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The Emerging New Shape of Practical Theology New Life for Practical Theology

For the last two decades we have been involved in a quiet but deep-going revolution in the self-understanding and work of practical theology. This is leading to changes in theological education and in the role of theology in the churches and societies from which the members of this conference come. This revolution centers in the recovery and re-emergence of practical theology as a discipline. In the United States, it has not been too long since practical theology was regarded as a basement operation in most divinity schools and theological seminaries. I mean this literally: departments of pastoral care, Christian education, church administration, homiletics and liturgics, and evangelization were actually located in basements or attics, added as though they were afterthoughts – which in fact they often were. You could almost count on it: the more academically prestigious the school of theology, the greater the status difference between the so-called *classical* disciplines of biblical studies, church history, systematic theology, and ethics, on the one hand, and the so-called *applied* disciplines, on the other.

And was it different in Europe? I think not. Departments of religious education were strong because of the obligation to prepare teachers of religion for the schools in your countries. Occasionally there would be departments of social sciences and theology, under the guise of the theological interpretation of culture and society. But most often the actual work of preparation of pastors and priests for ecclesial leadership was completed in more practically oriented Prediger Seminars or their equivalents. The university study of theological disciplines had little place for practical theology.

That older arrangement of the division of labor in theological education rested upon an unfortunate understanding of the relation between *theory* and *practice*. The description of practical theology as *applied theology* indicates the problem: We were working with a „trickle-down“ understanding of applied theology. The assumption was that the creative work in theology went on in the fields of Biblical Studies, Historical Studies, and most especially, Systematic Theology. Ethics, because it touched on the practical and political, had a somewhat ambiguous position. Unconsciously, theological faculties absorbed the positivist bias toward what could be called pure reason, scholarship that pro-

ceeded in accordance with the canons of *pure research* in the sciences. In theological education the results of scholarly inquiry and constructive interpretation in the so-called *classical* disciplines of theology would be appropriated and *applied* in the work of church leadership and pastoral practices. That is what I mean when I say that practical theology constituted a kind of step-child discipline in theological studies. We viewed its work as derivative and second-hand. In this perspective pastors and educators were encouraged to think of themselves as *consumers* and *transmitters* of theology, but not as producers. And the laity were viewed as passive receivers of this second-hand theology transmitted by pastors and educators.

By the early 1980s, however, some new perspectives on the nature and work of theology began to take form. Edward Farley, a systematic theologian, formulated these new understandings in a way that had broad influence.¹ He identified four major phases in the evolution of theology as a central activity and concern of the church, and later, the university. His analysis had the impact of shaking up our routinized assumptions about „pure“ and „applied“ theology. Let me briefly sketch the four phases in theology's evolution that Farley identifies:

The first phase began with the New Testament church and continued until the early Middle Ages. In this era, theology involved personal and existential inquiry into the mysteries of divine revelation, undertaken for the sake of helping the Christian community live toward truth. Farley calls this approach theology *habitus* – theology as knowledge of God pursued through the disciplines of prayer, study, liturgical participation, and the practices of discipleship. *Theology habitus* aimed toward the formation of persons and communities in accordance with the revealed knowledge of God.

A splendid example of the nurture of *theology habitus* can be found in the Rites of Christian Initiation which emerged in the second through the fifth centuries of the church's life. In a situation not unlike our own, the church found adults drawn to it who had no Christian memory or formation. They may have been adherents of other cults, gnostic sects, or adherents of the civic religion of the Roman Empire. Over a period of one to three years they worked with persons in a compre-

¹ A brief statement of this account is in Edward Farley, "Theology and Practice Outside the Clerical Paradigm," in Don S. Browning, Ed., *Practical Theology: The Emerging Field in Theology, Church and World*. New York: Harper and Row, 1983, pp. 21-41. The longer statement of Farley's position is in Farley, *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983. See also Farley's more recent book, *The Fragility of Knowledge: Theological Education in the Church and the University*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988.

hensive process of formation in Christian faith that focused not just on the teaching of the Bible or of Christian doctrine, but upon involving them in the community's practices of worship, sacrament, prayer, study, and service. Through a rigorous process of such preparation and examination, the church brought catechumens to the point of readiness for baptism and admission to the sacrament of holy communion. After their baptism on Easter Sunday, they underwent a final period of formation and nurture toward their forms of service in the church between Easter and Pentecost (Mystagoga).

The second phase in theology's evolution began to emerge in the second through the fourth centuries in the intellectual responses of the church to the challenges of heresies within and of competitive intellectual ideologies from without. The joining of Christian doctrine with the philosophical perspectives of neo-Platonism in the work of Augustine provides a powerful example. Farley calls this phase Theology Science. He sees it at its height in the great *Summas* of Thomas Aquinas, with their rational reconciliation of the recovered philosophy of Aristotle with Augustinian theology. In this era theology emerged as the dominant ordering framework for grounding all human knowledge in the west. Theology was, indeed, the „queen of the sciences“ *Theology science* provided the intellectual energy and thrust for the founding of the great medieval universities. It persisted – at least in Roman Catholicism – until well beyond the Counter-Reformation.

The next great wave of change in theology, Farley suggests, came with the impacts of the Renaissance and the Reformation, with their respective returns to classical and biblical antiquity. The fresh retrieval of humanistic traditions, unshackled from theological control, gave fresh impetus to scholarly study. The translations of the Latin and Greek texts of the New Testament into vernacular languages opened the way for the fresh illuminations and intense controversies of the Reformation. Coupled with the dawning age of scientific inquiry in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, these movements gave rise to the modern research university, with its beginning of the transformation of education for the classical professions into the work of specialized disciplines of research. No longer „queen of the sciences“ theology had to struggle to maintain a presence in the new universities. By forming alliances with the emerging „scientific“ disciplines of history, philosophy, philology, and rationally grounded ethics, various departments of specialized theological study began to form. *Theology Science* became *theological sciences*. A unity and working relation between these disciplinary specialties in theology was maintained by their contributions to the professional grounding of university-educated

pastors and priests. Schleiermacher's famous proposal for the role of practical theology as the place where the theological disciplines meet to inform the work of ecclesial science provided one such influential rationale for the continuing presence of theological faculties in the now secularizing universities. As specialization has continued, professional guilds of scholars in the various theological disciplines have generated both confidence and ever increasing rigor in their work. This has inevitably led to diminished conversation and collaboration *between* the disciplines, and often to a growing distancing of their work from that of the ministries of the churches.

The fourth phase in the evolution of the work of theology Farley identifies as *systematic* or *dogmatic theology*. Now separated from History of Christian Thought, from Ethics, and often from Biblical Studies, systematic theology itself becomes a specialized discipline. In academic circles it has increasingly given attention to issues of methodology and concerns about the legitimation of its work as a discipline. In the latter third of this century academic systematic theology has, on the whole, become increasingly remote from the practices of Christian faith in the churches and in our societies.

The emerging new field of practical theology has directly challenged this state of affairs. It has forcefully reasserted that theology, in any „classical“ era, was an eminently *practical* theology. From this standpoint the letters of Paul need to be seen afresh as inventive, inspired practical theology. There we see Paul initiating and responding with his writings to the challenges of the first Christian communities as they tried to give body and flesh to the new reality that had apprehended them in the risen Christ. We need to see Augustine not so much as laying down timeless dogmatic principles to be universally preserved in the churches, but as a highly gifted ecclesial leader writing to help make sense and shape responses to a time of great threat and transformation in the Roman Empire and in the Church. Similarly, we need to see the theologians of the reformation and counter-reformation as practical theologians, trying to re-shape the practices and teachings of the churches in their eras, in light of new historic circumstances and challenges. Theology in any of these now „classical“ eras had more the character of *theology habitus* than of the theological sciences. It was concerned with the shaping or re-shaping of the practices of the church so that they reflected faithfulness to Christ and formed congregations of folk through whom Christ could make his appeal in the world. In this sense, they were „local“ theologies, addressing the concreteness and specific challenges of particular times and places. Under the impact of these challenges they shaped powerful interpretations of experiences of revelation and of the documents of

scripture and tradition. Practical theology says, however, that we should be more concerned to imitate their faithfulness and creativity, in response to divine inspiration, than to slavishly trying to systematize and apply *their* practical theological solutions to our challenges in the present.

At the heart of practical theology's self understanding and effort to communicate its work we find the retrieval in theology and philosophy of the ancient concept of *praxis*.

Praxis, Phronesis, and Pragmatism

In the Greek city-state of which Aristotle wrote, the kind of knowing and ability required for the highest of Greek vocations — good political leadership — was that of *phronesis*, which we translate as „practical wisdom.“ *Phronesis* could be developed through education and through participation in *praxis*. By *praxis* Aristotle referred to a pattern in which action and ongoing reflection continually interpenetrate.²

Two other forms of knowing and action can be contrasted with *praxis* in Aristotle's writing. First there is *theoria*, from which our term *theory* comes. It refers to knowledge born of analytic distance and objectivity. In detached observation and analysis of the action in the Olympic games, „theorists“ advised participants on how best to train and develop strategies for competition. At another level, *theoria* was the fruit of philosophical reflection, resulting from the intellect's inspired contemplation on metaphysical reality. It is important to see that *theoria* and *praxis* are not opposites. Nor is one derivative of the other. They are richly complementary but distinct forms of knowing and action, animated by different interests and contexts, and employing different methods.

Poiesis is the third way of relating knowing to action that Aristotle identified. It can be characterized as *creative skill*. When a potter mixes clay to the right consistency, centers it on the wheel, and then gradually forms and lifts it into a graceful vase, she employs *poiesis*. The process of learning to ski or to swim involves the kind of knowing and acting that is *poiesis*. In *poiesis* we feel with our bodies the coordination of limbs and sensory signals that make these kinds of com-

² On the concept of *praxis* and its history, see Nicholas Lobkowitz, *Theory and Practice: The History of a Marxist Concept, from Aristotle to Marx*. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1967, and Richard J. Bernstein, *Praxis and Action*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971.

plex patterns of action possible and habitual. As we consider the role of „bodiliness“ in practical theology, we will have reason to recognize *poesis* as an important aspect of the formation of faith in a *theology habitus*.

Let's return to our focus on *praxis* for a moment. Capacity for leadership in the political *praxis* of the city-state required at least three elements: First, it requires a grounding in the myths and history of the polis and in its evolved purposes and ideals – a grounding in the city-state's story and vision. Second, *praxis* requires a wise knowledge of human nature and of the arts of organization and persuasion involved in leadership. And third, it requires a capacity for analyzing and understanding the factors shaping the present moment and their challenges to the welfare of the people. These are the ingredients of *phronesis* or practical wisdom. We need to recognize that these qualities are not the acquisitions or possessions of singular individuals alone, but rather, they arise out of the discourse and reflection-on-action that constitute the political process.³

Let me make two final points that undergird our understanding of the work of practical theology: First, *praxis* is not identical with *practice*. A practice or practices represent patterns of action by which a person or a community carries out the activities necessary to their life and flourishing. Practices are shared patterns of interaction that have evolved to meet the needs and serve the recurring interests of people in relation with each other. Institutions are made up of systems of practices, some that are formally established, many others that have evolved informally.

Secondly, *praxis* has two connotations that derive, respectively, from its Aristotelian heritage, on the one hand, and its Marxist heritage, on the other. For Aristotle, *praxis* was the ongoing integration of action and reflection through which the political process maintained and adapted the practices of the city state necessary for its flourishing and maintenance. For Marx, on the other hand *praxis* came to connote intentional action strategically aimed at the overthrow of the present patterns of economic and political domination and their replacement by the classless society. Practical theology has been influenced by the Marxist understanding of *praxis* through liberation and political theologies. It has been influenced by Aristotelian traditions through the impact of political philosophies from Europe. It has been shaped by

³ For a helpful description of these three orientations of knowing in Aristotle, see Thomas H. Groome, *Christian Religious Education: A Shared Praxis Approach*. New York: Harper and Row, 1980, pp. 153-157.

American pragmatist philosophies which have informed the influential work of a number of twentieth century American theologians. (The term Pragmatism has *praxis* as its root).

This dual heritage of the term *praxis* points to the claim that practical theology has a stake in maintaining the viability of the practices of the churches and their missions. At the same time, it engages in ongoing critical and constructive efforts at transformation toward the greater faithfulness and effectiveness of the churches in the societies in which they offer their witness.

The Hermeneutical and Correlational Dynamics of Practical Theology

Now let us consider a characterization of practical theology. Practical theology, we may say, is:

**Critical and constructive reflection by communities of faith
Carried on consistently in the contexts of their *praxis*,
Drawing on their *interpretations* of normative sources from
Scripture and tradition
In response to their *interpretations* of the emergent challenges and situations they face, and
Leading to 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*.**

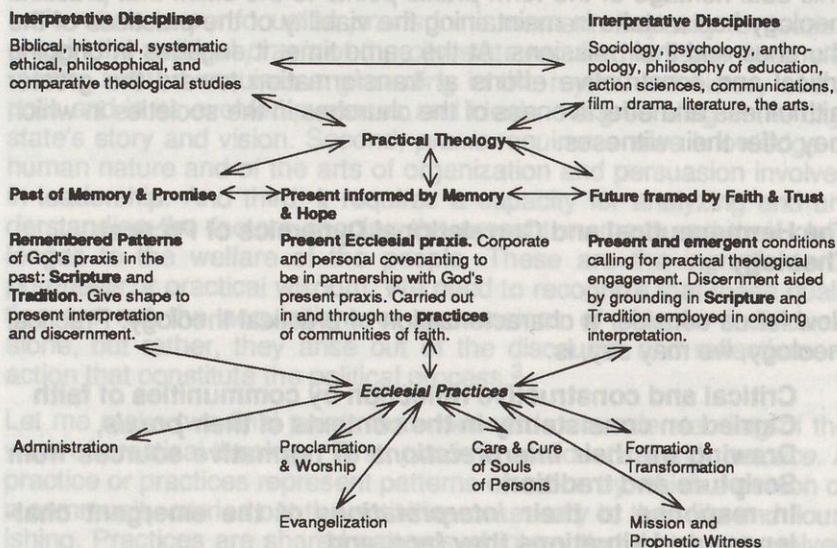
The following chart may be of help in visualizing the flow of inquiry and dialogue that communities of faith carry on in practical theological reflection. The examination of scripture and tradition is stimulated by the emergent situations and challenges they face, which call for the modification or transformation of their ways of living their missions and offering their witness. Let's attend to the diagram (next page) and see if we can illumine its dynamics.

Please look with me at the model I have offered (cf. p. 212). By reflection on this two-dimensional medium, we will try to bring into focus the multidimensional moments and movements of practical theological engagement.

First, let me call attention to the presence, in a number of places, of the words *interpretation* or *interpretative*. This term signals that we

understand practical theological thinking to be, at heart, a *hermeneutical* activity. The community of faith is a *community of interpretation*.

The Interpretative and Correlational Dynamics of Practical Theology



As a community of interpretation, the church finds its unifying and focal identity through its ongoing engagement with and interpretations of what I identified on the model as a „Past of Memory and Promise“. In scripture and tradition the church lives in relation to ongoing interpretations of the „Remembered Patterns of God's Praxis“ in the past. Scripture and tradition, engaged in ongoing interpretation, provide the lenses maps by which we try to discern the patterns of God's involvement in the in-breaking present. The „Ecclesial Practices“ identified below represent the ways the „Past of Memory and Promise“ forms and takes root in the soul and minds and practices of members of the community. This includes their grounding in Scripture and Tradition. It includes the emotional dispositions formed in their hearts and ethical sensibilities through the prayers, music, sacraments, the examples of others, as well as the proclamation and teaching of Bible and tradition. All of this sedimented complex of knowing, attitudes, and patterns of behavior shape the interpretations the community makes of the present challenges and emergent conditions they face. So their personal and corporate live are shaped by a „Present informed by Memory and Hope“.

At the same time, through these ecclesial practices, and their rootage in scripture and traditions, they also look toward the future, a „Future framed by Faith and Trust“. Through these practices they engage the society that surrounds them in mission and evangelization, in social witness and political *praxis*. As they make their interpretations of the challenges presented by the unfolding future, they do so with instincts and imaginations shaped by their personal and ecclesial memories of God's patterns of faithfulness in the past, and their experiences of God's faithfulness in the present.

The patterning of time we are working with here is reminiscent of that which Augustine offered in the eleventh chapter of *The Confessions*. In Section xxviii he writes, „But how does this future, which does not yet exist, diminish or become consumed? Or how does the past, which now has no being, grow, unless there are three processes in the mind which in this is the active agent? For the mind *expects* and *attends* and *remembers*, so that what it expects passes through what has its attention to what it remembers“⁴ The community of faith, in its interpretations of present and future, *expects*, *attends*, and *remembers*, with minds and hearts shaped and furnished by „Memory and Hope“

How does a church or ecclesial community awaken to the realization of a need for change in its *praxis*? How does a community of faith recognize that it must engage in fresh ways in fundamental practical theological re-working of its practices, its ways of being and mission? One could hope that as part of the *habitus* of their ways of being the church, they would be continually alert to the internal nudges of the Spirit of God. One could also hope that, like soldiers engaged in a field of battle, the church would have sentinels and systems of observation to detect a shift in the fields of their service, or identify new sources of danger and challenge. When a community of faith begins to recognize that new challenges and conditions call for new patterns of response and *praxis*, a process of intentional practical theological engagement can be the result.

When this need is recognized and embraced, a community of faith begins a practical theological process that is both hermeneutical and correlational. That is, it begins an intentional process of inquiry and reflection that engages in focused analysis and interpretation of the situation and emergent challenges that call for its attention and address. The community must ask, „What is going on? What are the

⁴ St. Augustine, *Confessions*. (Tr. by Henry Chadwick) Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991, p. 243.

threats we face? What are the dangers and challenges we must address? What goods are at stake in this situation?" Their attending and beginning analysis will be informed by their reading of scripture and tradition, and by the ethics and value system to which they hold. But they will also turn to other „Interpretative Systems“ – Those of the social sciences and other perspectives suggested in the upper right hand corner of our model. They will consult with members of the communities affected by the threat. They will converse with various „experts“ in such interpretation. From these resources they will identify the elements of particular strategies they might employ. They will identify various potential allies with whom they might join to meet the challenges.

At the same time, however, they will turn to other „Interpretative Disciplines“ and „experts“ – those that focus on the Scriptures and traditions of the community of faith (see the upper left-hand corner). There they will ask for help in finding norms and models for guiding the responses and initiatives they may shape in relation to the current challenges. They may discover that from their normative traditions they will find resources and precedents that will provide alternative and fresh perspectives they can offer to the coalitions with whom they work. They may also find moral and spiritual dimensions in the crisis that they had not previously recognized. They may also find constraints regarding some strategies or approaches they might have considered. What I am describing here has been called a process of „mutually critical correlation“.⁵ At the heart of intentional practical theological engagement we find this dynamic dialectic: *Interpretations of the situations of present challenges and their contexts are brought into mutually critical correlation with interpretations of the normative sources of Christian tradition and practices.*

Some practical theologians, following the influential work of Hans Georg Gadamer, (*Truth and Method*) refer to this process as a creative „fusion of the horizons“ of interpreted social reality with those of interpreted Christian normative sources.⁶ This image of the fusion of

⁵ See David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology*. New York: Seabury Press, 1975, Chs. 2 and 3. See also D. Tracy, „The Foundations of Practical Theology“ in Don S. Browning, Ed., *Practical Theology: The Emerging Field in Theology, Church and World*. New York: Harper and Row, 1983, pp. 61-82.

⁶ Gadamer's book is *Truth and Method*, New York: Seabury Press, 1975. On „fusion of horizons“ see pp. 273f, 337f, 358. Among practical theologians making use of Gadamer's hermeneutical theory see: Charles Gerkin, *The Living Human Document: Revisioning Pastoral Counseling in a Hermeneutical Mode*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984, Gerkin, *Widening the Horizons: Pastoral Responses to a Fragmented Society*.

horizons is important. It suggests the creativity and imaginative newness that can result from such a process. It does not go too far to suggest that when such a process is thoroughly and faithfully carried out, the results have the potential of producing new vision and commitment of a sort we associate with experience of revelation.

One can see from this description why I have characterized the work of practical theology as both *interpretative* (hermeneutical) and *correlational*. Perhaps you can also see in fresh ways how practical theology provides the means by which ongoing interpretation of Scripture and tradition, in correlation with present situations and challenges, can fuel processes of change in the practices of our churches, while honoring continuity and keeping faith with our scriptures and traditions.

Some Common Characteristics of Practical Theological Approaches

Perhaps it will be helpful if we summarize some of the marks that distinguish the emerging new directions in practical theology from other approaches. I will use as examples of these characteristics some aspects of the approaches employed by participants in this conference or those that have influenced them.

1. ***Praxis-Theory-Praxis***. Practical theological method claims as its starting place some context or contexts of praxis. That is to say, it arises in reflection out of the context of ongoing practices in which communities of faith engage. It arises out of practices and returns to practices. Its goal is not the formulation of abstract understandings or principles. Rather, it aims at the modification toward greater faithfulness and adequacy of the practices with which it begins.

One of the sources from which the re-emergence of practical theology had taken its direction is the focus in the United States on „congregational studies.“ This work, which began with sociological and anthropological studies of religious communities in the late 1970's, initially aimed at trying to serve theological educators and pastoral strategists in finding more effective ways to impact congregations with new

Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986 and Don S. Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology: Descriptive and Strategic Proposals*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991. Gadamer has had a great deal of influence on and through the work of David Tracy, *op.cit.* and *The Analogical Imagination*. New York: Crossroad, 1981.

theological teachings.⁷ This involved a prior theological commitment and intent which gave rise to the study of congregations for purposes of bringing about change, the directions of which were determined in advance by persons and groups from beyond the congregations. This could be called a classic *theory-praxis-theory* approach. In the course of a few years, however, practitioners of congregational studies began recognize the richly layered complexity of the practices of congregations. They began to come to understand that the formative power of congregational practices goes a great deal deeper than what a mere change in the articulation of their theology can affect. With these insights there began to appear books like Schreiter's *Constructing Local Theologies*⁸ and James Hopewell's *Congregation*.⁹ They have challenged and helped practical theologians recognize that change in the practices of religious communities must begin with helping congregations face and name the points at which their practices are inadequate, unfaithful, or both. Matthew Lamb, influenced by his teacher Johannes Metz, wrote a benchmark book, *Solidarity with Victims*, in which he showed decisively how the most influential theologies of the twentieth century virtually always approached the churches from the standpoint of the priority of theory.¹⁰

2. Practical theological approaches *are contextual, local, and stay close to experience*. In contrast to the aspirations of some philosophical or systematic theologies, practical theology does not aim at timeless, universal or comprehensive interpretations of Christian tradition. In many ways, practical theology is „problem-posing“ theology. In its ongoing monitoring of the horizon of challenges and issues the church faces it responds to crisis events or emergent issues by initiating practical theological discussion and inquiry. This is not to say that its work is merely piecemeal or fragmentary. In many ways the church's self-understanding and comprehensive interpretation of the meaning of the Gospel are brought into question by the practical challenges and issues it faces. However, instead of approaching scripture and tradition with the intent to make systematic and comprehensive interpretations, it approaches them with the focus of the par-

⁷ For representative writings of this position see Jackson W. Carroll, Carl S. Dudley and William McKinney, Eds., *Handbook for Congregational Studies*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986 and Carl Dudley, Ed., *Building Effective Ministry*. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1983.

⁸ Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Press, 1985.

⁹ Hopewell's book is *Congregation: Stories and Structures*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987.

¹⁰ New York: Crossroad, 1982.

ticular and local issues it confronts. The Dutch practical theologian, Johannes van der Ven, and the group he works with at Nijmegen University call their approach to practical theology „Empirical Theology.“ In doing so they pay particular attention to the analysis of social and cultural problematics that challenge the church to fresh theological thinking. At the same time they concern themselves to understand the ways contemporary people frame these issues so that theology may address them in intelligible and credible ways.¹¹

3. Practical theology reclaims the approaches of *a theology habitus*. The apostle Paul referred to the *ekklesia* – the community of persons called together in a new covenant in Christ – as „the Body of Christ.“ He spoke of the uniqueness of the gifts of those who make up the body in terms of the parts of our bodies – the ears, the eyes, the hands, the feet of the community. We are a creedal community who take seriously the witness to a bodily resurrection of the Jesus whose body was whipped, hung on a cross, and pierced with a spear. *Theology habitus* takes into account our „bodiliness“ as my colleague Rebecca Chopp puts it.¹² Our conscious cognitive functioning constitutes a relatively limited part of our modes of knowing and relating to the physical world and to each other. We are our bodies. We have powerful emotional experiences and patterns that shape the frameworks in which we construct and interpret our experiences. The levels of our energy and spirit in important ways depend upon our bodies. Likewise, our bodily health can be deeply affected by the frames of meaning or meaninglessness that characterize the societies and sub-communities with which we identify. Theologian Sallie McFague has boldly brought our experiences of bodiliness into her rigorously creative work on the theology of the Body of God.¹³ Bodiliness in theology means taking our natural and human environments seriously. It means taking seriously the substances we and others ingest into our bodies for nourishment, for healing and for the alteration of our moods and subjectivity. Bodiliness means taking the architecture and physical features of cities and constructed environments seriously. And bodiliness means profound care about what happens to the bodies of

¹¹ Johannes van der Ven, *Practical Theology: An Empirical Approach*. Kampen, The Netherlands: Pharos Publishing, 1993.

¹² Rebecca Chopp, *Saving Work: Feminist Practices of Theological Education*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995. She credits David Kelsey with the term „bodiliness“ in his book *To Understand God Truly: What's Theological About a Theological School?* Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992, p. 119.

¹³ Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987, and McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993.

persons — especially children — in the economic and social fragmentations associated with the advances of market capitalism and the global spread of cultural values of North America and Europe. Practical theology cannot do its work with the tacit assumption that people's bodies begin with their neck and extend only upward. This means, further, that practical theology opposes docetic theologies that compartmentalize the spiritual and the physical, and that shrink the concerns of the church to the private and spiritual needs of its members.

4. Practical theology includes, **but is not limited to reflective work in the functional areas of ecclesial practices**. In the older world of so-called „classical“ and „applied“ theology, the disciplines that worked with the functional specialties of applied theology could be taught and written about separately. There were professors of homiletics, who worked particularly on exegesis, sermon construction, rhetorical styles, and effectiveness in communication. Likewise, religious educators found their principal academic colleagues among secular educators. The often shared the assumptions and standards of education shaped by the „schooling“ models, carrying on their work without particular attention to its theological or ecclesial foundations. Professors of pastoral care, seeking to legitimate their teaching and research, often grounded themselves in the theories and clinical practices of secular psychological traditions. Frequently this meant incorporating practices and approaches that isolated individuals from their communities of faith and did little to address the spiritual crises and hungers they carried.

In the work of contemporary practical theologians we still see focal research and writing on pastoral theology, homiletics and religious education. But there are some remarkable new patterns emerging. Work in pastoral care by Pam Couture, just to offer one example, focuses on the experience of women and children in the context of the worldwide phenomenon of the „feminization of poverty.“ She addresses churches and society regarding the need to recognize and alleviate the crises of women's and children's lives in our contemporary societies. In doing so she draws with power on the ethical and biblical resources of the Christian tradition, offering them in ways that engage patterns of public debate in our societies.¹⁴ Work by Karl Ernst Nipkow and Friedrich Schweitzer on education in Germany has exhibited these same kinds of commitments and methods.

¹⁴ Pamela D. Couture, *Blessed Are the Poor? Women's Poverty, Family Policy, and Practical Theology*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991.

5. Practical theology works in two languages: *the „language behind the wall“ and the „language on the wall.“* In II Kings 18 and 19 we read the story of the time when Jerusalem, under the reign of Hezekiah, is surrounded by a huge host of Assyrian troops, sent there by King Sennacherib. The Assyrian forces have been plundering and sacking the cities of Judah. Jerusalem, the final prize, is now to be plucked. Hezekiah, 39 years old, and in the fourteenth year of his reign, is a pious and faithful king facing a terrible situation. He has already stripped the gold and silver off the altar and appointments of the temple and from the doors of the palace. His treasury is empty. There are no more material objects with which buy time against the Assyrians.

The Rabshakeh, Sennacherib's haughty ambassador, comes with his entourage to stand on the top of the wall that surrounds the beleaguered city. He is met by representatives of Hezekiah, who asked him politely to converse with them in Aramaic, which is the language of international diplomacy. „Do not speak to us in Hebrew, within the hearing of those of our people who are on the wall.“ The Rabshakeh responded with insult and threat: „Has my master sent me to speak these words to your master and to you, and not to the people sitting on the wall, who are doomed with you to eat their own dung and to drink their own urine?“ Then, in a loud voice and in bad Hebrew, he shouts his demands, laced with seductive promises and dire threat: „Do not listen to Hezekiah; for thus says the king of Assyria: 'Make your peace with me and come out to me; then every one of you will eat from you own vine and your own fig tree, and drink water from you own cistern, until I come and take you away to a land like your own land, a land of grain and wine, a land of bread and vineyards, a land of olive oil and honey, that you may live and not die'.“ (II Kings, 18:26-27)

Hezekiah and his advisors gather in the palace. The king sends one of his officials to consult with the prophet Isaiah. Hezekiah, a man of prayer, recalls God's faithfulness in the past and places his desperate situation before the Lord. The message from Isaiah comes: He has heard a Word from the Lord. He tells Hezekiah to hold firm and to lay his case and the arrogant threats of Sennacherib before God. Hezekiah is given assurance that a rumor will cause the Assyrian general to return to his own land, and that Sennacherib will die at the hand of one of his own sons. And as though miraculously, the Assyrian army is removed as a threat. The faith and righteousness of Hezekiah are vindicated.

Old Testament theologian, Walter Brueggemann has made this story the basis for offering a powerful set of observations about the kind of formation in faith that is required „behind the wall“ for people of faith to offer their witness and to challenge the values and assumptions of secular societies „on the wall.“¹⁵

Practical theology that aims to guide churches in the shaping and reshaping of their public witness in secular societies must be rooted in a vigorous life of worship, prayer, proclamation and study of scripture and tradition. If practical theology is to help churches unmask the pretenses of secular value structures and the seductive injustices of capitalist and market economies, communities of faith have to be grounded deeply in an alternate set of stories, and be equipped with an alternate set of virtues. Brueggemann says that if the churches are going to offer their witness and guidance „beyond“ the wall in credible and relevant ways, they must be capable of relating Christian normative judgments and visions in language that is intelligible and that has bite for those who have no Christian memory or commitments. Practical theology of this sort works in two languages: the language „behind the wall“ and the language for use „on the wall.“

The Need for Shared Visions of the *Praxis* of God and of Human Vocation

In trying to characterize the new shape of practical theological work I have emphasized its rootedness in *praxis*. I have stressed that it is **contextual** and **local**, and that it stays **close to experience**. The new practical theology seeks to reclaim and reshape a *theology habitus* for our time and for our societies. The new practical theology links the study and strengthening of the **practices** of ministry to the larger tasks of forming and guiding the faithfulness of communities of faith. In my final point, I stressed the need for practical theology to do its work in two languages: the languages of prayer, praise and proclamation „behind the wall,“ and the languages of public discourse „on the wall.“

As we come to our conclusion I must point to a dimension of theological work that has become particularly problematic for today's approaches to practical theology. I speak of the challenge and the need

¹⁵ Walter Brueggemann, „The Legitimacy of a Sectarian Hermeneutic“ in Mary C. Boys, Ed., *Education for Citizenship and Discipleship*. Philadelphia: Pilgrim Press, 1989, pp. 1-34.

to offer intelligible and convictional metaphors to depict what I will call the *praxis of God* in our time, and to offer equally compelling and correlated metaphors for patterns of **human partnership with God's praxis**.

In university based systematic theology of the last fifty years there has been a notable neglect of what historically was called the „Providence of God.“ In a book in press I have tried to address some of the reasons for our turning away from this kind of focus in theological work. Here, I will only point out that the new practical theology's commitments to working contextually and locally, and to root its work in *praxis* have made it suspicious of speculative systematic theologies, especially those dealing with the providence or *praxis* of God. Liberation theologies have not been so reticent in speaking about God's *praxis*. But they have often been criticized for subtly or blatantly shaping the *praxis* of God to fit the contours of the ideological commitments they bring to the Bible. Similarly, middle class academics have been accused of bringing our class biased and patriarchal ideologies to our efforts to construe God's *praxis* in society and history. And there are millions of people in this century who, in looking upon the mass slaughters, the holocausts, and the terrorist wars carried out, too often, in the name of our gods, simply have concluded that God helps those who „help themselves“ — but here not in Benjamin Franklin's sense of the phrase, but rather in the sense of the lords of international capitalism and their smaller scale imitators everywhere who are „helping themselves“ at the expense of the poor and of nature, and the futures of all our children.

I acknowledge the weight of these factors in making us extremely cautious as we try to find and formulate ways of offering the witness of Biblical faith as regards God's involvement in the processes of nature and history. But I submit to this gathering that we cannot afford to build theological approaches around a commitment to *praxis* without finding ways theologically to help communities of faith correlate their own efforts at faithfulness with the ways God's spirit is present and active in our world.

Don Browning has faced and named this need in his book *A Fundamental Practical Theology*.¹⁶ He argues forcefully that there must be a visional component linking God to our contexts of action in our theologies that can ground the normative guidelines of love and justice. I have named and worked with this issue as part of my approach in

¹⁶ Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991.

*Faith Development and Pastoral Care*¹⁷ and in a new manuscript that will appear in the coming year.¹⁸ Browning and I have, in somewhat different ways, both drawn on the metaphorical theology of H. Richard Niebuhr, in this regard, and have written about God's **Creating, Governing and Liberating/Redeeming praxis**.¹⁹ Browning has drawn the implications of these metaphors for norms in theological ethics. I have followed Niebuhr in developing co-related metaphors for the patterns of humans' partnership with God **in co-Creation, co-Governance, co-Liberation and Redemption**.

In addition to the kinds of objections to these approaches I mentioned earlier, there is a widespread sense that the connecting of practical theology to biblically derived metaphors that depict the **praxis of God** apriori disqualifies our work from any consideration in our broader secular and religiously pluralistic societies. Is it possible to speak of the praxis of God in a theology that could address a broader pluralistic or secular society? Let me share with you the kernel of a couple of convictions I am forming on this issue:

1. In the religiously pluralistic (and the militantly secular) contexts in which we work people exhibit high levels of spiritual hunger and ethical anomie. This condition makes it essential that we find intelligible and imaginative ways to offer access to the visions, practices and truths of our faith traditions. We are called to develop new forms of apologetic theological communication and formation addressed to those who are drawn to spirituality and to ethical awakening. We need to knit together cosmology and compelling metaphors for God's creating, judging, liberating and redeeming influences in human society. We need to provide contexts of community and care where people can experience and regain the liberating disciplines of prayer and praise.

2. Equally important, but even more urgent, I believe, is that we provide intelligible metaphoric and convictional images of God's **praxis** for the members of our Christian communities of faith. Members of Christian communities must have support and metaphorical clarity for

¹⁷ Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987.

¹⁸ James W. Fowler, *Faithfulness and Change: Human Development, Shame and the Ethics of Vocation*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, (In Press).

¹⁹ For an indepth account of Niebuhr's use of these metaphors see Fowler, *To See The Kingdom: The Theological Vision of H. Richard Niebuhr*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1974 and Lanham, Maryland: Universities Press of America, 1985. For an effort at fresh practical theological construction building from this Niebuhrian tradition see Fowler, *Faithful Change: The Personal and Public Challenges of Postmodern Life*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996.

understanding how their vocations and faithfulness can be part of the work and will of God. We will not get far with the serious renewal of practical theological engagement in our congregations if we fail at this fundamental task.

Ironically, I end these reflections on the new shape of practical theology with a challenge to my colleagues that we build deeply into our agenda attention to re-funding the visional level of our work. I am calling for us to invest our efforts in what might give rise to a provisional, revisable, but quite serious and daring Systematic Practical Theology. I am calling for a theology which arises out of and returns to the local, the concrete and the contextual situations in which we work. It should make a serious effort, through intercourse with the Bible and with the works of others from different contexts and settings, to avoid ideological captivity and entrapment in abstractions. At the same time, it should endeavor to offer a relevant and powerful depiction that will enable us to see the subtle depths and awesome patterns of God's suffering presence and providential power in preserving, healing and redeeming God's beloved creation. Through such a practical theological witness we and those whom we teach, may be moved, empowered and guided in making ourselves more fully a part of God's work in our time and in our places.