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THE HERMENEUTICAL PROMISE OF PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

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Abstract

This article proposes that, of all the disciplines and methods employed in faith's pursuit of understanding, the practical theologian is especially equipped to help overcome a long hermeneutical tradition of separating theory and practice in Christian theology. In order to make this case, I will first explicate the dynamics of dichotomies in the academy and church. Second, I will locate the centrality of practice and its relevance for what it means to do theology today. This sets the stage for a discussion of the field of practical theology with its interdisciplinary and collaborative approach to the hermeneutics of lived religion. Although practical theology does not exercise proprietary control over how the issues of dichotomies are tackled in this essay, what sets this theological discipline apart is the object of study, the variety of sources drawn upon, and the method employed. I will conclude, therefore, by illustrating the methodological distinction as articulated by Richard Osmer's consensus equilibrium model with its four-fold tasks—the empirical, analytical, interpretive, and pragmatic tasks. This article provides a contribution to a specific theological hermeneutic that is notably absent within the theological guild.

Keywords: practical theology, theological methodology, practice, hermeneutics, theological education

Dichotomy and Integration in Academy and Church

According to Claire Wolfteich, ministerial students entering their academic programs are portrayed as intellectually curious, spiritually hungry, and driven with a real sense of calling.[1] However, when faced with the reality of academic demands and expectations, many students become so overwhelmed that they neglect prayer, family, friends, and even their own health. Further implications reveal a dichotomy between seminary curricula that also asks for integration of academic work and field studies, yet often provides no interpretative framework to do so. If this is what it means to "master divinity" then there is an obvious irony: the study of divinity leaves little time for God. As a result of an inability to manage this tension between the intellectual and

[1]Claire E. Wolfteich, "Graceful Work: Practical Theological Study of Spirituality," *Hor* 27.1 (2000): 7.

the spiritual, and the theoretical and the practical, some aspiring ministers "find seminary halls graceless."[2]

Students, however, are only one side of the equation in theological education. Indeed, teachers constitute a crucial role as well, especially if students perceive them as the ones imposing what is experienced as a duplicitous curriculum. However, professors, especially non-tenured junior faculty, have their own challenges. Stephanie Paulsell paints a portrait of the contemporary teacher of religion who also faces a dichotomy, that of intellectual work and theological vocation. The "forces of commodification" in the academy often eclipse the passion for a particular subject matter that drives one to pursue a doctorate in religion in the first place, to the extent that specialized scholarship is experienced as incompatible with vocation.[3] Thus, "New faculty in theological schools can often feel confused, or even alienated, by the conversation about vocation, calling, and spiritual formation they encounter in their institutions."[4]

Discussions of this lived dichotomy in interpretative method extend beyond the university or seminary walls to that of the church as well. Succinctly put, there is a "sad gap between the academic pursuit of truth and the needs of contemporary spiritual seekers, inside and outside of the Christian churches."[5] Connecting academia and the church lies at the heart of another critique by L. Gregory Jones: "Preparation of men and women for ordained Christian ministry in most North American denominations has relied on a presumed division of labor."[6] Through the use of a working metaphor, Jones elaborates by describing theological education as a relay-race. Initial formation of future leaders, in terms of beliefs and practices, begins in the church. The church then passes the future leader on to a seminary, which, after deconstructing what was previously learned and experienced, along with teaching "practical pastoral skills," sends many graduates back into a local church setting. According to Jones, the problem rests in an increasing awareness that the respective educational partners are not running their leg of the race very well.

The philosophical underpinnings for this hermeneutical dichotomy, experienced both by students and teachers in the academy, as well as the church, are articulated by David Tracy. While others like Ellen T. Charry acknowledge the dawn of modernity as a dividing line in the way Christians think about theology in general,[7] Tracy more precisely speaks of three great

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[2]Ibid.

[3]Stephanie Paulsell, "Spiritual Formation and Intellectual Work in Theological Education," *ThTo* 55.2 (1998): 230.

[4]Ibid., 231.

[5]Wolfteich, "Graceful Work," 8.

[6]L. Gregory Jones, "Beliefs, Desires, Practices, and the End of Theological Education," in *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life*, ed. Mirsoslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 185.

[7]Ellen T. Charry, "Educating for Wisdom: Theological Studies as a Spiritual

separations in modern Western culture.[8] These separations in modern thinking have not only affected our ability to think theologically but have also damaged our ability to reflect on clergy training. These include: (1) the separation of feeling and thought; (2) the separation of form and content; and (3) the separation of theory and practice. All three are related to one another and therefore address a pressing need for integration and wholeness. While much can be said about all three, the great separation of theory and practice is the primary concern of this essay and shall be dealt with more fully below.

Hence, there is a desperate need for integration and collaboration on all levels, including student and teacher, academy and church. Virtually all of the aforementioned scholars reach back to pre-modern sources as a guide for healing the fragmentation of all syntheses that modernity has bequeathed us. Tracy asserts how the ancients, medievals, and several of the scholastics all recognized, through their respective texts and schools, that the distinctions mentioned above must not be separated. In fact, they would have found such a separation not merely strange but self-destructive for true education. Furthermore, "Philosophy, as it is well known, was for the ancients, above all, a love of wisdom, an attempt at a unity of thought and a way of life."[9] Paulsell and Charry also call for a return to ancient sources, such as the Greek philosophers, the author of Proverbs, and medieval monastics as a guide for integration. Such integration will require intentionality to discover formative practices of reading, writing, teaching, and research—the *telos* of such an approach to academic work being spiritually formative.[10]

One of the ancient sources drawn heavily upon to support a spiritually sensitive hermeneutic is Augustine of Hippo, though framed in slightly different contexts. Charry asserts that Augustine understood "theology [as] a spiritual exercise, not a scientific discipline[,] undertaken for the sake of the care of souls beginning with himself."[11] Theology is to enable people to advance in the spiritual life—to know, love, and enjoy God better—to enable wisdom.[12] In this regard, contemporary theological education has so drastically strayed from this norm that spiritual development has been relegated to its own respective field of study, and not considered part and parcel of the theological endeavor.[13] Similarly, Jones draws on Augustine's teaching of baptismal

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Exercise," *ThTo* 66.3 (2009): 296.

[8]David W. Tracy, "Traditions of Spiritual Practice and the Practice of Theology," *ThTo* 55.2 (1998): 235–241.

[9]Ibid., 238. See also Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1995).

[10]Paulsell, "Spiritual Formation," 232; Charry, "Educating for Wisdom," 298–301.

[11]Ibid., 296.

[12]Ibid.

[13]On this point, see Mark A. MacIntosh's brilliant study, *Mystical Theology: The Integrity of Spirituality and Theology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998).

catechesis as demonstrating one way to reunite dichotomous distinctions and thus provide a more integrative alternative to the relay-race model of clergy training. For Jones, Augustine's teaching of baptismal catechesis embodies "an exceptionally rich understanding of the interplay between beliefs, desires, and practices," which Augustine would understand as one. [14]Thus, the chief end of theological education is to cultivate "a love of learning and a desire for God," by modeling the ongoing interplay of these three elements.[15]

The need for integration represents a crucial healing factor for hermeneutics, but some scholars emphasize the necessity of interdisciplinary collaboration within the academy in the formation of future leaders. Although Serene Jones does not extract wisdom from the likes of Augustine, she stresses the importance of integration through her research, teaching, and the task of theological education as a whole. As a constructive systematic theologian, she insists that older models of applied theology, where theological concepts are merely "applied" into concrete situations, are not helpful. Instead, she opts for practical theology conceived in two modes—shared aspiration among all the disciplines and a distinct discipline—as the way forward.[16] Wolfteich concedes that even for the practical theologian, whose work is by definition interdisciplinary, it can be overwhelming to draw on multiple disciplines and methods in the study of even one subject, like spirituality. No one person can do it all. Nevertheless, there is a need for scholarly collaboration so that research projects do not become mere accretions and exercises in reinventing the wheel, but cumulative.[17] In the end, there is a growing consensus that all of the theological disciplines, including the so-called practical fields, must be made more fluid to serve the needs of the present situation.

Recovering the Centrality of Practice in Theological Hermeneutics

One of the key concepts in the effort to undo the long-standing methodological separation of belief and practice is reframing practice as a delineation of different aspects of human activity, not different domains. In other words, theory and practice share a recursive relationship—theorizing is a practice and practices constitute theorizing. Unlike Hans-Georg Gadamer's (1900–2002) development of *phronesis*, where practice is integral for establishing human understanding as necessarily practical, moral philosopher and practice theorist, Alasdair MacIntyre, viewed practice as even more foundational. According to Ted Smith, MacIntyre is "not so much trying to describe what it means for knowledge to be practical" as he is "using practice

[14]Jones, "Theological Education," 193.

[15]Ibid., 203. This phrasing, which Jones does not cite in his essay, actually comes from Jean Leclercq's classic study, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture*, 3rd ed. (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982).

[16]Serene Jones, "Practical Theology in Two Modes," in *For Life Abundant: Practical Theology, Theological Education, and Christian Ministry*, ed. Dorothy C. Bass and Craig Dykstra (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 210.

[17]Wolfteich, "Graceful Work," 17.

to name a kind of institution that can ground knowledge and values."[18] Thus, for MacIntyre, practice is a "coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity" formed around the pursuit of "goods internal to that activity."[19] This form of neo-Artistotelean virtue ethics emphasizes how "practices pursue the good in a coherent, traditioned way."[20]

As influential as MacIntyre's explication of practices has been for Christian practical theologians, his perspective on practice must be placed within a larger cultural movement, contributing to a new attitude concerning hermeneutics. In *The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory*, Theodore Schatzki locates "practices" as a major concept in current social thought. One of the reasons for its ubiquity across a large swath of disciplines, most notably in the natural, behavioral, and social sciences, is the impulse to move away from problematic dualisms in thinking, remnants of modernity.[21] The apparent genius of practices is that they underlie both subjects and objects. Closely linked to the opposition of dualistic thinking, another reason for the interest in practices is the hermeneutical turn in philosophy and the social sciences to the everyday life-world.[22] Regardless of the precise origin of the centrality of practices, a cursory survey of the field demonstrates the range of diversity and even conflict among practice theorists, both in terms of conceptions and research strategies. Yet, there are a number of ideas that unify the movement. Schatzki asserts how most conceive of practices, minimally, as arrays of embodied, human activity that occur within the field of practices.

Two elements of this statement figure prominently in Schatzki's analysis: embodiment and field of practices. Both of them have implications for hermeneutics. To say that human activity is *embodied* is to acknowledge that "the skilled body" is the "common meeting point of mind and activity and of individual activity and society."[23] Embodied practices thus dislodge the

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[18]Ted A. Smith, "Theories of Practice," in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, Wiley Blackwell Companions to Religion 74, ed. Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 246. See also, Dorothy C. Bass, et al., *Christian Practical Wisdom: What It Is, Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016).

[19]Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), 187.

[20]Dorothy C. Bass, "Introduction," in *Practicing Theology*, 6.

[21]Theodore R. Schatzki, Karin Knorr Cetina, and Eike von Savigny, eds., *The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory* (London: Routledge, 2001).

[22]Other prominent practice theoreticians include: Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Cambridge Studies in Social and Cultural Anthropology 16 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, Bloomsbury Revelations (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013); Etienne Wenger, *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*, Learning in Doing: Social, Cognitive, and Computational Perspectives (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition, New Forum Books* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

[23]Theodore R. Schatzki, "Introduction: Practice Theory," in *The Practice Turn*, 3.

mind as the sole phenomenon in human existence: "the source of meaning, the receptacle of knowledge and truth, the wellspring of activity, and the co- or sole constitutor of reality."[24] Embodiment also entails mediation and mutuality, as practices are materially "mediated by artifacts, hybrids, and natural objects," and are "centrally organized around shared practical understanding."[25] Another unifying idea, one which Schatzki refers to as the "linchpin of the practice approach," is the *field of practices*. As the meeting point of all interconnected human activity, the field of practices has become the place "to investigate such phenomena as agency, knowledge, language, ethics, power, and science."[26]

Despite these shared convictions among practice theoreticians, a unifying definition is elusive. Andreas Reckwitz comes close, however, by distinguishing practice theory as a conceptual alternative to other forms of cultural theory, which are based in structuralism, semiotics, phenomenology and hermeneutics, and Wittgensteinian language game philosophy. These other forms of cultural theories include cultural mentalism, textualism, and intersubjectivism, all of which "offer opposing locations of the social and conceptualize the 'smallest unit' of social theory differently: in minds, discourses, interactions and 'practices.'"[27] Thus, a practice is a "routinized way in which bodies are moved, objects are handled, subjects are treated, things are described and the world is understood."[28] Similar to Schatzki's proposal, Reckwitz places the human agent at the interpretive nexus of a constellation of crossings: the individual/social and the body/mind. The key to Reckwitz's definition is that a practice does not envelop two separate realms; instead, "bodily and mental patterns are necessary components of practices and thus of the social."[29] Practice theory is therefore a praxeological way of viewing the world.

The centrality of practice in the wider cultural turn in academia signifies, among other things, the inescapability of culture's role in any number of constructive projects. This is no less true for theological disciplines and hermeneutics, where practice is also beginning to figure more prominently. Regardless of which practice theory Christian theologians draw from, Dorothy Bass suggests there are at least four characteristics of any theory of practice that can be agreed upon: (1) "practices resist the separation of

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[24]Ibid., 11.

[25]Ibid., 2. For a discussion on the history of mediation, focused on elucidating how the Enlightenment was an event in the history of mediation, thereby foregrounding how mediation should include "everything that intervenes, enables, supplements, or is simply between," see Clifford Siskin and William Warner, eds., *This is Enlightenment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

[26]Schatzki, "Introduction: Practice Theory," 13–14.

[27]Andreas Reckwitz, "Toward a Theory of Social Practices: A Development in Culturalist Theorizing," *European Journal of Social Theory* 5.2 (2002): 245.

[28]Ibid., 250.

[29]Ibid., 252.

thinking from acting;" (2) "practices are social, belonging to groups of people across generations;" (3) "practices are rooted in the past but are also constantly adapting to changing circumstances;" and (4) "practices articulate wisdom that is in the keeping of practitioners who do not think of themselves as theologically trained."[30] Bringing these together, John Swinton offers a helpful definition. He articulates practice as a form of individual and communal value-laden action that emerges from various contexts that shape the way one views and encounters the world. In terms of Christian practices, he writes, "We practice what we believe in quite literal ways. In this sense, Christian practices are embodied theology which can be read, interpreted, and understood in a way similar to the way which we read and interpret texts."[31]

Theology-Practice and the Evolution of Practical Theology

It is precisely here, in the art and science of reading and interpreting "human texts," that the practical theologian locates her work, for the practices of lived religious experience constitute the beginning and ending points of theology. Although practical theology as a field of theological inquiry may be relatively new on the scene, at its core, it is preeminently concerned with the theology-practice binary and how they relate to and influence each other. This is also known as *praxis*—"the critical relationship between theory and practice whereby each is dialectically influenced and transformed by the other."[32] One may argue that Paul's epistles in the New Testament reflect this reality, as he worked out his understanding of Christianity while engaged in the practice of missionary activities.[33] All of his epistles are embedded in the lived experience of individual Jewish and Christian communities so that Paul's theology derived from these letters was not only contextual but in dialogue with revelation and lived religious experience.[34] The healthy distinction, yet mutual relationship,

[30]Bass, "Introduction," 6.

[31]John Swinton, *Dementia: Living in the Memories of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 16–17n1.

[32]David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology* (New York: Seabury, 1975), 243.

[33]For an excellent article on the influence of the Apostle Paul's missionary practice on his interpretation of Scripture and theological construction, see Andrew Tompkins, "The Interplay between Forms of Revelation: Implications for Theological Method," *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies* 12.1 (2016): 84–106.

[34]Gerben Heitink, *Practical Theology: History, Theory, Action Domains*, trans. Reinder Bruinsma, Studies in Practical Theology (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 105. Chris A. M. Hermans and Mary Elizabeth Moore add Peter's address to the crowd in Acts 2:14–36 as a case-in-point. Both the Pauline letters, especially those addressed to the Roman and Corinthian believers, and the Acts passage, reveal how these apostles were "engaged in studying living situations and then responding to them with theological affirmations and guidance for action, in short, practical theology," in "The Contribution of Empirical Theology by Johannes A. Van der Ven: An Introduction," in *Hermeneutics and Empirical Research in Practical Theology: The Contribution of Empirical Theology by Johannes A. Van Der Ven*, ed. Chris A. M. Hermans and Mary

between theology and practice can be seen from the time of the early church to the Middle Ages, as most theologians were either bishops or monks, and thus engrossed in the practice of ministry.[35] In the modern era, theologians such as Karl Barth (1886–1968) also recognized this reality, as he described any distinction between theoretical and practical as a "primal lie, which has to be resisted in principle."[36]

Having thus established the mutually critical relationship of theology and practice at the heart of practical theology, how the practical theologian approaches these two hermeneutically has developed over time. As an academic discipline, it is said that practical theology finds its modern origins in the work of Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834). The importance of his theological method cannot be undervalued, for it was a type of theological Copernican Revolution.[37] Like Copernicus, who shifted the focus of astronomy to the sun as opposed to the earth as the center of the universe, Schleiermacher shifted the focus of theology to human experience rather than authoritative propositions about God as the source of theology.[38] In other words, his innovation in theological method lies in the turn to the believing subject as a substantial criterion for theology. This resulted in practical theology as a reflection on the theory of practice, or what is referred to today as an action-reflection model.[39]

Despite the enormous significance and influence of Schleiermacher to Western theology in general and practical theology in particular, some have argued that he did not realize the hermeneutical ramifications which turned out to be revolutionary. In his attempt to legitimize the discipline of theology worthy of the university by correlating theology as professional training akin to medicine and law, he inadvertently caused a division within the theological

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Elizabeth Moore, Empirical Studies in Theology 11 (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 11–12.

[35]Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100–600)*, vol. 1 of *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 5.

[36]Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Thomas F. Torrance, trans. A. T. Mackay and T. H. L. Parker (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1955–1961), 787, quoted in Ray S. Anderson, *The Shape of Practical Theology: Empowering Ministry with Theological Praxis* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 15.

[37]Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Brief Outline of the Study of Theology as a Field of Study: with Essays and Notes by Terrence N. Tice*, 3rd ed., rev. trans. of the 1811 and 1830 ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011).

[38]Stanley J. Grenz and Roger E. Olson, *20th-Century Theology: God and the World in a Transitional Age* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 44.

[39]James O. Duke and Howard Stone, "Orientation to Schleiermacher's Practical Theology," in *Christian Caring: Selections from Practical Theology*, ed. James O. Duke and Howard Stone (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 17. See also Willhelm Gräb, "Practical Theology as Theology of Religion: Schleiermacher's Understanding of Practical Theology as a Discipline," *International Journal of Practical Theology* 9.2 (2005): 181–196; John E. Burkhart, "Schleiermacher's Vision for Theology," in *Practical Theology: The Emerging Field in Theology, Church, and World*, ed. Don S. Browning (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983), 42–57.

encyclopedia. This isolated practical theology as the field of study concerned with the application of the other theological disciplines, namely philosophical and historical theology, and resulted in further dividing theology from practice. Practical theology and its subfields (liturgics, homiletics, pastoral theology, religious education, etc.) were now primarily concerned with "tips" and "techniques" for the professional minister. Edward Farley brilliantly traces the history of what he refers to as *theologia* and the devastating unintended consequences of Schleiermacher's project for the study of theology and theological education, namely the "clerical paradigm."[40]

Practical theology continued to develop as a field of inquiry in the early twentieth century, particularly in the United States, along the lines of pastoral theology. British scholars Stephen Pattison and James Woodward see little need to distinguish between practical and pastoral theology: "It is probably futile to try and separate these areas either definitionally or in practice."[41] However, in North America, pastoral theology has come to be virtually synonymous with pastoral care and counseling—a field considered by many a sub-discipline of practical theology.[42] Leading figures include Anton Boisen,

[40]Edward Farley, *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2001). For a more concise summary of the *Theologia* concept and its implications, see Farley's "Theology and Practice Outside the Clerical Paradigm," in *Practical Theology: Emerging Field*, 21–41. For a further development of Farley's thought beyond *Theologia*, see his follow-up texts: *The Fragility of Knowledge: Theological Education in the Church and the University* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1988); *Practicing Gospel: Unconventional Thoughts on the Church's Ministry* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003); and "Interpreting Situations: An Inquiry Into the Nature of Practical Theology," in *Formation and Reflection: The Promise of Practical Theology*, ed. Lewis S. Mudge and James N. Poling (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 1–26.

Farley and others have challenged Schleiermacher's clerical paradigm. Indeed, as Bonnie Miller-McLemore asserts, it has gained such staying power that it constitutes the primary way of characterizing the problem of theological education. However, Miller-McLemore goes on to challenge the dominancy of the clerical paradigm discourse by arguing "that it has distorted our perception, misdirected blame, and hence left other problems unattended" in "The 'Clerical Paradigm': A Fallacy of Misplaced Concreteness?" *International Journal of Practical Theology* 11.1 (2007): 20. Instead, she seeks to reclaim the value of congregational and pastoral know-how; for in denigrating the clerical paradigm the field of practical theology has suffered a terrible blow: "how to teach it, how to learn it, and how to demonstrate it" (ibid., 21).

[41]Stephen Pattison and James Woodward, "An Introduction to Pastoral and Practical Theology," in *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology*, ed. James Woodward and Stephen Pattison (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000), 6.

[42]According to Dana R. Wright, the developing field of practical theology in the United States moved in other directions as well—the religious education movement being one of them. See "The Contemporary Renaissance in Practical Theology in the United States: The Past, Present, and Future of a Discipline in Creative Ferment," *International Journal of Practical Theology* 6.2 (2002): 299. Currently, those in the field of pastoral care and counseling have sought a language revision in order to reflect a more inclusive perspective and not be tethered to the overt

who urged the study of "human living documents" and consequently founded the pastoral counseling and clinical pastoral education (CPE) movements, and Seward Hiltner, whose *Preface to Pastoral Theology* "set the terms of reference for discussion of pastoral issues" for decades.[43]

Criticisms have been brought against the pastoral theology hermeneutic as being largely organized around a psychological interpretation of human experience and symbolic interpretations of God.[44] Furthermore, the "contemporary renaissance in practical theology in the U.S.," to use Dana R. Wright's words, rendered invisible "the Christological determination of human history announced in the Gospel, making practical theology within the limits of the comic-kergymatic imagination appear naively confessional to the guild."[45] Rebecca S. Chopp maintains that this is indicative of a liberal agenda, which "construes religion and theology in a way that may not be adequate to the present situation."[46] The result, Andrew Purves claims, has been a loss of Christology, soteriology, and the doctrine of God, and has caused the work of the Church to be based largely on secular goals and techniques of care.[47]

While much can be said about these authors and their critiques, it was the work of such theologians as Tracy and Don S. Browning, which helped

Christian connections. The preferred name today is "spiritual care and counseling," and is reflected in seminary and divinity school course offerings and hospital chaplain service departments across the United States.

[43]Alastair V. Campbell, *Rediscovering Pastoral Care* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981), 41. See Anton T. Boisen, *An Exploration of the Inner World: A Study of Mental Disorder and Religious Experience* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971); Seward Hiltner, *Preface to Pastoral Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1958). Johannes van der Ven provides a more nuanced version of practical theology in the United States than can be explicated here, see *Practical Theology: An Empirical Approach* (Leuven: Peeters, 1998). He traces the origin of empirical theology—an intradisciplinary approach whereby the methodology of one discipline (the empirical sciences) is adopted by another (pastoral theology)—to the "Chicago School" of the early twentieth century and clinical theology, "both of which grew out of the clinical pastoral education movement" (ibid., 5). The philosophical climate of these forms of theology lie in the pragmatism and empiricism of Jonathan Edwards, William James, and John Dewey in the United States, as well as Enlightenment philosophers like John Locke, James Mill, David Hume, and John Stuart Mill (ibid., 7).

[44]Andrew Purves, *Reconstructing Pastoral Theology: A Christological Foundation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), xiv; Andrew Purves, *Pastoral Theology in the Classical Tradition* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 3. See also Thomas C. Oden, *Pastoral Theology: Essentials of Ministry* (New York: HarperOne, 1983).

[45]Wright, "Contemporary Renaissance," 292.

[46]Rebecca S. Chopp, "Practical Theology and Liberation," in *Formation and Reflection: The Promise of Practical Theology*, ed. Lewis S. Mudge and James N. Poling (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 121.

[47]Purves, *Pastoral Theology*, 3. The subtitle to the following work also reflects this view: E. Brooks Holifield, *A History of Pastoral Care in America: From Salvation to Self-Realization* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1983).

produce a hermeneutical shift, bringing pastoral theology back to a practical theology in the United States. This shift brought practical theology much closer to a form known in the premodern era. However, this was not a complete resuscitation of theory and practice as a coterminous hermeneutic, but rather a contemporary corrective. In contrast to the psychotherapeutic emphases of modern practical and pastoral theology, Tracy and Browning underscore the necessity of theological ethics and the public nature of practical theology in a post-Shoah and globally pluralistic world. Implications for this reconstruction of practical theology can be summarized in Browning's sophisticated approach, which is outlined in his classic text, *A Fundamental Practical Theology*. For Browning, practical theological methodology "goes from practice to theory and back to practice. Or more accurately, it goes from present theory-laden practice to a retrieval of normative theory-laden practice to the creation of more critically held theory-laden practices."[48]

Practical theology has since evolved to an empirical-hermeneutic model in which interdisciplinary theological reflection on the dialectical relationship of theory and practice has assumed center stage. In the words of Elaine Graham, practical theology has emerged as a "problem-solving and inductive discipline, which connects with practical issues in a way that illuminates and empowers. It has also emerged as a way of reflection that draws on other disciplines in its analysis of experience in order to do justice to the complexity of the situation."[49] Put another way, practical theology focuses on the "how to" within Christianity, but is guided by an informed theory of "why to"—"why we ought to practice the Christian way of life in certain ways in light of an interpretation of a particular social context and the normative claims of the Christian community."[50]

The Practice of Practical Theology

How do practical theologian's practice theology? Richard R. Osmer describes a specific direction that practical theology has been moving internationally as a hermeneutical discipline. When examining the variety of approaches to practical theology espoused by scholars around the globe, he writes: "[F]our distinguishable but mutually influential tasks have emerged as central to practical theology as a field."[51] These four tasks or movements of Osmer's consensus equilibrium model constitute a paradigm of reflective practice, which inform each other within a hermeneutical circle or spiral (see **Figure 1** below). All four tasks attend to four related questions and include: the Descriptive Task (What is going on?); the Interpretive Task (Why is it going

[48]Don S. Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology: Descriptive and Strategic Proposals* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 7.

[49]Elaine Graham, Heather Walton, and Frances Ward, *Theological Reflection: Methods* (London: SCM, 2005), 5.

[50]Richard R. Osmer, *Teaching Ministry of Congregations* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), xiv.

[51]Ibid., xv.

on?); the Normative Task (What ought to be going on?); and the Pragmatic Task (So what? How to?). It is important to note that one can enter into the hermeneutical spiral at any point and, because of the interrelated nature of the four tasks, will inevitably move back and forth between each "moment," especially within the descriptive-empirical and interpretive points on the circle. According to Osmer, "It is the mutually influential relationship of practical theology's empirical, interpretive, normative, and pragmatic work that allows this field to construct action-guiding theories of religious praxis" (see **fig. 1**).[52]

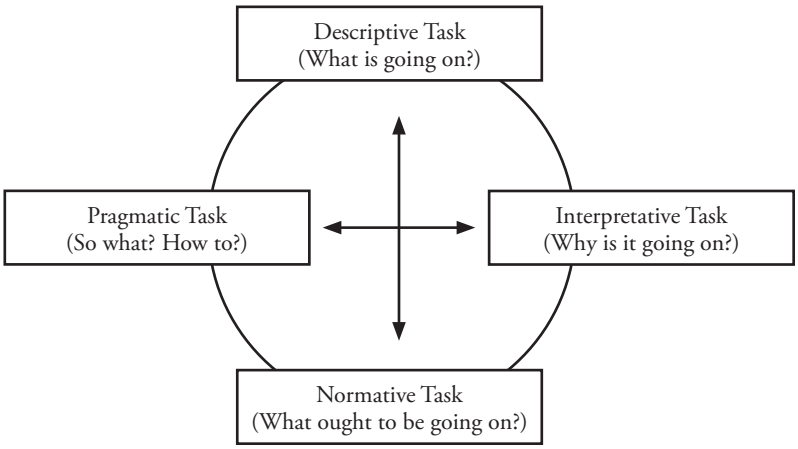

Figure 1. The Four Tasks of Practical Theology

The first task of practical theology is the descriptive-empirical. The question that lies at the heart of this task of practical theological reflection is, "What is going on?" This is an attempt to arrive at a thick description of a particular field of experience—a situation, problem, or practice—either within a Christian setting, such as a local congregation, or in society-at-large. It is more than a social scientific practice of gathering data of an actual, empirical phenomenon. The practical theologian who opts to conduct his own qualitative and/or quantitative research also engages in this stage as astute listener and partner with the Holy Spirit. Osmer elaborates: The key term is "attending," relating to the other with openness, attentiveness, and prayerfulness. Such attending opens up the possibility of an I-Thou relationship in which others are known and encountered in all their uniqueness and otherness, a quality of

[52]The quotation is taken from Richard R. Osmer, "Johannes Van der Ven's Contribution to the New Consensus in Practical Theology," in *Hermeneutics and Empirical Research*, 152. **Figure 1** is taken from idem, *Teaching Ministry*, 303.

relationship that ultimately depends on the communion-creating presence of the Holy Spirit.[53]

The second task is the hermeneutical one. "Why is this going on?" is the question the practical theologian seeks to answer at this point. While the descriptive stage may draw on social scientific methods, such as participant-observation, interviews, surveys, or a focus group to gather the necessary data, the interpretive moment enters into an intentional dialogue with specific theories. For example, a hermeneutical "conversation" can engage social scientific theories of practice (as I do in this article), look to the arts as an interpretive lens when considering racism, or economics when examining issues related to classism.[54] Whatever the case may be, the objective is to interpret and explain "patterns of behavior, actions, and ideas."[55] As Osmer is apt to note, since the data of empirical research is not self-evident and must therefore be interpreted, it is vital that researchers be aware of the ways their own hermeneutical commitments inform their investigation.[56] In this way, the descriptive and interpretive are both individual as well as mutually influential tasks.

Stepping into the realm of formal theology and ethics, the third task of practical theology—the normative—asks the following question: "What *ought* be going on?" Having developed an informed and thorough description of a particular episode, situation, or context, the practical theologian, who ultimately conducts research in service of the church, brings the aforementioned interpreted description into formal dialogue with the Christian tradition.[57] The objective is "to construct ethical norms to guide our responses and learning from 'good practice.'"[58] The work of the practical theologian during this stage most closely resembles the biblical scholar, Christian ethicist, or systematician; however, an important distinction must be made between these respective fields and practical theology. The goal of the practical theologian is not to develop a theological doctrine or write a biblical commentary, for example. Rather, she constructively makes use of these sources to articulate context-specific models of divine and human action

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[53]Idem, *Practical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 34.

[54]For a sampling of the range of possibilities in practical theology, see: Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, ed., *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, Wiley Blackwell Companions to Religion 74 (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012).

[55]Osmer, "New Consensus," 150.

[56]Idem, *Teaching Ministry*, xv.

[57]These are technical terms used by Osmer to describe the following. "An *episode* is an incident or event that emerges from the flow of everyday life and evokes explicit attention and reflection"; "A *situation* is the broader and longer pattern of events, relationships, and circumstances in which an episode occurs"; "A *context* is composed of the social and natural systems in which a situation unfolds," in *Practical Theology*, 12.

[58]Ibid., 4.

in order to "better understand the patterns of God's praxis in the world and to shape the patterns of their lives and communities accordingly."[59]

The fourth task that completes the hermeneutical circle is the pragmatic. The question under consideration here is: "How might we respond?" More specifically: "How might this area of praxis be shaped to more fully embody the normative commitments of a religious tradition in this particular context of experience?"[60] One of the common misconceptions of contemporary practical theology is that it is "applied theology." That is, the practical theologian develops tips and techniques for Christian ministry based on the work of the biblical scholar and/or systematic theologian. Though this task of practical theology is very much concerned with the pragmatic "how to" of praxis, one must remember it rests on the cumulative work of rigorous interdisciplinary scholarship aimed at formulating a specific action plan, and is theory-laden. Thus, when questions, such as those mentioned above, are posed, it becomes clear: "Rules of art are not guidelines that can be applied in a mechanical or rote fashion. They presuppose creativity and good judgment on the part of the practitioner, who must determine a fitting course of action in a particular context or experience."[61]

In totality, all four tasks mutually inform each other in a hermeneutical spiral, which is one of the reasons why practical theology must be differentiated from other ways of doing theology. As a paradigm of reflective practice, practical theology "makes room for reflection on experience and practice and for dialogue with the social science as it engages the normative resources of the Christian faith."[62]

Conclusion

In summary, practical theology can be understood as beginning with lived religion, human experience, practice, or a crisis. It then draws on a variety of sources and methods as a hermeneutical process of interpreting and reflecting on what is going on, namely revelation and science. Pattison and Woodward remind us that the disciplines employed in practical theology are varied and hinge upon the particular phenomena being considered.[63] For example, practical theology may draw on economics when analyzing financial

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[59]Idem, *Teaching Ministry*, xvi.

[60]Idem, "New Consensus," 151.

[61]Idem, *Teaching Ministry*, xvi. On the move from applied theology to practical theology, see A. G. Van Wyk, "From 'Applied Theology' to 'Practical Theology,'" *AUSS* 33.1 (1995): 85–101. To my knowledge, Van Wyk's study is the only article published on practical theology proper in *AUSS*. The present essay moves beyond and updates Van Wyk's Dutch-South African perspective to more accurately reflect the development of the field over the past twenty-five years.

[62]Richard R. Osmer, "Practical Theology: A Current International Perspective," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 67.2 (2011), n.p., https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v67i2.1058.

[63]Pattison and Woodward, "Introduction," 9.

debt, psychology when considering the experience of guilt, or anthropology when studying African tribal conflict. Each of these respective disciplines has embedded philosophical assumptions—such as the nature of knowledge, and corollary research methodologies—such as case study, narrative research, and ethnography. Although employing social-science methodology and empirical research findings may be useful in the hermeneutical process, there are very real challenges that practical theologians must face with this critical correlation. John Swinton and Harriet Mowat pose several questions: "How does it actually link with theology? What kind of conceptual structure will allow the two disciplines to come together in a way that prevents one from collapsing into the other? Precisely where does the information elicited by qualitative research fit into the process of practical theology research?"[64] Nevertheless, every practical theologian must answer these and similar questions in order to maintain an integrative approach.[65]

As Serene Jones has already suggested above, in order to overcome the hermeneutical dichotomies bequeathed to us from modernity, "shared aspiration" among all the theological disciplines as well as the need for a "distinct discipline," is the way forward. Much good has already come from the work of practical theologians within Roman Catholicism, mainline Protestantism, as well as Evangelicalism. Ellen T. Charry affirms how theological teachers are moving closer and closer to the necessity of being interdisciplinary and more intentional about partnering with local churches. They are also becoming more attentive to the real needs of their pupils in the academy, for many "students are more interested in nurturing their life in God than in the teacher's dexterity at mastering the material."[66] It is for these reasons that practical theology, with its insistence upon fully informed reflective practice, is beginning to undo the devastating separation between spirituality and theology, theory and practice, within the academy and church.

To be sure, practical theologians do not claim to exercise sole proprietary control over the concerns about hermeneutics that I have outlined in this essay. However, because of the ways practical theologians put these concerns together in terms of method, the field "simultaneously builds bridges of understanding and collaboration in the wider academy, as well as with practicing religious leaders and others in the churches."[67] Theologians and religious scholars today must seek more collaborative ways of practicing theology and not fall prey to the temptation of isolation within our own academic and ministerial silos. I would thus propose the practical theologian, as outlined in this essay, as one such academician to lead the way.

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[64]John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (London, UK: SCM Press, 2006), 73.

[65]For a good overview of the available options, see Osmer, *Practical Theology*, 163–173.

[66]Charry, "Educating for Wisdom," 306.

[67]Kathleen A. Cahalan and Gordon S. Mikoski, eds., *Opening the Field of Practical Theology: An Introduction* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 2.