

Opening the Field of Practical Theology

An Introduction

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Chapter One

Introduction

What do practical theologians say about the nature and task of our field? Even though we differ among ourselves about a range of issues from method to theological norms to the use of the human sciences or cognate fields of study that we engage, it remains that as practical theologians we share a number of core commitments. The unity of the field lies in the constellation of interests and concerns that we foreground in our work and how those interests and concerns relate to one another. While other fields of theological study also find resonance with or claim commitment to a number of these interests, the difference lies in the relative weight, priority, complexity, level of engagement, and self-identity with which practical theologians work.

The focal concerns characteristic of the field of practical theology tend to overlap, imply each other, and interlock. We have identified at least eleven major concerns that integrate and guide the work of practical theologians across a variety of contexts, intellectual commitments, and specializations. As a dynamic and differentiated field, practical theology involves the following elements and values:

- Attentive to theory-practice complexity
- Practice and performance oriented
- Oriented to multidimensional dynamics of social context and embodiment
- Holistic
- Interdisciplinary
- Open-ended, flexible, and porous
- Theologically normed
- Hermeneutical
- Interventionist and critically constructive
- Teleological and eschatological
- Self-reflective and self-identified

Practical theologians do not claim to exercise sole or proprietary control over these concerns or particular constellations of them. While recognizing that others also care about these issues, we seek to attend to all or most of these concerns as we go about our work. The ways in which practical theologians put these concerns together give rise to a number of trajectories or approaches to the field and allow us to establish and maintain disciplinary integrity. The field simultaneously builds bridges of understanding and collaboration with scholars in theological education and the wider academy, as well as with practicing religious leaders and others in the churches. In order to better understand practical theology, we offer a brief description of the key features here, which are treated more fully in the chapters that follow.

KEY FEATURES OF PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

Attentive to Theory-Practice Complexity

Practical theology engages the complex interplay of theory and practice in a focal way. People who work in this area affirm that theory and practice imply and shape each other. Practice gives rise to theory, while theory often has practical implications. Trying to understand and explain human action and thought requires complex theoretical frameworks. Theoretical frameworks, in turn, arise out of reflection upon actions and practices.

Methods in practical theology often bear witness to the complexity of the theory-practice relationship. Often practical theologians will use a spatial metaphor to describe this complexity. For instance, some agree with Richard Osmer that the interplay between the elements of practical theology functions as an infinite loop or spiral.¹ Other practical theologians prefer Don Browning's proposal of the triangle—a thoroughly practical approach to practical theology begins with a base in practice, moves toward theoretical reflection, and returns to practice.² Nearly all practical theologians today agree that there is no straight line from theory to practice.

Practice and Performance Oriented

Attending to the dynamic interplay of theory-practice, practical theologians also pay particular attention to the complex, multilayered ways individuals and communities engage in patterns of practice. Clusters of coordinated and purposeful behaviors or actions form practices. Whether in more restricted (e.g., practices of hospitality) or more expansive notions of practice (e.g., the practice of discipleship), many practical theologians, in recent decades, have emphasized the importance of understanding and proposing specifically religious practices for individuals and communities.

Practical theologians also lift up the importance of performance. When working with theological students or religious leaders, we insist upon the embodied expression of particular kinds of knowledge. For example, students learning to become effective preachers require training in how to use their voices (projection, tone, and volume), hands, and eyes, and how to stand. They practice their way into establishing a rapport and relational presence with a congregation through the act of preaching. In addition, practical theologians, particularly in theological education settings, place a high priority on reflective and formative assessment of performance.

Oriented to Multidimensional Dynamics of Social Context and Embodiment

Related to the complexities of both the theory-practice relationship and to the multilayered realities of practices, we take context seriously and we ground our work in specific times and places with particular groups of people. Just as there is no Christian education or pastoral care in the abstract, practical theologians generally involve real-life situations and “facts on the ground.” In this, we demonstrate a strong preference for Aristotelian concretion and realism over Platonic abstraction and idealism. Even more strongly than Aristotle, though, practical theologians embrace the inescapable fact that human beings live in particular times, places, and cultures. Central to our task today is an emphasis on race, ethnicity, gender, class, and sexual orientation arising from the situated and embodied character of human life.

In order to access and understand lived human experience in context, we employ a variety of empirical research tools from the human sciences such as psychology, sociology, and cultural anthropology. Some conduct their own empirical research on contexts and others rely on research conducted by other practical theologians or by researchers in the human sciences.

The multilayered and continuously changing aspects of embodied human life lived in particular contexts make it possible to see why practical theologians strongly reject the nineteenth-century “applied theology” paradigm for their work. Application of supposedly unchanging theological principles depends, in part, on a static and relatively uncomplicated target. If the target moves and has multiple dimensions, every attempt to apply theological principles without engaging in a serious effort to understand a particular context will miss the desired target.

Holistic

Human experience is not limited to ideas and the life of the mind, but involves other features of human knowing and embodiment—emotions, intuition, imagination, and relationality. Understanding the dynamics of the self

in relation to others, to the physical environment, to time and history, and to cultural and social dynamics is central to the practical theological task. For these reasons, practical theology cannot rest satisfied with treatment of ideas and thoughts alone, but must engage a broad range of human experience. In order to take such experience seriously as it is actually lived in particular contexts and living communities, practical theology necessarily grapples with understanding and articulating a holistic approach to human life.

Interdisciplinary

Practical theologians regularly engage fields of knowledge beyond our own. We interact appreciatively and critically with scholarship and teaching in other theological fields such as biblical studies, church history, systematic theology, and theological ethics. We also engage a wide range of nontheological disciplines including psychology, sociology, cultural anthropology, performance studies, neuroscience, the learning sciences, communication studies, philosophical hermeneutics, history, and economics. While particular practical theologians use the social sciences in diverse ways, we share a commitment to critically engage multiple sources available to us that can shed light on our work. Practical theologians such as Johannes van der Ven and Richard Osmer have argued that practical theologians themselves need to become competent and adept at conducting their own social science empirical research.³ Other practical theologians make judicious and critical use of social science research conducted by researchers within the various social science fields.

Open-Ended, Flexible, and Porous

Because practical theologians study the complex, multilayered experience of real people in particular communities, our work remains provisional and open-ended. No single practical theologian or research team could claim exhaustive knowledge of an individual, community, or problem. We can always learn more and come to new insights. Moreover, the conclusions at which we arrive and the interventions we prescribe can change or be re-framed with new, better, or different data and interpretive perspectives.

Dealing with complex and ever-changing subject matter requires practical theologians to improvise. New problems or unanticipated roadblocks often require an ability to think beyond accepted parameters and established procedures. The best-laid research plans often require modification in the process of carrying them out. Similarly, the results of practical theological research have a provisional and revisable character.

Due to the complexity of our work's focus and the difficulties inherent in interdisciplinary work, practical theology draws from and opens out to other

fields of study. While the field taken as a whole has a discernible shape, a growing literature, and an ever-developing set of disciplinary norms and accumulated wisdom, practical theology has porous boundaries. It overlaps with and runs parallel to endeavors such as liberation, liturgical, and constructive theology as well as theological ethics, biblical studies, and church history, especially when those disciplines turn to concerns of embodiment, context, and practice.

Theologically Normed

Inasmuch as practical theologians work as theologians, we operate by theological perspectives, standards, and commitments. Taken as a whole, one can find a wide array of theological orientations among practical theologians. We share, though, the conviction and the practice of theological reflection as a key element of our work. Unlike those who work strictly in the social sciences, practical theologians are not content with rich and nuanced descriptions of lived human experience. Rather we push from description and understanding toward significance and impact for the communities we serve. Practical theologians know and take responsibility for the fact that each phase of our work operates by explicit and implicit theological commitments. Even in deciding upon what counts as a focus for our work, practical theologians are shaped by theological norms and values. Practical theologians reflect on the contours of lived human experience in relation to a wide range of theological issues including the transcendence and immanence of God, the problem of evil and human suffering, human knowing, means of change and transformation, and the relationship between divine and human action.

Practical theologians often make the case that the meaning of traditional theological teachings cannot be known apart from testing or assessment in human life. Others argue that traditional theological tenets need revision or even fundamental reworking in the light of contemporary human experience. Some even make the bold case that new theological insight can come about through empirically based investigations of human experiences in particular contexts.

Hermeneutical

Practical theologians typically recognize the importance and rigors of interpretation throughout our work. We know that every reading of a sacred text, every practice engaged, and every theory developed reflects hermeneutical commitments of various kinds. Practical theologians operate with the awareness that there is no innocent or naive access to reality as such and that every issue raised for theological inquiry requires interpretation from a particular point of view with a set of commitments and power negotiations at work. We

interpret many kinds of texts—the written word offered in a variety of genres such as sacred texts, literature, poetry, and theoretical analyses as well as orality expressed in music, proclamation, storytelling, preaching, prayer, and debate, to name a few.

Interventionist and Critically Constructive

As mentioned previously, practical theologians cannot and do not rest content with understanding and explanation; we are committed to asking “so what?” Practical theologians are unapologetic change agents. Much of our work aims at critically assessing what is destructive and diminishing of our lives and what can be changed in order that individuals, communities, or societies can strive toward a more just common good. But not all practical theologians provide detailed plans of action. We do, however, at a minimum, offer principles and guidelines within which specific plans of action could be developed, including the ways in which practical theological knowledge is produced and disseminated.

Teleological and Eschatological

Practical theologians’ work is most often executed on behalf of human communities and the wider creation. It operates within an ultimate horizon, a vision of the eschatological promise. Often embedded in our prescriptions for change one can discern our interpretation of that vision, seeking to further God’s work in and for the world. Much of practical theology, as is displayed in the chapters in this book, uses teleological language such as integration, reconciliation, human flourishing, and peace, but it does so within an analysis of the incomplete, halting, and fractured existence of human lives and the natural world. Because practical theology attends to the concrete and particular, its presentation of the teleological and eschatological character of the Christian life cannot be simplistic. Thus, practical theologians wrestle with the tension between claiming Christian hope in God’s purposes for all creation while at the same time recognizing the many ways in which this vision is not our current reality.

Self-Reflective and Self-Identified

Aware of the dynamics and challenges of interpretation, practical theologians are self-reflexive. Modernity’s belief that empirical or interpretive intellectual work can be done with strict objectivity has been abandoned by most. In the postmodern era, practical theologians identify themselves in their work and give some account of their investment, commitments, and agendas. We realize that researcher and research function in a dialectical continuum in which both are in play. We know that what we see arises from our biases and

precommitments. While there is no escaping this fact, practical theologians today take ethical responsibility for the way we position ourselves in our work.

In addition to intentional self-reflexivity, practical theologians often identify with the language and social networks associated with the field of practical theology. Even though our work overlaps, sometimes quite considerably, with that of those who work in other theological areas, we tend to describe ourselves as members of the guild of practical theologians. This makes it possible for us to claim the constellation of elements and commitments described here. Conversely, practical theologians tend to avoid claiming that people doing liberation or contextual theology, for example, are somehow secretly or unconsciously practical theologians. Self-description functions as a key part of self-determination and autonomy. Self-identification, therefore, functions as one of the markers of a practical theologian.

Practical theologians employ different ways of combining these core elements into coherent approaches to the field. In this book, we intentionally avoid “solving for X” in relation to method, since there is no single approach in the field. Instead, we wanted to affirm the plurality and multiplicity of approaches in the field, especially for students entering the field for the first time. Readers will readily discern overlap and family resemblances among the approaches represented here. The irreducible plurality represented in this book provides something of a snapshot of the character and richness of contemporary practical theology.

PLAN OF THE BOOK

The various “openings” into practical theology we include here provide evidence for the diverse approaches and perspectives in our situation today.⁴ We have elected to use the term “opening” in the title, rather than “models,” since the language of models and types tends to result in conceptual entities abstract from the messiness and complexity of actual practice. Instead, we have opted for terms such as “openings” and “approaches” in order to reflect the provisional, often permeable, and, at least in principle, open-ended and collaborative character in which colleagues engage in disciplinary conversation. The language of openings allows for both clarity of definition and, at the same time, porosity of boundaries that strike us as maximally helpful in understanding the field today.

In order to aid comparison across the chapters as well as to enable baseline analysis of particular approaches to practical theology, each chapter utilizes a common template, based on the key features discussed above. Each author analyzes and discusses their approach through the following elements:

Historical Context
 Orientation and Key Features
 Norms and Sources of Authority
 Views of the Theory-Practice Relationship
 Role of and Approach to Contexts
 Interdisciplinary Conversation Partners
 Areas of Current and Future Research
 Suggested Readings

Due to the variety of approaches selected for the book, these elements look different across the chapters. While every author covers the categories in the template, some approaches require relatively more and others relatively less treatment.

After considerable conversation with the authors about potential groupings or subheadings for the various approaches included here, we decided to arrange the table of contents in alphabetical form by approach. We decided for a simple organizational principle rather than creating an order according to some other principle. We hope this text, with its simple format, can be used by students entering the field of practical theology and that they, and their teachers, will read the content in multiple ways, grouping the approaches as best fits their situation and interests. In this regard, reading the book in chapter order may not make the most sense. The approaches included here could be organized credibly in relation to several different organizational schemas; we could have organized the approaches in chronological and historical order, by method, or in thematic clusters. In fact, we created three alternative tables of contents other than alphabetical order and offer them here by way of example—by method, by ecclesial tradition of the author, and by ethnic or gender identity.

ALTERNATIVE TABLES OF CONTENTS

By Method

Hermeneutical:

Contextual Theology as Practical Theology, Stephen Bevans SVD
 Hermeneutics in Protestant Practical Theology, Sally A. Brown
 Hermeneutics in Roman Catholic Practical Theology, Claire E. Wolfteich
 Religious Practices in Practical Theology, Don C. Richter

Liberationist:

African American Practical Theology, Dale P. Andrews
 Asian American Practical Theology, Courtney T. Goto
 Feminist and Womanist Practical Theology, Joyce Ann Mercer

Liberation Practical Theology, Katherine Turpin
 Postmodern Practical Theology, Tom Beaudoin
 U.S. Latino/a Practical Theology, Hosffman Ospino
 White Practical Theology, Tom Beaudoin and Katherine Turpin

Transformational:

Evangelical Practical Theology, Andrew Root
 Neo-Protestant Practical Theology, Gordon S. Mikoski

Applied:

Roman Catholic Pastoral Theology, Kathleen A. Cahalan

Empirical:

Empirical Practical Theology, Richard Osmer

By Ecclesial Tradition of the Author

Roman Catholic:

Contextual Theology as Practical Theology, Stephen Bevans SVD
 Hermeneutics in Roman Catholic Practical Theology, Claire E. Wolfteich
 Postmodern Practical Theology, Tom Beaudoin
 Roman Catholic Pastoral Theology, Kathleen A. Cahalan
 U.S. Latino/a Practical Theology, Hosffman Ospino
 White Practical Theology, Tom Beaudoin and Katherine Turpin

Protestant:

African American Practical Theology, Dale P. Andrews
 Asian American Practical Theology, Courtney T. Goto
 Empirical Practical Theology, Richard Osmer
 Evangelical Practical Theology, Andrew Root
 Feminist and Womanist Practical Theology, Joyce Ann Mercer
 Hermeneutics in Protestant Practical Theology, Sally A. Brown
 Liberation Practical Theology, Katherine Turpin
 Neo-Protestant Practical Theology, Gordon S. Mikoski
 Religious Practices in Practical Theology, Don C. Richter
 White Practical Theology, Tom Beaudoin and Katherine Turpin

By Ethnic or Gender Identity

In Relation to Particular Identity Markers:

African American Practical Theology, Dale P. Andrews
 Asian American Practical Theology, Courtney T. Goto
 Feminist and Womanist Practical Theology, Joyce Ann Mercer

U.S. Latino/a Practical Theology, Hosffman Ospino
 White Practical Theology, Tom Beaudoin and Katherine Turpin

Cutting across Ethnic and Gender Identity:

Contextual Theology as Practical Theology, Stephen Bevans SVD
 Empirical Practical Theology, Richard Osmer
 Evangelical Practical Theology, Andrew Root
 Hermeneutics in Protestant Practical Theology, Sally A. Brown
 Hermeneutics in Roman Catholic Practical Theology, Claire E. Wolfeich
 Liberation Practical Theology, Katherine Turpin
 Neo-Protestant Practical Theology, Gordon S. Mikoski
 Postmodern Practical Theology, Tom Beaudoin
 Religious Practices in Practical Theology, Don C. Richter
 Roman Catholic Pastoral Theology, Kathleen A. Cahalan

These alternative organizational schemas do not by any means exhaust the possibilities for ways readers might encounter the approaches offered here. Hopefully, our suggestions will stimulate the imagination and serve as a stimulus for creativity. What best serves your study of the field of practical theology? How might you create another grouping of the material offered here?

Chapter Two

African American Practical Theology

Dale P. Andrews

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

I can think of no event that more effectively dramatizes the historical staging for African American practical theology than the famed encounter between the suffragist and abolitionist Sojourner Truth and abolitionist Frederick Douglass in the early 1850s. Following the horrific retrenchment of the Fugitive Slave Act, a despairing Douglass called resoundingly for liberation ethics that could no longer contemplate nonviolence based in any means of spiritual or moral reasoning. Truth's challenge, in response, seized the debate with, "Frederick, is God dead?" [or otherwise reported, "Frederick, is God gone?"].¹ Those attending the event starkly faced the debate that endures in the social politics of black life and religious practices of black faith. This debate wrestles over effective, faithful responses to the cultural and systemic assault of racism on human liberties and the destructive capacities of racism upon the human spirit.

This historic debate unearths the roots of African American practical theology because of the core struggles at stake: how to shape faithful religious, moral, social, political, and communal practices that in turn shape human thriving, community, and faith traditions. The convergence of racism with other forms of oppression—such as sexism, classism, colonialism, and heterosexism—augments the conditions of the debate for and within black faith. The historical context of African American practical theology involves black religious and communal practices surviving oppression, while seeking the latter's demise, even as it mutates and evolves. Debates over theological and political reasoning and practices extend from the antebellum freedom campaigns and hush arbors of black communal faith practices, as well as abolitionism and early black church institutional formation. We can observe