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Editor's Notes

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Editors' Notes

D'Esta Love and Stuart Love

We open 2016 with an issue on *Practical Theology*. Our guest editor, David Lemley, serves as practical theologian at Pepperdine University helping students to learn the art and craft of ministry in today's church. Ministers and church leaders should be concerned with practical theology because it is their task to pursue how service in Christ addresses the challenges of congregational ministry today.

This editor cut his teeth on practical theology mostly through the work of Don S. Browning. That was about thirty-five years ago. Browning made three generalizations about practical theology: (1) it "tries to answer the question of what we should do in the face of problems and challenges to faithful action," (2) "it consists of several different levels," and (3) "it is correlational and critical."¹

Concerning the second generalization, different levels, Browning identifies five.² First is the *metaphorical level* that parallels what we often refer to as systematic theology. God as creator is an example. Second is the *obligational level* that parallels theological ethics and is concerned with moral development. Third is the *need-tendency level*, that is, the psychological plane concerned with personal emotional development. Justice and mercy in a marriage relationship is an example. Fourth is the *contextual-predictive level*, the sociological dimension wherein "we try to interpret the situation that confronts us in our ethical deliberation."³ A church's struggle for survival as it attempts to care for the homeless in the community is an example. Finally, is the *rule-role communication level*, the point in which "specific rules and roles for organizing practical action" takes place, both for individuals and groups.⁴ Paul's command to the Thessalonians that they abstain from fornication as the will of God is an example (1 Thess 4.3). Sadly, practical theology too often is identified with level five without asking how, for example, the first two levels are necessary to arrive at a particular rule.

Practical theologians, therefore, work with all of these generalizations and all of these levels. Accordingly, practical theology is much more than implementing real-world applications. The field presupposes biblical studies, church history, systematic theology, and ethics. In a sense it is the capstone of ministerial training and practice. Sadly, in too many cases, ministers and church leaders ignore the in-depth preparation that informs their pastoral behavior.

So, where is the field today? David Lemley provides us with at least a partial answer to that question.

We have supplemented the work of Lemley's writers with a few articles that have awaited publication in *Leaven*. In this grouping are pieces by **SUSAN GIBONEY**, **ROBERT M. RANDOLPH**, and **JEFF MILLER**. **GIBONEY** focuses on our senior members in the church in terms of respecting, serving, and mobilizing them in the midst of an intergenerational congregation. Truly, they are a force for good in Christ's service. **RANDOLPH**, who delivered the 2015 William Green lecture at Pepperdine University, explores how Christian values, firmly rooted in the Church of Christ heritage are at the heart of the educational enterprise at Pepperdine. Because this is so, he invites all of us to examine, be challenged, and to grow in our faith regardless of our spiritual backgrounds. In closing, **MILLER** reminds us that the central issue in Jesus's question over Caesar's image is whether the image of God is stamped on our hearts.

1. Don S. Browning, "Integrating the Approaches: A Practical Theology," in *Building Effective Ministry*, ed. Carl S. Dudley (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), 222–223.

2. *Ibid.*, 223. The list is a compilation I created from Browning's data.

3. Don S. Browning, *Religious Ethics and Pastoral Care* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 70.

4. *Ibid.*

Continue to pray for *Leaven*. Other issues this year celebrate the pastoral lives of Paul and Kay Watson, members of *Leaven*'s editorial board; address the dimensions of violence in contemporary society in an issue edited by Michael McRay; explore the Joseph novella in the book of Genesis with guest editor Mindy Thompson; and glean some of the best sermons and classes from the 2016 Pepperdine University Lectures.

Guest Editor's Notes

David Lemley

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom," writes the teacher of Proverbs, "and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding" (Prov 9.10). Throughout Scripture, wisdom is not only a head full of good ideas, reflecting on lived experience, but also an empowering, creative force bestowed by God: "By wisdom the LORD laid the earth's foundations" (Prov 3.19); stay close to wisdom and understanding, and "they will be life for you" (9.22). Wisdom is demonstrated in the doing of it, the living of it: "wisdom is proved right by all her children" (Luke 7.35).

Practical wisdom is the biblical norm. Wisdom is the evidence of knowing God; a Godward life is the evidence of wisdom. Right or correct knowledge of God—"the fear of the LORD"—gives birth to wisdom as a way of life. Wisdom marks good ministry as God's doing and demonstrates a congregation's maturity in Christ. Ministry forms practical wisdom in the life of God's people.

Practical theologians speak of their work as theology that constantly proceeds from, and precedes, the church's ever-developing praxis: her lived gospel proclamation in each time and place. Practical theology is a work of fostering wisdom through multidisciplinary listening that takes place within and for the church. The evidence of good practical theology is the formation of practical wisdom in congregational life and mission.

This issue of *Leaven* demonstrates the kind of listening that can bring about practical wisdom in the life of a church. The authors follow a pattern common to ministers and theologians pursuing practical wisdom: listening for where wisdom is needed in the context of our current ministry; listening for how the wisdom of Scripture and the church speaks to our setting; listening for evidence of God's wisdom among us; and listening for God's call to practical wisdom.

CARSON REED provides us with an overview of practical theology as a task of ministry, describing its integral connection to discipleship. Following that, we consider the formation of wisdom through attention to context; that is, wisdom for, and foundationally embedded among, the people God created. **PHIL KENNESON** models listening to how we are being formed by our cultural stories and practices, in order to discern how God would form us for the culture of God's kingdom. **CARI MYERS** demonstrates how understanding unfamiliar cultural experiences can help Christians—and churches—better love and serve their closest neighbors.

We then turn to the practices keeping us close to God's word as a source of practical wisdom. **TERA HARMON** encourages us to let biblical scholars and historians tune our ears to the wisdom of Scripture and our co-interpreters through the centuries, revealing how present, relevant, and critical those voices are to our missional discernment. Also gleaning from the past, **BRADY BRYCE** promotes "attentiveness to God in life" by reintroducing us to a five-hundred-year-old conversational prayer exercise.

My subsequent essay considers how Jesus's references to wisdom, in the gospel of Luke, correlate to the movement of reflection described by our authors: listening to our context, listening to the Christian tradition, listening to our own stories, and discerning missional participation in God's story in our time and place.

Concluding our study of practical theology, three pieces show how worship can form practical wisdom: **LEE MAGNESS** sends the church into a performance illuminating "the marks of ministry"; **ANDREA ZAHLER** invites the church to let the table remind us to "live in freedom"; and **SEAN PALMER** asks the church to redefine family and "enter a world where water is thicker than blood."

I hope it will be evident that the contributions to this issue "prove wisdom" in witnessing to the love that marks the children of God. ✕