

PREFACE

Years ago James Loder said that “practical Theology is the generative problematic of divine and human action.”¹ This statement has been my own personal rudder as I’ve sought to sail the seas of practical theology. Yet, I have embarked on this project because it appears that the major approaches in the field of practical theology have not always embraced Loder’s definition and mission for the field. Practical theology has been able to create rich projects on human action in relation to church life, society, and pastoral practice. But these fruitful articulations have not always sailed practical theology into the deep waters of exploring divine action, therefore missing, in my mind, the generative and problematic nature of practical theology.

In this project I hope to make a case for the central place of divine action in practical theology. Like Loder, I believe deeply generative possibility rests in contemplating divine action next to human experience and agency. And yet to do so is problematic, for divine action, if we are to contend that it is real—that is, a reality—is a transcendent mystery.

There, then, is possibility and peril in practical theology making such a voyage into the waters of divine action, for we must contemplate how potentially incongruent forms of action that exist in different layers of reality (God is in heaven and we on earth, for example) can and do nevertheless relate. It confesses the possibility of the event of God encountering us in our concrete and embodied lives. Overall, I’ll argue (to melt down my project to a single line) that it is in *ministry*, as distinct and related forms of action, that these apparently incongruent forms of reality are fused. The event of ministry associates the divine to the human, taking the human into the divine (time into eternity). I

1. Paraphrased from James Loder, “Normativity and Context in Practical Theology: ‘The Interdisciplinary Issue,’” in *Practical Theology: International Perspectives*, ed. Friedrich Schweitzer and Johannes A. van der Ven (Berlin: Peter Lang, 1999).

will then make a case in this project that practical theology *is* ministry (both in its operations and its attention).

Most books are written in parts. This book is particularly organized around its parts as I seek to present a practical theological approach I call a Christopraxis practical theology of the cross.

Part 1 seeks to reveal that there is something missing in the rich discourses on practical theology. While practical theology has become a force in the last half of the twentieth century and first decades of the twenty-first, it has nevertheless struggled to articulate its theological, or even normative, character. I argue that practical theology has been magnificent at articulating rich approaches to human action but has been deficient, as I hope to show, in articulating divine action in the same depth.

I believe this inability to discuss divine action has happened because practical theology has erroneously seen divine action as *impractical*. Practical theology's commitment to the lived and embodied realities of concrete persons and communities seems to draw practical theology like a magnet toward conversations with philosophy, the social sciences, and forms of empirical research. Within discourse in these fields and disciplines practical theology has found the dialogue to move into rich approaches to human action. But, most of these perspectives (with exceptions like that of T. M. Luhrmann, whom I'll discuss more below) overlook or are disinterested in divine action. This disinterest in the possibility of a divine or transcendent reality has made it harder for practical theology to attend to the theological.

Yet, the idea that divine action or transcendence is impractical seems to me to be a misstep. I will seek to show that divine action itself is not impractical, but rather is a deeply practical and lived reality, that people do have distinct experiences with God that they believe are concrete, lived, and *real*. These very experiences direct their lives in formative ways, moving them to do one thing or another in their embodied practical life. These experiences are bound in a reality that they claim is beyond them, a reality that transcends them, but which is nevertheless *real* to them and real in the most practical way, directing them to quit high-powered jobs or forgive themselves for not seeing a husband's illness, for example.

There are many people that assert they have had concrete and lived experiences of divine action. It is my contention that practical theology has missed this, and in so doing not only has failed to be truly "practical" (not attending to the depth of people's practical experience), which has therefore led to a "theological" deficiency within practical theology itself. Practical theology has rightly started with people's experience, but because it has been blind to the

possibility that people have *real* experiences with God, it has neglected to wade deeply into conceptions of divine action that would move practical theology further toward unique theological contributions.

In the four chapters of part 1 I seek to show how practical theology has missed what I call the “evangelical experience.” By “evangelical experience” I *do not* mean to make a case for American Evangelical Christianity. This is not a practical theology for Evangelicalism (though Evangelicalism is part of my own story, as I’ll discuss in the first chapter). I ask the reader to be diligent in recognizing where I say “evangelical” and where I say “Evangelical” (noting the capitalization).

By “Evangelical” I mean something more like the sociological category of American Evangelicalism that is a loose set of denominations and churches forming a cultural coalition. There are places throughout this book where I have critical things to say about this cultural coalition. Yet, while so doing I want to honor these people and many others (who live out their faith beyond this coalition) that nevertheless assert that they have had real experiences of God coming to them, that they have experienced God speaking to them, directing them, or caring for them.

I call these real experiences of God’s coming to people in concrete and lived ways the “evangelical experience.” So by “evangelical” I mean something broader and connected back to the Protestant Reformation—experiences like that of Luther, who contends that he had a distinct occurrence of divine action, that Jesus came to him. By “evangelical experience,” I mean the centrality of the commitment to a God who comes to us, calling each of us to confess our sin and follow the Jesus who lives. The practical theological approach that I’ll present in this book can be read as a deeply committed Protestant perspective of practical theology, an approach that honors the concrete “evangelical experience” of God’s coming to us as *pro me* and *pro nobis*.

Therefore, I make this case by articulating the “evangelical experience.” The evangelical experience, then, is a realist sense that people have experiences of God’s coming to them, that they have experiences of Jesus. T. M. Luhrmann adds texture to what I mean by evangelical experience when she says, “People seem to call themselves evangelical to signal something about their own sense of spirituality. . . . They are asserting that they want Jesus to be as real in their lives as the Gospels say that he was real in the lives of the disciples. . . . For many of them . . . this involves an intense desire to experience personally a God who is as present now as when Christ walked among his followers in Galilee.”²

Luhrmann, a Stanford professor, has provided a unique argument from within psychological anthropology for what I call the evangelical experience.

In her book *When God Talks Back*, Luhrmann shows the possibility that those who claim such experiences of God actually may have encounters with a divine reality. Luhrmann shows that these claims of experiencing divine action are not mad, but may truly open people up to real experience with the ministering activity of the living Jesus.

I wish to show how practical theology has not always been open to these experiences as real encounters with divine action. I believe that doing so *could* move practical theology onto more significant theological ground, to attend as deeply and concretely with the reality of divine action as practical theology has with human action.

The first part of the book then makes the case that people have concrete experience of divine action and that practical theology has missed this. I use the first two chapters to locate myself and define practical theology. Chapter 3 presents the voices of those whom I interviewed, exploring the shape of their real experience with divine action. Part 1 concludes by examining the most formative approaches to practical theology in North America, showing how these perspectives have, perhaps unwittingly, overlooked divine action.

Following the possibility that people do have concrete and lived experience with the living Jesus, as Luhrmann says, in part 2 I present my own approach to practical theology called Christopraxis practical theology of the cross. This part moves into three distinctly theological chapters that are centered around the concrete and lived experience of divine action itself. I mobilize theological discourse to help make sense of people's concrete experience of God's coming to them as seen in part 1. This coming to them I call *Christopraxis*, which is the continued ministering presence of Christ. The very shape of God's coming to people takes the form of ministry; encounters with divine action come as ministry.

Therefore, I argue that practical theology *is* ministry and that as ministry it is both practical and theological. Ministry is the shape of divine action itself. God is minister. People in my interviews who spoke of the evangelical experience, of encountering divine action, spoke of this action coming to them as ministry, either through the feeling of God's care and healing or through the ministerial activity of another (or themselves to another) that mediated the depth of divine encounter. Therefore my approach to practical theology, called Christopraxis practical theology of the cross, places ministry at the very center, claiming that ministry is practical theology because ministry directs human

2. T. M. Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God* (New York, Vintage, 2012), 13.

action as a response to the nature of divine action. Ministry is the shape of God's very act and being, coming to us as a concrete and lived reality.

But, just as “evangelical” can be confused in my argument, so too can “ministry.” By ministry I do not mean clerical or institutional functions, but a relational, personal, and embodied (even emotive) encounter of love and care, a willingness to share in the other, to join in the concrete experiences of homelessness, imprisonment, and hunger, to enter the experiences of suffering for the sake of participating in the transformation toward new life. In these acts of ministry that join concrete humanity, Jesus is present through the ministerial action of the Spirit (Matthew 25). Chapter 5, the first chapter of part 2, explores Christopraxis as ministry, extending and deepening the thought of Ray S. Anderson. Chapter 6 explores ministry as the shape of justification, entering a dialogue with Eberhard Jüngel and seeking to connect practical theology to the heart of the Reformation (justification by faith alone). And by making this connection, this chapter also makes a pitch for practical theology to move away from the Aristotelian framework of actuality to possibility that it has been so embedded within, claiming that such a framework pushes practical theology away from divine action as ministry.

The *consursus Dei* is the focus of the final chapter of part 2, which explores how divine and human action further come together as participation in the divine being through the act of ministry with concrete and lived people. The reader will notice, especially in chapters 6 and 7, both the Lutheran and Reformed elements in my thought. My own history stands equally between these two theological perspectives, as they are linked in the early Reformation. I seek not a Lutheran or a Reformed practical theology, but a practical theology that attends to people’s real experience of divine action. I have used Lutheran and Reformed concepts (justification and God’s otherness that comes to us in freedom) as hermeneutics of God’s action next to concrete human experience; I assert that these perspectives provide lenses with which to understand people’s concrete and lived experience of God’s coming to them.

The first two parts of this project take distinct steps away from the established conceptions of practical theology, using concrete experiences as a way of critiquing and then reconstructing a practical theological approach. The third part leads me to defend how I can even claim divine action as a reality. After all, since its renaissance in the 1970s, most practical theology has been constructed on antirealist frames (that is, the hermeneutics of suspicion, postmodern deconstruction, and the like). I have said boldly that people have real experiences of God and that God’s ministerial being and act may very well be a true reality. But how can I claim this?

I make references throughout the first two parts that my Christopraxis approach rests on critical realism. Critical realism becomes the direct focus of the third part of the book. Here I show how divine action is a possibility through the framework of critical realism. I therefore place my Christopraxis practical theology of the cross on what Christian Smith has called a “critical realist personalism.”

In this final part I make a strong case for a realist practical theology, but this realism must be a critical postfoundationalism that sees divine action as a real possibility but always recognizes the need for judgment and evaluation. In other words, it is possible that our experiences of God are truly that, but it is also possible that we are confused or misguided. I claim, with critical realism, that parts of reality exist outside the human mind, that there is a real world that human minds cannot possess. But because this is so, we are always in need of judgment and discernment of our experiences. Because reality is more than us, there is the possibility that we do have real encounters with God. But in the same way, because reality is more than our minds, it is also possible that we are misguided and the evangelical experience is just a stomachache. Therefore, critical realism allows us to honor the evangelical experience, claiming that these experiences of Jesus may be real, but also recognize that they may be erroneous and that we must enter into judgment and discernment as an act of ministry itself. Placing my Christopraxis perspective on a critical realist personalism allows me, in the final chapters of this project, to explore normative conceptions of human action and an interdisciplinary method that places ministry itself as the mechanism that orders the conversation between theology and the sciences.

While this project is uniquely my own, it nevertheless stands within a stream of practical theological projects that have gone before it. These projects have not rested at the center of established practical theology in North America or beyond. The focus on the evangelical experience and its movement into the theological swims in the currents of a certain kind of Princeton practical theology. Princeton practical theology has been both correctly and erroneously perceived as a practical theology concerned with theology. It is quite true that the Princeton school has sought from its beginning to do practical theology always in deep conversation with theology. But what has often been missed is that this embrace of theology has most often been for the purpose of deeply articulating the lived experience of divine action itself—this cannot be ignored, for example, in the introduction of James Loder’s *The Transforming Moment*. I’m following then the likes of Charles Erdman,³ Elmer Homrighausen,⁴ and James Loder,⁵ who turned strongly to the theological in practical theology to help

make sense of the experiential, to help them testify to the very shape of God's coming to them.

Richard Osmer more than anyone else has tended, curated, deepened, and, in the last few decades, shaped the Princeton form of practical theology. I am personally and greatly indebted to Rick Osmer. I came to Princeton Seminary as a PhD student, fresh from the mentoring of Ray Anderson at Fuller. Rick not only encouraged my own unique voice but broadened my theological purviews, motivating me to embrace passionately the theological in the practical theology that Ray had taught me and to move further into conversation with the wider world of practical theology. I'm thankful for Rick's continued encouragement and wisdom around this project.

3. Gordon Mikoski and Richard Osmer describe Charles Erdman's theological commitments for practical theology, which were embedded in his own evangelical experience. They state, "Charles Erdman represents the beginning of a trajectory of practical theology that would continue to develop at PTS over the course of the twentieth century. It placed emphasis on theology as central to the identity of so-called 'practical fields.' . . . Moreover, it attempted to develop a theology that was a clear alternative to Reformed orthodoxy, on the one hand, and theological liberalism, on the other." *With Piety and Learning: The History of Practical Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary* (Berlin: LIT, 2012), 85. They continue by describing how Erdman embraced the evangelical experience: "Charles Erdman is best described as a Reformed evangelical. While subscribing to orthodox, Reformed doctrine, he was evangelical in his emphasis on ecumenism in the church's mission and on the spiritual life, which take precedence over confessional distinctives." *Ibid.*, 96.

4. Mikoski and Osmer state, "At the heart of Homrighausen's project is the recovery of the theological grounds of Christian ministry—the ministry of clergy, laity, and the congregation as a whole. This is central to Homrighausen's sense of vocation. When asked why he entered the field of Christian education in the department of practical theology, he responded: 'It is primarily because I regard the practical field as in desperate need of being undergirded by sound theological structure.' Later, reflecting on his time at PTS, he put it this way: 'I felt that all Practical Theology needed to become centered more fully in a theology of the Word. Practical Theology needed to become theological.' Homrighausen's emphasis on theology continues a central feature of the trajectory of practical theology established by Charles Erdman. This will continue to be the case in future decades at PTS." *Ibid.*, 120.

5. Loder's whole project was to make sense of experience like my own, shared in chapter 1, and those I interviewed, shared in chapter 3. Most famously Loder's own experience of God's coming to him in the Spirit is described, dramatically, in the introduction to *The Transforming Moment* (Colorado Springs: Helmers and Howard, 1989). But before this experience Loder describes another that, because it is less dramatic, connects more directly to the experiences I share in this book. Mikoski and Osmer report, "In an interview with one of his former students, Dana Wright, Loder shared a significant experience that took place during his first year of seminary. His father was diagnosed as having brain cancer and died fairly quickly. At home and in deep grief, Loder grew seriously ill and was confined to bed. He called out to God, 'Do something!' To his surprise, his body was enveloped by a 'warming presence,' leading him to get up out of bed and begin singing, 'Blessed Assurance, Jesus is Mine.'" *With Piety and Learning*, 148.

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