

Setting the Terrain

What Is Practical Theology, Anyway?

The forecast of religion in America remains tempered, with some spotting trends of decline and others reporting relative stability.¹ But almost no one is predicting clear skies and perfectly happy days for American religion as it moves into the next decades of the twenty-first century. While sociologists and cultural theorists (whether academic or popular) continue to discuss a (new or revived nontraditional) spiritual propensity of the populace, the institutions of religion in America are, it appears, unequivocally taking a hit.

And no institutions are impacted more directly than theological seminaries and divinity schools. Some predict that nearly a third of mainline seminaries will need to close their doors in the next decade or two. Many are already merging, even across denominational and theological traditions, to remain afloat. A radical reorganization, if not already here, has gathered on the horizon with force and is moving in our direction.

As leaders of denominations and educational centers rush to batten down the hatches to either prepare for or mitigate the damage of the high winds of change, they are often turning to practical theology. It is more than obvious that theological education as usual, a theological education that fails to prepare graduates for concrete and lived faith communities, will not do. In the storm of change only a more *practical* perspective, a *practical* perspective that connects

1. For an account of decline, see Robert Wuthnow's *After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty -and Thirty-Somethings Are Shaping the Future of American Religion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007). For reports of stability, see Mark Chaves, *American Religion: Contemporary Trends* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011). Though Chaves sees a relative stability in American religion, he nevertheless mentions that religion has experienced slight declines since the 1970s, and particularly since the mid-1990s.

theory with practice, will provide any way to fortify the structures of local congregations and denominations.²

THE BASTARD CHILD

Practical theology has experienced a revival of relevance. It was born as the bastard child of another radical transition of theological education, born in the ferocious winds of the arrival of post-Enlightenment modernity, which saw a momentous shift in the location of theological education as it moved from monasteries, abbeys, and humanist classrooms to modern research universities. This shift uprooted theological education from places of formation and repotted it in the soil of empirical science. Because of such an environment, practical theology was pushed into the world.³

But its arrival was never celebrated. In the ethos of the modern scientific research university it had no claim to royalty; practical theology's bloodlines were too mixed with experience and practice (with the practical as opposed to the theoretical) to claim the right of the throne of science. Belittled and ignored, it rested at the bottom of the theological encyclopedia, and it was imagined to be a bottom feeder, hoping to gather up the intellectual crumbs that fell from the table of Bible, systematics, and history.⁴ Practical theology was to use these scraps to *apply* the noble scientific theories of the university's high table to the peasants out in the practice of ministry. It was believed that if budding pastors had the scientific theory (the true meal) of the classic theological disciplines (systematics, history, and Bible), then with a few concluding courses (a little sweet and fluffy dessert) on management and liturgical organization, they were properly nourished and ready to lead.⁵

2. If one trend has been to turn to practical theology, another trend, arguably congruent with the practical theology, is the turn toward the missional. A number of thinkers in practical theology and missiology have begun to cross-fertilize with each other. For instance, Kenda Creasy Dean and Thomas Hastings have drawn on missional perspectives for practical theology, and Ben Conner has pulled from practical theology for his missiological work. See Kenda Creasy Dean, *Practicing Passion: Youth and the Quest for a Passionate Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004); and Thomas Hastings, *Practical Theology and the One Body of Christ: Toward a Missional-Ecumenical Model* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007).

3. Richard Osmer, following Edward Farley and others, has made the point that before the modern research university all theology had a practical edge. Osmer calls such heroes of the faith like Luther, Calvin, Augustine, and Paul proto-practical theologians, explaining that for these fathers (and a number of mothers could be added) all theology was embedded in concrete communities and was never imagined outside of the "livedness" of a people.

4. See Gisbertus Voetius's seventeenth-century encyclopedia for an example.

Such a perspective held for centuries. With theological education housed in the brick buildings of universities and the church itself protected by the castles of nobles in Europe and the monocultural socialization of North America, the “university” system of theological education was firmly protected by any strong winds that might blow.

WINDS OF CHANGE AND A BASTARD NO MORE

But after a few centuries, and leading into the last decades of the twentieth century, the erosion of the brick walls created by the friction of positivist empiricism and cultural pluralism became evident. The winds of transition began to penetrate the halls of the theology department, coming with a bitter chill that made other empirical fields, such as the hard and social sciences, wonder why a university needed a theology faculty at all. As the church lost cultural relevance and faced the challenge of living in a context in which pluralism and doubt met it at every turn, new students stumbled into the cold lecture halls and seminar rooms already raw from the winds of transition, shaking their heads as the learned “men” spoke with little acknowledgment or concern for the state of change and how these winds had frozen brittle, applied, theory to practice perspectives into irrelevance.

In the 1970s and 1980s a handful of the very scholars teaching in universities made a push for a renewed understanding of practical theology. Recognizing the winds of transition and the erosion of the theological encyclopedia, and bolstered by the recovery of practical philosophies (from Aristotle to Marx to American pragmatism to postmodern deconstruction), people like Don Browning, James Fowler, Edward Farley, Lewis Mudge, and Thomas Groome sought to turn the bastard discipline into a prince (or at least mutual sibling).

5. Duncan Forrester explains, “In both Protestantism and Roman Catholicism this tradition has continued almost up to the present with little or no critical theological reflection or suggestion that the subject is or may be a systematic and rigorous discipline in volume after volume of good advice to ministers, and in hints and tips on how to perform traditional functions of ministry. F. D. Schleiermacher’s suggestion that practical theology was the completion and ‘crown of theological study’ indicated the possibility of a better integration between practical theology and the other theological disciplines. But Schleiermacher saw practical theology as no more than the craft of church management, the channel through which the theories of biblical and systematic theology flow to nourish the life of the church. The present structures of church and ministry were accepted uncritically, as was the assumption that the subject addressed itself exclusively to the practice of clergy.” “Can Theology Be Practical?,” in *Practical Theology: International Perspectives*, ed. Friedrich Schweitzer and Johannes van der Ven (Berlin: Peter Lang, 1999), 8.

Arguing that all theology needed to make a turn to the practical, these scholars sought to move practical theology out of the basement of theological education and into a more constructive and essential place within the endeavor. These scholars made a convincing case that concrete communities of practice (whether congregations or other social forms of lived practice) are the very text of practical theological reflection because these communities are places of embodied theology, places of practical wisdom.

This effort has given practical theology a new relevance. Those standing against the stiff winds of transition are quick to point to practical theology as a way forward, as a way of connecting theory and practice, theological education and ministry, Christian practice and public engagement. After all, if the institutions of American religion are waning but there is nevertheless a potent (though maybe chaotic) spiritual propensity, then maybe theological education would do much better to turn toward these concrete organic communities of experienced practice.

MORE COMPLICATED THAN IT SEEMS

Practical theology has been ushered out of its basement room of shame, redefined no longer as bastard, and *maybe* even made leader in a way forward for theological construction. Practical theology has made a move to the concrete, to lived contexts and lived theology, leaving the stuffy library behind for fieldwork and questionnaires. This undertaking has not been done simplistically. But because it has *not* been done simplistically, it has *not* been free from slippage and confusion regarding what exactly practical theology is and how it goes about its work.

I will do my best to avoid this slippage as I seek in the following chapters to recalibrate the field within a lived conception of justification through a Christopraxis practical theology of the cross. Doing all I can to avoid this slippage is not only needed for my argument, but it also communicates my deep appreciation for other practical theological projects and work already offered within the field. I no doubt will be critical of some of this work (even in the paragraphs below) but nevertheless recognize that it also hoists me onto its shoulders, making it possible for someone like me to climb from the theological dungeon of bastard derision into theological partnership.

While many standing in the squall of transition have pointed to practical theology as a helpful way forward, these very advocates in seminary administrations or denominational offices have often found it hard to actually say what practical theology is and who does it—this is the very slippage to

which I'm referring. Is it something done by pastors, professors, or laypeople? And what makes a practical theologian different than, say, a biblical scholar who is concerned with the practice of preaching or Bible study in her classroom? Is she a practical theologian as well as Bible scholar? And what exactly is a practical theologian? Practical theology's turn to the concrete and lived is essential (and something I deeply affirm), but how is this done? And where? And by whom?

WHAT IS PRACTICAL THEOLOGY AND HOW DOES IT WORK?

Two leading scholars in the field of practical theology, Bonnie Miller-McLemore and Richard Osmer, on whom I'll draw first, have spotted this slippage and sought to answer the questions above. Osmer has provided what he calls his "reflective equilibrium model of practical theology."⁶ He explains that this is not a method per se, though some have used it that way. Rather, it is a model that seeks to explore the shared operations of those calling themselves practical theologians. Osmer's model seeks to provide some traction on what practical theologians do, on the operations of practical theology.

Osmer has defined practical theology, then, as consisting of four core tasks: the descriptive, interpretative, normative, and pragmatic. These four core tasks, broadly done, articulate what practical theology is and does.⁷

These tasks surround four central questions. The descriptive asks, *what is happening?* and uses tools of thick description to answer it. These tools could include case studies, questionnaires, appreciative inquiry, participant observation, and so forth. The interpretative asks, *why is it happening?* and places the descriptive findings in conversation with frameworks that seek to explain the phenomenon experienced and examined. These usually are cultural, psychological, or anthropological frameworks.

6. See Tom Hasting's *Practical Theology and the One Body of Christ* for a critical exploration of Osmer's perspective.

7. In *Practical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 9, Osmer provides a summary of these tasks. •*The descriptive-empirical task.* Gathering information that helps us discern patterns and dynamics in particular episodes, situations, or contexts. •*The interpretive task.* Drawing on theories of the arts and sciences to better understand and explain why these patterns and dynamics are occurring. •*The normative task.* Using theological concepts to interpret particular episodes, situations, or contexts, constructing ethical norms to guide our responses, and learning from 'good practice.' •*The pragmatic task.* Determining strategies of action that will influence situations in ways that are desirable and entering into a reflective conversation with the 'talk back' emerging when they are enacted."

These two core tasks of practical theology bind it unequivocally in concrete and lived contexts. Practical theology, whether it starts with a crisis, established practice, or lived belief, is placed first and foremost on the ground. This is a unanimous commitment across the field. Yet this also makes the field confusing in depiction to outsiders (and in function to some insiders). The need for rigorous attention to the descriptive and interpretative DNA of practical theology can make it appear, to some, as “social science lite.” It can be seen as a kind of sociology in the theological faculty, leading some to wonder about the difference between sociology of religion and practical theology.

For practical theology to continue to be concrete and lived, it must not expunge these tasks from its operation, yet it nevertheless must also think of how such moves (in themselves) point to the theological nature of practical theology. After all, it appears *en vogue* and ruled as good scholarship to nearly take off the theological hat when doing descriptive and interpretative work, before (maybe) putting it on again later. We will explore this assertion in more depth in the discussion of critical realism in part 3. But for now it is enough to ask whether practical theology, by taking off its theological hat and succumbing to the logic of the university (its birth mother that never wanted it), takes on a kind of social constructionism that sees reality as little more than socially constructed phenomena, making the objective of practical theology to articulate empirically human constructs rather than to articulate something about a complicated emergent and stratified reality.

When this happens, the descriptive and interpretative tasks become locked in epistemology (what humans *know* as constructed and observable) and escapes ontological articulations that touch on concrete and lived ways people lean into the mystery of reality itself, a reality bigger and more than socially constructed constructs. Taking on the social constructionism of a hyperempirical social scientific pursuit makes rich conversation about divine and human encounter (those that uphold God’s own freedom) ever difficult; for the divine cannot be captured in strict social constructionism without severe reduction. While seeking to avoid reduction but still wed to a hard social constructionism, practical theology runs the risk of avoiding the *theological* and succumbing to the human agent’s social construction of God. Or more often, it simply stops talking of God and instead turns to religious phenomena—staying only at the level of the congregation, for instance, and its interaction with political ideologies.

TWO OTHER CORE TASKS

Osmer explains that there are two other core tasks to practical theology, two tasks he calls the normative and pragmatic. The questions that mobilize these two tasks ask respectively, *what ought to be happening?* (the normative) and, *what then should we do?* (the pragmatic). Osmer explains clearly that though the normative is the heart of the specifically theological move in practical theology, theology has also been present prior to the operation of this task. As a matter of fact, Osmer in the appendix to his *Teaching Ministry of Congregations* explains that the outworking of these four core tasks, which are shared by all practical theologians, are nevertheless mobilized in different ways depending on an upper lens, which includes things like one's view of praxis, one's theological anthropology, and one's cosmology.⁸ I would include one's epistemology in this frame.

Though there is contention about how these normative and pragmatic tasks are used, practical theology clearly needs them to secure its identity as a theological discipline with some value within the faculty and church. While I would argue that in a scholarly frame practical theology has given its most direct attention to description and interpretation, it has not forgotten its pragmatic and performative mandate. Practical theology has not been shy about distinguishing itself from pure sociology or anthropology by asserting that it is interested not only in describing and interpreting the world, but in changing it.⁹ For this change to happen, renewed, reimaged, or newly created forms of action are needed. So practical theology hones classic practices of the Christian tradition like liturgy or counseling, helping those performing such practices reflect on them and do them better. Practical theology as pragmatic action may also seek more public, even political, engagement. This search to change the world as much as describe it leads some to assert that practical theology is simply a normative sociology or normative anthropology.

Said either in disparagement or affirmation, such a comment reveals, nevertheless, that this attention to pragmatic action places practical theology within normative commitments. To seek to change things is to make some normative assertion about the deficiency of the present and the new direction

8. Richard Osmer, *The Teaching Ministry of Congregations* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005).

9. "In [practical theology's] focus on concrete instances of religious life, its objective is both to understand and to influence religious wisdom or faith in action in congregations and public life more generally." Miller-McLemore, "Introduction: The Contributions of Practical Theology," in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, ed. Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 14.

the future needs to take. Osmer's question, *what ought to be happening?* has most often been taken in this kind of ethical framework, leading practical theology to be seen by some (particularly Don Browning) as a kind of pragmatically engaged ethics.

While honoring the concrete and lived commitments of practical theology, such a perspective nevertheless tends to flatten out divine action, choosing to see normativity as dialogue with the Christian tradition that sets ethical (normative) directions for engagement. Divine action, then, as an independent and free reality, runs the risk of being lost.

Therefore, from my perspective, it may be better to see Osmer's normative question, *what ought to be happening?* not solely in an ethical frame, but also in a revelatory one, that is, asking, *what ought to be happening (what ways should we perceive of reality, ourselves, the church, our practice, and conceptions of God) now that God has encountered us? What ought to happen now that we have experienced the event of God's encounter?* I might change this question to, *now what?* After we've had an experience with the living Christ, now that the divine presence has come to us in hole or dream, in our very concrete and lived experience, ministering to us. Now that we've called these experiences *real*, now what?¹⁰

The heart of the normative question in the perspective I'll be articulating is the "ought," defined not as moralistic or epistemological (Kantian) but as an event of encounter, as an ontological reality, as the unveiling of God's being next to our own. What ought to happen now that the Spirit has come upon us (Acts 2)? Therefore, my Christopraxis practical theology of the cross frames the normative question of *what ought to happen* not within a philosophical ethic, but as the experience of Pentecost.¹¹ *Now that the Spirit of the living Christ has fallen on us as a very ontological reality, as something we experience as real, now what?* From the experience of this encounter Peter and the disciples are pushed to performative action (Acts 2)—to preach in such a way that is not only a "best practice" (three thousand are added to their number, as all hear them in their own languages) but is the very participation in the continued action of God (the Spirit moves to build Christ's church by overcoming the curse of Babel in the communion of Word heard and responded to).¹² I could add little to

10. This shifting of Osmer's question is actually the heart of this project—Christopraxis.

11. Ray Anderson, whom I am following in my Christopraxis perspective, discusses this Pentecostal starting point. See part 4 of *The Soul of Ministry* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1997).

12. "While we have suggested that the starting point for Practical Theology is human experience, in fact this is not strictly the case. God and the revelation God has given to human beings in Christ is the true starting point for all Practical Theology." John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (London: SCM, 2006), 11.

John Swinton's excellent definition of practical theology: "Practical Theology . . . is dedicated to enabling the faithful performance of the gospel and to exploring and taking seriously the complex dynamics of the human encounter with God."¹³

GRIPPING THE SLIPPAGE

Osmer's consensus model of the four core tasks has provided helpful traction as we grapple with the slippery nature of practical theology. Osmer has helped us see the core operations of this diverse intellectual makeup of practical theologians. I used the model earlier in a dual manner, both as a way of defining the *shared* movements of practical theology *and* as a way of seeing the problematic way these shared movements have been operationalized in practical theology.

But Osmer's perspective too is not completely free of slippage. In his book *Practical Theology* Osmer explains that these four core tasks explicate what academic practical theologians do. But he also hopes that these four core tasks connect to those directly in the practice of ministry. And I, personally, from work in the classroom, think they can be helpful to practitioners.

But this doesn't alleviate tension around who does practical theology. While the four core tasks may be insightful for those in ministry, is practical theology something done by scholars or something done by pastors? And even in the academy, is the Bible scholar whom I discussed above, who teaches the Pauline epistles with an eye toward preaching and gives assignments to write Sunday morning Bible studies, not also doing practical theology? Confronted with these questions it appears that we want to say yes, but no, confused as to why both the affirmative and negative is in us.

WHAT IS THE DEFINITION OF PRACTICAL THEOLOGY? WHO DOES IT?

Bonnie Miller-McLemore has explained that invariably, whenever a conversation on practical theology occurs, someone will say, "Well, what really is practical theology after all?" In other words, who does practical theology and where is it done? If Osmer helps us deal with the slippage in the function of practical theology, then Miller-McLemore helps us deal with the slippage in who does practical theology and where it occurs.

Miller-McLemore explains that practical theology is done in four related but distinctive locales, which therefore possess unique audiences and objectives.

13. *Ibid.*, 4.

She explains that practical theology is (a) a *discipline* done by scholars, yet it is also (b) an *activity of faith* done by believers. But she doesn't stop here, explaining that practical theology can also be defined as (c) a *method* used for studying theology in practice and finally, (d) as a *curricular area* of subdisciplines (like pastoral care, homiletics, liturgy, and youth ministry) located in seminaries and universities.¹⁴

A) Scholarly Discipline	B) Activity of Faith
C) Method of Study	D) Curricular Area



Figure 1. Four Loci of Practical Theology (from Bonnie Miller-McLemore)

So the biblical scholar described earlier is not a practical theologian in the sense of (a) a discipline done by scholars, and her work is not located in a practical theology department in the sense of (d) a curriculum area, but she is using practical theology inside her Bible course in the sense of (c) a method for studying theology in practice, with the hopes of impacting her students to do practical theology in the sense of (b) an activity of faith done by believers. So in some sense she is involved in practical theology, turning theology to the practical. But she has not exhausted or eliminated the field in her classroom operations.

In my own school there has been a significant turn throughout the institution toward concrete congregations of practice. All faculty are called to attend to these concrete locales in all courses. We are a school that has sensed the winds of transition. But this turn has actually worked to tacitly subjugate the division of practical theology (called “leadership”) to a group of misfits that do not fit squarely into Bible, theology, or history. When an argument is made for more clearly affirming the pursuits of practical theology within the division itself, colleagues outside the division will return with, “Well, I also do practical theology in my systematics classes.” But what is missed is that yes, they may do practical theology in the sense of (c) a method for studying theology in practice and (b) an activity of faith done by believers, but not as (a) a discipline done by scholars and (d) a curriculum area. We continue to talk past each other because of the slippage in locales, which Miller-McLemore helps us see.

14. See Miller-McLemore, “Introduction: The Contributions of Practical Theology,” 4.

Therefore, in conversation about practical theology we must be clear about which of the four dimensions of practical theology we are discussing. Miller-McLemore has helpfully shown that we cannot flatten the essential texture of the field itself.

So when I talk of practical theology in this project I mean to keep in mind all four dimensions but will focus directly on practical theology as (a) a discipline done by scholars and (b) an activity of faith done by believers, exploring how it is that a Christopraxis practical theology of the cross might impact and address the scholarly field of practical theology, giving it normative footing within a revelational realism that nevertheless still attends to the concrete and lived. *By focusing on (a) and (b) I am seeking to assert that those in (b) have real experiences of divine action, and it is the job of those in (a) to attend to these concrete experiences, giving theological shape to them.*

Therefore, while the primary audience for this thought experiment is the field itself, I hope to also provide ways that it might impact the vista of those in ministry, most directly because of the centrality that ministry plays within my perspective (I'll argue below that I think practical theology is ministry). I hope to show how practical theology as a discipline done by scholars is connected to practical theology as an activity of faith done by believers, who, as I'll show in the next chapter, have concrete experiences of God's action, of Jesus' presence, coming to them through ministry.

CONNECTING THE A WITH THE B

Practical theology has tended to stick to the phenomenal (to borrow Kant's language), believing that attending to the phenomenal and ignoring the noumenal is, in the end, more *practical* (that is, concrete and lived).¹⁵ Practical theology then attends to phenomenal religious experience.

It has been a great pursuit of practical theology as a discipline to make "practical" or obvious this link between the field as (a) a discipline done by scholars and as (b) an *activity of faith* done by believers. By this I mean that it has worked to make the link close at hand for the human agent. Practical theology has had a certain aversion toward metaphysical assertions about noumenal realities. This knee-jerk disdain for any metaphysical starting point, ruled out as impractical, has tended to make practical theology, at least in North America, uneasy with *even* the revelatory realism that I will be forwarding. I too will stand against a firm metaphysic that is claimed to be beyond experience and

15. This, in my opinion, also shows how ingrained practical theology is in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century liberalism.

intangible. But, my assertion is that experiences of transcendence, experiences of Jesus coming to us, may actually be concrete and lived—may be *practical*; they get us out of holes and heal our broken hearts. And because they do, we can claim them as real. Below, I'll ground my perspective not in a disconnected metaphysical but in a commitment to the mysterious nature of reality that comes to us as event. Transcendence, experiences like Marlen's and mine, may be contested but may nevertheless possess the possibility of being real experiences of higher strata of reality, of divine action, not as a pure metaphysic but as an event of ministerial encounter.

There have been three connected ways, like Russian nesting dolls, to make the connection between (a) and (b), between scholarly reflection and the action of practitioners, and each of these ways has tried to avoid some of the pitfalls of nineteenth-century liberalism while not always being opposed to it. These three ways have been an attention to *phronesis*, an exploration of human flourishing, and, most richly, an analysis of practice itself.

Phronesis is a concept taken from the thought of Aristotle. It is practical wisdom as opposed to formal knowledge of the theoretical (*theoria*). It signals a practical form of knowing that stands in contrast to *theoria*. *Phronesis* is a form of knowledge that is acquired by doing through practice; it is more than simply *techné*, but in the end it is attentive to the lived rather than turning to articulations or explorations of universal truths. Its attention rests in the generative depth of human actions, whether those actions are rationally conceived or tacitly formative. It stands in contrast to the theoretical, but it nevertheless is a form of rational knowledge blooming from the concrete, lived experience of reflective doing (from praxis).

Phronesis connects (a) and (b) because it is a form of knowledge that those operating in (a) can attend to that is bound within the practical phenomenal experience of those in (b). Therefore, those in (a) can study those in (b) to see how *phronesis* is operating and formed. Concrete communities, through their practice, take on practical forms of wisdom that deeply impact their communities. Therefore, the practical theologian in (a) can study these actions to see how the practical wisdom is either benefiting or hurting the concrete community. Those engaged in these communities of *phronesis*, those in (b), also are practical theologians because their stewarding of practical wisdom is deeply formative. But this focus on practical wisdom takes little account of the concrete and lived experiences people have of God. *Phronesis* makes the experience of the transcendent of little concern.

What, then, is the objective of *phronesis*? While *theoria* has an objective goal—to be right, to rule, to possess the truth—*phronesis* seeks the virtues necessary for living well together. So we could say that the objective of *phronesis*, and then the next way that practical theology has sought to connect (a) with (b), is to cultivate human flourishing.

The origins of the centrality “of human flourishing” rest in the biblical text: Jesus comes to bring life and bring it abundantly (John 10:10).¹⁶ But this abundant life, in the discourse of the field, also comes from within the phenomenal where it lacks the cruciform conception of abundance that I believe Jesus is pointing to. Human flourishing happens through liberative (or at least engaged and reflective) action that has its core foundations in *phronesis* itself. Because the human agent and her actions in the phenomenal are the source of *phronesis*, attending to her pursuit for flourishing reveals an experienced “good.” This anthropological “good” reveals the direction and value of human agency.

The experience of the “good” is equated with the experience of God. To examine actions toward the “good” of human flourishing is to study people’s experience of God. So those in (a) explore how those in (b) are acting for the sake of human flourishing, equating, maybe downstream, such action with the work of God. If *phronesis* is rational knowledge, an epistemological way of knowing within practical operations, then teasing out “human flourishing” from within *phronesis* gives practical theology over to the human realm. Human beings determine what it means to flourish because human communities create *phronesis*. It is true that these rationally formed conceptions of human flourishing are born in *phronesis*, which takes its shape through interactive dialogue with tradition (that is, Scripture, creeds, and so forth). But this very dialogue of determining human flourishing happens not with a living God, within transcendent experiences, but with a tradition. While a tradition may be made to live through the hermeneutical operations of a community of *phronesis*, this perspective remains locked within human action. It may be a dynamic interpretative human action, but it nevertheless runs the risk of being human action locked in its own echo chamber.¹⁷

16. This is the central theme or objective of practical theology as defined in one of the field’s most important texts: Dorothy Bass and Craig Dykstra, *Life Abundant: Practical Theology, Theological Education, and Christian Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008).

17. Claire E. Wolfteich articulates what a practice is and shows the tradition-based, human action echo chamber I critique. “Practices are theory-laden; they embody and enact belief. Practices also are deeply formative; they shape belief, religious identity and community. . . . Practices also invite us into spiritual wisdom and transformation. Practice is built into ancient Christian traditions of passing on spiritual

Later we'll need to face how the very act of God, and the very life of the Spirit in a community, changes the frame of human flourishing from a natural and historical logic to an eschatological one bound in the starting point of the cross. In other words, no community of *phronesis* outside the movements of divine action (the Spirit) would imagine that to live is to die (Phil. 1:21) and to be first is to be last (Matt. 20:16). But this is the wisdom of the Spirit; it is the reality (the realism) of God's action, a reality that chafes against *theoria* (the Greeks) and *phronesis* (the Jews) (1 Cor. 1:23). From the perspective of the *theologia crucis*, human flourishing is bound in a deep foolishness. Paul is not trying to construct his communities as practical theologians around *phronesis* that leads to human flourishing but in and through the foolishness of the cross that opens up an all-new ontological realism to them—that makes them not wise but new creations.

This then moves us into the third and final—and the most formative—of our Russian nesting dolls. If *phronesis* is a practical wisdom bound in the phenomenal experience of acting for human flourishing, then these actions of practical wisdom are bound most powerfully in practice.¹⁸ Practices done well together mediate human flourishing and produce *phronesis*.

Practice has become such a paradigmatic concept in practical theology that it has almost become inseparable from the definition of practical theology in North America. Such a definition asserts, at least in the dimension of (a), that while systematics attends to the history of doctrine, practical theology attends to practice. Practice itself has become a text to study, linking (a) and (b). In some practical theologies practice becomes the locale where the divine and human associate or, for some, even merge. Practice is the human-constructed vehicle that brings God's presence. These practices may not have their origin in human constructs; they may be practices given by God. But when they are studied or examined, the methods of the social sciences lead practical theologians to attend to them first and foremost as phenomenal human constructions.

wisdom." "Re-Claiming Sabbath as Transforming Practical: Critical Reflections in Light of Jewish-Christian Dialogue," in *Religion, Diversity, and Conflict*, ed. Edward Foley (Berlin: LIT, 2011), 254.

18. Swinton and Mowat see practices differently than for human flourishing only and see them in a way I would affirm. "The key thing in this understanding is not that the practice brings particular benefits to individuals or communities (although it may do). The important thing is that the practice bears faithful witness to the God from whom the practice emerges, and whom it reflects, and that it enables individuals and communities to participate faithfully in Christ's redemptive mission. Thus the efficacy of practice (the good to which it is aimed), is not defined pragmatically by its ability to fulfill particular human needs (although it will include that), but by whether or not it participates faithfully in the divine redemptive mission." *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 22.

Ted Smith brilliantly articulates the limits of practice, limits I see bound strongly in the realist perspective on justification that I'll be articulating. Smith shows here how practices that attend only to the cultural can miss the larger purviews of reality itself.

Theories of practice have opened up significant ground for constructive work in practical theology. But attention to practice, as Certeau saw, eventually runs into limits. The limits of practice are closely linked to the limits of the cultural turn more broadly. They appear at the boundaries of the category of "culture," and especially at the edges of three allegedly foundationalist "others" against which the turn to culture defined itself: nature, material relations, and doctrine. . . . Can we turn to culture as a source and object of study and still make claims about a God who is not identical to culture?¹⁹

From the level of the theology of the cross, from its very foolishness, we can see that all practice, all forms of action, that do not go through death possess no transformative (soteriological) power.²⁰ Practice itself must take on this paradigm (hence the reason baptism and communion remain central for Paul and Luther, as they are practices that exist in death-to-life paradigm).²¹ They are also bound in the emotive over the linguistic—more on this in part 3.

Practice has become so central to practical theology that it may be fair to organize the multiple projects in the field around their conception of practice. Building on or pushing off from a hermeneutical framework, many recently have constructed their projects around a pseudo neo-Aristotelian conception of

19. Ted Smith, "Theories of Practice," in Miller-McLemore, *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, 251–52.

20. Swinton and Mowat point in the direction I will be headed: "Practical Theology is critical, theological reflection on the practices of the Church as they interact with the practices of the world, with a view to ensuring and enabling faithful participation in God's . . . redemptive practices in, to and for the world." *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 6.

21. It is interesting that in Dykstra and Bass's work on practice, baptism and communion are not as richly articulated as the other practices. Benjamin Conner has critiqued them for this in *Practicing Witness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011). I believe that attending to these two practices (sacraments) pushes the practices into the death-to-life paradigm I see in the theology of the cross and its Christopraxis method I develop. I see practices in a way much more like the way that Swinton and Mowat explain them. "Christian practices are a reflection of the Church's attempts to participate faithfully in the continuing practices of the triune God's redemptive mission to the world." *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 24.

practice, a postmodern Bourdieuan view, or even a critical, liberative take on practice. These philosophical frameworks have become bridges linking (a) and (b), and thus they have also become frames of the ways the human associates with the divine.

Because this has been so central and poignant, in chapter 4 I'll use these differing grounds of practice to explore multiple and significant projects in practical theology. I'll do this not with the intention of disparaging these perspectives but with great appreciation as a way of exploring how my own Christopraxis practical theology of the cross may differ in the way it conceives of divine action, human encounter of the divine, the human condition, and the ontological realism it rests on.

In chapter 4 I will also explore four perspectives of practical theology.²² I will examine a hermeneutical (Gadamerian) perspective represented by Don Browning; a postmodern Bourdieuan perspective represented by Bonnie Miller-McLemore and Mary McClintock Fulkerson; a pseudo neo-Aristotelian perspective represented by Dorothy Bass, Craig Dykstra, and Kathleen Cahalan; and a strict Barthian perspective represented by Andrew Purves.²³

But, before I can move to this, it is important to honor the concrete and lived nature of practical theology, broadening my own experience by listening to the voices of others, by placing my own experience of the ministering Jesus in conversation with others. To do this, the next chapter will present interviews with a number of laypeople who tell stories of their encounter with God, of Jesus coming to them to minister to them and to send them out into ministry.

22. I am following Richard Osmer, with some notable additions and subtractions, in my mapping and exploring of the dominant models of practical theology in the next chapter. Osmer states, "We can identify at least five paradigms of practical theology in contemporary American practical theology, which cross ecumenical lines: (1) a postmodern transforming practice approach (Mary McClintock Fulkerson, Bonnie Miller-McLemore); (2) a hermeneutical approach (Charles Gerkin, Thomas Groome, James Fowler, Don Browning); (3) a Christo-praxis approach (Ray Anderson, Andrew Root, Richard Osmer); (4) a neo-Aristotelian practices approach (Dorothy Bass, Craig Dykstra); and (5) a neo-Barthian approach (James Loder, Deborah Hunsinger)." "The United States," in Miller-McLemore, *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, 503.

23. I call the third perspective "pseudo" because both Bass and Dykstra affirm their indebtedness to Alasdair MacIntyre, the leading philosophical neo-Aristotelian thinker on practice, but also distance themselves from him. Their distancing has much to do with a desire to infuse a rich theological perspective to the conversation. Therefore, the "pseudo" signals their distancing, but the label nevertheless highlights their indebtedness to the perspective.