

*Don Browning*

## **The Idea of the International Academy of Practical Theology**

Casual conversations during informal exchanges at professional meetings can sometimes be dangerous. Participants often become expansive and uninhibited. Their imaginations become inflamed by the excitement of the conference, and they begin to imagine ways to continue, indeed expand, the conversations, friendships, and intellectual breakthroughs which they are experiencing.

It was during informal exchanges between Hans van der Ven, Dietrich Roessler, Karl Ernst Nipkow, Friedrich Schweitzer, myself and others during a June 1990 consultation sponsored by the Department of Practical Theology of Tuebingen University that the idea was born for an international organization on practical theology. Upon returning to the United States, I shared these dreams with Professor Richard Osmer of Princeton Theological Seminary. Through two generous grants from President Thomas Gillespie of Princeton Theological Seminary, we were able to hold a founding meeting in the summer of 1991 and defray some of the costs of this conference. The founding meeting was attended by Camil Menard from Canada; Riet Bonsstorm and Hans van der Ven from Holland; Dietrich Roessler, Karl Ernst Nipkow, and Friedrich Schweitzer from Germany; and Richard Osmer, Norbert Hahn, and myself from the United States. With an exhilarating sense of omnipotence, we founded the International Academy of Practical Theology and voted ourselves its first members and officers. For a passing moment, we all had some sense of what God must have felt at the creation of the world. This is to confess that, in certain ways, the Academy was something like an act of *creatio ex nihilo*. We founded an academy which we hoped would encourage intercultural, interdisciplinary, and scientific exchange about the purposes, unity, and relevance of the practical theological disciplines to both church and world.

We must pause immediately to give our thanks for President Gillespie's support for the birth of this academy. It is my conviction that this assistance comes not only because Tom Gillespie is a very fine man, which he is, but because of the longstanding commitments of Princeton Theological Seminary to the disciplines of practical theology. This is reflected, I believe, in the development at Princeton of one of the leading departments of practical theology in the world.



The birth of the Academy was based on some shared observations. Several of us had noticed a new, world-wide interest in practical theology. Furthermore, we were struck by the large number of shared themes that characterized the writings of practical theologians in different countries who had, as a matter of fact, little contact with one another. At a consultation between Dutch and American practical theologians at Elspeet, Holland in 1990, Gijs Dingemans wrote an important paper which summarized many of the converging world trends.<sup>1</sup>

### Some World-Wide Trends

In what follows, I will try my own hand at identifying these shared themes. My list, however, will have many continuities with Professor Dingemans's observations. I see seven trends widely shared in the practical theological revival around the world. First, there is the widespread belief that all of theology, including what is traditionally called practical theology, should begin with the analysis of practice and situations. Second, many believe that practical theology should concentrate on the church's practice in the world (the public paradigm) as well as the ordering of the internal life of congregations (the clerical and ecclesial paradigms). This was a point made over twenty years ago by Alistair Campbell in an important 1972 article titled "Is Practical Theology possible?"<sup>2</sup> Third, it is thought that practical theology in the future will be interdisciplinary and, in fact, may need to involve coordinated teams of theologians, ethicists, and social scientists working together on joint projects. Our Dutch colleagues have been pioneers in this approach. Fourth, practical theology should strive for unity; it should attempt to evolve coordinating models that interrelate the specialized subdisciplines of practical theology with each other and with theology as a whole. Fifth, there is a growing belief that it should be scientific and critical in the broad senses of these terms. German, Canadian, Dutch and some American scholars have joined in affirming these values. Sixth, practical theology should attend to both the critical norms of practice as well as the dynamics and rhetorics of transformation; it should be concerned with the transformation of the world in accordance with its discernment of God's action in the world. And seventh, and the most controversial, some believe that practical theo-

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<sup>1</sup> G.D.J. Dingemans, *Practical Theology: An Introduction into its Dutch Background* (Summer, 1990)(xeroxed).

<sup>2</sup> Alistair Campbell, "Is practical Theology Possible?" *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 25 (1972), 217-27.



logy must show how it is the strategic fulfillment of the whole of theology, which should now be conceived as practical through and through.

This list, of course, is to some degree a personal construction on my part. It is, in part, a wish list of what I hope practical theology becomes. Clearly, many of you would quarrel both with its descriptive adequacy and its normative desirability. All seven points are certainly not present in every vital expression of practical theology throughout the world. Nonetheless, a large number of those elements are visible in the writings of many practical theologians, and the fact of their presence marks a significant change in the way academic practical theology is proceeding in several countries.

### **The Family as Illustration of Trends in Practical Theology**

It is easy to list these seven features. It is more challenging to illustrate what they actually mean for the practical theological enterprise. This is what I will now try to do. I do this not to convince you that either my description of trends or my ideal vision are correct. Instead, I will use them as tentative guides for illustrating challenges and opportunities for the further development of practical theology. The theological disciplines in our time have, for the most part, staked their futures on having a decisive relevance for the problems of modern life. This does not mean that they are no longer interested in the promises of a resurrected life, but they claim as well to be relevant to inner-worldly struggles facing humans in their days on this earth. Theology, especially in its political and liberation forms, has convinced itself of its relevance to these worldly challenges, but it has not convinced the secular world and certainly not the secular academic disciplines. Indeed, we have difficulty even convincing the church of theology's relevance to worldly problems. Many of our proposals for change seem like either idealistic demands for abstract social justice that are impossible to implement or actual accommodations to the transformations that modernity, not the church, is thrusting upon us. Can a more selfconsciously practical theology do better? Possibly, but only if we understand the demands and opportunities that these seven trends open before us.

I want to develop this point by using contemporary, worldwide transformations of the family as a case study. These transformations constitute one of the real struggles facing the church in nearly all the countries touched by modernity and postmodernity. What do these seven trends mean when focused on the church's struggle with changing,



and perhaps declining, families? I will confine my remarks primarily to problems in Western countries where increasing wealth has developed hand-in-hand with increasing family fragmentation. Although problems are doubtless different in other parts of the world, as modernity spreads, the experience of these wealthier countries may be predictive of trends throughout the world. First, what does it mean to start practical theology with description, in this case the description of families and the practices of institutions which surround them? Although many families are still giving birth to babies, raising children, and enriching the lives of parents, the last two decades have witnessed a vast decline in family well-being. Not only has there been dramatic increases in rates of divorce in all advanced industrial societies, there have been parallel increases in out-of-wedlock births (29% of all births in the United States), the feminization of poverty, the number of poor and unhealthy children, and the number of fathers absent from the financial and moral support of their children. A fourth to one-half of the children in advanced industrial societies are being raised primarily by their mothers, frequently with modest to no supports from their fathers. Large numbers of men are living most of their lives outside of the socializing effects of families, a fact that may correlate with an increase of male violence in most industrial states<sup>3</sup>. Practical theology would need to supplement this surface description of the facts with additional social science and theological explanations. But how should this be done? At what level of analysis should practical theology proceed? Should it work at some grand macro-level or some more detailed psychodynamic level or both? Can theology itself help explain the situation of families? Much of political and liberation theology have proceeded at the level of macro-analysis. And indeed this is indispensable. At this level, the dynamics of industrial or rational capitalism account for many of these family strains. Both Marxist and rational-choice economic analyses reveal how rational capitalism enticed men out of family farms and crafts into wage-earning positions in labor and management<sup>4</sup>. Rational capitalism created a profound split between public and private life, pushing fathers into public work outside of the home and women into the private activities of mothering and homemaking. This split increased female economic dependency on men. It removed fathers, to varying degrees, from responsibility for

<sup>3</sup> Nancy Gibbs, "Bringing Up Father," *Time*, (June 1993), pp. 53-61. For a particularly powerful statement of this point, see James Q. Wilson, "On Gender," *The Public Interest*, No. 112 (Summer 1993), pp. 8-13.

<sup>4</sup> Frederick Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, (New York: International Publications, 1972); Gary Becker, *A Treatise on the Family*



the socialization of their children, especially their sons. It created a greater psychological and sociological distance between childhood and adult life, thereby introducing dynamics of estrangement and anomie between youth and normative social institutions. In more recent decades, mothers have joined fathers in the paid labor force. This is generally seen as a liberation for women. It also can be seen, as Habermas has suggested, as a new stage of the colonization of the family by the forces of rational capitalism. This move has many consequences, not the least of which is the fact that now both fathers and mothers are significantly removed from the rhythms of child care. As William Goode said in his 1970 *World Revolutions and Family Patterns*, the forces of technical rationality and rational capitalism not only have fragmented the cohesiveness of the extended family, they have dealt a near fatal blow to the nuclear or conjugal core of already weakened extended family networks<sup>5</sup>. Many other factors could be mentioned to complete this macrolevel analysis. For instance, demographers Larry Bumpass and Ron Lesthaeghe have shown how enlightenment individualistic values have driven this entire process<sup>6</sup>. This is one reason why family decline has actually increased during more affluent periods, such as the last quarter of the 19th century and, in the United States, the 1970s and early 1980s when family income from both public and private sources grew at a dramatic rate. For some sectors of society, discrimination and racism clearly have been factors contributing to family decline, although these factors do not explain the world-wide trends nor the spread of the trends into the middle and upper-middle classes. Practical theology in all of its expressions — from homiletics to pastoral care — must take account of this macro-level analysis that I have illustrated around the family issue. But if it becomes preoccupied with this level, practical theology will become indistinguishable from the liberation and political theology which have specialized in broad sociological and economic analyses. Practical theology, in its description of situations, must also attend to the way human beings actually experience these forces and struggle with them in the fullness of their subjectivity. For example, we should not only analyze the macro-level tensions between the public and private aspects of family life, we must describe how these tensions are concretely experienced by mothers, fathers, and children living in both the

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(Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991); Richard Posner, *Sex and Reason* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).

<sup>5</sup> William Goode, *World Revolutions and Family Patterns* (New York, 1970).

<sup>6</sup> Larry Bumpass, "What's Happening to the Family? Interactions Between Demographic and Institutional Change," *Demography*, 27:4 (November 1990), 483-497;



traditional modern family as well as those in the new post-modern, two-income family. Furthermore, practical theology should describe how the inherent ambiguities of human experience such as anxiety, guilt, shame, and sin both precede and interact with these broader forces of modern life and our subjective experience of them.

The question of the appropriate level of analysis of families has immediate implications for the second trend in practical theology — the move beyond the clerical and ecclesial paradigms to an emphasis on the public ministry of the church in the world. Within the confines of the clerical and ecclesial paradigms, practical theology concentrated on the role of ministers, priests, and laity in caring for broken families within their congregations or parishes. The larger cultural and social-systemic forces producing family strains were generally neglected. Theological analysis and prescription, for example, would center on this father's alcoholism, that mother's neurosis, this son's delinquency, or, perhaps, this particular family system within the context of other local systems. The family system as a part of the grand systems of modern and post-modern life was generally ignored. Clearly, for practical theology to guide public ministries, it must have available to it various macro-level modes of analysis. But once again, going beyond the clerical and ecclesial paradigms should not mean forsaking them. A challenge to practical theology in the future will be the task of balancing its public and ecclesial/clerical paradigms and integrating its macro and microlevel analyses of situations<sup>7</sup>.

This brings us to the third widespread feature of the new practical theology, its emerging interdisciplinary character. If practical theology is to take the analysis of situated practices seriously and yet bring powerful normative witness to them, it must be interdisciplinary. If, for example, one is to do both micro and macro-level analyses of the modern family, the social sciences — especially sociology, psychology, economics, and anthropology — clearly have a role. Orchestrating these disciplines with one another and establishing their relation to theological description is another major task of contemporary practical theology. Building on the work of Gadamer, Ricoeur, and Robert Bellah, some of us have proposed the concept of "descriptive theology" as a way of both using yet subordinating the social sciences to theology for the purpose of describing situations.

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Ron Lesthaeghe, "A Century of Demographic and Cultural Change in Western Europe," *Population and Development Review* 9:3 (September 1983), 411-435.

<sup>7</sup> Don Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 77-93.



Fourth, the family issue offers a dramatic illustration of the need for unity in practical theology. Imagine trying to meliorate the family issue if the church's ministry were reduced to pastoral counseling in either its parish or specialized settings. Even if the family pastoral counselor is aware of how market and bureaucratic forces of rational capitalism affect family formation, the counseling situation itself is a poor vantage point from which to exercise leverage on these larger systemic realities. Yet, the more intimate interventions of the counselor or minister are crucial. It is unthinkable that we will ever find the perfect social and economic system totally devoid of tension-producing pressures on families and individuals. Rational capitalism has its problems for families but so does bureaucratic socialism. Our task may not be to trade one economic system for another, but to bring constructive critiques and changes to the economic systems a particular society is trying out at a given moment in history. Furthermore, is it imaginable that the church can address the disintegration of families without finding a role for religious education and preaching to supplement its pastoral care and social action? For instance, what is the meaning of the gospel for gender justice in families and the wider society and how can this be proclaimed from the pulpit? If one of the crucial trends in modern family life is the growing absence of fathers, how can this be addressed in the church's socialization and initiation of boys and young men? And what shared methodologies and integrating models make it possible for the discrete practical theological disciplines to relate fruitfully to one another on this and other crucial issues?

What does it mean for practical theology to be scientific and critical, the fifth characteristic mentioned above. How can the family issue illustrate this feature of the emerging trends in practical theology? No area of contemporary cultural conflict is more fraught with ideology and sentimentality than the family debate. In the United States, we have what James Davison Hunter has called a cultural war over "family values." Conservative religious and political voices associate family values with the stable modern or industrial family, i.e., the breadwinning father and the domestic and child rearing mother<sup>8</sup>. They attempt to justify the industrial family by references to the *Haustafeln* codes of the Pseudo-Pauline letters and the Pastoral Epistles. Liberal religious and political parties are not exempt from ideology as well. They strain to minimize the consequences of family change or legitimate the decline of the extended and conjugal family with reference to the ostensibly anti-family passages of Mark and Matthew<sup>9</sup>. Both

<sup>8</sup> James Dobson and Gary Bauer, *Children at Risk* (Waco: Word Publishing, 1990).

<sup>9</sup> See Mark 13:12-13; Matthew 10:34-39.



sides engage in inflammatory rhetoric and use both Bible and the social sciences for their purposes. Indeed, it is difficult to find the indisputable truth on this matter in either scripture or the human sciences. In fact, even to speak about the truth requires confronting challenging issues in the philosophy of the social sciences and the hermeneutics of texts. The practical theology of the future must have the patience to confront these difficult issues. Only by doing this will we make progress in surmounting the polarizing rhetorics of both right and left. This is what is meant by practical theology being both scientific and critical. It means, insofar as it is an academic discipline, that practical theology should advance reasons subject to public review for the positions that it advances.

Sixth, practical theology should be interested in the dynamics and rhetorics of transformation. Practical theology, even as an academic discipline, believes that all efficacious transformations come from God. But it also believes that Christians, as James Fowler has reminded us, both witness to and participate in God's transformative activity<sup>10</sup>. Theological ethics tries to articulate the criteria by which we discover the action of God. Practical theology should have, as I have often argued, a strong ethical moment, but it must go beyond theological ethics in also studying the conditions and rhetorics of transformation. Few theological ethicists study this latter question. This is what distinguishes practical theology from ethics as such. Transformative action on the family issue is complex, and the rhetoric of the family debate is even more complex. Individuals, families, work places, governments, social service agencies, cultural values, may all need transformation if family decline is to be reversed. To know the right and the good in practical matters, however, does not mean we can easily translate this moral knowledge into positive actions that will implement the right and the good. The new practical theology should assume responsibility for the critical articulation of both the norms guiding transformation and the processes that actualize transformation. This, I believe, is a move in the right direction.

Finally, if practical theology is to contribute to any concrete issue, including the family issue, it must understand itself as relating to the other theological specializations. To address the family issue, we must do research on the Hebrew, Greek, Roman, and early Christian origins of Western families. This requires the closest possible contact with historical and biblical inquiry. But to discover origins is not the same as determining the worth, value, and relevance of these origins.

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<sup>10</sup> James Fowler, "Practical Theology and the Shaping of Christian Lives, Practical Theology, ed. by Don Browning, (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), 148-166.



We must be open to the possibility that early Christianity had a negative consequence for families in Western societies, as many of our Jewish friends tend to think. In addition, we must be willing to acknowledge that much of what we often call Christian pertaining to families may really be Greco-Roman. This may be good or bad depending on additional normative arguments that are brought into play. Strategic practical theology will have a more comfortable relation with the other theological disciplines if they are reconceived to be primarily practical themselves, as Gadamer's theory of hermeneutics suggests<sup>11</sup>. Our task is to determine the relation and appropriate responsibilities of the various theological disciplines, all of which participate in practical logics to some extent.

The creation of the International Academy of Practical Theology is not only a grand moment for the traditional practical disciplines, it is a highly significant occasion for all of academic theology as well as the wider church. Our responsibilities and possibilities are momentous. It is with a keen sense of excitement and anticipation that I look forward to our conversations these coming days.

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<sup>11</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York:Crossroad, 1982).