, for example, than as practical theologians.

#### *An Approach to Theology and Religious Faith*

Since its re-emergence in the 1980s, practical theology designates more than the theology of the pastorate or the methods and objectives that unite

the ministerial subdisciplines. Building on its three-century history in university and seminary education, scholars have expanded its meaning and mission. Practical theology seeks religious knowledge in the service of a larger *telos* (end or aim) of enriching the life of faith in the world. It is not only a branch of study, but a way of doing theology attentive to lived faith. This definition, aimed at re-orienting theological education toward its ultimate end, challenges conventional divisions between classical and practical disciplines, academy and congregation, and theory and practice. Despite the organizational and structural usefulness of such divisions, they have led to a misperception of theological education as either merely about acquiring technical pastoral skills (the clerical paradigm) or merely about acquiring cognitive knowledge of history and doctrine (the academic paradigm). In reality, all theology is practical at heart, and practical theology, redefined more expansively, has the good of the larger whole in mind. It involves the study of faith toward the end of divine flourishing in human life and the world.

Questions about the usefulness of Scripture, history, and doctrine arise here not in a narrow utilitarian sense but with this larger purpose in mind. This goal-oriented or teleological practical theology is an endeavor intentionally oriented toward particular goods and ends in which many different people — believers, clergy, and faculty across the curriculum — have some investment. In fact, all theological disciplines have or should have, as the influential twentieth-century Catholic theologian Karl Rahner argued, an element of practical theology contained within them. Some recent systematic and historical theologians with convictions about liberation or interest in studying theology through new means, such as ethnography, have understood the boundaries of their work as falling within this wider realm, if not the discipline, of practical theology. In turn, believers and religious leaders are also significant partners in a theology whose aim in the study of Scripture, doctrine, and life is faithful practice. Their efforts to embody faith are not lower-level versions of a more sophisticated academic theology, simplified for the masses. Rather, they possess a theological intelligence and imagination unique to the concrete demands of practice, and they thereby contribute to the general construction of religious tradition and community. This definition obviously extends the boundaries of the term to include faculty, religious leaders, and believers who may not consider themselves practical theologians and are not practical theologians in the strict sense of the term as a curricular area or discipline.

*An Academic Discipline*

Although relatively few people identify themselves foremost as practical theologians, a subset of people undertake the critical task of clarifying the divergent aims of practical theology. Scholars who call themselves practical theologians, often in addition to another primary disciplinary identity, are invested in sustaining the three other modes of practical theology. They see themselves as responsible for the maintenance and enrichment of practical theology as a multifaceted confessional, ministerial, teleological, and academic enterprise. Supported by new national and international guilds, such as the Association of Practical Theology and the International Academy of Practical Theology, they understand the value of research and teaching in practical theology as a discipline and a field that contain these four aspects, even if they also recognize that the ultimate aim is not disciplinary knowledge for its own sake but the equipping of religious leaders and believers in fostering life abundant.

Toward this end, practical theologians assume a number of tasks. They explore the activity of believers through descriptive study and normative assessment of local theologies. They seek to discern common objectives among the ministerial subdisciplines and in the study of theology more generally. They study patterns of integration, formation, and transformation in theological education and vocational development. They seek methods by which students, faculty, and ministers might bridge practice and belief, such as ethnography, narrative theory, case study, and the hermeneutical circle of description, interpretation, and response. They develop theologies of discipleship, ministry, and faith, using secular sources, such as the social sciences and literature, in addition to Scripture, history, and doctrine. In each instance, the development of theory aims to enhance the connective web of theological formation, bridging specific disciplines and ecclesial and educational institutions toward the aim of ministry and the life of faith.

Scholars in practical theology come from a number of areas, predominantly pastoral theology and religious education in the United States, for example, and social and political theology and ethics in Britain. They often devote more attention to concrete topics (important to teleological practical theology), such as mental illness, children, poverty, and social policy, than to disciplinary issues in practical theology. However, their approach to these topics is guided by methods and objectives of the discipline.

## LIVING WEB: A SUBJECT MATTER

DISTINGUISHING THESE four separate but related uses is an important advance. Practical theology has expansive boundaries. The term gets used in many academic and plain-sense ways as an activity in religious contexts, an overarching rubric for a collection of subdisciplines, a type of theology, and a discipline within the study of religion in North America. Its subject matter intentionally extends beyond a disciplinary department in the university and seminary to the broader *telos* of faith that guides religious communities. Its participants are equally wide-ranging. Nearly everyone in theological education and religious life has a role to play.

## PART II

### PRACTICAL WISDOM: A WAY OF KNOWING