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Toward a Foundation for Ministerial Practice

Carson E. Reed

As a person who has been practicing ministry for over thirty years, I have given no small amount of time thinking about ministry. I didn't come to such a life without a fight. I am well acquainted with our older brother Jonah who, when God tapped him, grabbed the first boat heading out of Joppa's port. Tarshish looked pretty good to Jonah, especially in contrast to Nineveh, just as law school did for me. I much preferred the thought of dealing with crooks, thieves, and sinners in an environment where a robust theological anthropology was assumed—not ignored! Besides that, as a son of a minister I had seen the challenges of the ministerial life in my father; I had experienced it as a member of a family submerged in it. Frankly, I was not eager to jump into the pool. I had already been tossed in the water a few times; the pool seemed too deep and murky to me.

But you likely know this story. Usually fishermen tell stories about the monster fish that got away. However, for Jonah, for me, and perhaps for you, the story is about some monster fish that did not let us get away. Instead it spewed me up on the muddy, messy shores of ministry and I have been living in and out of Nineveh ever since. And so here we are. I still find myself reflecting about the life of ministry—particularly about what really matters in terms of the foundations of ministry. Beginning at the beginning is a good thing . . . if only we knew where to start.

Others have asked foundational questions before. Drifting back into the early nineteenth century at the University of Berlin, Friedrich Schleiermacher was the chair in a three-person committee charged with developing a rationale for including the study of theology and the training of pastors in a university that was emerging as a place for empirical research.¹ Originally published in 1811 and—due to the popularity of his approach—enjoying several revised editions, Schleiermacher's rationale offered a justification for theological education in a research setting.²

Schleiermacher offered a series of three broad disciplines necessary for theological education including philosophical theology, historical theology (which included biblical studies, systematic theology, historical theology, and church history), and then practical theology. In the first edition of his *Brief Outline* he took care to present the interconnectedness of these three disciplines through the use of an illustration of a tree.

1. Gijsbert D. J. Dingemans, "Practical Theology in the Academy: A Contemporary Overview," *The Journal of Religion* 76 (January 1996): 82–96. John E. Paver recounts this story in *Theological Reflection and Education for Ministry: The Search for Integration in Theology* (Ashgate, 2006), 7–10; see also Bonnie Miller-McLemore, *Christian Theology in Practice: Discovering a Discipline* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 2ff.

2. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Kurze Darstellung des theologischen Studiums zum Behuf einleitender Vorlesungen* (Berlin, 1811). Sociologically, Schleiermacher reminded his readers of the significant and pervasive role of religion in society. Philosophically, he declared that Christianity was rooted in experience and therefore was worthy of study. Thus the academic discipline of theology was justified and that, in order to have professionally trained clergy, it was necessary for universities to prepare competent ministers for the good of society.

The roots of the tree represented philosophical theology, which explores the foundational polemical and apologetic questions that undergird the Christian faith.³ The trunk of the tree, what is visible to us in texts and what is observable to us by observation and correlation, is the work of historical theology (and its attendant subdisciplines of biblical studies, etc.). The crown of the tree—its branches, limbs, and leaves—is the place of practical theology.

However, this integrated focus was soon lost. In the subsequent edition of his *Brief Outline*, published in 1830, the tree disappears. Authors Howard Stone and James Duke suggest that Schleiermacher “feared that readers would mistakenly believe that he intended to subordinate philosophical and historical theology to practical theology, when his true intention was to emphasize the equality of the three.”⁴ Yet subordination did occur. Even as Schleiermacher sought to show the integration of the three disciplines, the way in which practical theology was framed eventually led it to be, in the words of John Paver, “intellectually inert!”⁵

So the enduring legacy of Schleiermacher’s proposal was not the integration of these various disciplines but rather as separated, specialized silos of knowledge about which any pastor must be able to demonstrate competency. And perhaps most telling is that practical theology was distanced and sometimes divorced from work in biblical studies and theological studies.

As a result, practical theology gave way to skills to be developed and the management of congregations. And with that, any reciprocity between the leaves and branches with the trunk and the roots were cut off. Practical theology came to be known as the “helps and hints” department of theological institutions.⁶ The real heavy lifting was taking place in the other departments.⁷ And what became neglected was practical theology’s capacity to ask the really hard questions and work in the very context where theological inquiry begins.

The focus on competency in a variety of disciplines, and upon training an individual to be skilled at delivering religious goods and services, gave rise to the term *clerical paradigm*.⁸ The goal of theological education was to prepare experts in various disciplines to dispense ministry in their respective congregations. But is this idea of competency, the skilled “technologist,” really sufficient to build our understanding of the practice of ministry? Is the knowledge of Hebrew or, for that matter, the latest in homiletic theory really the thing that is needful for congregations? Is the real end or *telos* of ministry to have a specially trained person to do ministry for, among, or to other people?

Moving quickly to 1983, Edward Farley published *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education*⁹ In it, Farley critiques the clerical paradigm, the sort of approach that is framed by many disciplines and consists of the “communication of the many regions in which scholars and scientists

3. See Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Brief Outline of Theology as a Field of Study*, rev. trans. of 1811 and 1830 eds., translated with notes by Terrence N. Tice (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 7–14.

4. Howard Stone and James O. Duke, editors of Friedrich Schleiermacher’s *Christian Caring: Selections from Pastoral Theology* (Fortress, 1988), 22. Interestingly, Elaine Graham states: “He argued for the essential unity of theory and practice, by stating that the practical should be given preferential status in assessing the authenticity and validity of the truth-claims of theological discourse. Thus it is the congregational reality that serves as the validating norm for Christian theology, and not simply abstract or ideal philosophical principles.” In *Transforming Practice: Pastoral Theology in an Age of Uncertainty* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002), 60.

5. Paver, 10.

6. Seward Hiltner, a leading pastoral theologian who kicked off a path toward integration writes in 1958: “The notion of ‘hints and helps,’ implying the right to dispense with structural and theoretical considerations, to set aside scholarship in this area, and to appeal to the more degraded forms of parallelism, helped to drive most systematic books out of this field by the turn of the century.” In *Preface to Pastoral Theology* (Abingdon Press, 1958), 48.

7. For full critiques see Browning 1991, Farley 1983.

8. For a recent critique and exploration of the term see Bonnie J. Miller-McLenore, “The ‘Clerical Paradigm’ A Fallacy of Misplaced Concreteness,” *International Journal of Practical Theology* 11(2007):19–38. She presses and nuances her critique in the newly released volume of essays, *The Practice of Theology?* (Eerdmans, 2012).

9. Edward Farley, *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education* (Fortress, 1983). I am leaving out much historical context in the body of this essay. Here is a little more: For the past fifty years there have been people asking questions about

divide up the cognitive universe.”¹⁰ In such a world ministerial preparation easily reverts to learning methods and mastering content.

Rather, Farley suggests that the purpose or larger aim of ministerial preparation lies in shaping a person who is informed by knowledge and content and skills but is living “in and toward God and the world under the impact of redemption.”¹¹ This movement led to the theme of “minister as theologian,” raising the value of theological inquiry to training ministers. Most notably, Farley’s work signaled a new day of thinking holistically or organically about the formation of ministers; he also identified the need for the development of the character or virtue of the minister.

This heightened value for critical thinking, for theological thinking, for historical clarity, is a reminder that theology is not an ivory tower endeavor, but is connected to everything taught in seminary and in what ministers do and say daily and weekly within congregations. Thus, in more recent years, as Bonnie Miller-McLemore suggests and gently chides Farley, forming ministers is moving from “minister as theologian” to a more nuanced “minister as practitioner.”¹²

The path forward perhaps can be located in the work of Craig Dykstra. In 1991, Dykstra opened an important essay that offered this critique: “Theology and theological education are burdened by a picture of practice that is harmfully individualistic, technological, ahistorical, and abstract.”¹³ Dykstra noted that ministry is usually seen as something someone does—preach a sermon, make a pastoral visit, teach a class, organize a ministry. This sort of doing by a single person—the minister—leaves unexplored the deeper, more complex, and yet pervasive reality of the congregation itself.

Dykstra presents the important claim that ministry is something done with a community of people and thus the dynamic of community is part and parcel with the practice of community. Relying on the significant work of Alisdair MacIntyre, Dykstra offers this definition for the practice of ministry: “Practice is participation in a cooperatively formed pattern of activity that emerges out of a complex tradition of interactions among many people sustained over a long period of time.”¹⁴ Ministerial leadership within congregations is dependent on the practices of congregations— Scripture interpretation, preaching, prayer, service, and more.

This essay launched a number of essays and books over the past twenty years.¹⁵ What Craig Dykstra, Dorothy Bass and others are calling for in this volume of essays is integration of theory and praxis. For the

preparing people for ministry. In fact, the big watershed point that began moving away from the clerical or academic paradigm is found in the work of Richard Niebuhr when he published *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry: Reflections on the Aims of Theological Education* (Harper & Row, 1956). As the title suggests, Niebuhr began to ask questions about the practice of ministry and the larger purposes of the church itself. For Niebuhr, the church existed to be a community of people who reflected the great commands of Jesus—love God and love your neighbor.

So if that is the purpose of the church, then how does the practice of ministry serve that aim? The question of the church’s purpose, the matter of ecclesiology, is beyond the scope of our conversation today, but Niebuhr got a ball rolling that has not stopped since—at least as the question of ecclesiology shapes the formation of ministers. More germane to our modest exploration today is a renewed focus on the minister as person who must integrate the various disciplines for the sake of the church’s purpose.

10. Ibid., 151.

11. Ibid., 156.

12. Bonnie Miller-McLemore, *Christian Theology in Practice: Discovering a Discipline* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 180.

13. Craig Dykstra, “Reconceiving Practice,” in *Shifting Boundaries: Contextual Approaches to the Structure of Theological Education*, ed. Barbara G. Wheeler and Edward Farley (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 35.

14. Ibid., 43. Connecting with my theme on integration are also his remarks: “Some cooperative human activities build up, over time, patterns of reciprocal expectations among participants, ways of doing things together by which the cooperative activity is given not only direction but also meaning and significance. The form itself comes to embody the reasons for the practice and the values intrinsic to it. This is why, in order to participate in a practice intelligently, one must become aware of the *history* of the practice” (43–44). See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2nd edition, 1984), 187.

15. Dorothy C. Bass and Craig Dykstra, eds., *For Life Abundant: Practical Theology, Theological Education, and Christian Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008). The thesis statement: “God in Christ promises abundant life for all creation. By the power

church to embody abundant life, congregational ministers need to be able to bring Scripture, theological reflection, historical awareness, and pastoral skills together within the life of the church. Miller-McLemore identifies the relationship between skills and theological engagement as interdependent.¹⁶ Some years ago, Karl Barth called for such a way of thinking as well. “Praxis and theory, Church and theology, love and knowledge, simply cannot be set over against one another in this kind of abstract way.”¹⁷

So we need Schleiermacher’s tree—the whole tree, not just the roots and the trunk. The life of ministry, the practice of ministry, requires it. It is also significant to understand that the practice of ministry informs our exegesis and our philosophical engagement. Leaf, trunk, and root need each other in order for the tree to thrive. Sap rises and sap falls—conveying what is necessary for life throughout the whole tree.

Where to begin? Perhaps we should begin with working out a definition of practical theology. That in and of itself is no easy matter. The growing interest and renewed commitments to the contextual nature of theological reflection has launched a flurry of activity in the past twenty years.¹⁸ Yet pinning down a definition of practical theology is as illusive as finding a unicorn at the zoo. While you may find several animals that possess germane characteristics—a horn (or two), four legs with hooves, a mane, etc.—those characteristics are not in the right place, to the right proportions, or combined correctly. Likewise, within the discipline of practical theology it is becoming increasingly clear that different trajectories are developing an emphasis on one dimension or another. So the open question is how to properly define practical theology. Richard Osmer’s recent essay in *Opening the Field of Practical Theology* provides four sets of frames that delineate the way various practical theologians understand the theological task.¹⁹

First, Osmer identifies what he calls the hermeneutical trajectory. This approach to practical theology understands the task as an interpretive activity, often using the insights of philosophical and cultural hermeneutics as a lens to consider the varied sources available. Experience, reason, Scripture, and tradition are all important sources, but empirical reasoning is the leading interpretive tool.

Second, Osmer posits what he terms the transforming praxis trajectory. The fundamental assumption for practical theologians in this trajectory is the liberating work of God against institutional structures that bind and oppress. In varying degrees critical social theory undergirds transforming praxis; thus this trajectory often seeks alliances with social movements that resonate with theological themes of freedom and solidarity with

of the Holy Spirit, the church receives this promise through faith and takes up a way of life that embodies Christ’s abundant life in and for the world. The church’s ministers are called to embrace this way of life and also to lead particular communities of faith to live it in their own situations. To do this, pastors and other ecclesial ministers must be educated and formed in ways of knowing, perceiving, relating, and acting that enable such leadership.”

Several of the articles in this volume of essays explore ways of teaching in theological institutions to model and form ministers that reflect this integration. See also Dorothy C. Bass, ed., *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*, 2nd ed., (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010); Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass, eds., *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002). Additionally speaking of this interpretive work, pastoral theologian Elaine Graham writes: “My vision of pastoral theology portrays it as the systematic reflection upon the nature of the Church in the world, accessible only through the practical wisdom of those very communities. Therefore, as a discipline, pastoral theology is not legislative or prescriptive, but interpretive. It enables the community of faith to give a critical and public account of its purposeful presence in the world, and the values that give shape to its actions.” In *Transforming Practice*, 208–9.

16. Miller-McLemore, *Christian Theology in Practice*, 178.

17. As quoted by Ray Anderson in *The Shape of Practical Theology: Empowering Ministry with Theological Praxis* (IVP Academic, 2001), 15. Anderson also quotes Barth as saying that “Christ as the light of life can only be understood as a ‘theory which has its origin and goal in praxis.’” *Ibid.*, 20. Among those who would argue that theology and ministry were integrated throughout history until the shifts and changes marked by Schleiermacher would be Andrew Purves in *Pastoral Theology in the Classical Tradition* (Westminster John Knox, 2001).

18. Kathleen A. Cahalan and Gordon S. Mikoski, eds., *Opening the Field of Practical Theology: An Introduction* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2014) might serve as orientation to the breadth of the field.

19. Richard Osmer, “Empirical Practical Theology,” in *Opening the Field of Practical Theology: An Introduction*, ed. Kathleen A. Cahalan and Gordon S. Mikoski (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 61–77.

the poor. Empirical reasoning is coupled with social theory, creating a particular vision and task for the practical theologian.

Third, Osmer identifies a trajectory that finds linkages with virtue ethics or neo-Aristotelian thought. The significant influence in this trajectory comes from moral philosophy and the emphasis on acquisition of virtue through practices. Thus this approach to practical theology pays particular attention to the practices of community and explores how practices shape belief. Empirical reason is highly valued here but often practical theologians within this trajectory are keenly attuned to qualitative processes and to the lived experience of communal practices.

Fourth, Osmer presents what he calls the confessional trajectory. This trajectory finds a dominant influence in the work of Karl Barth where the focus is on the mission and witness of the church. Practical theologians, as they engage the lived experience, give a priority to Scripture and tradition. Human experience is important because it is where God's revelatory work is expressed and observed.

Osmer's four categories demonstrate a breadth of understanding and practice regarding practical theology. For ministers and practical theologians the challenge is how to appropriate Schleiermacher's categories within the concreteness of human experience within a particular context. Add to that a breadth of understandings about divine, or how God is at work in human experience. What you have then is quite a nuanced set of challenges.

Having said that, what might be said about practical theology? How do I navigate my way to Nineveh? My assumption is that practical theology is undergirded by the conviction that the Christian faith is primarily about an embodied, communal way of life in relationship with the triune God who creates, redeems, and sustains. That way of living is constantly shaped by its connection to God's will through Scripture and tradition. Such a connection is dynamic and fluid as God's actions and human action engage with one another. It is in that set of relations between God's action, the witness of Scripture, the legacy of tradition, and contemporary experience that practical theology finds its work.²⁰

Significantly, what gives shape to this set of interactions is the primary work of God—past, present, future. Ray Anderson is helpful here: "All ministry is first of all God's ministry. Every act of God, even that of creation, is the ministry of God. God's ministry of Word and deed breaks the silence and ends all speculation about whether or not there is a God and of how deity might be disposed toward us."²¹

So it is possible to say that practical theology is another way of talking about discipleship. Paying attention to God's work and presence in lived experience is the environment of the practical theologian. Discipleship—following Jesus—means paying attention to not only our beliefs but also to the way in which we live out those beliefs.²² The vitality of the disciple rests in the doing, not in what is said that we will do or in what we say we believe. Practical theology is concerned with the same concerns as discipleship—with living the Christian faith. To say it another way, practical theology is the real-life practice of theology, the reality of living one's theology.

Thus practical theology takes shape in three distinct ways:

- (1) Practical theology is research into communities of faith: what does discipleship look like?
- (2) Practical theology is witness to God's own practice of ministry: how do the people of God faithfully embody God's mission?
- (3) Practical theology pays attention to praxis: what are intentional life-giving practices for disciples?

20. Swinton and Mowat say it this way: "Practical theology therefore finds itself located within the uneasy but critical tension between the script of revelation given to us in Christ and formulated historically within Scripture, doctrine and tradition, and the continuing innovative performance of the gospel as it is embodied and enacted in the life and practices of the Church as they interact with life and practices of the world." John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (London: SCM Press, 2006), 5.

21. Ray S. Anderson, *The Soul of Ministry: Forming Leaders for God's People* (Westminster: John Knox Press, 1997), 5.

22. Eric Stoddart makes a similar point in a recent book *Advancing Practical Theology: Critical Discipleship in Disturbing Times* (SCM Press, 2014). He argues that practical theology is necessary for discipleship. My argument is that discipleship is practical theology.

Conclusion

It may seem like a long way from Tarshish or Nineveh or Schleiermacher but actually I think that they are quite close. Though ministry is messy, the foundations of discipleship and practical theology are bound up with each other—a lot like the roots, trunk, and branches of Schleiermacher's tree. The attentive minister is really an attentive disciple, paying attention to the ministry of God in the varied contexts of life. And in those varied contexts, the practical theologian continually looks for the intersections of Scripture, tradition, and lived experience to point the way.

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