

# PRACTICAL THEOLOGY: A TRANSFORMATIVE PRAXIS IN THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION TOWARDS HOLISTIC FORMATION

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## Introduction

Practical Theology, as central to church leadership, pastoral practices and missionary contexts, is emerging as a distinct discipline in ‘theological education’<sup>1</sup>. Struggles of life analyzed in theological and ethical deliberations often call for a review of our perception and practice of theology. Thus, centrality of context and hermeneutic in the practice of theology inspire educators and ministers to critically analyze the traditional ministerial practices. More over, the rapidly changing socio-economic scenario of the world inspires the believing community to be keen on guidance at the theological and practical issues they encounter daily. On the other hand, Christians serving the secular world with their expertise in behavioral sciences, sociological studies and other humanities disciplines, have key insights, still to be identified, explored and incorporated by the Christian community. Critical

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Theological Education here takes the definition of Bass & Dykstra as a “place of service to ministry.” Any discussion of Practical Theology is valid in the context of Theological Education if only the latter aims at ministry formation. No doubt, Practical Theology liberates not only the very definition of Theological Education, but also the patterns of learning, teaching and collaboration of historical perspectives, Biblical views, theological reflection methods and contemporary situation analysis. What it recognizes the most is the Scripture-centred coherence that it can undergird in the mission, discipling and theological education tasks of the Christian community.

dimensions that question the effectiveness of the current training in terms of holistic and lifelong formation of student are varied. This paper attempts to present the predicament of fragmentation in theological education prior to its advocacy to utilize Practical Theology as a discipline that integrates the disciplines of theology and the skills training in theological education. Projecting the transformational vision of Practical Theology as a discipline as such for church and society, the paper elaborates on its major approaches.

Practical theology is introduced and advocated as a potential theological construct to facilitate coherence by integrating the philosophy, objectives and tasks in theological education, in view of the lack of consensus in the stated and espoused objectives of training in the church, theological institutions and missions. The burden for theology re-iterated here is that all theological education is/has to be practically grounded theology. Being aware of the dissonances among the formational dimensions as well as the specialized disciplines in theological education, this article attempts to portray Practical Theology as an academic discipline that encompasses the philosophical and practical underpinnings of problem-based and context-oriented learning.

## **Fragmentation<sup>2</sup> and Integration Crisis in Theological Education**

Churches, theological institutions and mission fields-Christianity in general seems to be embracing division rather than unity on these dimensions. Defining ‘church and its ministry’, ‘theological education and its objectives’ and ‘mission work and its outcome’ become the most difficult task in theological analysis particularly due to its tendency to build walls of separation rather than bridges to connect. Generally,

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<sup>2</sup> Edward Farley, *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983).

churches express their dissonance with the current theological training; theological colleges fail to show intense commitment to meet the felt needs of the churches or mission fields; missions, in response to this crisis, resort to their own contextual training and plans. The concern here is to highlight theological education on its pressing need of integration by praxis, for which Practical Theology is advocated as a resourceful alternative. Practical Theology's expanded definition does not divide Theological Education from church ministry or mission field as it says, "theological education, as we use the term, includes not only seminaries and divinity schools but also other institutions that deliberately foster the education and formation of pastors and other ministers, such as teaching parishes, judicatory offices, retreat centres, publications, para church organizations and continuing education programmes."<sup>3</sup>

Many theological schools today are little more than technical, degree granting institutions that often fall under the multiple demands from accrediting bodies on syllabus and academic activities. As a result, large numbers of genuinely committed students are uncertain about the nature, problems and practical demands in ministry. Caught in either of the extremes of overly cognitive orientation or total negligence of academic formation, our training system ends up in the lack of unity and coherence. Often, the content and practice of faith are indiscreetly forgotten while knowledge is splintered into unrelated pieces of information in academic training.

Finding answers to how far we are able to incorporate the four basic dimensions of formation- spiritual, academic, ministerial and personal- in our practice of theological education is challenging. If a theological institution realizes from its own self-evaluation that it fails to meet the expectations of either

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<sup>3</sup> Dorothy C Bass & Craig Dykstra (eds), *For Life Abundant: Practical Theology, Theological Education and Christian Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 2.

the church or missions, the most urgent task is to review its own stated objectives and the methods employed. Analysis of problems by scholars who detach themselves from social interactions and individuals who are directly affected by the situation can be implausibly different. As conflicts arising between stated objectives and felt needs; academic skills and ministry skills; professional knowledge and espoused purpose or curriculum prepared by intellectual experts and outcomes expected by a drastically different constituency, how do we propose Practical Theology in any case as a resolution? For this, Practical Theology itself has to be defined.

## **Defining ‘Practical Theology’**

Practical Theology provides theological foundation for ministry stimulates theological reflection on contextual as well as conventional situations and simultaneously reflects on theology from a ministerial perspective. Pattison and Woodward view Practical Theology as ‘a place where religious beliefs and practice meets contemporary experiences, questions, and actions and conducts dialogue that is mutually enriching, intellectually critical and practically transforming.’<sup>4</sup> It is a critical, constructive and grounded theological reflection by communities of faith, carried on consistently in the contexts of their ‘praxis’, which here denotes a combination of knowledge born of analytical objectivity and distance, practical wisdom and creative skills. “It draws on and responds to people’s interpretations of normative sources from scripture and tradition and helps ongoing modifications and transformations of their practices in order to be more adequately responsive to their interpretations of the shape of God’s call to partnership.”<sup>5</sup> As a problem posing theology, it specifically deals with life and recovers the theology of the

<sup>4</sup> S Pattison & J Woodward, *A Reader in Practical Theology*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2000, 7.

<sup>5</sup> James W Fowler, “The Emerging New Shape of Practical Theology”, Paper presented at the International Academy of Practical Theology, Atlanta, 4. Copy in the Archives of Edgehill College, UK.

past and constructively develops theology for the future.<sup>6</sup> In other words, it is the doing of theology that is first informed by the real situation of people and then allowing us, by a careful hermeneutical process, to reflect theologically on those situations and problems and then return to the situation to gently and carefully transform. Therefore, the social horizon and the context of the locus of praxis form the operational base for Practical Theology. Agreeing with Farley's analysis of fragmentation, Joseph C Hough, Jr., and John B Cobb, Jr., emphasizes<sup>7</sup> the need of "practical thinkers and reflective practitioners". It is about a transformative practice that helps the community of God to preach what they practice and practice what they preach. The call to keep balance is explicitly identified by Duce and Strange, "Practical Theology has the task of interpreting scriptures for the life of the church today, in its structure, in its practice, its ethics and pastoral care. This discipline is often omitted from a modern university or treated as a Cinderella while in fact, it represents the crown of all the rest and the goal of scripture itself, for the aim of God's self-disclosure is the creation of a regenerate community in response to His word.... Practical Theology is *application* of God's revelation to the individual and the church. It represents the climax, and the final point of theological endeavour."<sup>8</sup>

In summary, the overall approach is problem-based, action oriented, critical reflective, hermeneutical, research-grounded and correlational. This endeavor encompasses the whole of life for the sake of all God's people through its call not to envision not just preparational but operational training also.

## **Towards Integration through Practical Theology**

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<sup>6</sup> Paul Ballard and John Pritchard, *Practical Theology in Action: Christian Thinking in the Service of Church and Society* (London: SPCK, 1996).

<sup>7</sup> Joseph C Hough, Jr., and John B Cobb, Jr., *Christian Identity and Theological Education* (Atlanta: Scholar's Press, 1985).

<sup>8</sup> Philip Duce and Daniel Strange, *Keeping Your Balance: Approaching theological and Religious Studies* (Leicester: Inter-varsity, 2001), 76, 77.

Practical Theology calls the theological education enterprise to face up with the real situation and the challenges it raises and then to translate knowledge into practice, by critically reflecting on theology, culture, sociology, organization, psychology and any other discipline related. It explains the theological foundation for ministry, stimulates theological reflection on contextual problems and simultaneously reflects on theology from a ministerial perspective. The task that keeps the hermeneutical vision at its core, therefore, is action-theological reflection-practical contemplation-action. Some of its specific emphases in approach are identified below.

- **Problem-Based, Action-Oriented Approach**

Since it is problem-based, it is action-oriented. It presupposes openness to the fundamental shifts in the society in ways people see religion, sexuality, life and relationships in the multi-cultural, multi-religious and globalized contexts, the theological method also required ongoing reviewing. Prior to addressing ultimate queries such as “what should we do” or “how should we live”, practical theology takes so much of analysis owing mainly to differences in theological hermeneutic and diverse approaches to cultural values. ‘Problem Based learning’ (PBL), as increasingly employed in formal education, helps to develop skills of critical thinking, research, substantive dialogue, clear writing and of practical ministry.<sup>9</sup> This is crucial in theological education as James Whyte observes, “Since the church’s life and action is related not only to its self-understanding and comprehension of its faith, but also to the changing society in which it functions, practical theology is triadic, concerned with the inner relationship of faith, practice and social reality and is aware

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<sup>9</sup> Hans Madueme and Linda Cannell, “Problem Based Learning and the Master of Divinity Program” 47-60in *Theological Education*, Vol. 43, Number 1, (2007): 47.

that the lines of force flow in both directions [church and society].”<sup>10</sup>

Practical Theology is an Action-Oriented discipline, that identifies and articulates a pertinent issue in ministry (openness and commitment to learn and change); analyzes the situation as it is (confidence to tackle pressing issues first-hand); interprets the situation as it should be (biblical/theological centrality); deliberates on and list the tasks and designs specific action plan (contextual awareness and sensibility); reflects on, evaluates and modifies plans; returns to practice (ministry focus). Only when our theological system shows commitment to address people’s questions about the changing social, economic and cultural dynamics that challenge them as a community of faith, it will start to discern and appreciate God’s redeeming activity in God’s world. While the Biblical, Dogmatic and Historical Theology serves as the foundation to guide our steps, Hermeneutics assist in explaining our vision in understandable terms to people and Pastoral Care and Counseling is about providing them with practical assistance in faith and life. Thus the hermeneutical element is highlighted as key in our discussion.

- **Reflective Hermeneutical Approach**

Contextual sensibility is key to our theological attempt in seeking meaning and reading our world and the conventional practices. Practical theology essentially being a hermeneutical theology, seeks answers to ‘what do we do with our theology / how do we understand our theology in this situation?’ Dealing critically with imposing theology and ethics, it encourages keen students of theology to evaluate the inherited understandings that guide the interpretations and actions and to become transmitters of theology into people’s real lives.

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<sup>10</sup> James Whyte, in Alastair Campbell, *A Dictionary of Pastoral Care* (London: SPCK, 1987), 213.

However, the method is primarily a reflective equilibrium model that facilitates the ministry of reconciliation and hope. “All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting their sins against them.” 2 Cori. 5:18-19 (NIV). Anderson insists on grace in his definition of the mission of Practical Theology thus, “A theology that does not begin and with grace both from God’s side as well as from the human side is a theology that binds “heavy burdens” (Matt. 23:4) and sets a “yoke of slavery” (Gal.5:1) on those who look for freedom and forgiveness.”<sup>11</sup> What Practical Theology suggests is a strategic perspective that links the hermeneutical with the empirical so as to achieve an integrative model that underlies the theological task as a whole.<sup>12</sup> The theological questions that practically challenge people in their daily life presuppose *scientia* and *sapientia*-in other words, theoretical knowledge and practical wisdom. Nevertheless, the theological system, not to exacerbate the theory-practice divide has to enhance its hermeneutical mission to relate.

- **Critical-Correlational Research Approach**

This research approach usually follows social scientific methods because it works by holding the Christian vision for the world and the actual situation in the world in reciprocal relationship. For Heitink, it is a model of interpretation that links the hermeneutical perspective of the Humanities with the empirical perspective of the social sciences.<sup>13</sup> Contemporary theological system often faces up with the lack of a discipline to accommodate specialization on an eclectic topic with

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<sup>11</sup> Ray S Anderson, *The Shape of Practical Theology: Empowering Ministry with Theological Praxis* (Illinois: IVP, 2001), 29.

<sup>12</sup> Paul Ballard and John Pritchard, *Practical theology in Action: Christian Thinking in the Service of Church and Society* (London: SPCK, 1996), 63.

<sup>13</sup> Gerben Heitink, *Practical Theology: History, theory and Action Domains* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 102-103.

complex practical underpinnings since it does not perfectly fit into most conventional disciplines. Practical theology's educational vision offers the correlational possibility to systematically handle this research concern. However, since many theological educators as well as researchers tend to get overly subsumed in social scientific disciplines, Practical Theology has to be intentional in its emphasis on Scriptural centrality. Keeping this balance is a challenge to evangelical theological education today.

The educational vision embedded in Practical Theology seeks to develop this interdisciplinary skill in Christians to read their Bible, the world around them and the traditions and cultural practices they uphold for a much deeper perception of the situation rather than knowledge accumulation confined to classrooms. For Shulman,<sup>14</sup> learning involves one's whole being and therefore, a learning pattern that divides the cognitive, affective and performance dimensions might not equip people for life. The proxy indicators for a holistic educational pattern for Shulman are: engagement and motivation; Knowledge and Understanding; Performance and Action: reflection and Critique: Judgement and Design and Commitment and Identity. No doubt, 'engagement' matters for Practical Theologians, who explore specific methodologies primarily by engaging in the situation. Engagement may indicate a variety of approaches to providing for learning in terms of being cognitively engaged (I understand and want to know more), physiologically engaged (I am paying attention), emotionally engaged (I have a vested interest), or strategically engaged (I am 'in the action'). Evoking engagement in a learning object design is a challenge; each learner may have different ways they are engaged.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Lee Shulman, *The Wisdom of Practice: Essays on Teaching, learning and Learning to Teach* Edited by Suzanne M Wilson (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004).

<sup>15</sup> Patricia McGee, 'Learning Objects: Bloom's Taxonomy and Deeper Learning Principles', Department of Interdisciplinary Studies & Curriculum and Instruction, the University of Texas at San Antonio, <<http://edu3.utsa.edu/pmcgee/nlii/LOBloomMcGee.doc>>

The Critical Correlational research approach in Practical Theology offers academic freedom and flexibility to choose/explore the best possible methods to analyze the situation and reflect on it theologically, among which, we have *ethnomethodology* (study on the ways in which people make sense of the world and display their understandings of it), *phenomenology* (gathering deep information and perceptions through inductive, qualitative methods) and *hermeneutics*. Social scientific methods such as content analysis of literature, life stories, historical analysis, surveys, interviews, quantitative and qualitative questionnaires, participant, non-participant or disguised observations, focus groups, narrative analysis, case studies, structured and non-structures observations, attitudinal tests, opinionnaires are to list a few methods that makes both the learning and teaching interactive, reflective, interdisciplinary and hence, transformational.

- **Call to Transformational Practice in Theological Education**

Overall, the aim is to bring our world into greater harmony with the Creator's intensions as it arises out of practice and returns to practice. Refusing to limit itself to academics or certain areas of pastoral practice, training has to extend to the personal and spiritual needs and queries of people by maintaining the hermeneutical balance in theological reflection. There is a felt need in educational institutions around the globe to liberate teaching and learning styles from fragmentation to integration. More over, concepts like 'hospitality' in learning situations introduced by Nouwen and later expounded by Jane McAvoy, questions the idea of teacher as the sole custodian of knowledge. However, it takes risk to

overcome the fear of change in an academic setting as anywhere else.

The relational and praxis-oriented Practical Theological approach includes narrativity, human experience, critical thinking, interdisciplinary and non-hierarchical learning which are essentially in opposition to the ‘banking model’ of education. The pedagogical models<sup>16</sup> such as, the banking-Model (the teacher owns information and the student is a passive recipient of the knowledge), Expert-Apprentice Model (The teacher is the master who moulds and trains his/her disciple), consumer Model (the student is a consumer and the teacher is a sales person; the student buys whatever interests him/her), and the Therapeutic-Individualistic Model (the teacher helps, gives wise counsel to select courses that would help the student to find satisfaction and personal edification) operate within the traditional patterns of theological education. Even so, students, deprived of an opportunity to gain the skills of practical ministry and reflective learning during their theological education, feel empty within on completion of their courses that they have not deposited anything of practical significance for their life. Practical Theology with its extended openness across disciplines and human problems, offers a new paradigm as problem-oriented, constructively critical, collaborative and dialogical. Contributions of experts such as Knowles<sup>17</sup> (Andragogical Learning), Kolb<sup>18</sup> (Experiential Learning) and practical theologians such as Stephen Pattison<sup>19</sup>, Ballard & Pritchard have all been vital. For education to become a holistic process and of life long value, it has to become a ‘total experience’ that involves the cognitive, affective and psychomotor development of the learner. In

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<sup>16</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* Trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1987), 54.

<sup>17</sup> Malcolm S Knowles, et al., *Andragogy in Action: Applying Modern Principles of Adult education* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1984)

<sup>18</sup> David A Kolb, *Experiential Learning* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1984)

<sup>19</sup> Stephen Pattison, *The Challenge of Practical theology: Selected Essays* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2007).

Practical theology this corresponds to a learner-centred, experience-based learning that espouses open-access and is cooperatively oriented so as to echo what Farley terms a recovery of 'Theologia', the reflective wisdom of faith.<sup>20</sup> This was the method of Lord Jesus Christ, who, beyond awareness of the existing tensions, conflicts and historically and culturally established boundary lines, went out graciously to make such a theologically sound discourse with the Samaritan woman, brought down Zachaeus to address his problems. His theology did not place restrictions to deal with human needs and queries, in spite of the socio-religious complexities they entailed. Jesus, the perfect model of Practical Theologian, made thoughtful engagement with practical situations through a well-integrated analysis which was at once fully theological and rigorously empirical.

## Summary

Reiterating this burden for theology is simple and straightforward. All theology is/has to be Practical Theology and this is the task of the whole church. The all-encompassing horizon of faith in God and in His unchangeable Word is the hub of the theological practice. Practical Theology is a theological approach but more than that it is a distinct discipline that covers the philosophical and practical underpinnings of theological disciplines. It recognizes the unreserved commitment and intentional work plans to help students to get immersed in local and to confidently address the global situations in which they are to minister, persisting to overcome ideological captivity and irrelevant abstractions. By its essential net-working and interactive style of learning, it attempts to make theological schools and mission organizations envision that the pastoral team is balancing their ministry by interacting with the academia and the theological

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<sup>20</sup> Edward Farley, *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of theological Education* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 35.

scholars honoring the practical bearing of their own scholarship. Nevertheless, the spotlight is not solving problems but instilling the theological vision and hope for the world. As Practical Theologians, we consistently seek the depths and awesome patterns of God's grace in redeeming and preserving His creation, which is facilitated by the reflective hermeneutic task undertaken in life's struggles of individuals as well as communities.