



INTRODUCING PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

Mission, Ministry, and the
Life of the Church

PETE WARD

B
Baker Academic

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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.”¹ “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.

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.¹ 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."² 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.

demic 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.³ 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.”⁴ 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.⁵ 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.”⁶

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.⁷ 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.⁸

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.”⁹ 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.¹⁰ 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.”¹¹ 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.”¹² 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.”¹³

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.”¹⁴

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.