

7-2005

Three Approaches to Practical Theology, Theological Education, and the Church's Ministry

Kathleen A. Cahalan

College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, kcahalan@csbsju.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/sot_pubs

 Part of the [Christianity Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Cahalan, Kathleen A. "Three Approaches to Practical Theology, Theological Education, and the Church's Ministry." *International Journal of Practical Theology*, 9, no. 1 (2005): 64-94. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1515/IJPT.2005.005>.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. It has been accepted for inclusion in School of Theology and Seminary Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@csbsju.edu.

Three Approaches to Practical Theology, Theological Education, and the Church's Ministry

Kathleen A. Cahalan

Introduction: A Renewed Practical Theology*

The decline of mainline Protestantism has been a major impetus for the revitalization of the field of practical theology in North American theological education since the 1980s.¹ This decline has taken place both internally, in terms of the size and vitality of local congregations and denominations, and externally, in terms of the church's influence on culture, public policy, and law.² The situation has drawn church leaders, theologians, and theological educators into conversation on a wide range of questions. How can Christians live and witness their faith within a pluralistic society where Christianity is no longer presumed to be the *de facto* established religion? How can local congregations be communities of vitality and faithfulness in the midst of daily postmodern realities (e.g., shifts in technology, labor, mobility, time, and space)?³ How can seminaries produce leaders and ministers "beyond the clerical paradigm" who will lead post-Christendom congregations and denominations to be communities of faithful disciples and citizens? A common characteristic of all these questions is their practical nature, and it is to a newly conceived practical theology that many theologians have turned for answers.⁴

* This article is a revised version of "The Renewal of Practical Theology, Theological Education, and the Church's Ministry," delivered at the Practical Theology Working Group of the Catholic Theological Society of America in June 2002.

- 1 Catholic theologians have also been attentive to issues in practical theology, but mostly from the vantage point of liberation theology as it has developed in the Latin American context. In the North American context, I would argue that most Catholic thinkers, especially those in theological education and pastoral ministry, have followed the lead of their Protestant colleagues.
- 2 Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion*, Princeton (Princeton University Press) 1988; Wade Clark Roof/William McKinney, *American Mainline Religion. Its Changing Shape and Future*, New Brunswick (Rutgers University Press), 1987.
- 3 Paul Lakeland, *Postmodernity. Christian Identity in a Fragmented Age*, Minneapolis (Eortress Press) 1997, 1-12.
- 4 Edward Earley, *Theologia. The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education*, Philadelphia (Eortress Press) 1983; Don S. Browning, ed., *Practical Theology. The Emerging Field in Theology, Church, and World*, San Francisco (Harper & Row) 1983; James N.

Theological educators began to heed the call for change, and many during the early 1980s were persuaded by the work of Edward Farley, who described the dilemma of practical theology in terms of the “clerical paradigm.” The discipline of practical theology, and hence theological education, had become consumed by the narrow interest of professional preparation for ordained ministers. North American theological schools inherited Schleiermacher’s notion that practical theology is an applied discipline that brought knowledge from historical and philosophical theology to pastoral theology, but not the reverse. Essentially, practical theology had become an “applied” discipline like other professional fields in the university, and as a consequence, in Farley’s opinion, theology had lost its grounding in *habitus* or practical wisdom.⁵

According to Farley, the four-fold paradigm of theological education had run its course by the late twentieth century. The minister’s application of theology in the pastoral situation had proven inadequate in the context of declining mainline Protestantism and increasing secularization. The conversation in the early 1980s among theologians interested in revitalizing practical theology toward Farley’s idea of *habitus* centered on the relationship between theory and practice, theological education for the whole church, and the role of practical theology in relationship to public and social issues.⁶

Broadly speaking, practical theology as it has developed over the past twenty years has attempted to sort out answers to these questions. In fact, the field has grown to such an extent that at least three types or approaches to practical theology can be identified. The three approaches are related in terms of their interests in the practical nature of Christian life, yet distinct in their theological interpretations and methods about how the Christian community should proceed forward in this new age. Furthermore, each approach is distinctive in terms of its understanding of the church’s ministry in post-Christendom North America, and the kind of theological education that is necessary to educate ministers for this changing context. Each approach takes seriously Farley’s critique of

Poling/Donald E. Miller, *Foundations for a Practical Theology of Ministry*, Nashville (Abingdon Press) 1985. Lewis S. Mudge/James N. Poling, eds., *Formation and Reflection. The Promise of Practical Theology*, Philadelphia (Fortress Press) 1987; Barbara G. Wheeler/Edward Farley, eds., *Shifting Boundaries. Contextual Approaches to the Structure of Theological Education*, Louisville (Westminster/John Knox Press) 1991.

5 Farley contends that theology was always considered practical in so far as it was considered a *habitus*, or a disposition of the soul in relationship to God. Theology was a kind of practical knowledge or wisdom about the Christian life that was never purely theoretical. See Farley, *Theologia*; and Edward Farley, *Interpreting Situations. An Inquiry into the Nature of Practical Theology*, in: *Formation*, eds. Mudge/Poling, 2.

6 On practical theology as public theology, see Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society. Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology*, New York (Seabury Press) 1980; David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination. Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism*, New York (Crossroad) 1981.

theological education and interprets *habitus* according to its vision of practical theology. As a way of analyzing the three approaches to practical theology, I will use Paul Lakeland's description of three postmodern options in philosophy and theology. Lakeland's typology provides a helpful framework for understanding the philosophical and strategic approaches of postmodern theology. I turn first to Lakeland's account of the late modern, countermodern, and radical postmodern approaches, and then describe a corresponding approach to each among practical theologians. I will conclude with a discussion and critique of the three approaches.

Practical Theology and Postmodernity

In *Postmodernity: Christian Identity in a Fragmented Age*, Lakeland describes three emergent responses to the crisis of modernity: the late modern, the countermodern, and the radical postmodern.⁷ He points to examples within contemporary philosophy and theology that comprise each of these positions. I would extend his argument by suggesting that these responses are also represented within various approaches to practical theology, theological education, and ministry.

The *late moderns*, according to Lakeland, generally "find the project of modernity unfinished" and are willing to continue exploring the possibility that ethics and politics can be grounded in universal principles or in a "thin" metanarrative. Late moderns, such as Jürgen Habermas and Charles Taylor, have yet to give up on the Enlightenment's quest for formal conditions that define the human subject, though they have each modified Kant's autonomous subject in favor of a "situated subjectivity" that is marked by a dialogical and politically engaged agent. For late moderns, reason's power is modified and constrained not by its own self-imposed critical capacities, but by a community of engaged subjects in dialogue seeking understanding. What is foundational or universal is not necessarily the content but the capacity for conversation and dialogue that moves toward truthful engagement in and with the world.

The countermodern and radical postmodern positions, though substantively and strategically quite different, share one common feature: they reject the modern project as well as any late modern attempt to salvage the Enlightenment project. For both groups, modernity is bankrupt and unable to carry the human family or planet into anything other than complete destruction. For the *countermoderns*, the collapse of modernity is a warrant for recovering the kinds of integrated communities and community-dependent truth claims that (so it is argued) defined worlds of

⁷ Lakeland, *Postmodernity*, 12. I do not have space to defend Lakeland's position. Instead, I am using it as a way of mapping the various theological projects under the umbrella of practical theology.

discourse and action prior to the modern project. For the *true* or *radical postmoderns*, a return to either the premodern or modern past is unacceptable and impossible, since both encompass totalizing discourses that distort, corrupt, and oppress people, cultures, and communities.

Countermoderns look backward in order to look forward. Lakeland identifies two positions as countermodern: the fundamentalist option, and a position that includes both neo-conservatives and post-liberals. Like Lakeland, I am concerned with the neo-conservative/post-liberal variant of countermodernity. Countermoderns are particularly concerned about the impact of ethical relativism and the subsequent loss of religious authority (or authority that appeals to metaphysics) that has traditionally legitimated moral and religious norms and practices. Most often, the enemy is “liberalism,” defined in terms of “unlimited self-autonomy,” that has bequeathed to us a litany of evils: individualism, secular humanism, moral relativism, loss of community, and every social problem that plagues the family. The countermodern project, defined in many respects by Alasdair MacIntyre’s *After Virtue*, is to retrieve values abandoned by the Enlightenment, either through metaphysics or the values and practices of a particular religious and cultural tradition.⁸

While the countermoderns embrace either an “authoritarian religious ethic” or “an Aristotelian ethic of virtue,” radical postmoderns, in Lakeland’s view, replace “ethics with either aesthetics or irony.”⁹ The radical postmodern position, represented by Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Jean-François Lyotard, rejects both the countermodern claim in favor of tradition and the modern quest for universal truth claims. Both share the false attempt to create a totalizing masterpiece of universal truth, human reason, or divine plan. Radical postmoderns critique the attempt by the metanarratives of the West to create “otherness” out of any creature that does not fit the story’s plan. The deconstruction of the most radical of the radical postmoderns is the destruction not only of the West’s metanarrative but even the attempt to form a metanarrative, which is, of course, a hope that the late moderns (e.g., Habermas’s ideal speech situation) and countermoderns maintain.

Each of Lakeland’s three postmodern positions finds a corollary in contemporary practical theology. The late modern position is clearly evident in Don Browning’s proposals for a fundamental practical theology. The countermodern position can be recognized to some extent in the recent work on Christian practices by Dorothy Bass and Craig Dykstra. Radical postmodern perspectives are being explored in a new generation of thinking in praxis-based theologies, in particular liberation, feminist, and contextual theologies. These three approaches to practical theology can

8 Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue. A Study in Moral Theory*, Notre Dame (University of Notre Dame Press) 1981.

9 Lakeland, *Postmodernity*, 28.

be compared in regard to the positions they take on three issues. First, each approach has a particular reading of the postmodern situation based on an analysis of the Enlightenment's impact on Christian thought and practice. Second, each offers constructive proposals to advance the Christian community's attempt to live faithfully in secular post-Christendom. Finally, each advances a model of the church's ministry with corresponding proposals for theological education, which in some cases are being implemented in seminaries and schools of theology in North America.¹⁰

Fundamental Practical Theology: A Late Modern Option

In the mid-1980s, Browning, along with several of his colleagues at the University of Chicago, launched a new doctoral program in practical theology.¹¹ Browning, who had taught at the university for thirty years in the areas of religion, psychology, and ethics, was beginning to extend his work toward conceiving a new model of practical theology. Initially, Browning explored questions about the nature of theology, its practical dimensions, and its relationship to the social sciences and ethics. He found ready conversation partners about the practical nature of knowledge with pragmatic philosophy, the Frankfurt school, and hermeneutical theories advanced by Paul Ricoeur, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Habermas. Since then, Browning has made significant contributions to the methods of practical theology, which is best exemplified in his research on the family.¹² I cite Browning's work as the prevailing late modern option in practical theology for several reasons. Browning embraces a revised correlational method in theology, stated simply as, "Christian theology becomes a critical dialogue between the implicit questions and the explicit answers of the Christian classics and the explicit questions and implicit answers of

10 For example, Browning's model of practical theology has influenced the curriculum at Boston University and Candler School of Theology. The practices material is influencing the curriculum at both Duke Divinity School and Candler School of Theology. Candler has recently introduced a new doctoral program in practical theology and religious practices. Praxis and contextual models shape ministry education at Catholic Theological Union, Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley, Iliff School of Theology, Claremont School of Theology, and Union Seminary in New York.

11 David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order. The New Pluralism in Theology*, New York (Seabury Press) 1975; Tracy, *Analogical*, 47-99. Tracy defines practical theology in terms of a revised correlational method, though he has not employed the method in relationship to practical concerns to the extent that Browning has developed and utilized that method in his work on the family.

12 Don S. Browning and others, *From Culture Wars to Common Ground. Religion and the American Family Debate, The Family, Religion, and Culture Series*, Louisville (Westminster John Knox Press) 1997. Browning serves as the general editor for eleven volumes in this series and has authored numerous articles on the family, most published during the 1990s.

contemporary cultural experiences and practices.”¹³ This method is both philosophical and critical; it begins in faith but moves quickly beyond to the grounds for public conversation and validity. For Browning, “to live and communicate in the pluralistic world in which we live, it must be a faith seeking reasons and a faith determined to articulate itself before both believing and non-believing publics.”¹⁴ The revised correlational method also emphasizes that the task of theology is practical “through and through” in the sense that the practical concerns, questions, and issues of contemporary life drive, motivate, and shape theology at every level.¹⁵

Practical theology begins when secular and religious practices and their meanings are questioned and challenged. The theologian (and pastor) examines the community’s practices in light of its sacred texts and traditions as well as knowledge outside the tradition, particularly knowledge gleaned from the social sciences, in order to form a faithful and substantive response. For Browning, practical theology is the movement from “present theory-laden practice to a retrieval of normative theory-laden practice, to the creation of more critically held theory-laden practices.”¹⁶ The weight of Browning’s project rests on the claim that the tradition bears no more or less weight than other kinds of knowledge. It is an equal partner in the search for truth; if its claims do not pass the test of

13 Don S. Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology. Descriptive and Strategic Proposals*, Minneapolis (Fortress Press) 1991, 46.

14 Don S. Browning, *Integrating the Approaches. A Practical Theology*, in: *Building Effective Ministry. Theory and Practice in the Local Church*, ed. Carl S. Dudley, San Francisco (Harper & Row) 1983, 222. In earlier definitions of pastoral theology, Browning argued that practical theology must be philosophical because ministers (chaplains and therapists) must “articulate their role before various professions and constituencies within the public world.” “It is better to articulate one’s faith assumptions in a more public and philosophical language ... better than lapsing into the jargon of the social sciences as is the case with so many of our pastoral specialists today.” Again, “Pastoral theology should be understood as philosophical reflection on the major themes of the Judeo-Christian tradition with special regard for the implication of these themes for a normative vision of the human life cycle. [...] Pastoral theology must attempt to discern and articulate the relevance to care of both the religious dimension of common experience as well as the explicit faith themes of the historic Judeo-Christian tradition. [...] Pastoral theology should understand itself as an expression of theological ethics, primarily concerned with the religio-ethical norms governing the human life cycle. [...] Pastoral theology should be concerned with specifying the logic, timing, and practical strategies for relating theological-ethical and psychodynamic perspectives on human behavior.” Browning, ed., *Practical*, 191-198.

15 Any claim about practical theology has implications for how theology is defined. For Browning, all theology essentially is practical theology. He defines theology as the “systematic reflection on the historical self-understanding of a particular religious tradition;” Browning, *Fundamental*, 5. The practical turn in theology is directly related to the turn to the practical in contemporary philosophy (*phronesis*, pragmatist, neo-pragmatists). Because these practical philosophies are Browning’s main dialogue partner, *A Fundamental Practical Theology* is a book of “religiously oriented practical philosophy” or a “practical philosophy of religion;” *Ibid.*, 3. Randy L. Maddox, *The Recovery of Theology as Practical Discipline*, in: *Theological Studies* 51, 1990, 650-72.

16 Browning, *Fundamental*, 7.

reasonability, they can and should be refashioned. It is likewise for the social sciences. Browning has long been critical of the *uncritical* use of the social sciences in pastoral and practical theology. This knowledge, too, must come under scrutiny and be *critically* engaged in order that it aid theological proposals for the common good.¹⁷

Along with the social sciences, theology is marked by a hermeneutic of practical reason (*phronesis*), dialogue, and understanding. The capacity to engage in practical reasoning, both its universalizing and its consensus-building capacities, mark his project as particularly late modern.¹⁸ Browning understands experience and knowledge as culturally and historically situated, but he has not relinquished the search for determining the formal and structural capacity for a universally situated reason. The subject is historically situated, but not to such a degree that he or she cannot step beyond history, or the “story,” to critically reflect on personal and social situations from a (somewhat) universal perspective.

Like other late moderns, Browning claims that his theory comes close to but is not a strict foundationalism.

Because I find *some* role for reason and the human sciences, it may appear that I side with the foundationalists. [...] Although it is impossible to advance absolutely foundational, crystal-clear, and totally objective judgments at any of the five levels, the historically situated nature of practical thinking does not prevent us from advancing good reasons for what is better or worse.”¹⁹

While Browning does not want to claim a metaphysical foundation to practical reason, he does want to claim a certain natural, biological, and psychological predisposition to this capacity. In other words, some arguments are better than others and we can discern an anthropological constant that allows for all humans to discern the right and the good. This formal, structural constant is expressed in the human capacity for reversible thinking, the basis for understanding our obligations of equal regard, mutuality, and *agape*. There is evidence that “principles like neighbor love and the golden rule, with their features of reversibility and

17 This, of course, is one of Browning’s primary interests. His early work focuses on the relationship between theology and psychology, particularly the disciplines and practices of care that emerge from modern psychotherapy, social work, and psychiatry. He sees this as a very practical kind of question: How have the modern psychologies informed church practices of care? How can they do so critically? What does religion offer to modern secular approaches to care?

18 There are five levels of validity claims that fully define practical reason: the visional, obligational, tendency/need, contextual/environmental, and rule/role.

19 Browning, *Fundamental*, 173-174. Practical theology must support “implicit validity claims if it takes part in the discourse of a free society aimed at shaping the common good. [...] The arguments that a critical practical theology advances cannot be foundational arguments assuring absolute certainty. Its arguments can have the status of good reasons that, although not absolutely certain, can advance discourse about the action we should take;” *Ibid.*, 71.

universalization” are found in “religious and cultural contexts around the world in both ancient and modern times.”²⁰

Browning uses the image of an envelope to describe practical reason. The outer sleeve constitutes the tradition’s narratives and practices, and the inner space or “core” is the universal capacity for thinking about all experience in reversible terms. Persons process experience through cultural categories constructed by tradition and its narratives, but we can also think about that experience and discern the true and the good through a kind of reversible thinking (expressed in the love command and the ethical imperative).²¹ All religious and cultural narratives, then, shape this inner core of practical reason, but the teleological is secondary to this fundamental *human* capacity and principle.²² Narrativist approaches to ethical thinking, represented by Stanley Hauerwas and MacIntyre, are insufficient, according to Browning, because they articulate one level of practical reason: the visional or narrative dimension. Browning affirms that practical reason “lives off” community-shaped virtues and passions, but he argues that,

... there are ways in which the reason in practical reason can play back on the traditions that form it. It can criticize these traditions and help stabilize conversations designed to achieve consensus Practical reason can kick at the edges of tradition and take small but important steps outside it. This is because our reflective and generalizing powers work not only on the linguistic and symbolic materials that traditions provide but also on the thick and brute aspects of experience that do not completely yield to the linguistic constructions we place upon them.²³

Another feature of Browning’s late modern strategy is the way in which knowledge and truth are gained through communal dialogue, understanding, and consensus. Here is another important anthropological claim. We are creatures who can engage in dialogue and conversation in order to achieve understanding because all dialogue partners can draw on this

20 Ibid., 176-180. The six “submoments of rationality” are: conventionality, reconstructive memory, discernment of human needs (including introspective induction, comparison, and objective empiricism), discernment of systemic constraints, the logic of equal regard, and descriptive generalization.

21 Browning is indebted to moral development theorists, such as Lawrence Kohlberg, and philosophers in the Kantian tradition, such as John Rawls and Ronald Green. Ibid., 94-109.

22 Ibid., 179. Normative ethical claims emerge through discernment of the “workings of human reason” that “gradually elaborate general principles of obligation that have a rational structure.” Obligation and tendency need are the inner core of practical reason, the implicit or explicit principles that state what a person or group is morally obligated to do. Ibid., 105. Equal regard is the inner rational structure, or inner core of practical reason and of a Christian ethic. It forms the rational structure of both mutuality in intimate and public affairs. Ibid., 160.

23 Ibid., 177ff.

inner capacity to reverse their thinking and come to view a situation or condition from another's perspective. Reversible thinking forms the basis for all ethical obligations, defined in Browning's terms as equal regard and mutuality. The kind of knowledge and truth Browning seeks is of an everyday variety, a form of practical wisdom that is gained from human interactions, relationships, and community over time. It is historically rooted and enduring, yet malleable. It has roots and strength, but it can change. In this sense, Browning sides with the pragmatists rather than metaphysicians.²⁴

What then should Christians do in the postmodern situation? How can Christian communities become vital centers of dialogue that can contribute to the good of the society and the world? Browning proposes that the Christian community strives to create, nurture, and enhance the conditions for the possibility of individual and communal transformation through the ongoing practice of *phronesis*, practical reasoning or reasoning-in-dialogue. *Phronesis* must attend to the anthropological (biological, psychological, and social), contextual, and environmental conditions of contemporary life. More simply, the *telos* of practical theology, and all theology for that matter, is to guide the community "to know how to live and act faithfully."²⁵ Employing a method of correlation, practical theology's task is to put forward constructive proposals for and on behalf of the Christian community that are built on the community's reflection on its own practice in light of the common good of all.

For Browning, the practice of practical reason allows religious communities to engage in a critical hermeneutical dialogue. Arguments are advanced on grounds that are reasonable and publicly defensible for the sake of the common good. These arguments can be drawn from the Christian tradition insofar as the church is able to articulate *why* these positions can be acceptable to Christian and non-Christian alike. According to Browning, the survival of the mainline church depends upon its capacity to develop an ethics of discourse that can address secular society and "establish this ongoing level of religio-moral sensibility and culture" that "is the primary task of a religiously informed practical reason."²⁶

24 Drawing on the radical empiricism of William James, Browning states that we interpret our tendencies and needs through our inherited narrative traditions, but "brute reality" and the ongoing experience of human nature, "at times intrude and teach us nuances about ourselves that our cultural-linguistic traditions lead us to overlook or obscure." For Browning, radical empiricism makes the narrative view less rigid by allowing experience as well as narrative to inform both our principles of obligation and our perception of needs/tendencies. *Ibid.*, 180.

25 Browning, *Integrating*, 223.

26 *Ibid.*, 220ff. In the opening and concluding sections of *A Fundamental Practical Theology*, Browning speaks of transformation as the goal of the Christian community and the work of engaging practical theology. His practical theology is primarily a procedural method to achieve transformation, but there is little substantive theological content to define transformation by what and toward what.

What then constitutes the church's ministry according to this model, and how do we train for such ministry? According to Browning, practical theology must move beyond the clerical paradigm in theological education and ministry in order that the churches might play a role in creating a good society. For Browning, practical theological thinking is an art practiced by the minister as well as the local congregation. However, the former is insufficiently trained to lead the community and the latter is ignorant of its possibilities.

Most ministers practice practical theological thinking as an art. But like many artists, they have little conscious knowledge of or control over the rules of the art that they intuitively practice. And if their judgments are challenged and they are asked to justify their thinking, they find it difficult to trace their steps, give reasons if required, or put things straight when they go wrong.²⁷

According to Browning, practical theology is not applied systematic or biblical theology. Instead, practical theology constitutes "the most complex, most difficult" of the theological disciplines, because it requires the theologian, church leader, and minister to "study, interpret and understand with an end toward action, prescription, decision."²⁸

Ministers engage congregations in conversation both about the culture's meanings and practices and those of the Christian tradition, in order that the religious community as well as the larger society can live toward the fullest realization of human transformation. The tasks of ministry are both confessional and apologetic. Ministers should attend to Christian education for discipleship as well as public education for competent citizens in a democracy (Browning has given much greater articulation to the latter). In both instances, the minister and the community must make reasonable, valid claims for the church's action. The confessional task alone is not sufficient for Christian communities today if they are to participate and thrive in a pluralistic context. In order for the congregation and its ministers to advance valid and reasonable claims about their belief and action, their practice must pass the test of Browning's five levels of practical reason. The task of the local congregation is to promote practical reason, both its outer sleeve and the inner core, and likewise the central purpose of theological education is to produce ministers who can lead the community in the practices of a fundamental practical theology.²⁹

We get a brief glimpse of what this kind of ministry might look like in Browning's critique of the Wiltshire Church, a congregation studied by a group of interdisciplinary scholars and reported on in *Building Effective*

27 Ibid., 220.

28 Ibid., 221.

29 At the conclusion of *A Fundamental Practical Theology*, Browning argues that seminaries should educate ministers in descriptive theology, similar to what church consultants do, in order that they can engage a full practical theology that will lead them to encourage people to deny their own needs in relationship to others. Browning, *Fundamental*, 286.

Ministry. Part of the problem in mainline congregations, according to Browning, is that pastors have not adequately taken into account the central needs and tendencies of people. Pastors have disregarded these needs through an overemphasis on distorted understandings of self-sacrifice.³⁰ The congregation, according to Browning's interpretation of *agape* as equal regard, has "every right within a Christian understanding to pursue its needs. Its members do not have a right do so *inordinately*." The ethic of equal regard allows them to take their needs seriously as well as attend to others' needs. Where there are "clear and obvious imbalances, they are obligated to work on behalf of others," and "if they go to God in trust and openness God will empower them to do this."³¹ The mainline should assist people in accepting their needs and tendencies as part of the created order and ordering them according to "a love ethic of equal regard." The community must see its needs and tendencies as normal and natural before moving on to confront the idolatries and distortions that fuel wants and desires out of control.

The minister is therefore a trained hermeneutical guide, someone who can help people understand their experience in relationship to another's experience. The minister is a practitioner of practical reason. In order to achieve this kind of leadership, Browning argues that theological education should be understood as fundamental practical theology and organize itself around four sub-moments: descriptive, historical, systematic, and strategic (or fully) practical theology (e.g., ministries of education, pastoral care, preaching, liturgy, social justice, and administration, with both "inner ecclesial" and "public" dimensions).³² In addition, students should learn to guide the community in dialogue, conversation, and understanding that will push them beyond conventional understandings to embrace solutions that are both faithful and publicly valid.³³

30 Browning points out that many mainline ministers were influenced both by Niebuhr's interpretation of original sin and sacrificial love (over mutuality) and by liberation theology. *Ibid.*, 172.

31 *Ibid.*, 171.

32 Fundamental practical theology is "critical reflection on the church's dialogue with Christian sources and other communities of experience and interpretation with the aim of guiding its action toward social and individual transformation;" *Ibid.*, 36.

33 Browning discusses two possible uses of this model in the seminary in regard to a revised Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) model. CPE offers a method for clinical training and field education that aids students in listening both to their own experience and to the experience of others. Browning's proposal for CPE includes four steps: (1) experiencing and defining the problem; (2) deeper attention, listening and understanding; (3) critical analysis and comparison of relevant options; and (4) decision and strategy. The five levels of practical reason speak primarily to steps three and four. Browning describes written assignments that challenge students to use descriptive, historical, systematic, and strategic practical theology in discerning a course of action in a pastoral situation. He invites students to report the changes between their pre-understanding and post-understanding – changes in themselves and changes in subjects through dialogue. *Ibid.*, 72. Students would learn practical thinking through the revised correlational method in relation to the five levels

Christian Practices in Practical Theology

A second area of practical theology to emerge in the past ten years is an emphasis on the idea of Christian practices. It is distinct from Browning's public and socially-engaged practice and liberation models of praxis. It is a confessional rather than an apologetic approach to thinking about the Christian life. In George Lindbeck's terms, it exemplifies the cultural-linguistic approach to theology that seeks to identify the narrative and linguistic aspects of religious faith.³⁴ If Browning's proposal for the mainline is to embrace a set of practices that engage the philosophical and public claims for Christian moral positions, the Christian practices approach advocates a set of practices aimed at strengthening and sustaining Christian identity.

The work on Christian practices derives mainly from MacIntyre's ideas about social practices and traditions in *After Virtue*,³⁵ although the authors I am concerned with here have modified his concept of practices in a theological direction so that practices are "theological and thus normed not only internally but also through the responsive relationship of Christian practices to God."³⁶ What is a practice? According to Dykstra and Bass,

of practical moral thinking, which makes it possible critically to correlate: (1) the gospel witness at each of the five levels; (2) significant cultural options in terms of their implications for each of the five levels; and (3) one's own personal experience in terms of its implications for the levels. "This three-way critical dialogue should run throughout the student's theological education and provide the structure that will bridge the existential and theoretical aspects of the student's learning;" Don S. Browning, *Practical Theology and Religious Education*, in: Eormation, eds. Mudge/Poling, 97.

- 34 George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine. Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*, Philadelphia (Westminster Press) 1984, 16. Browning claims that his approach to practical theology takes account of both the confessional ("theology as primarily witnessing to the narrative structure of the faith") and the apologetic ("which defends the rationality of the faith and tries to increase its plausibility to the contemporary secular mind"); Browning, *Eundamental*, 44.
- 35 MacIntyre's concept of social practices is developed in relationship to his understanding of virtue. According to him, the only way to overcome the profound alienation of modern individualism and moral relativism is to cultivate virtue and the "goods internal" to practices. Engaging in practices together, over time, shapes personal and social identity, and develops moral awareness and character in quite particular ways. Virtues are the qualities, skills, and capacities that allow persons to achieve the goods internal to practices. They are an "acquired human quality" that develops through the engagement of practices over time. Virtues help to realize the goods that are "internal" to practices, which cannot be acquired in any other way but through practice. Virtue, for MacIntyre, is not an abstract or metaphysical reality, but is conditioned by a tradition of practice that is deemed valuable and important by a particular community. Certain communities will place a high premium on particular virtues because they value particular practices. This focus on practices has helped to enlarge the concept of virtue beyond a more traditional individualistic and privatized notion of the self and the moral life. Practices make virtue communal as well as personal.
- 36 Craig Dykstra/Dorothy C. Bass, *A Theological Understanding of Christian Practices*, in: *Practicing Theology. Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life*, eds. Miroslav Volf/Dorothy

practices are “things Christian people do together over time to address fundamental human needs in response to and in the light of God’s active presence for the life of the world.”³⁷ The authors of *Practicing Our Faith* identify twelve practices that are “shared activities that address fundamental human needs and that, woven together, form a way of life:” honoring the body, hospitality, household economics, saying yes and saying no, keeping Sabbath, testimony, discernment, shaping communities, forgiveness, healing, dying well, singing our lives.³⁸ These practices are basic anthropological and social activities, and when they are known, taught, and passed on within the Christian community, a way of life emerges that strives to be consistent with the life of Jesus Christ.³⁹

C. Bass, *Grand Rapids* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing) 2002, 21. The works to which I am referring relate primarily to the concept of practices as defined by MacIntyre, although there are other definitions of practices stemming from the social sciences, Marxist, philosophy, and spiritual theology. For example, see the essays in *Practicing Theology* by Kathryn Tanner and Sarah Coakley.

- 37 Ibid., 18; Craig Dykstra/Dorothy C. Bass, *Times of Yearning, Practices of Faith*, in: Dorothy C. Bass, ed., *Practicing our Faith. A Way of Life for a Searching People*, The Practices of Faith Series, ed. Dorothy C. Bass, San Francisco (Jossey-Bass Publishers) 1997, 5. Dykstra has put forth several definitions: “A practice involves people doing things with one another, and normally at least some part of the time people will be doing what they do in physical proximity to one another;” and “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;” Craig Dykstra, *Reconceiving Practice*, in: Shifting, eds. Wheeler/Farley, 40, 43. Bass’s definition states, “Christian practices are patterns of cooperative human activity in and through which life together takes shape over time in response to and in the light of God as known in Jesus Christ. [...] Focusing on practices demands attentiveness to specific people doing specific things together within a specific frame of shared meaning;” Dorothy C. Bass, Introduction, in: *Practicing Theology*, eds. Volf/Bass, 3. Other views in *Practicing Theology* include Serene Jones’s definition of practices in relationship to the language of sanctification: “... practices are the things that Christians do as their lives are conformed to patterns of living that embody God’s will, patterns embedded in the Law and manifest in the life of Christ, patterns of holiness – *sanctus*;” Serene Jones, *Graced Practices. Excellence and Freedom in the Christian Life*, in: *Practicing Theology*, eds. Volf/Bass, 60; and Kathryn Tanner’s: “Social-scientific (especially neo-Marxist) accounts of the prerequisites for large-scale, ongoing forms of coordinated social action aid in understanding the features of Christian practices that generate theological reflection;” she emphasizes the “effort-filled and always only temporarily successful struggles to make Christian practices a whole way of life;” Kathryn Tanner, *Theological Reflection and Christian Practices*, in: *Practicing Theology*, eds. Volf/Bass, 228ff.
- 38 Also in *The Practices of Faith Series* are: Stephanie Paulsell, *Honoring the Body. Meditations on a Christian Practice*, San Francisco (Jossey-Bass) 2002; Dorothy C. Bass, *Receiving the Day. Christian Practices for Opening the Gift of Time*, San Francisco (Jossey-Bass Publishers) 2000; and Thomas G. Long, *Testimony. Talking Ourselves into Being Christian*, San Francisco (Jossey-Bass) 2004.
- 39 Dykstra’s list of practices includes interpreting scripture, worship and prayer, confession and reconciliation, service, witness, social criticism, and mutual bearing of suffering. Margaret Miles includes ascetic practices, worship and sacraments, service, and prayer. Margaret Ruth Miles, *Practicing Christianity. Critical Perspectives for an Embodied Spirituality*, New York (Crossroad) 1988. Interestingly, Langdon Gilkey also called for practical theology to take up “spirituality” or “piety” or the “health or nurture of the soul” that would include a

I am placing the work on practices within Lakeland's category of the countermodern. Most of these authors lean in the countermodern direction, however not the fundamentalist but rather the virtue or narrative option. They are interested in *traditioning* communities of faith, but they are not *traditionalists*. They are looking neither for the radically new nor necessarily for new knowledge and ideas outside the Christian narrative, and in this sense they are not correlationists. Wisdom from the past is the most vital element in creating a way of Christian life in a secular, post-modern context. There are few alternatives for Christians but to search for a way of life that is grounded in the long tradition of Christian thought and practice. Scripture and tradition are filled with stories of people who "have done things that other people also do, simply because these things are part of being human ... But they have done them somehow differently because of their knowledge of God in Christ."⁴⁰

If Browning is advancing a social ethic, the practices literature is clearly in line with the virtue tradition. At this point, the authors are not interested in extending the late modern concerns for universal ethical principles. They trust in the wisdom from the past that can "guide us into renewed ways of life, which humanity so sorely needs at the present difficult turn in the history of this world we inhabit together." One of the countermodern assumptions here is that the metanarrative is, for the most part, in tact. It does not necessarily need to be defended against any rival claims or modernity's challenges. In fact, despite modernity's challenges to faith and belief, practices are the surest way to invite and nurture people into the Christian way of life. Rather than pursuing philosophical or theological arguments, the Christian community and its theologians should find ways to invite people to consider what this way of life looks like and how it is lived.

Why promote practices for the postmodern Christian situation? The argument for nurturing and sustaining Christian practices arises from a central concern regarding the erosion and destruction of basic patterns,

"number of modes of behavior both individual and communal: meditation, contemplation, yoga, prayer, worship, participation in sacraments, in dance, in chanting – and so on." In response to the modern problem of practice, Gilkey contends that if our spirit is sick and estranged, certainly we deal with "praxis that deals with the health of our being." "Are there modes of practice in Christian life which assist or encourage the deepening of faith, the unity or strength of the spirit, the dedication of the spirit to others, the discerning power of the spirit to see what is good – the 'non-attachment' of the spirit to itself and its own well-being?" Practical theology would address the sorts of practices that contribute to the "nurture of faith, spiritual strength and ethical motivation," how practices can be studied and theoretically understood within the academy, and how they can be "oriented forwards towards agency as well as backwards towards the growth of piety." Christians need to learn from other traditions, as well as their own, what practices can nurture the soul under present cultural traditions. Langdon Gilkey, unpublished manuscript presented at the University of Chicago, 1985.

40 Dykstra/Bass, *Theological Understanding*, in: *Practicing Theology*, eds. Volf/Bass, 16-17.

habits, and forms of life wrought by modernity. Individuals, families, and communities conduct their lives quite differently because of profound changes in labor, commerce, bureaucratization, and technology. While the forces of modernity have altered social arrangements and systems, they have also altered and to some extent destroyed basic rhythms and habits of daily life. The way we cook and eat our meals, care for our bodies, the speed at which we live, how we make decisions, encounter strangers, care for the sick and bury the dead, and, of course, worship in a local community, have all been profoundly altered.⁴¹ Those concerned with practices address these fundamental ways of living in order to educate and enlighten communities about the essential nature of practices for individual and social good. They seek to show people that wisdom from the past is essential for living more fully within modernity's constraints, and they seek to instruct Christians about ways of interpreting basic human realities from a Christian perspective. "Many Christian people seem to be unaware of the rich insights and strong help the Christian tradition can bring to today's concerns."⁴²

Because people have lost contact with the tradition and live among "rapid social change and intense spiritual restlessness," the authors of *Practicing Theology* offer a Christian way of life "right down to the specific words, gestures, and situations of which it is woven" that "finds its fullest integrity, coherence, and fittingness insofar as it embodies a grateful human response to God's presence and promises."⁴³ Essentially, people are "practicing" all the time, and these practices are informed by all kinds of cultural messages, some positive, but most destructive. Dykstra and Bass want to offer Christian interpretations of practices that express a "Christian way of life" that they believe can sustain people regardless of the ongoing contextual, historical, and cultural changes or interpretations.

There is not a grand methodological scheme for practical theology within the practices literature, at least not at this time and certainly not in the way Browning has been advancing. The authors have defined several ideas that are central to the idea of practices, and within this discussion we see some hints toward what practical theology would be. Practices embody certain anthropological realities, and the authors are advancing certain claims about who we are as human beings and how the Christian narrative informs these basic ways of being. Practices "address fundamental human needs and conditions through concrete human

41 Dykstra/Bass, *Times, Practicing Our Faith*, ed. Bass, 2, begins with an example of the pressures of "having too much to do" and the "yearning to understand what the too-much-to-do adds up to."

42 *Ibid.*, 5.

43 Dykstra/Bass, *Theological Understanding*, in: *Practicing Theology*, eds. Volf/Bass, 16. The basic argument is that thinking and doing, belief and practice, are "inextricably entwined;" *Ibid.*, 21.

acts.” They are “done together and over time” and “possess standards of excellence.” They are ordinary activities of daily life that “are all tangled up with the things God is doing in the world” and therefore “share in the mysterious dynamic of fall and redemption, sin and grace.” Finally, practices are interrelated insofar as they form a “way of life.” There is something ordinary and natural about practices, but the defining characteristic of the postmodern situation is that people *lack understanding* of the importance of these essential human capacities.⁴⁴

In this model, the congregation is a primary context for the renewal of Christian practices, and one of the main tasks of the minister is to be a teacher, sage, guide, and sustainer of Christian practices.⁴⁵ Ministers are not only engaged in practices, but also

are uniquely responsible for the participation of whole communities in them. This requires that they organize these practices corporately in a particular situation and insure that the people of that community, young and old, are initiated into them, guided in them, and led in them.

In order to teach practices, ministers must know their history, reasons, and the “forms of judgment borne both by the traditions of which they are a part and by competent and wise contemporary engagement in them.”⁴⁶ Ministers are “practicers” as well, embracing and modeling the practices for the community as well as engaging the practices of ministry. For instance, the practice of preaching a good sermon is based on the practice of deliberating over and praying with the scriptures through a lifetime. Ministers are fundamentally teachers of the gospel, and they teach practices in order that the truth and reality of the gospel might be manifest.

In order to be a teacher of Christian practices and to create a community of practice, ministers must know the history, source, and context of the community’s practices. Furthermore, the minister must help people negotiate the difference between a Christian understanding of practices and their cultural counterparts. The congregation and Christian community are but one context in which people learn practices, and that is why

44 These five concepts were first defined in Dykstra/Bass, *Times*, in: *Practicing Our Faith*, ed. Bass, 6-8, and more recently in Dykstra/Bass, *Theological Understanding*, in: *Practicing Theology*, eds. Volf/Bass, 22-32.

45 Dorothy C. Bass, *Congregations and the Bearing of Traditions*, in: *American Congregations*, eds. James P. Wind/James W. Lewis, vol. 2, *New Perspectives in the Study of Congregations*, Chicago (University of Chicago Press) 1994, 169-91. See Dorothy C. Bass/Craig Dykstra, *Growing in the Practices of Faith*, in: *Practicing Our Faith*, ed. Bass, 199-201, for a description on how to teach practices in the congregation. That same volume also has a guide for congregational study groups. Both Browning’s and Bass’s projects have produced numerous books as well as websites, videos, study guides, and materials for congregations. The *Religion, Culture, and Family Project* can be found at <http://divinity.uchicago.edu/family/>. The *Practicing Our Faith Project* can be found at <http://www.practicingourfaith.org/>.

46 Dykstra, *Reconceiving*, 54ff. See also Craig Dykstra, *Growing in the Life of Faith*. Education and Christian Practices, Louisville (Geneva Press) 1999.

it is crucial that ministers help guide people in understanding and living *Christian* practices. Ministers need to understand the complex context of these interfacing practices, their “continuities and discontinuities.”

Dykstra has identified the role theological education plays in preparing ministers of Christian practice (my phrase). For Dykstra, the purpose of theological studies is the “identification, study, and pursuit of practices that are central to and constitutive of Christian faith and life Moreover, in the context of theological study, we attend to practices of a form of life that claims to bear intimacy with God as well as world-transforming power.”⁴⁷ If Christian practices are central to theological education, students will be engaged in learning the communal, historical, and theological aspects of these practices in order that they might lead Christian communities in faithful practice.

Dykstra claims that theological education should consist of a community of teachers and students who engage in practices together, and that students be exposed to and guided by “others who are competent in these practices to help us: to be our models, mentors, teachers, and partners in practice.” Students will “catch” practices from those they respect and care about. Of course, students have already been shaped and formed in practices. Theological education should help students understand what practices mean and the reasons and values that are assumed within them.⁴⁸ In coming to understand what practices are and how they function within a community, theological education should push toward “broader, more varied, and more complex dimensions” of the practices in order that students may gain greater “articulation of the significance and meaning.” They should “take increasing personal responsibility for initiating, pursuing, and sustaining these practices, and for including and guiding others in them.”⁴⁹

The problem in theological education, according to Dykstra, is an inadequate and harmful understanding of practice. Practice is viewed as *individualistic* (ministry is something the minister does to others: he or she teaches, preaches, and cares); *technological* (the minister is technically good at what he or she does and is guided in ministerial practice by good theory learned in the seminary and applied in the congregation);

47 Dykstra, *Reconceiving*, 48.

48 Education in “ecclesial practices” should begin prior to theological education, and in essence we are “dependent upon” communities that are shaping people in Christian practices. Of course, some students are not exposed to all Christian practices and a “key task in clergy education is to insure that all students are exposed to and participate in all of these practices in some context and at some level and become aware of the breadth and depth to which these practices may extend;” Dykstra, *Reconceiving*, 54. For other remarks on the relationship between the congregation and the seminary, see E. Gregory Jones, *Beliefs, Desires, Practices, and the Ends of Theological Education*, in: *Practicing Theology*, eds. Volf/Bass, 185-205.

49 Dykstra, *Reconceiving*, 54.

and *ahistorical and abstract* (the theory-practice model is a technological approach to practice in which we fail to take account of the history of practices or the role practices play in our current circumstances).⁵⁰ In such a case, practical theology “attends to a stripped down form of practice” contributing to a “know-how” model of ministry. Furthermore other fields “disregard practices almost entirely.” For example, biblical and historical studies rarely take practices seriously as a point of inquiry. Practices should be explored by the full range of theological disciplines so that students understand the way practices shaped Christian communities in the past and how ministers (and congregations) can retrieve their insight and wisdom for contemporary life. Likewise, systematic theology should critique and reform “these practices, the goods internal to them, and the knowledge that they make possible.” According to Dykstra, theological education should not be reduced to practices alone, but the theological and historical disciplines could contribute to practical theology by examining practices more intentionally.⁵¹

Practical theology, then, is defined in terms of “disciplined reflection on and engagement in the practices.” Departments of social ethics, church and society, and practical theology could “articulate these practices, describe them, analyze them, interpret them, evaluate them, and aid in their reformation. It would also be their focal responsibility to help students participate actively in them in actual situations of the kind they do and will face in their roles as clergy.”⁵² In addition, practical theology would analyze the context and institutions necessary to sustain such practices. Of course institutionalization is a danger, but that is not what is meant here. The practice of building institutions (e.g., family or congregation) that sustain Christian practice in context may be, for Dykstra, the “particular practice that defines what it means to be clergy.”⁵³

Liberating Praxis in Local Contexts

The first two approaches to practical theology correspond directly to Lakeland’s categories: Browning and Habermas as late moderns, and Bass and Dykstra following some of MacIntyre’s countermodern tendencies.

50 Ibid., 35-41. Dykstra bemoans the fact the theological schools have adopted an ahistorical understanding of practice, particularly in relationship to the history of practical theology, Christian education, preaching, pastoral care, and administration.

51 Ibid., 55-56.

52 Ibid., 57. Dykstra admits to being ambivalent about the organization of theology around practices. If the biblical, historical, and systematic theologians dealt with practices more specifically, it might be that there is no need of a practical theology department. Since that is unlikely, he offers this proposal for practical theology.

53 Ibid., 58. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 181-82, points out that politics constitutes the “making and sustaining of forms of human community – and therefore of institutions – that constitute of a community’s form of life.”

The third approach to practical theology, like the countermodern approach, corresponds to one aspect of Lakeland's third category, the true or radical postmoderns. In philosophy, the radical postmodern position is embodied in the work of Foucault, Derrida, and French feminism, and Lakeland admits that few theologians can do theology out of this most radical of positions.⁵⁴ However, there are theologians who take seriously *the situation described and the questions posed by* radical postmodern philosophers and who seek to explore their implications for Christian theology, and in this sense they are true postmodern theologians. They are not "death of God" theologians but they have certainly pronounced the death of the White-male European theologically-constructed God. Within this group, Lakeland has in mind many self-described liberation theologians, including feminist, Latin American, African American, African, and Asian theologians. I would also include theologians who describe themselves as contextual theologians, who are taking local culture as a primary consideration for doing theology.⁵⁵

While respecting the range of opinions and interests within this otherwise large group of theologians, one can argue that liberation theologians share several distinguishing features in their approach to practical theology. Lakeland discusses several common features of the "ecclesiality" of liberation theology. Liberation theologians are concerned with and drawn from communities of the marginalized, which may include race, gender, class, or sexual orientation. They have "focused group profiles" that seek to combine "spirituality and social praxis." There is a de-emphasis on hierarchies, theology is inductive rather than deductive, and there is opposition to all intellectual and social dualisms. Liberation theologians often connect with non-Christian groups on the margin and eagerly share ideas among other liberation-minded thinkers.⁵⁶ The way theology

54 Though in many respects different from one another, Lakeland claims these thinkers have three things in common: the rejection of the subject at the center of epistemology, a "contextual and relative" understanding of reason, and reason's dependence on power or desire. Lakeland, *Postmodernity*, 16. See p.42, for a discussion of theology and radical postmodern philosophy.

55 Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, rev. ed., Faith and Cultures Series, Maryknoll (Orbis Books) 2002; Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, Maryknoll (Orbis Books) 1985; Robert J. Schreiter, *The New Catholicity. Theology Between the Global and the Local*, Maryknoll (Orbis Books), 1997.

56 Lakeland, *Postmodernity*, 61. In his address to the Catholic Theological Society of America in 2001, Steve Bevans raised many of the issues facing the true postmodern theologian in the context of his own discipline, missiology. In terms of practical theology, he embraces a praxis understanding of theology that is characterized by: (1) an inductive rather than deductive method; (2) a method that listens to traditional sources as well as those "beyond the boundaries," particularly those voices from "local churches around the world" (especially in Ruether's terms of the "prophetic principle" that is at the heart of "countercultural movements"); and (3) a method that takes inculturation seriously ("such a theology will never pretend to universality or timelessness, but will be rooted in cultural and historical particularity). Bevans argues that if systematic theology becomes practical theology, it

is done, who does it, and for what purpose has been radically challenged by liberation theologians. Praxis, as both act and intellectual posture, is a constitutive dimension of theology, constituting the beginning and end of the theological task.

The true postmodern theological reading of the situation begins with a consideration of how European- and male-dominated theologies have distorted ideas of truth, reason, history, and authority by claiming their own culturally-tinged perspective as universal.⁵⁷ In so doing, they have denied the entry of other voices into the theological conversation. True postmodern theologians take seriously the implications of the “radical historicity” and culture for Christian faith and life, especially as it is made known in the reality of the “other.” The particular, the local, and the historically and culturally conditioned manifestations of religion are the theologian’s point of contact. At this point, there is no turning back to either premodern or modern grand theological systems. All theology is historically-situated and there can be no universal expression of the Christian faith that is pure and unfiltered. Grand metanarratives, theological or political, can lead to distortions of persons and communities, which in the end legitimate the power of the few over the many who are weak. In a revised edition of *Models of Contextual Theology*, Stephen Bevans claims, “There is no such thing as ‘theology;’ there is only *contextual* theology.”⁵⁸

As one instance of the liberation approach to practical theology, I have chosen the feminist theologian, Rebecca Chopp, and more particularly her book, *Saving Work: Feminist Practices of Theological Education*. As noted earlier, the liberation approach to practical theology is perhaps the most widely developed and known of the three approaches I have discussed, and there are many examples that could be drawn from this literature. I have selected Chopp’s work because of the serious attention she gives to theological education. Other North American feminist theologians have extended feminist theory into the practice of ministry.

Chopp’s reading of the contemporary context has a decisively radical postmodern ring. It is not possible to approach theological education today from a universal or formal perspective. What we need are “analyses from the perspectives of particular groups within theological education” in order

will be interdisciplinary (in conversation with the social sciences); “occasional” in terms of reflecting on particular questions within particular communities; listening for questions outside the normal range for classical theology; employing a variety of methods depending on the context; and finally, it will be communal and collaborative, and perhaps less discursive and more aesthetic. See Stephen Bevans, *Wisdom from the Margins. Systematic Theology and the Missiological Imagination*, CTSA Proceedings 56, 2001, 32-35.

57 Browning is certainly sympathetic to this position. Issues of contextual theology fit the third level of practical reason. Like the visional level, however, this is an area that Browning has not spelled out entirely.

58 Bevans, *Models*, 3.

to highlight the often neglected aspects of particularity and contextuality in theological education.⁵⁹ Chopp's approach to practical theology, and hence theological education, rests on a method of "critical theory" that does not look to universal models that "hold for all times and places," but rather encourages models that arise in a "specific situation, and using the symbols, images, and concepts involved in that situation, attempts to move against distortion and dysfunction and to shape new forms of flourishing."⁶⁰ This even means that feminist theology cannot universalize White, middle-class women's experience, but must accept a range of women's experience from a variety of social locations.⁶¹

Drawing from women's experience in theological education, Chopp describes three feminist practices that make a feminist approach to theological education unique. These practices can also be read as Chopp's constructive proposal for how Christians can live faithfully in a post-modern context.⁶² The feminist practices are narrativity, new practices of *ekklesia*, and reconstructive and transformative approaches to theology and Christian life.

Narrativity refers to the capacity to write one's own life, and for women, "the power to write one's life as an active agent is the power to participate, potentially and actually, in the determination of cultural and institutional conditions."⁶³ This is a particular condition of the post-modern situation, since the "established narratives of modernity" have disappeared. This leaves space for new narratives to enter the public imagination, but also means that narratives that stand against oppression and dehumanization must enter the cultural and religious fabric. A consequence of postmodernity is that people are engaged in composing new identities. For women, this can be a form of emancipation, as they reject old definitions imposed by patriarchal forms and set in search of new models.

In addition to narrativity, feminist theology puts forth new practices of *ekklesia*.⁶⁴ Because many women experience the church as both a "space of justice and community" and a barrier to justice, feminist models of

59 Rebecca S. Chopp, *Saving Work. Feminist Practices of Theological Education*, Louisville (Westminster John Knox Press) 1995, 11, criticizes Edward Farley's and David Kelsey's proposals for theological education as being too formal, seeking a "unity above and beyond the fragmentation and pluralism."

60 *Ibid.*, 12.

61 *Ibid.*, 37.

62 *Ibid.*, 15. Chopp adds her own definition of practice: "... socially shared forms of behavior that mediate between what are often called subjective and objective dimensions; a pattern of meaning and action that is both culturally constructed and individually instantiated; practice draws us to inquire into the shared activities of groups of persons that provide meaning and orientation to the world, and that guide action."

63 *Ibid.*, 21.

64 Chopp is here relying on the work of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Discipleship of Equals. A Critical Feminist Ekklesia-ology of Liberation*, New York (Crossroad) 1993.

ekklesia include resistance to present structures as well as alternative visions and practices for the church, enacted now and for the future.⁶⁵ *Ekklesia* is not a separate church for women but instead the place where God's redemptive presence is experienced, a presence that overcomes sin (depravation and deprivation of flourishing life) and announces grace. *Ekklesia* is engaged in "saving work," according to Chopp, because it stands in the space of the already and not yet: grace enables a way of "holy living" that "saves us from the ravishes of sin." Feminist models of ecclesiology argue for the church as the "counter-public sphere of justice," a community of friends, and a spirituality based on praxis.⁶⁶

Along with narrativity and *ekklesia*, the third feminist practice is that of theology. Theology is not a matter of uncovering "unchangeable foundations" nor does it hand on the "cognitive truths of tradition or discloses the classic or even figures out the rules of faith." Instead, the method of theology is rhetorical, and its purpose is the ongoing reconstruction of symbols and narratives toward transformation, both at the personal and communal levels. Feminist theology argues for a model of knowledge as transformation. In Chopp's estimation, this means that knowledge is a socially constructed reality. Knowledge for transformation must include the imagination, and in theology this means creating imaginative forms of poetry, metaphors, new symbols, and narratives. All knowledge has a praxis orientation because knowledge begins in concrete human situations and drives toward transformation of concrete realities. Chopp's pragmatic critical theory, like Browning's, is built on certain understandings of pragmatism and argues for an essential relationship between ethics and epistemology. She states:

The task of theology, within feminist practices, joins the ethical and the epistemological by asking about the practical consequences of a theological symbol and by formulating norms of emancipatory praxis for revisioning Christian symbols. As "saving work," feminist theology is itself a type of ethical and moral practice aimed at survival and flourishing. As such, its very nature is to produce discourses of emancipation that are self-conscious and reflective of their own cultural-political location and, as far as possible, of their emancipatory potential.⁶⁷

Three feminist practices – justice, dialogue, and imagination – form the basis for a feminist understanding of theological education. Justice entails the honoring of each person's "voice in self-determination" and "envisioning new spaces in church and culture." Dialogue for Chopp goes beyond the formal outlines of Habermas' ideal speech situation or Tracy's "forgetting

65 Chopp, *Saving Work*, 58, identifies three spaces in *ekklesia* that names and opposes sin: lamentations of suffering, critical analyses of systems and oppression, and the depth order of sin as idolatry.

66 *Ibid.*, 62-68.

67 *Ibid.*, 83.

of the self.” Dialogue occurs in open, mutually critical engagement among embodied persons in relationship to their lives. Theological education provides for such conversation to emerge among all a school’s participants. Imagination points feminist practices in a future-oriented direction: again, the emphasis is on creating new symbols, narratives, and spaces. Unlike the countermodern approach, Chopp and most praxis theologians are cautious in turning to the tradition as the primary or sole authoritative voice in shaping contemporary life. Only a critical appropriation of traditional stories and symbols that unmasks dehumanizing tendencies is adequate for theologically constructive work today.

The hallmarks of feminist practices of theological education also provide a way of thinking about ministry in the postmodern context.⁶⁸ Though Chopp does not draw out implications from her proposal for the actual practice of ministry in *Saving Work*, other feminist theologians have attended to the relationship between feminist theory and ministry.⁶⁹ Ministry informed by feminist theology acknowledges the importance of social location, affirms the naming of experience (especially of marginalized voices), and upholds justice as the principle of critique and possibility. Ministry strives, therefore, to create communities that support narrative agency. Ministers acknowledge and promote the identification of differences and support models of reconstruction that are based on symbols and narratives that promote human flourishing. Ministers also nurture and sustain patterns of moral agency aimed at overcoming oppressive structures.⁷⁰ Like Bass and Dykstra, feminist models of ministry are concerned with aiding the Christian community in understanding ordinary daily practices as revelatory of God’s presence in the world. However, they are more concerned than the countermodern alternative with critically assessing the oppressive tendencies embedded in such practices and refashioning them according to just and dialogical values.

According to praxis and contextual approaches, one of the primary tasks of ministry is to bring the gospel’s call of justice and liberation to *both* the church *and* society. This is both a methodological and substantive claim. The minister is skilled in leading the community in critical reflection on its situation and bringing the gospel message to bear on the

68 There are several theological schools that are exploring contextual education as the basis for training in the ministry, though what “contextual” means varies for each. For example, Luther Seminary’s contextual education program focuses on the missional identity of Lutheran congregations, while Iliff School of Theology’s contextual emphasis is more liberation oriented, attending to the marginalization of women, African Americans and Hispanics.

69 See Christie Cozad Neuger, ed., *The Arts of Ministry. Feminist-Womanist Approaches*, Louisville (Westminster John Knox Press) 1996; Denise M. Ackermann/Riet Bons-Storm, eds., *Liberating Faith Practices. Feminist Practical Theologies in Context*, Leuven (Peeters) 1998; Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore/Brita L. Gill-Austern, eds, *Feminist and Womanist Pastoral Theology*, Nashville (Abingdon Press) 1999.

70 Chopp, *Saving Work*, 37-40.

social, political, and economic realities that distort and oppress human flourishing. The minister is attentive to the ways theological reflection can inform the community's practice, but the minister never "applies" theological ideas to the situation.⁷¹

Comparisons and Critiques

I have described three approaches to practical theology: (1) the search for universal epistemological and moral reason; (2) the claims for Christian identity through engagement of practices; and (3) the search for just, authentic expressions of Christian life within particular local communities and contexts. It may appear that these types or approaches to practical theology are so varied and different that it is difficult to talk about a field or a discipline called "practical theology." However, that is not the case. The three approaches have a great deal in common and share several basic concerns.

First, each is postmodern in the sense that they have stepped beyond the presuppositions of the modern project and are attempting to find alternative foundations for claims to Christian knowing, doing, and living. Each approach takes a critical stance in relationship to modernity, and each is searching strategic solutions for how to live an authentic Christian life in a time of great change. If "postmodern" generally refers to critical engagement with the modern project, practical theologians are in the heat of the debate.

Second, the authors share an interest in the *practical* nature of the Christian life, how it is lived and expressed with integrity in our time and place. "Practical" refers to the everyday realities that are part of constructing lives of meaning and purpose, what is actually possible given the situation, not what the ideal might be if all contingencies were removed. Practical theology is a *constructive and future-oriented* task insofar as it is moving from the critical (or deconstructive) to concrete proposals for Christian communities. Practical theologians do not remain theoretical for very long, at least only insofar as the theoretical is in service to praxis. The basic practice orientation means that biblical, historical, moral, and systematic theology stand to a large extent in service to the practical. Practical theology is an inherently interdisciplinary quest, engaging the full range of theological disciplines. It searches for the wisdom of the past, for

⁷¹ An early proposal for theological education and ministry that comes out of the "true post-modern" position is Joseph C. Hough/John B. Cobb, *Christian Identity and Theological Education*, Chico (Scholars Press) 1985, 84. They propose the minister as a "practical Christian thinker" who has "a clear sense of Christian identity" with an "extensive and reflective understanding of what constitutes that identity;" a sense of how Christian identity shapes how we understand "world-historical situation;" and wise discernment for action.

criteria to assess our current projects, and for visions of the already and not yet character of the Christian life. Practical theology, then, *depends* on biblical, historical, and theological insights that can be brought to bear on the particular, local, and contextual realities of contemporary thought and life.

Third, the approaches to practical theology discussed here are *communal* undertakings, and in two ways. On the one hand, this is seen in terms of their attention to the local community, particularly the congregation (or local culture) as the primary locus of the church's ministry. While they attend to the subject with great care, practical theologians are not interested in an isolated autonomous subject, but instead the subject-in-community. The various proposals for *how* Christians are to construct meaningful lives in postmodern North America are communal in character. Communities of discourse, narrative, practices, dialogue, and justice hold forth the greatest hope for renewed church and society. On the other hand, practical theology is also communal in the way practical theologians do theology. In other words, practical theology is not a solo art. Of course, other theologians would claim the same, but there is something unique among practical theologians in this regard. Browning's project on the family, for example, engaged biblical scholars, historians, social scientists, theologians, and ethicists in conversation over a three year period. Twelve volumes were produced out of the mutual conversation and critique that happened together over time, not in isolation from one another. Likewise, authors of *Practicing Our Faith* and *Practicing Theology* have met and conversed over several years, producing edited volumes of essays that are written out of conversation together (though this has not been, by and large, an interdisciplinary conversation).⁷² Bevans also notes that contextual theologians are engaged in constructive reflection together, and certainly feminist theologians, like liberation theologians in Latin America, Asia, and Africa, have formed communities of discourse and *do* theology communally.

Finally, these practical theologians share a concern for reforming theological education. Each takes seriously Earley's concern to retrieve *habitus* as its central form and purpose. Both Dykstra and Chopp share a sense that theological education is itself a practice, and the way it is organized and carried out should exemplify the Christian life toward which ministers will lead. In extending Farley's notion of *habitus* by connecting it to practices, Dykstra says that, "what such habitus involves is profound, life-orienting, identity-shaping participation in the constitutive practices of

72 Bass affirms that theology is a communal enterprise: "... those who lead theological communities need to find ways of learning with and from people of varied views and histories, while also preventing theological reflection from becoming overly abstract or distant from the messy realm where human beings dwell and where Christian life and ministry take place." Bass, Introduction, in: *Practicing Theology*, eds. Volf/Bass, 5.

Christian life. If theology is habitus, then it follows that we learn theology (are formed in this habitus) by participation in these practices.”⁷³

Each approach to practical theology has brought forth important aspects for constructing new approaches to practical theology. The common concerns and methods noted above demonstrate that some coherence in the field can be identified. This does not mean that practical theologians are without differences. By virtue of the various postmodern positions *vis-à-vis* Lakeland, we can see that they differ methodologically and procedurally. They have different understandings of the nature of truth and the role of tradition. They approach historical resources and use the social sciences differently. They have differing criteria for judging what Christian communities should do, and how theological education should be organized and carried forth. These differences warrant more critical discussion and dialogue among practical theologians who are doing practical theology from any one of these approaches. I conclude here with a brief critique of each approach, highlighting some ways that each one engages the others.

One of the most important contributions Browning has made to practical theology is the insight he draws from a wide range of social scientific perspectives on the human person, which include cultural anthropology, socio-biology, psychology and sociology. These perspectives have added to our understanding of human capacities for moral insight on which religious story and tradition can build. He extends the late modern project into practical theology by continuing to explore the philosophical grounds by which reason can inform faith. Whether or not one agrees with his extension of the Kantian tradition, he offers churches (particularly the mainline community) one model for engaging a social ethic.

Browning also has a comprehensive understanding of theology as fundamental practical theology, and a way for theological education to organize the disciplines around ministerial practice rather than the guilds, connecting historical, systematic, and moral theology directly to ministry.⁷⁴ More particularly, Browning draws theological ethics into pastoral practice, reminding us that the pastoral disciplines have given more attention to the social sciences than they have to ethics.⁷⁵ He also extends hermeneutics into the practice of ministry, enriching our view of

73 Dykstra, *Reconceiving*, 50.

74 Boston University has revised its curriculum according to Browning's model of practical theology. Robert C. Neville, *Theses Regarding Direction in Theology Education*, unpublished manuscript, 1998.

75 Browning, *Pastoral Theology*, in: *Practical Theology*, ed. Browning, 187, has long argued that ethics must be more central to practical theology, advancing an ethic of obligation rather than a virtue ethic: “Pastoral theology should rediscover itself as a dimension of theological or religious ethics. It is the primary task of pastoral theology to bring together theological ethics and the social sciences to articulate a normative vision of the human life cycle. [...] In addition, pastoral theology should express a theology of those pastoral acts

the pastoral art of engaging a community in dialogue and understanding, in order that it might understand and act more faithfully.

One serious limitation of Browning's version of fundamental practical theology, however, is that it is not nearly theological enough. While he has enriched our understanding of anthropology, there is little explicit connection between his anthropological claims and Christology or ecclesiology. In other words, what implications do these claims about human persons have for our understanding of Jesus and the church? Browning claims that practical theology is philosophical and critical: it begins with faith and religious action but ends with "reasons and justifications for the practical actions it proposes."⁷⁶ The trajectory of practical thinking is toward the common good of society, and therefore extends beyond any one community or ecclesial tradition. Because he spends considerable time explaining how the community engages practical reason toward a social ethic, he fails to explain in theological terms God's relationship to practical reason. Browning claims that, "God is always finally the agent of transformation. All other agents of transformation – community, minister, lay leader – are metaphors of God's deeper transformative love," but he tells us little about how we are to understand God as an agent of transformation.⁷⁷

Concepts such as dialogue, understanding, and *phronesis* are primarily anthropological and philosophical concepts in Browning's system. His categories are similar to Dykstra and Bass's notion of practices, but lack the more explicit Christian interpretation of meaning that these authors have explored. In fact, one could claim that dialogue and *phronesis* are basic human capacities that all persons and communities engage in, but that Christians do so in a particular way. Without a fuller Christian interpretation of Browning's anthropological and moral categories, his system becomes overly rational, entrusting so much to the capacities of human reason that it is difficult to know how the model leads to knowledge of God's influence on transformation, *phronesis*, and *habitus*.⁷⁸

through which this normative vision of the human life cycle is appropriately mediated to individuals and groups in all of their situational, existential, and developmental particularity. Furthermore, pastoral theology in the future increasingly must express itself within a pluralistic society of diverse religio-cultural assumptions, differing cultural disciplines, and conflicting ethical patterns of life."

⁷⁶ Browning, *Fundamental*, 3.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 279.

⁷⁸ For example, the model requires a theology of grace to explain how God effects the dynamic realities of conversion, dialogue, and *phronesis*. Theological interpretations of Jesus as God-in-dialogue with humanity or the Trinity as God-in-communion might expand the theological claims about dialogue and conversation. Furthermore, the spiritual tradition may offer some insights into prayer as ongoing "critical" conversation with God. Essentially, Browning has not worked out his own understanding of the visional level of practical reason.

One of the reasons Dykstra and Bass's idea of Christian practices has gained momentum in the past ten years is because of the way these practical theologians identify how Christian communities can guide people to make sense of their lives in Christian terms. They boldly critique the culture for the ways culture distorts practices that are fundamental for human well-being, and they hold out Christianity as the truest path for finding the truest way of life. What is particularly exciting about Dykstra and Bass's formulation of practice is the way it advances a virtue ethic beyond the more static and individualistic approach to the virtues, by highlighting virtue's historical and communal aspects. Practices are more than virtues, however. The idea of practices is more complex because of the way practices capture how human persons are bodily, social, and communal in essence.

Practical theology's attention to practice as a core element of its theological anthropology is at an early stage. There is certainly more to be said about the concept of practices from a Christian point of view, and we can look forward to more publications from Bass's project in the future. As the literature and concept develops, it will be important for theologians who are working on Christian practices to pay attention to several lacunae in the work to date.

For instance, Lakeland suggests that countermodern and the radical postmodern approaches share a common suspicion for the modern project's reliance on autonomous reason, though they look to different strategies for living beyond the Enlightenment paradigm. Some liberation theologians might interpret the Dykstra and Bass's proposal for Christian practices as maintaining the *status quo* or returning to some previous *status quo*.⁷⁹ So far, these authors have paid attention to describing what practices are and what a Christian interpretation of particular practices might be, but they have not fully articulated the principles for critically assessing Christian practices. The authors remind us that "without neglecting the sin that is part of Christian history, it is vital that those who seek to walk in such a way today learn to recognize the lived wisdom of Christian people over time and across cultures as a constructive resource."⁸⁰ Radical postmodern theologians continue to point out that practices are not neutral but in fact can mask and hide all kinds of distortions that foster social control of one group over another. As liberation theologians have demonstrated, sin is not only an individual act but also a reality of beliefs and attitudes that shape social, economic, and religious systems. Any attempt to form Christian identity through the practices concept must attend to the problem of vice and evil in the Christian life and in the world.

79 This is similar to what Robert Schreiter calls "revanchism, an attempt to regain territory that has been lost." Schreiter, *New Catholicity*, 22-23.

80 Dykstra/Bass, *Theological Understanding*, in: *Practicing Theology*, eds. Volf/Bass, 16.

In addition, the work on Christian practices has not yet developed a *thick* understanding of culture. Browning uses insights from the social sciences regarding fundamental human needs and tendencies, and liberation theologians look to the ways local cultures shape and influence religious belief and practice (as in the work of Robert Schreiter and Bevans). It will be important to expand cultural understandings of Christian practices, how they change and develop over time, and the cultural forces that inhibit as well as foster practices.

Dykstra and Bass have not yet engaged important religious and social questions regarding pluralism and globalism. Certainly the idea of practices could be an entrée into interreligious dialogue, and here Browning might be of some help. What are the core human elements and dynamics that attend to the practice of dialogue toward understanding, particularly understanding across cultural groups?

Finally, Dykstra and Bass have yet to make a connection between practices and social ethics, the common good, and public theology. Without making the case for practices as the foundation of a Christian social ethic, this approach could lapse into a sectarian ethic. Again, it is not difficult to see the way in which practices *are* a social ethic by virtue of their social and communal dimensions. More needs to be said, however, about how the intentional daily living of practices in the home and neighborhood become the foundation for society's capacity to build institutions, structures, and political systems that foster humane ways of life for all.⁸¹

Liberation theology takes seriously the postmodern condition for doing theology as well as the conditions under which theology is done. Liberation theology asks who is doing theology and how is it getting done. Liberation approaches to practical theology have made significant methodological and theological contributions to theology as a whole. Of the three approaches I have discussed, it has done the most to engage the full range of theology as expressed in Christology, ecclesiology, Trinitarian theology, moral, and sacramental and liturgical theology.⁸² The lexicon of liberation, emancipation, oppression, and social sin has made its way into every area of theology as well as into the vocabulary of Christians, ministers, and local communities of faith. Raising the "prophetic" as a fundamental practice of every Christian will be the legacy of liberation theology.

81 In this regard, practices address Browning's first level of practical reason, the visional, but not a full practical theology. Beyond the level of the narrative and visional, this literature has not addressed how practices are related to norms and obligations or to context.

82 Liberation theologians, for example, have given considerable attention to the role of symbols and imagination, whereas both Browning and Dykstra and Bass have not explored as fully the non-linguistic dimensions of human experience. Up to this point, Browning's work has not given extensive consideration to the role of symbol, narrative, aesthetics, and imagination, although there is room for this dimension of human experience in his first level of practical reason. Chopp, for example, allows imagination a much greater role in her critical theory than does Browning. Chopp, *Saving Work*, 74ff.

Besides its many merits, which cannot all be recounted here, liberation theologians are open to a number of critiques. As they look to local expressions of religious belief and practice, liberation theologians are easily open to the charge that postmodernity's relativity is incompatible with the Christian tradition. They have yet to show how the local and particular relates to *catholic* understandings of the faith. Liberation theologians who embrace the radical postmodern posture will have to show how their claims attend to both the local and the universal. Of course, most liberation theologians do make universal claims even if they do not always admit as much. Experience, justice, dialogue, and narrativity hold a privileged position in their analysis. These categories are used by most liberation theologians to read most if not all situations.

As Dykstra and Bass have argued, people need concrete resources to help figure out how to live the Christian life in our time. These resources need to be accessible. At times, liberation theology becomes inaccessible and far from concrete when it spends most of its time in a deconstructive position. Many stop listening not only because the critique becomes all too familiar, but also because concrete strategies for particular communities remain unspecified. Most communities cannot overthrow the entire system of oppression and prejudice overnight. Liberation theologians need to be more attentive to helping people figure out local strategies to work at over time that can finally bring down systems. The kind of change that most liberation theologians seek, however, will take generations of faithful Christian practice.

Conclusion

I have used Lakeland's categories of postmodern thought to describe three approaches to practical theology as the field has emerged in the past twenty-five years. As a relatively new field in theology, practical theologians are exploring a variety of ways to engage faith in the postmodern world. I believe the field can be strengthened by further attention to the philosophical assumptions that inform each perspective. What do the three approaches I have described offer for future directions in practical theology? By way of conclusion, I will briefly highlight three areas that reach across the three approaches that I hope will garner further exploration in the field.

Eirst, practical theology is concerned with the interpretation of sacred texts and traditions, the interpretation of contemporary experience, and the relationship between the two. Obviously, practical theologians attend to a multiplicity of texts with a multiplicity of worldviews behind and in front of those texts. What is exciting about current work in practical theology is the way "text" is being defined. In other words, we often think of theologians interpreting written texts from the past, but in the case of

practical theology we are talking about interpreting what I would call the living text of human lives and faith communities. Interpreting living texts is a complex task and we are definitely better at attending to its parts rather than the whole. The contributions each of the three approaches makes to practical theology should be understood as advancing our understanding of important parts of human living and Christian faith. We begin to run into danger if we think that any one approach gets at the whole.

Second, describing practical theology in terms of interpreting multiple texts extends the important contribution that practical theology is making to theological anthropology and ecclesiology. Theologians working in the three approaches described earlier all are advancing our understanding of the human as interpreter, the human as practitioner, and the human as symbol and narrative-maker. Human persons are being described not in some static, essentialist way by practical theologians, but as living, embodied, community-creating beings. The more we know about how human beings actually go about constructing lives of faith and meaning, the more ministers and leaders of faith communities can help them to do that well.

This leads to my third and final point. Practical theology can make important contributions to our understanding of ministry without lapsing into the clerical paradigm. Practical theology can begin by attending to how Christians live and ought to live within the peculiar vagaries of time and place. In this sense, practical theology is first and foremost about wisdom-seeking for all Christians. Only then can it turn to the particular issue of how ministers guide and assist Christians in living such wise and faithful lives. In a certain sense, ministers do not choose their ministry. To a large extent, the conditions, problems, and issues of the local context will determine to whom and what ministers must respond. The problem as well as the solution must be locally born. If this is the case, then the minister must be trained to be an interpreter of many texts, which include the sacred scriptures, the tradition of teaching and witness, and the contemporary context. The minister must practice a hermeneutic that embraces the local and particular as well as the universal and global, the contemporary as well as the past. To train for that capacity continues to challenge theological education everywhere.

Practical theology is particularly challenging and difficult work, for it takes the risk of listening to the critical concerns and practical realities of Christians living in particular contexts, and it must offer constructive *theological* proposals for living faithfully in that context. To do so, it must practice theology as a *habitus*, a kind of theological knowledge and wisdom that comes from ancient as well as contemporary sources. As it does so, the ear of the practical theologian must remain close to the lives of faithful Christians and the ways in which people are making religious sense out of the postmodern realities of our time.

Zusammenfassung

Unter Verwendung von Paul Lakelands Typologie der Postmoderne identifiziert die Vf.in im nordamerikanischen Kontext drei unterschiedliche Konzepte von Praktischer Theologie, die sie mit Hilfe der Kategorien *spätmodern*, *antimodern* und *radikal-postmodern* zu beschreiben sucht. Die spätmoderne Variante sieht sie in Don Brownings umfassender Grundlegung der Praktischen Theologie realisiert, während die antimoderne Position sich am stärksten in den Arbeiten zur christlichen Praxis von Dorothy Bass und Craig Dykstra geltend mache. Radikal-postmoderne Perspektiven schließlich ließen sich vor allem in hefreigungstheologischen, insbesondere in feministischen und kontextualistischen Ansätzen ausmachen. Die Autorin zeigt, dass alle diese Konzepte jeweils auf einer bestimmten Deutung der postmodernen Situation des Christentums aufruhren und immer auch konstruktive Vorschläge für eine spezifisch christliche Lebens- und Glaubenspraxis unter den Bedingungen einer säkularisierten, post-christlichen Gesellschaft heinhalten. Außerdem eröffneten sie insgesamt eine Perspektive auf das geistliche Amt und die theologische Ausbildung, die stark durch das Nebeneinander einer Vielfalt differierender Interpretationen und Auffassungen sowie einer Vielzahl unterschiedlicher Praxismodelle geprägt sei.



Copyright and Use:

As an ATLAS user, you may print, download, or send articles for individual use according to fair use as defined by U.S. and international copyright law and as otherwise authorized under your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement.

No content may be copied or emailed to multiple sites or publicly posted without the copyright holder(s)' express written permission. Any use, decompiling, reproduction, or distribution of this journal in excess of fair use provisions may be a violation of copyright law.

This journal is made available to you through the ATLAS collection with permission from the copyright holder(s). The copyright holder for an entire issue of a journal typically is the journal owner, who also may own the copyright in each article. However, for certain articles, the author of the article may maintain the copyright in the article. Please contact the copyright holder(s) to request permission to use an article or specific work for any use not covered by the fair use provisions of the copyright laws or covered by your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement. For information regarding the copyright holder(s), please refer to the copyright information in the journal, if available, or contact ATLA to request contact information for the copyright holder(s).

About ATLAS:

The ATLA Serials (ATLAS®) collection contains electronic versions of previously published religion and theology journals reproduced with permission. The ATLAS collection is owned and managed by the American Theological Library Association (ATLA) and received initial funding from Lilly Endowment Inc.

The design and final form of this electronic document is the property of the American Theological Library Association.