

THE WILEY BLACKWELL COMPANION TO

PRACTICAL THEOLOGY



EDITED BY

Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore

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To Mark, for *hesed* through thick and thin

*

To those who have inspired the work of practical theology and to those who now join
in the venture of capturing, characterizing, and transforming faith in action

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INTRODUCTION

The Contributions of Practical Theology

Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore

The main intent of *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology* is to review and appraise practical theology as a major area of Christian study and practice. As with other books in the Wiley-Blackwell Companions series, it provides an introduction to and an overview of key developments, themes, methods, and future directions. More particular to practical theology, it reflects the substantial intellectual and institutional growth of the last half-century. In short, the book hopes to organize, scrutinize, and advance a burgeoning area of study and practice.

Intellectual and Institutional Developments

The chance to produce a reference guide to practical theology comes at an opportune time. In the 1950s and 1960s, scholars in the study of theology and religion began to challenge a structure of theological knowing particular to modernity that restricted practical theology to the application of doctrine to pastoral situations (e.g., Hiltner 1948; Boisen 1971; see also Gerkin 1984). Since then, fresh conceptions of practical theology have grown to such an extent that there is a serious need to clarify its emerging uses and contributions.

Several factors have fostered this growth. Among the intellectual developments in the academy at large, early twentieth-century psychology demonstrated the value of close study of the “living human document” as a valid “text” for theological study, comparable to traditional texts of scripture and doctrine. Education in professions such as medicine, nursing, and social work underscored the role of supervised clinical experience and case studies in learning. Growth in other social sciences, such as sociology and anthropology, confirmed the value of fieldwork and offered new empirical means to study social problems, culminating most recently in the widespread use of ethnography by scholars in many disciplines. These social sciences provided not only

methodological reorientation, but also fresh readings of human behavior. Throughout this time, influential and diverse scholars in philosophy and social and political theory such as Jürgen Habermas (1971), Clifford Geertz (1973), Stephen Toulmin (1976), Pierre Bourdieu (1977), Alasdair MacIntyre (1985), and Paul Ricoeur (1991) turned to practice with new interest. These scholars challenged, in different ways, conventional dichotomies between theory and practice (mind and body, explanatory and interpretive science, academic and everyday knowing, etc.) and drew new connections between thinking, being, and doing. The turn to practice and daily life as a site where knowledge accrues also reflected the influence of critical theorists in the Frankfurt School who debated modern conceptions of knowledge and transformation, philosophers of education, such as Paulo Freire (1970), who promoted new politics and pedagogies of liberation, as well as postmodern theorists, Michel Foucault (1972) in particular, who showed how knowledge is connected with power.

These developments affected educators and scholars in professions such as law, medicine, nursing, and ministry as well as directors of endowed foundations such as Carnegie and Lilly who began to question *theoria* or objective theoretical knowledge (knowledge for its own sake alone) as the best means to learning a professional practice (e.g., Sullivan and Rosin 2008). The expert practitioner in the professions possesses a kind of wisdom that escapes the quantifiable, technical, rule-bound restrictions of theory alone (e.g., Dreyfus and Dreyfus 1986; Benner 2004). *Phronesis* or practical knowledge, a term that appears frequently in the early 1980s revival of practical theology, now appears across a range of professions as the kind of intelligence or knowledge that professional and college students need and that professional schools and colleges should cultivate (e.g., Shulman 2004; Schwartz and Sharpe 2010).

Intellectual influences internal to religion and theology proper also contributed to practical theology's expansion and make today an auspicious time for reassessment. Mid-century European political theology and Latin American liberation theology asserted the significance of "first-order" theology in grassroots communities and the political character of all discourse (e.g., Gutiérrez 1973; Segundo 1976; Metz 1980), leading to a plethora of liberation theologies all returning to context and experience as primary sources of knowing. Correlation emerged as a neo-orthodox and liberal theological answer to quandaries about how to relate doctrine and modern life (Tillich 1951; Tracy 1975) and soon became a favorite method among scholars with practical theological inclinations. In the 1980s leading researchers in several theological disciplines gathered and published collected works criticizing practical theology's restriction to a tiny corner of the academy and offering new interpretations of its role (e.g., Browning 1983; Poling and Miller 1985; Forrester 1990; Ballard 1986). This revitalization occurred on a worldwide scale with single-authored books in countries such as Germany (e.g., Mette 1980), the Netherlands (e.g., van der Ven 1993), England (e.g., Ballard and Pritchard 1996), Canada (e.g., Viau 1993), and the United States (Browning 1991; Groome 1991). Gradually the case study of the 1960s shifted to congregational studies, an emerging discipline in its own right that uses social science methods to uncover concrete dynamics of faith within religious communities (e.g., Hopewell 1987; Ammerman et al. 1998). *Practice* became a compelling term and subject of study, partly inspired by the leadership and vision of practical theologian and vice president of reli-

gion at Lilly Endowment, Inc. Craig Dykstra. His desire to revitalize the church and his redefinition of *practice* as a socially and historically rich pattern of engagement that forms persons, communities, and faith led to a wide variety of influential projects and reoriented the discussion in practical theology (Dykstra 1991). Other scholars argued that theology is sustained through religious community and narrative, not through propositions or universal experience (e.g., Frei 1974; Lindbeck 1984), and that pastoral situations and church theology should have a closer connection (e.g., Hauerwas 1981; Charry 1997). Even though this latter relationship became increasingly strained with the Enlightenment and the construction of the modern university, Christian theology and doctrine have evolved over the centuries directly out of pastoral practice. Practical problems spark reflection on ecclesial and theological issues. Sources in premodernity that engage theology in practice therefore elicited renewed interest.

In recent years, as those in philosophy and the social sciences sought new ways to engage practice, scholars traditionally housed in separate disciplines in theological and religious study took new interest in lived religion, ordinary theology, and popular culture, with the allure of ethnography a notable example of a method that crossed disciplines (e.g., Fulkerson 2007; Moschella 2008; Scharen and Vigen 2011). The turn to practice (and the desire to shape it) began to erase markers of difference between previously distinct areas, such as systematic and practical theology, ethics, sociology of religion, and even church history and religious studies (e.g., Hall 1997; Marsh 1997; Volf and Bass 2002; Orsi 2005; Maffly-Kipp et al. 2006; Ammerman 2007; Fulkerson 2007). In short, a wide-ranging number of intellectual developments inside and outside religious and theological studies – too many to name and describe in detail – intersected to generate fresh interest in practice, the study of practice, and the pursuit of improved pedagogical strategies for cultivating practical knowledge.

Institutional developments have accompanied this growth in scholarship. Over the last several decades, those in practical theological subdisciplines, such as preaching and pastoral care, established academic societies to advance their specialties. More comprehensive national and international societies in practical theology were formed in the 1980s and 1990s to strengthen common aims across subdisciplines and to extend practical theology as a method to other areas of the theological curriculum. Publication accompanied the increase in scholarly meetings, leading to the creation of national and international journals in subdisciplines and in practical theology as a whole, with the *International Journal of Practical Theology* a leading example. Five years ago, the largest academic society of the study of religion in North America, the American Academy of Religion, approved the creation of a new program unit, a Practical Theology Group, signaling new receptivity in the academy to the study of living religious traditions and pastoral practice. During this same time, newly funded projects on lived religion, material religion, everyday religion, and religious practices sprouted up in religion departments and divinity schools. Innovative doctoral programs in practical theology and religious practices have also been founded at major institutions, such as the Doctor of Practical Theology at the universities of Manchester, Birmingham, and Chester in Britain, the Program in Theology and Practice at Vanderbilt University in the United States, and the Graduate School of Practical Theology in Icheon, Korea. In other words, these trends were worldwide, engaging people from North, Central, and South America,

Europe, Africa, the Pacific, and Asia (see Ackermann and Bons-Storm 1998; Schweitzer and van der Ven 1999).

In short, in a variety of different settings over the past half-century people have sought to reconfigure the relationship of theory and practice and to understand the value of practical knowledge and lived religion in ministerial study, in the study of religion and theology, and in the wider public. Few publications in practical theology have tried to mark this progress. Many previous overview books have had a homogeneous authorship and a largely intradisciplinary audience. A more diverse representation of voices and a wider audience are now called for. Pre-1950 views of practical theology not only restricted research and teaching in practical theology to pastoral application. They distorted other areas of knowledge, such as historical and systematic theology, as if they concern only theory in abstraction from practice. Such views also perpetuated the misconception that people of faith outside the academy do not practice or produce theology and that theological claims and activities have little to do with public life. Even the 1980s proponents of practical theology perpetuated doubts in their early writings as to whether practical theology actually constitutes an academic discipline or has relevance as such across the curriculum and beyond the academy (e.g., Farley 1987: 1; van der Ven 1999: 323; Lee 2003: 171; Burck and Hunter 2005: 867).

Developments in the last three decades contest such views, calm the doubts, and reveal practical theology's contributions. Participants in the discussion have changed and grown. New views of practical theology have implications not only for the discipline itself but also for other academic areas and for ministerial practice, religious communities, and the public at large. This book, therefore, reaps the benefits of practical theology's efforts in recent decades to grapple with theology's dynamic character in the midst of faith and ministry and to broaden the scope of theology in general.

The General Shape of the Volume

The layout of the book is based on a recent four-part definition of practical theology I developed for an entry in the *Encyclopedia of Religion in America*. My articulation of this definition in turn rests on the shoulders of colleagues in two major projects with which I have been involved in the past decade. I have had, in essence, the good fortune of a virtual consulting committee. The book's organization owes much to the grace and wisdom of good colleagues and supporting institutions.

Developing a more succinct yet expansive definition of practical theology is one of the more arduous but rewarding tasks that arose almost inevitably for me as a result of two involvements. In 2003–2004, on behalf of the Graduate Department of Religion at Vanderbilt University, I co-chaired a planning grant, "Teaching for Ministry," funded by Lilly Endowment, Inc., aimed at creating a new Ph.D. program to prepare students for seminary teaching. An interdisciplinary group of faculty met biweekly for the academic year, reading literature in practical theology and theological education, listening to invited experts, and talking about components of a new program.

There were times that year and over the years since our department received a grant for a novel Ph.D. curriculum in Theology and Practice when I tired of hearing colleagues and newly admitted students ask, “What is practical theology *anyway*?” This is not a simple question. Practical theology is not an easily defined category.

The sheer difficulty of definition, however, does not mean practical theology is an invalid or ill-conceived enterprise. Rather it underscores its complex and extended responsibilities. Practical theology itself is multivalent. It appears in a broad array of spaces and places. Eventually I articulated a more thorough answer, greatly helped by a second experience – participation in a consultation on Practical Theology and Christian Ministry that began in 2003, also funded by Lilly. It gathered a group of about twenty scholars and ministers from a variety of disciplines and traditions a couple times a year for several years. Its most obvious outcome was an edited book, *For Life Abundant: Practical Theology, Theological Education, and Christian Ministry* (Bass and Dykstra 2008).

As important for me as the publication of that volume, our work together changed my understanding of practical theology in two fundamental ways. Discussing each other’s research, syllabi, and accounts of ministry reoriented my view of practical theology’s aim. Disciplinary expertise is always highly valued. But its ultimate aim lies beyond disciplinary concerns in the pursuit of an embodied Christian faith. Second and related to this, I gained a clearer picture of the multivalent nature of practical theology. Practical theology as a term refers to at least four distinct enterprises with different audiences and objectives, the two just named: it is a *discipline* among scholars and an *activity of faith* among believers. And it has two other common uses: it is a *method* for studying theology in practice and it is a *curricular area* of subdisciplines in the seminary.

To state these four uses again in slightly different order, moving from practical theology’s concrete embodiment to its specialized use, practical theology refers to an *activity* of believers seeking to sustain a life of reflective faith in the everyday, a *method* or way of understanding or analyzing theology in practice used by religious leaders and by teachers and students across the theological curriculum, a *curricular area* in theological education focused on ministerial practice and subspecialties, and, finally, an *academic discipline* pursued by a smaller subset of scholars to support and sustain these first three enterprises. Each understanding points to different spatial locations, from *daily life* to *library* and *fieldwork* to *classroom*, *congregation*, and *community*, and, finally, to *academic guild* and *global context*. The four understandings are connected and interdependent, not mutually exclusive, however, and reflect the range and complexity of practical theology today.

One benefit of this fourfold definition is its descriptive rather than prescriptive intent. In my entry for the *Encyclopedia*, I try to describe the varying contexts and ways people commonly use the term. Differentiating the various uses helps straighten out the confusion when people use the same term for equally valuable but different purposes. I also try to distinguish its use in different countries and religious traditions as well as its connection to other disciplinary areas, such as religious studies and systematic theology. Most British authors, for example, see *pastoral* and *practical* theology as fairly interchangeable, with increasing preference for *practical theology* as it has acquired wider recognition as a discipline that points beyond the Christian pastorate (e.g.,

Pattison and Woodward 2000: 1–3). The Roman Catholic tradition often uses both terms to refer to various aspects of pastoral ministry rather than academic disciplines. There are, of course, twentieth-century Catholic advocates for the creation of practical theology as a discipline, such as Karl Rahner (1972) and more recently Kathleen Cahalan (2009, 2010). Yet, as Cahalan points out, the Catholic Church and its educational institutions currently lack the infrastructure to support this development.

I argue in this book and elsewhere that we need to take greater care in distinguishing between *practical theology* and *pastoral theology* (see Miller-McLemore 2010b). Since the mid-1950s and more so today, people use these terms in confusing and conflated ways. Failure to use the terms with sufficient clarity risks missing one of practical theology's distinctive contributions as that discipline most concerned with mediating and integrating knowledge within theological education and between seminary, congregation, and wider society. We also lose sight of the distinctive resources of twentieth-century pastoral theology as developed in the United States in rigorous conversation with modern psychoanalytic theory and psychology. Whereas practical theology is integrative, concerned with broader issues of ministry, discipleship, and formation, pastoral theology is person- and pathos-centered and focused on the activity of care. The blurring of pastoral and practical theology also pushes to the periphery other valuable practical theological subdisciplines, such as religious education and preaching, which have their own distinctive contributions. So, even though pastoral theology and practical theology share a common interest in lived experience, they are not as interchangeable now as in other periods, places, and traditions. In fact, I see value in accentuating rather than glossing over the distinctions.¹ Hence, this book focuses on practical theology as a broader enterprise distinct from pastoral theology. It situates pastoral theology as one among many valued subdisciplines within practical theology.

The Specific Design

To clarify the growing breadth and depth of practical theology, therefore, the book is organized around four ways in which the term *practical theology* gets used. The titles of the book's four major parts include the brief definition or use of practical theology as the main heading (way of life, method, curriculum, discipline), a subtitle that amplifies this definition (shaping faith among believers, studying theology in practice, educating for ministry, and defining content and method), and a final clause that identifies the primary context in which each definition commonly operates.

Because the uses of the term *practical theology* are both distinctive and interconnected, these four parts are self-contained and yet do not stand alone. Thus, methods in Part II, for example, often have a close connection to specific subdisciplines in Part III (e.g., case study method and pastoral care; ritual theory and worship). Many chap-

¹I situate my own work in pastoral theology within practical theology because of the latter's commitment to wider curricular and ministerial concerns. But I remain a pastoral theologian at heart, appreciative of its appropriation of psychology as a key means to comprehending what matters most to individuals and their personal suffering and care.

ters in Part IV on the discipline also discuss curricular developments in the subdisciplines, the focus of Part III. Themes in Part I, such as suffering and blessing, have greater or lesser prominence in various subdisciplines in Part III and in certain traditions and geographic regions in Part IV. And so on.

Way of life: Shaping faith among believers in home and society (Part I)

By beginning with constitutive *activities* of daily life, the book intentionally subverts the usual order of affairs in practical theology overviews and in other volumes in the Companions series. Rather than starting with the discipline of practical theology, the book starts with the particular because that is a basic premise of practical theological knowing. Methodologically practical theology begins with the concrete and local. However, this focus on the particular is not just a methodological choice. It also reminds practical theologians of the more comprehensive aim of their work. Practical theology either has relevance for everyday faith and life or it has little meaning at all.

These constitutive activities of daily life are also sites where faith breaks down and people struggle. Theological deliberation arises when problems that demand practical reasoning occur (Browning 1991: 5–6). Or, as Kathryn Tanner observes, it arises “to meet problems that Christian practices, being what they are, inevitably generate” (2002: 228). Moreover, as the editors of a book on practice in Protestant history comment, “Christian practice in America has always presented a series of quandaries rather than a stable set of ingredients” (Maffly-Kipp et al. 2006: viii).

Part I is not centered on “problems,” however, even though many practical theologians would recognize this approach to the subject more readily. Practical theologians often ask what is hurting or what is not working, and how people should respond. Problems like families, illness, poverty, and violence have focused our attention, made us develop new concepts, and reshaped our methods.

The initial chapters shift the focus slightly. They retain an interest in problems but embed this within an exploration of activities of faith in their encounter with the challenge of everyday embodiment. Part I offers rich case studies, so to speak, of practical theology as it develops in the midst of ordinary life circumstances. Distinct from the existential tradition where religious meaning emerges “beyond the everyday” (Tracy 1975: 106) or at opposite ends of the human spectrum (from illness and anxiety on the one hand to joy and ecstatic love on the other), the activities chosen in Part I exemplify the appearance of religious meaning in the mundane. The chapters are illustrative, therefore, not comprehensive. Suffering, healing, playing, eating, loving, consuming, and blessing were chosen not because they are unique but because they figure prominently for some people as sites of religious formation and transformation. They provide instances of what Peter Berger once called “prototypical human gestures to the transcendent” (1969: 14). But they are not the only such gestures. The hope is that the chosen sites, selected from an almost unlimited range of material situations where faith concerns arise, will give readers a generative taste of what an activity-oriented view of practical theology looks like. The chapters elicit and point toward other places and ways in which faith is active in practical theological knowing.

The use of gerunds captures something important about Part I and practical theology more generally. In English, gerunds are words that end with *-ing* and look like verbs but function as nouns. That is, they are nouns (words that name persons, places, ideas, etc.) that contain action; they are verbs used as nouns. In English grammar they are subjects, direct objects, indirect objects. But they tilt toward action in their very verb-like composition. Children learn nouns first. But verbs are often the most important and powerful part of a sentence. Some say the Jewish and Christian God is more verb- than noun-like. Several biblical scholars translate God's answer to Moses' request for God's name in Exodus 3:14, YHWH, as "I am who I am *becoming*" rather than the etymology of YHWH, "I am who I am." In either case, YHWH is a "verbal form," according to the annotated commentary in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. It "does not indicate God's eternal being but God's action and presence in historical affairs" (Metzger and Murphy 1991: 72). Similarly, practical theology is also verb-like. However, rather than leaping to huge claims about God's nature and practical theological parallels (e.g., practical theology is God-like or closer to God), it is better to say simply that practical theology is like a gerund. It has both nominal and verbal qualities. Part I reflects this dual capacity. Authors reflect on their subject as noun *and* verb, subject *and* action.

Although some of the chapters, such as those on loving or suffering, might suggest an individual focus and action, each practice has critical connections to ecclesial and social contexts and public theology. Eating, for instance, is a personal act with great importance in the church and serious ecological and political ramifications. So these activities of faith cross over from personal to public spheres. Each instance has personal *and* social or communal dimensions. Authors vary in the extent to which they attend to intersections between persons and wider culture. They also vary in the extent to which they make their practical theological method and content explicit. Chapters in Part I were challenging, perhaps more so than other chapters, because the genre is still unusual. It cannot be measured by typical academic standards. Even with varying means and style, however, each author adheres closely to the main intent of Part I: to display or show practical theology at work in the world.

Discipline: Defining history and context in guild and global setting (Part IV)

Before commenting on the two middle sections of the book, I want to turn to the final part. The book concludes where some scholars and students may prefer to start, with the contextual and historical developments within the *discipline*. Although the book moves intentionally from the most general usage of *practical theology* (Part I) to the most particular (Part IV), Part IV will have greater meaning for one primary audience – those in educational institutions where debates over practical theology as an intellectual endeavor find their most lively context. Consequently, I want to discuss practical theology's most specialized meaning next.

Part IV insists that practical theology is more than a method (Part II) or a curricular area (Part III). It has become a necessary and a valuable scholarly enterprise in its own right whose purpose depends (ironically, paradoxically, ideally, eschatologically?) on its

life beyond the academy (Part I). That is, practical theology's academic importance rests on its value for, or its relationship to, the life of everyday faith.

A few years ago, as the discipline struggled to establish itself, Part IV might have been the whole book. It is subdivided into sections on prominent issues, regional developments, and Christian traditions. It begins with an exploration of several challenges particular to the modern, postmodern, and postcolonial context. Isolating these issues (race, gender, globalization, economics, disability, religious pluralism) and the discriminations they spawn (racism, sexism, heterosexism, colonialism, classism, ableism, disablism, Christocentrism) in distinct chapters should not be misinterpreted. One chapter does not take care of each problem. Nor is the burden of transformation placed solely on authors who self-identify with an oppressed group. The book and the selection of authors as a whole argue against ghettoizing women and people of color as spokespersons on issues like race or gender while leaving white men to define the field. Authors of chapters in Parts I, II, and III have also had to attend to these issues. At the same time, while these issues appear in other chapters and should never be relegated to a marginal place in the book, they deserved special attention from scholars uniquely positioned to consider them. In contrast to Part I, the issues selected are not open-ended or illustrative. Each one was chosen specifically because it has had a huge and destructive impact on human society and on individuals. Heightened consciousness about this is a chief characteristic of modernity and postmodernity. As a quintessentially modern discipline invested in everyday religion, practical theology has been acutely attentive to these issues. The best people to speak to them are often scholars with immediate experience of the problems.

Part IV also investigates practical theology in different global contexts and Christian traditions. Sometimes when scholars use the term *practical theology* in international meetings and publications we think we are talking about the same enterprise when we are not. Part IV makes the differences and the commonalities more apparent. Scholarship and teaching in the discipline have evolved differently in each context depending on social factors such as practical theology's proximity to or distance from the church, the nature of church-state relationships, the relationship between theological (or seminary) and university education, the source of financial support for theological education (church, state, foundations, etc.), and the degree of secularization, religiosity, and religious and ethnic diversity unique to each country. It may be an interesting project for readers to take any one of these factors and run it across the chapters in the final two sections as a lens for analysis.

The middle section of Part IV does not attempt to cover international developments in a comprehensive fashion. It is focused on hot spots or places where practical theological scholarship has flourished worldwide, whether regions, countries, or continents. In only two cases are entire continents covered – Europe (although Britain has its own chapter) and Australia and Oceania. It may be that both these areas had slightly greater cohesion as the historically oldest and newest sites of disciplinary development respectively. But even here it quickly becomes evident that internal differences abound, and areas such as Scandinavia or the diverse countries in the southwestern Pacific deserve their own chapters. Even though such coverage was not feasible, the chapters on Europe and Oceania at least provide an excellent record of events in two important world

regions. In cases such as Africa, the Americas, and Asia it is even harder to speak for the whole. I learned this readily through conversation with colleagues. For example, a theologian who taught for several years in Japan remarked, "Beyond the often perfunctory participation in groups like the North East Asia Association of Accredited Theological Schools, theologians in these countries do not have a lot of contact with each other. Therefore, if you really intend to do a section called East Asia, you may have to invite one representative from each country." Similarly, colleagues in South Africa pointed out that Africa contains at least five distinct regions (northern, western, eastern, central, southern). The book only covers two areas – the region of West Africa (and Nigeria in particular) and the Republic of South Africa.

In a similar fashion, the final section on denominational or Christian traditions represents historical and contemporary places where theologians and scholars have devoted energy to conceptualizing practical theology. This section is obviously only a beginning. Like the middle section on global developments, there was also the challenge of how wide or narrow to focus. This section includes and yet partly neglects specific traditions such as Lutheranism or Southern Baptists under broader categories such as mainline and evangelical Protestantism. It does not include some traditions where practical theology as a discipline has had less prominence, such as Eastern Orthodoxy.

Fortunately the *International Journal of Practical Theology* regularly features commissioned articles on developments in particular countries. On this topic and more generally, the journal stands in as a wonderful supplement to the *Companion*. I hope other publications address the much needed conversation across diverse locations, traditions, and languages. One growing edge for practical theology as a discipline in North America and Europe is greater understanding of what is happening among our French and Spanish neighbors. Only one chapter on French Canada points to the potential conversation here. It is some solace that many volumes in the Companions series, such as the companions to political theology, modern theology, postmodern theology, and Christian ethics, do not have sections on worldwide developments at all and pay scant attention to what is happening in the southern and eastern hemispheres, with few authors outside the United States. This raises an interesting question: Why has practical theology, with this *Companion* as illustrative, displayed international interests, perhaps more than other disciplines?

Method: Studying theology in practice in library and field (Part II)

Between the bookends of life of faith and academic discipline lie two other places where practical theology plays significant roles. Part II offers an array of *methods* or ways in which scholars and ministers have analyzed the dynamics of theology and faith in practice. Although none of these methods is unique to practical theology, practical theologians have had significant interest in their development and use as a means to connect theory and practice in academy, church, and society. These methods provide a way to understand the practice or experience of faith and to affect its transformation. In each chapter, authors describe the method, its development and particular manifestations in practical theology, and its wider ecclesial and public relevance.

In a strict sense, these are *methods of research* that scholars employ to study embodied theologies. To understand theology in practice and to make religious experience and ministry a text for study and discernment is actually one of practical theology's most significant contributions to the academy. Part II should prove especially helpful to readers who want to bridge the academic study of theology and the practice of faith and ministry not only in research but also in teaching. This includes faculty, ministers, and students in contextual education. It also includes faculty and students involved in introductory and culminating exercises in ministerial degree programs (e.g., the senior project in the master of divinity, the thesis in the doctorate of ministry, the introductory course for both degrees). Faculty members sometimes lack the intellectual and ministerial background to support the kind of integration and theological fluency required of students at critical moments of the curriculum, such as field education and senior seminar. This section provides a plethora of exemplary methods for aiding faculty and students in the analysis of theology in practice.

These methods comprise more than a scholarly exercise, however. They are also *methods of pastoral practice*. That is, practical theologians appreciate them because they are also useful in ministry. They are methods for understanding and shaping theology and faith in homes, congregations, hospitals, social institutions, and so forth. In fact, although they have certainly been refined within the academy, they often originate in the clinic (e.g., case studies), congregation (e.g., congregational studies), field (e.g., ethnography), and political realm (e.g., social policy analysis). They also have relevance beyond theological education because practical theologians recognize that an educational degree is only one instantiation in a much longer trajectory of formation that shapes people for ministry and discipleship. Although they are taught explicitly in theological schools, there is hope that those who learn these practical theological methods will continue to find them useful within ministerial and social contexts. Practical theologians understand method as a means to ecclesial and social change. In fact, a distinctively practical theological objective of method is to have a transforming influence on religious faith in congregations and society.

The variety of methods has grown beyond originating schools of thought in the 1980s that saw the options as largely threefold – hermeneutical, empirical, and aesthetic. The order of chapters in Part II follows a very rough chronology of the appearance and use of particular methods in practical theology. Case study and psychological theory were among the first means adopted to get closer to the “living document.” Hermeneutics and empirical quantitative research also have a long legacy. The use of practice theory, ethnography, action theory, and participatory action research are relatively new ventures. Some methods, such as social policy analysis, poetics, and use of scripture, have been widely used but rarely articulated and developed as methods. Other methods such as emancipatory and womanist theory have been in the air we breathe, so to speak, shaping all fields. These and other methods, such as ritual theory, congregational studies, and narrative approaches, have become major areas of research or disciplines in their own right. Some methods are used more regularly by particular subdisciplines within practical theology. The use of ritual theory by those in worship and liturgical studies is a good example, although pastoral care and religious education also use ritual theory to understand transitional processes in human development.

Therefore, none of the methods is restricted to one disciplinary area, and scholars and ministers usually use multiple methods in their work.

So why does method (Part II) come before curriculum (Part III) if many countries and scholars still equate practical theology with its historical designation in the traditional nineteenth-century “theological encyclopedia” as a third or fourth area of the curriculum (alongside biblical, historical, and systematic theology)? This latter organizing schema, which some say has outlived its usefulness, still strongly shapes perception of the term *practical theology* and pervades our institutional lives. Doesn’t Part III, therefore, have priority over Part II?

Putting method ahead of curriculum is partly related to developments in the United States where interest in methods for studying religion and theology in practice has spread across all theological disciplines. But the decision is not just situation-dependent. It has a theoretical rationale. The *Companion* moves from the most expansive to the most focused use of the term. Part II comes before Part III precisely because it represents a broader reach and definition for practical theology. The methods in Part II are not just methods for subdisciplines like religious education and leadership. Practical theology designates a method or way of doing theology that has relevance to all areas of study in theological education. Practical theology as method is one place where practical theology has begun to be used by people outside the narrower designations of practical theology as either a curricular area or a discipline. Part II vividly reflects practical theology’s usefulness even though all three parts do this in some way.

Part II does not aim at inclusive coverage, nor are the methods comparable to each other or of the same order and magnitude. Some methods, such as phenomenology and aesthetics, are absent from this collection but are partially included in related chapters on narrative method, ritual theory, and poetics. There are several chapters on different kinds of qualitative method – ethnography, participant action research, case study – that some people group collectively as qualitative research (e.g., Swinton and Mowat 2006). The term *ethnography* itself gets used in varying ways. For some, it means quasi-objective research with interviews, questionnaires, and participant observation. For others, it means immersion in a community on an extended basis as a member.

There is also variation between chapters that focus on *method* and those that focus on *theory*. That is, some chapters provide specific instruction on “how to” study practice. Others focus more on “knowing that” or the ideas that change how one thinks about practice (e.g., feminist theory, womanist theory, practice theory, etc.). In their book on qualitative research, John Swinton and Harriet Mowat use the word *methodology* rather than theory to distinguish the general interpretive assumptions and framework behind a method from the *method* itself (2006: 74–75). In several cases I did, in fact, ask authors to attend to “theory” even though I also wanted reflection on how this theory shapes the study of theology and practice, and even on how someone might use it. This is a very slight difference of emphasis but it is worth noting. This variation came to my own attention most acutely in reading Sally Brown’s chapter on hermeneutical theory where she acknowledges a debate in its history about whether it is a *method* or a *perspective*. The relationship between theory and method is another question readers might use as an angle for critical reading of Part II.

Curriculum: Educating for ministry and faith in classroom, congregation, and community (Part III)

As both Parts II and IV suggest, practical theology still has a critical place in the theological *curriculum*. Unfortunately, all the concern in practical theology in the last few decades about the connection of theory and practice has led to a neglect of its important work in the subdisciplines. The 1980s revival of practical theology was partly based on a critique of the *clerical paradigm*, or the focus on training in the skills of ministry as a reprehensible restriction of theological education's proper aim. This led many people to perceive the conventional ministerial subdisciplines, such as preaching and evangelism, as too clerically and narrowly oriented. These subdisciplines have not disappeared, however. In fact, the decades since the 1980s have proven the value of ministerial formation when particular techniques and skills are embedded within a richer theological understanding of ministry and discipleship. Thus, Part III argues that practical theology retains a particular responsibility for specific acts of ministry, such as speaking, caring, teaching, leading, worshipping, praying, and so on, and their connections with one another. Chapters vary as to whether they focus primarily on the ministerial practice at hand or on the practice of the discipline that studies and teaches that practice (again, a slight but an important difference). Some authors focus on teaching whereas others emphasize the development of research within the subdiscipline. But all authors were asked to consider their subdiscipline in relationship to practical theology as a shared endeavor.

Hence, Part III does not stop with subdisciplinary areas traditionally equated with practical theology narrowly defined. The book suggests instead that all curricular areas of theological education are best taught when understood as dimensions of a wider practical theological enterprise. Contrary to pre-1950s views that foisted ministerial formation on practical theology as only one small part of theological education and a minor concern at that, other areas in the theological school, such as Bible, history, and systematic theology, must consider how their particular knowledge pertains to practical theology and practices of ministry and faith. The use of materials from other disciplines has largely been unidirectional, from Bible, history, and systematic theology to practical theology. This book argues for greater multidirectional curricular, academic, and ministerial movement.

So Part III includes chapters on biblical, historical, and systematic theology as well as chapters on contextual education and integration and two disciplines many scholars see as fundamentally practical, even if not always directly related to ministerial arts – ethics and spirituality. To varying degrees, authors frame their understanding of a particular curricular area in relationship to the demands and aims of practical theology as a more encompassing enterprise. They also consider how their discipline relates to other areas and the church broadly defined. In actuality, none of these curricular areas has much meaning unless they are related to practices in which people in congregations and the wider community also participate (see Witvliet 2008: 118–120). For this reason, authors in Part III were also invited to explore how activities such as religious leadership or pastoral care are shared by the laity and by people involved in leadership and care in society at large. Because it is hard to draw such a connection between subdisciplines and wider participation, this receives the least amount of attention.

Shared Understandings

Contributors were asked to consider their own particular topic in light of this fourfold framework. In addition, each person brought her or his own unique definition. Nonetheless, there are common understandings of practical theology that most authors share and that stand behind the four divergent uses of practical theology that structure the book. In all four parts, practical theology is a general way of doing theology concerned with the embodiment of religious belief in the day-to-day lives of individuals and communities. It engages personal, ecclesial, and social experience to discern the meaning of divine presence and to enable faithful human response.

Practical theology is seldom a systematic enterprise, aimed at the ordering of beliefs about God, the church, or classic texts. More often it is an open-ended, contingent, unfinished grasp or analysis of faith in action. It focuses on the tangible, the local, the concrete, and the embodied. As a result, authors were asked to ground their chapters in case study, concrete illustration, or thick detail. This request presumed adherence to a widespread view of practical theology – that it remains grounded in practice and stays close to life. Practical theology, defined in this way, has also gone by many other names, such as *operative*, *occasional*, and *contextual theology*. Its subject matter is often described through generic words that suggest movement in time and space, such as *action*, *practice*, *praxis*, *experience*, *situation*, *event*, and *performance*. Its subject is also associated with action-oriented religious words, such as *formation*, *transformation*, *discipleship*, *witness*, *ministry*, and *public mission*. It often takes place as a shared, collaborative, communal exercise (e.g., in congregations, colleague groups, professional schools). It depends on knowledge and experience of people outside narrow areas of expertise and specialization.

Finally, in its focus on concrete instances of religious life, its objective is both to understand and to influence religious wisdom or faith in action in congregations and public life more generally. That is, practical theology has a decidedly “strategic” moment or movement, in Don Browning’s words (1991), that discerns the best means and rhetoric in concrete situations. Others, such as Gerben Heitink (1999), depict practical theology as a theory of action mediating Christian faith in church and society. Most agree that at its best it functions as a kind of public theology sensitive to the individual but directed toward the wider social order. A significant part of the field deals with congregational, organizational, and leadership development. Ultimately, practical theology is normatively and eschatologically oriented. It not only describes how people live as people of faith in communities and society. It also considers how they might do so more fully.

Limitations

Given the book’s organization, it is hard to avoid the question of what is left out. There are topics overlooked, senior scholars not included, religions besides Christianity bracketed, and a difficult-to-avoid imperialistic or colonialistic ordering of topics. The