

PRACTICAL THEOLOGY
A DISCIPLINE IN SEARCH OF A DEFINITION
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It is hard to imagine a topic of theological methodology that is receiving more attention at the moment than that of the nature and task of the specialty-discipline, Practical Theology! Discussion of this issue has taken on ecumenical and international scope over the last twenty-five years. In the process, it has spawned a remarkable variety of proposals for construing the discipline. At the moment, this very variety is perhaps the main obstacle to further progress in the discussion. A pause to survey and organize the suggested alternatives would seem to be in order. This process could help clarify the major issues, locate any possible trends, and identify the most pressing items for the agenda of the discussion.

I. Background to the Current Discussion

To understand the current discussion of Practical Theology, it would be helpful to preface a brief summary of its historical background.¹ Many of the current proposals have been consciously framed through appeal to *earlier* understandings of the discipline.² The other proposals are reacting to problems created by prior transformations of the discipline, whether they recognize this or not.

For the earliest Christian setting, the term “practical theology” is most appropriately a characterization of the genre of theology as a whole, not the name for some distinct element or discipline within it. This inclusive use ended by the thirteenth century, with the emergence of the Western universities. It

¹For the details and documentation that this summary is based on, see Randy L. Maddox, “The Recovery of Theology as a Practical Discipline,” *Theological Studies* 51 (1990): 650–72.

²This is especially true of German proposals. Cf. Botho Ahlers, *Die Unterscheidung von Theologie und Religion. Ein Beitrag zur Vorgeschichte der praktischen Theologie im 18. Jahrhundert* (Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1980); Walter Birnbaum, *Theologische Wandlungen von Schleiermacher bis Karl Barth: Eine enzyklopädische Studie zur praktischen Theologie* (Tübingen: Katzmann-Verlag, 1963); Volker Drehsen, *Neuzeitliche Konstitutionsbedingungen der praktischen Theologie: Aspekte der theologischen Wende zur soziokulturellen Lebenswelt christlicher Religion*, 2 vols. (Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1988); Gerhard Krause, *Praktische Theologie: Texte zum Werden und Selbstverständnis der Praktischen Disziplin der Evangelischen Theologie* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1972); Gert Otto, “Selbstverständnis, Systembildung und Darstellungsform der praktischen Theologie,” *Theologia Practica* 19 (1984): 202–21; and Dietrich Rössler, “Prolegomena zur praktischen Theologie: Vermächtnis Christian Palmers,” *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 64 (1967): 357–77.

now became common to distinguish the “speculative theology” of the university from “practical theology,” which reflected on Christian spirituality (usually in contexts *outside* of the university).

Eventually the title “practical theology” found its way into the university. The apparent earliest example (late sixteenth century) was to designate a simplified summary of academic theology, stripped of all the disputation, prepared for students who were not pursuing advanced theological training (i.e., “mere” pastors). By the seventeenth century it became more typical to use “Practical Theology” (capitalized because now a distinct university discipline) to designate the academic study of Christian *actions*, as distinguished from “Theoretical (or Speculative) Theology,” which dealt with Christian *beliefs*.³

This distinction between the academic disciplines of Practical Theology and Speculative Theology reflected an important transition in the Western universities. They had originally assumed that the knowledge (*scientia*) which they pursued was a unified whole. This single subject matter was considered to unite the various disciplines. However, the proliferation of knowledge, with its resulting specialization, undermined this unity. The eventual result was that the university became an aggregate of sciences, distinguished by their differing subject matter while (supposedly) united by their method. Academic theology mirrored this move, becoming a collection of subject-defined disciplines—most typically: Biblical Theology, Historical Theology, Systematic Theology, and Practical Theology.⁴

At its inception, Practical Theology’s subject matter was identified as general Christian (or human) praxis. It’s task was to formulate norms for this praxis. In other words, it was Moral Theology. This identification changed through the nineteenth century. In the first place, Kant’s analysis of practical reason had the (unintended?) affect of restricting Practical Theology to merely “applying” to praxis theories that were developed by Systematic Theology. Second, following Schleiermacher’s influential theological encyclopedia, the subject field of Practical Theology was increasingly narrowed: first, to

³This distinction was modeled on Aristotle’s differentiation between *theoria* and *praxis*. Roman Catholic schools typically followed Boethius in using *speculativa*, the Latin equivalent of *theoria*.

⁴The first independent chair of Practical Theology in a theology academy is apparently in 1774 (cf. *Praktische Theologie heute*, edited by Ferdinand Klostermann & Rolf Zerfass [Munich: Christian Kaiser, 1974], 11). The best survey of the history of the specialty-discipline is Dietrich Rössler, *Grundriß der praktischen Theologie* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1986), 22–53. See also: Edward Farley, “Interpreting Situations: An Inquiry into the Nature of Practical Theology,” in *Formation and Reflection: The Promise of Practical Theology*, edited by Lewis Mudge & James Poling, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 1–26; René Marlé, *Le Projet de Théologie Pratique* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1979); and K. Wegenast, “Zum Verhältnis systematischer und praktischer Theologie in Geschichte und Gegenwart,” *Evangelische Erzieher* 36 (1984): 674–702.

ecclesial praxis; and then, to the praxis of clergy. That is, Practical Theology became Pastoral Theology, a discipline aimed at preparing ministers to handle the technical aspects of their profession.

While the model of Pastoral Theology was solidifying its dominance in the university, there were two other short-lived understandings of “Practical Theology” in German theological circles. Near the end of the eighteenth century a genre of popular theology (often called “Practical Theology”) surfaced briefly, aimed at distilling the major conclusions of recent academic reflection for presentation to interested laity among the newly emerging educated middle-class. As the nineteenth century ended, Ernst Troeltsch combined influences of Schleiermacher’s *Glaubenslehre* and Hegel’s understanding of praxis to conceive a “Practical Theology” that was devoted to articulating the implicit convictions of the current Christian community. He advocated this as an alternative to imposing a traditional or “dogmatic” definition of faith upon the present church. Troeltsch’s proposal was abruptly abandoned by the Neo-Orthodox turn in the early twentieth century, which rejected his assumption of the primacy of current church praxis over traditional teachings, and consolidated Pastoral Theology.

II. Alternative Contemporary Models of Practical Theology

The paradigm of Practical Theology as Pastoral Theology dominated both Protestant and Roman Catholic circles through the middle of the twentieth century. However, the last twenty-five years have witnessed a renewed and growing debate within the field over its nature and goals. This debate has been most active in German and Anglo-American theological arenas.⁵ Although carried on largely independent of each other, the major conclusions and tensions of the debate in these arenas are remarkably similar.

At the center of the recent debate have been the effects of the nineteenth-century narrowing of Practical Theology to Pastoral Theology. As such, the alternative positions being advocated focus on two major questions: 1) What

⁵Important collections of the German debate are *Theologie und Handeln: Beiträge zur Fundierung der praktischer Theologie als Handlungstheorie*, ed. Ottmar Fuchs (Düsseldorf: Patmos Verlag, 1984); and *Praktische Theologie heute*, eds. Klostermann & Zeffass. American collections include *Practical Theology: The Emerging Field in Theology, Church and World*, ed. Don Browning (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983); and *Formation and Reflection*, eds. Mudge & Poling. For the British discussion, see *The Foundations of Pastoral Studies and Practical Theology*, ed. Paul H. Ballard (Cardiff: University College Faculty of Theology, 1986). For mention of some parallels in the Netherlands to the American and German discussions, see G.D.J. Dingemans, “Praktische Theologie als een academische Discipline,” *Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift* 43 (1989): 192–211. For relation to South African debates, see Gerald Hawkes, “The Relationship Between Theology and Practice in Southern Africa,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 68 (1989): 29–39.

is the subject field of Practical Theology? and, 2) What is Practical Theology's task in relation to that field?⁶

A. The Subject Field of Practical Theology

One issue around which the recent discussion of Practical Theology has fractured is the identification of the subject field of the discipline: What praxis does it deal with?

1. *Pastoral Ministry*. In the paradigm of Practical Theology as Pastoral Theology the subject field was clear: the range of tasks involved in pastoral ministry. This identification of the subject field is still apparent in the *de facto* structure of most seminary faculties and textbooks. Its status as the "established" position accounts in part for its slim representation in the current discussions.⁷ The most active participants have been discontented with such an identification.

2. *The Life of the Church*. The beginnings of this discontent can be dated with some precision. German universities experienced widespread student unrest and demands for curriculum revision in the mid-1960s. This inevitably affected the area of theology. The students called for theology to become more relevant to the whole Church, by entering into greater dialogue with the sciences. They focused such demand for changes on Practical Theology in particular.⁸ This triggered the establishment of a new journal, in 1966, to provide a forum for developing a Practical Theology that transcended its current clerical focus: *Theologica Practica*.⁹

⁶The interrelations between these two topics cover the major points mentioned in other suggested typologies of these debates. Cf. Christof Bäumlner, "Probleme der Theoriesbildung praktischer Theologie," in *Einführung in die praktische Theologie*, eds. Rolf Zerfaß & Norbert Greinacher (Munich: Christian Kaiser, 1976), 77–95; Peter Bloth, "Praktische Theologie," in *Theologie im 20. Jahrhundert: Stand und Aufgaben*, ed. Georg Strecker (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1983), 389–493; Gerald Hawkes, "The Role of Theology in Practical Theology," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 49 (1984): 38–48; Godwin Lämmermann, *Praktische Theologie als kritische oder als empirische-funktionale Handlungstheorie* (Munich: Christian Kaiser, 1981), 23; and James Poling & Donald Miller, *Foundations for a Practical Theology of Ministry* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985), 29ff.

⁷This subject field still appears in the recent German *Handbuch der praktischen Theologie*, 4 vols, ed. Peter Bloth, *et al.* (Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1981–88). An American example of continuing influence is Steward Hiltner, *Preface to Pastoral Care* (New York: Abingdon, 1958). It can also be discerned in the discussions of Gerhard Ebeling, *The Study of Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), 109–24; James Fowler, "Practical Theology and the Shaping of Christian Lives," in *Practical Theology*, ed. Browning, 148–66; James Lapsley, "Practical Theology and Pastoral Care: An Essay in Pastoral Theology," in *Practical Theology*, ed. Browning, 167–86; Walter Neidhart, "Aspekte der Beziehungen zwischen den beiden Disziplinen," *Theologia Practica* 9 (1974): 97–104; and Charles Winqvist, "Re-visioning Ministry: Postmodern Reflections," in *Formation and Reflection*, eds. Mudge & Poling, 27–35.

⁸The manifesto of this movement was: Wolfgang Hermann & Gerd Lautner, *Theologiestudium: Entwurf einer Reform* (Munich: Christian Kaiser, 1965).

⁹Cf. the introductory editorial: Gerhard Krause, "Zur Standortbestimmung einer Zeitschrift für praktische Theologie," *Theologia Practica* 1 (1966): 1–10.

The call for a broader definition of the subject field of Pastoral Theology struck an immediate chord. For example, it found expression in the Catholic *Handbuch der Pastoraltheologie*¹⁰ then in process, which defined its subject as the nature and task of the whole Church. That is, it defined the ministry that it was trying to understand and foster in a manner inclusive of all members of the Church, not simply the clergy. This broader definition of ministry soon encouraged the rejection of the title “Pastoral Theology,” preferring the previous “Practical Theology.”¹¹ Karl Rahner became the most influential advocate of such a Practical Theology.¹² Other persons adopting the same general stance would include: Alistair Campbell, Eberhard Hübner, Manfred Jossutis, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Dietrich Rössler, and Gerhard Sauter.¹³

3. *The Life of the Church in the World.* A third proposed identification of the subject field of Practical Theology is a slight, but significant, nuancing of that just mentioned. It still deals with the Church as a whole, but now with a special emphasis on the placement of the Church in the world, and its resulting mission. Accordingly, the discussion of even “internal” topics such as worship takes on a new focus concerning how they prepare for, encourage, or express ministry to the world. Among those advocating such an understanding of the subject field of Practical Theology are: Christof Bäumlner, Karl-Fritz Daiber, Norbert Greinacher, Godwin Lämmermann, Dennis McCann & Charles Strain, Alois Müller, Richard Osmer, James Poling & Donald Miller, Johannes Van der Ven, and Rolf Zerfaß.¹⁴

¹⁰Edited by F.X. Arnold, *et al.* (Freiburg: Herder, 1964–66).

¹¹See Heinz Schuster, “Pastoral Theology,” *Sacramentum Mundi*, IV: 365.

¹²Cf. Rahner, “Practical Theology within the Totality of Theological Disciplines,” *Theological Investigations IX*, 101–14 (New York: Herder & Herder, 1972).

¹³See: Alastair Campbell, “Is Practical Theology Possible?” in *Theology and Practice*, ed. Duncan Forrester (London: Epworth, 1990), 10–20; Eberhard Hübner, *Theologie und Empirie der Kirche: Prolegomena zur praktischen Theologie* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1985); Manfred Josuttis, *Praxis des Evangeliums zwischen Politik und Religion: Grundprobleme der praktischen Theologie* (Munich: Christian Kaiser, 1974); Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Theology and the Philosophy of Science* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), 423–40; Dietrich Rössler, “Praktische Theologie – Begriff und Aufgabe” in *Praktische Theologie*, ed. F. Wintzer (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1982), 1–10; Rössler, *Grundriß*; and Gerhard Sauter, “Beobachtungen und Vorschläge zum gegenseitigen Verständnis von praktischer und systematischer Theologie,” *Theologica Practica* 9 (1974): 19–26.

¹⁴Cf. Christof Bäumlner, “Praktische Theologie, ein notwendiges Element der wissenschaftlichen Theologie,” *Theologia Practica* 9 (1974): 72–84; Karl-Fritz Daiber, *Grundriß der praktischen Theologie als Handlungswissenschaften* (Munich: Christian Kaiser, 1977); Norbert Greinacher, “Praktische Theologie als kritische Theorie kirchlicher Praxis in der Gesellschaft,” *Theologische Quartalschrift* 168 (1988): 283–99; Lämmermann, *Praktische Theologie*; Dennis McCann & Charles Strain, *Polity and Praxis: A Program for American Practical Theology* (Minneapolis: Winston, 1985); Alois Müller, “Praktische Theologie zwischen Kirche und Gesellschaft,” in *Praktische Theologie heute*, eds. Klostermann & Zerfaß, 15–26; Richard Osmer, *A Teachable Spirit* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1990), 147–74; Poling & Miller, *Foundations for Practical Theology*; Johannes Van der Ven, “Practical Theology: From Applied to Empirical Theology,” *Journal of Empirical Theology* 1 (1988): 7–27; and Rolf Zerfaß, “Praktische Theologie als Handlungswissenschaft,” in *Praktische Theologie heute*, eds. Klostermann & Zerfaß, 164–77.

The greater interaction with the world that this position endorses requires an increased dialogue with the social and human sciences that analyze the world. Of course, understanding the world is not enough. The real question is how to change it! This concern is represented in the German arena by the articulation of Practical Theology as a *Handlungswissenschaft*—a human science oriented directly to action.¹⁵ Closely related is the association of Practical Theology with critical theory.¹⁶

Ultimately, what is involved here is a turn back towards the earlier understanding of Practical Theology as Moral Theology.¹⁷ This return has not been without its critics. In particular, some have argued this move is based upon too narrow of an understanding of what humans are and do—reducing them to solely moral entities, without appreciating as well their affections, etc.¹⁸

4. *Religious/Moral Life in the World.* The equation of Practical Theology with Moral Theology is even stronger in the fourth identification of its subject field: religious/moral actions in the world. While the Church is part of this subject field, it is not programatically identified as the centre of all God's work in the world. Rather, attention is directed to the moral/religious dimensions of general human culture. The goal of Practical Theology then becomes the development of a "public" account of proper action in the world; i.e., an account that is not confessionally-dependent upon the Church. Some major examples of such an emphasis are Don Browning, Edward Farley, Schubert Ogden, Gert Otto, Bernd Päsche, and David Tracy.¹⁹

Not surprisingly, this position has been particularly important to those most concerned to

¹⁵This connection is most explicit in Bäumler, Daiber, and Lämmermann. The term *Handlungswissenschaft* was coined by Helmut Schelsky. It denotes those human and social sciences that are particularly directed to procuring results for social action—i.e., sociology, political science, economics, etc. See Schelsky, *Einsamkeit und Freiheit: Ideen und Gestalt der deutschen Universität und ihrer Reformen* (Hamburg: Reinbek, 1963), 278–91.

¹⁶This association is most direct in Greinacher and McCann & Strain.

¹⁷Cf. the intricate discussion needed to distinguish Practical Theology and Christian social ethics in McCann & Strain, *Polity and Praxis*, 161ff. Osmer essentially equates Practical Theology with moral reasoning.

¹⁸The major examples of such a critique are: Rudolf Bohren, *Daß Gott schön werde: Praktische Theologie als theologische Ästhetik* (Munich: Christian Kaiser, 1975), 124–25; Albrecht Grözinger, *Praktische Theologie und Ästhetik: ein Beitrag zur Grundlegung der praktischen Theologie* (Munich: Christian Kaiser, 1987), 168ff; Leo Karrer, "Praktische Theologie – ein Januskopf," *Freiburger Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 30 (1983): 307–29, esp. 316; and Lapsley, "Practical Theology," 170.

¹⁹See especially: Don S. Browning, *Religious Ethics and Pastoral Care* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983); Browning, "Practical Theology and Political Theology," *Theology Today* 42 (1985): 15–33; Edward Farley, "Theology and Practice Outside the Clerical Paradigm," in *Practical Theology*, ed. Browning, 21–41; Farley, "Interpreting Situations"; Schubert Ogden, "Prolegomena to Practical Theology," *Perkins School of Theology Journal* 35.3 (1982): 17–21; Gert Otto, "Praktische Theologie als kritische Theorie religiös vermittelter Praxis," *Theologia Practica* 9 (1974): 109–15; Otto, *Grundlegung der praktischen Theologie* (Munich: Christian Kaiser, 1986); Bernd Päsche, "Praktische Theologie als kritische Handlungswissenschaft," *Theologia Practica* 6 (1971): 1–13; David Tracy, "The Foundations of Practical Theology," in *Practical Theology*, ed. Browning, 61–82; and Tracy, "Practical Theology in the Situation of Global Pluralism," in *Formation and Reflection*, eds. Mudge & Poling, 139–54.

justify Practical Theology's status as a science in the university, while it has been attacked by others as an undue concession to the university and as a surrendering of the concrete community within which truly effective Christian action actually arises.²⁰

5. *Human Spiritual/Existential Experience*. While the third and fourth positions just summarized are the majority views within the current debate on Practical Theology, there have been a few participants who identify the discipline's subject field in a manner reminiscent of the earlier contrast between "practical theology" and the "speculative theology" of the universities. These folk argue that Practical Theology should focus less on human actions than on such fundamental human *experiences* as temptation and the contradictions that call life into question. The purpose of reflecting upon such experiences is to help guide the life of the soul. The clearest examples of this approach are Eilert Herms and Volker Weymann.²¹

B. *The Task of Practical Theology*

The other major issue differentiating current proposals about Practical Theology concerns the adequacy of the nineteenth-century identification of Practical Theology as an "application" discipline. This question was given new urgency by the modern theological and philosophical debates concerning the relationship of theory and practice. These debates have generally rejected the two extremes: 1) merely deriving practice from theory, and 2) seeing theory as a mere reflection of practice. Instead, they have argued for the need to see authentic human actions (as contrasted with mere technique) as both meaning-discerning and meaning-laden. The term "praxis" has been retrieved to capture this dialectical relationship between action and reflection.

²⁰For reflections on the university status of Practical Theology see: Birnbaum, *Theologische Wandlungen*; James Fowler, "Practical Theology and Theological Education: Some Models and Questions," *Theology Today* 42 (1985): 43–58; Lämmermann, *Praktische Theologie*, 11, 20; Wolfgang Steck, "Die wissenschaftliche Situation der praktischen Theologie," *Wissenschaft und Praxis im Kirche und Gesellschaft* 63 (1974): 65–80; and Zerfaß, "Praktische Theologie."

²¹Eilert Herms, *Theologie—eine Erfahrungswissenschaft* (Munich: Christian Kaiser, 1978); and Volker Weymann, "Gegensatzerfahrungen: Zum Praxisbezug praktischer Theologie," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 82 (1985): 455–76.

“Praxis,” then, designates “creative action, inspired by critical reflection, that gives rise to both change and insight.”²² Correlated with this understanding of praxis is a conception of the type of knowledge that those who reflect on praxis will develop. It is neither pure theory nor mere technique, but *phronesis*—a wisdom that interrelates the universal and the particular.²³

Admitting the general agreement on the need to interrelate praxis and theory, there are still discernable differences of emphasis in the current theological and philosophical discussion.²⁴ Similar differences are evident in the appropriation of this discussion for the issue of the task of Practical Theology.

1. *Apply Theological Theories to Subject Field.* The early attempts to return from Pastoral Theology to Practical Theology by enlarging the subject field of the discipline to the whole Church retained, by and large, an understanding of its task as the application to the Church of theories previously developed by Systematic Theology.²⁵ This general understanding retains a few representatives in the current discussion.²⁶ However, most participants advocate a more formative role for Practical Theology.

²²Dermot A. Lane, *Foundations for a Social Theology: Praxis, Process and Salvation* (New York: Paulist, 1984), 4. For some general accounts of the discussion of praxis and its relationship to Practical Theology, see Farley, “Interpreting Situations, 7; Wolfgang Herrmann, *Die Angst der Theologen vor der Kirche: Gegen den Praxisverlust der Theologie* (Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1973); Norbert Mette, *Theorie der Praxis: Wissenschaftsgeschichtliche und methodologische Untersuchung zur Theorie-Praxis-Problematik innerhalb die praktische Theologie* (Düsseldorf: Patmos Verlag, 1978); and Helmut Peukert, “Was ist eine praktische Wissenschaft?” in *Theologie und Handeln*, ed. Fuchs, 64–79.

²³This understanding of *phronesis* is indebted particularly to Aristotle and (recently) Hans-Georg Gadamer. Perhaps the best brief analyses are Richard Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), 47–49; and *Philosophical Profiles* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986), 99. See also Stephen Toulmin, “The Recovery of Practical Philosophy,” *American Scholar* 57 (1988): 337–52. For helpful applications of this model to the task of Practical Theology see Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, “Theory and Practice: Theological Education as a Reconstructive, Hermeneutical, and Practical Task,” *Theological Education* 23 (1988, Supplement): 113–41, 136; and Rodney J. Hunter, “The Future of Pastoral Theology,” *Pastoral Psychology* 29 (1980): 58–69.

²⁴The best typology of these differences is Matthew Lamb, *Solidarity with Victims: Toward a Theology of Social Transformation* (New York: Crossroad, 1984), 61ff.

²⁵See the evaluations of this development in Karl Lehman, “Das Theorie-Praxis-Problem und die Begründung der praktischen Theologie,” in *Praktische Theologie heute*, eds. Klostermann & Zerfaß, 81–102; and Norbert Mette, “Von der Anwendungs- zur Handlungs-wissenschaft: Konzeptionelle Entwicklungen und Problemstellungen im Bereich der (katholischen) praktischen Theologie,” in *Theologie und Handeln*, ed. Fuchs, 50–63.

²⁶The most obvious are Gerhard Ebeling and Gerhard Sauter (In addition to previous references, see Sauter, “Die Praxisbezug aller theologischen Disziplinen,” in *Praktische Theologie Heute*, eds. Klostermann & Zerfass, 119–131). Schubert Ogden also comes close to this position in “Christian Theology and Theological Education,” in *The Education of the Practical Theologian*, eds. D. Browning, D. Polk, & I. Evison (Atlanta, GA: Scholar’s Press, 1989), 21–35. See also the discussion in J. Matthes, “Wie praktisch ist die praktische Theologie?” *Theologia Practica* 20 (1985): 149–55.

2. *Analyze Subject Field.* A second proposed understanding of the task of Practical Theology assumes that the overall project of theology is a correlation of the Christian truth with the present situation. Given this larger goal, the task assigned Practical Theology is to analyze the current situation in its subject field (however defined), drawing all the help it can from the various human and social sciences. This information is then fed into the larger theological enterprise. Examples of such an approach would include Hans-Dieter Bastian, Edward Farley, Eilert Herms, Norbert Mette, Walter Neidhart, and Dietrich Rössler.²⁷

3. *Develop Critical Theory from Subject Field.* While the descriptive task is clearly important, other participants question the limitation of the task of Practical Theology to description, arguing that it should also involve a step of critical reflection. Of course, the crucial question then becomes: “Where and how does Practical Theology obtain the norms by which to undertake a critique of its subject field?”

For some these norms are apparently understood to emerge from the consideration of the subject field (again, however defined) of Practical Theology itself.²⁸ In other words, these folk construe the task of Practical Theology as clarifying the implicit theological convictions of contemporary ecclesial praxis (or, general religious praxis) and then critiquing that praxis in light of its immanent norms. This would appear to be a renewal of Troeltsch’s understanding of Practical Theology as formulating the implicit *Glaubenslehre* of a religious community.²⁹ It is also open to the same troubling question about whether it does justice to the authority of Christian tradition.

4. *Correlate Theological Theory and Praxis in Subject Field.* Sensitivity to the need for critiquing present praxis by more than just its own fallible internal norms has led most participants in the current debates to articulate the task of Practical Theology as the correlation of critically-appraised theological theory with critically-investigated praxis.

Within this larger agreement there are differences of emphasis. Some representatives appear to be pursuing what Matthew Lamb calls “critical

²⁷Cf. Hans-Dieter Bastian, “Praktische Theologie und Theorie,” *Theologia Practica* 9 (1974): 85–96; Farley, “Interpreting Situations”; Herms, *Theologie*; Norbert Mette, “Praktische Theologie als Handlungswissenschaft,” *Diakonia* 10 (1979): 190–203; Neidhart, “Aspekte”; and Rössler, *Grundriß*.

²⁸Those most suggestive of this possibility are: Daiber, Drehsen, Wilhelm Gräb (“Dogmatik als Stück der praktischen Theologie: Das normative Grundproblem in der praktisch-theologischen Theoriebildung,” *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 85 [1988]: 474–92), Lämmermann, Otto, Päsche, and Wegenast.

²⁹Note the explicit appeal to Troeltsch in Drehsen, *Neuzeitliche Konstitutionsbedingungen*, 2:514ff; and Gräb, “Dogmatik,” 484ff.

theoretic correlations,” while others champion a “critical praxis correlations.”³⁰ Both alternatives stress the need to preserve a dialectical relationship between the analysis of present praxis, the determination of theological norms, and the critique of present praxis in light of these norms. However, the second approach stresses more clearly than the first the need for reflection to *begin* with praxis (a particular emphasis of feminist and liberation theologies).

III. CONCLUSION

As the preceding overview makes clear, the majority trend of the recent discussion of the specialty-discipline Practical Theology has been to refocus it on the task of a critical correlation of Christian faith with contemporary Christian praxis. Once the task of Practical Theology is construed this broadly, however, the obvious question becomes: “What remains for Systematic Theology?”

There is a growing realization among those who are seeking such a transformation of Practical Theology that they may actually be calling for a return to understanding theology per se as practical, somewhat like the understanding prior to the emergence of Western university theology.³¹ In expressing such a desire for recovering theology as a practical discipline, these participants in the debates about Practical Theology join a growing group of other theologians. As Helmut Gollwitzer has put it, there is an increasing awareness of the need to recognize that theology, properly conceived, is second-order activity that stands between existing and future Christian praxis; in other words, that Christian theology is, in its core, practical theology.³²

If such a transformation of theology per se is embraced, however, then the distinctive role of specialty-discipline Practical Theology is called into

³⁰Cf. Lamb, *Solidarity*, 80–82. Among those who appear to endorse a theoretic correlation are Bloth, Browning, Greinacher, Hübner, Jossutis, McCann & Strain, Pannenberg, Tracy, and Van der Ven. Those pursuing more clearly a praxis correlation would be Rebecca Chopp (“Practical Theology and Liberation,” in *Formation and Reflection*, eds. Mudge & Poling, 120–38), Johannes Heinrichs (“Theorie welcher Praxis? Theorie-Praxis-Vermittlung als die Grundaufgabe praktischer Theologie,” in *Theologie zwischen Theorie und Praxis*, ed. L. Bertsch [Frankfurt am Main: Josef Knecht, 1975], 9–85), Lamb, and Müller. For other advocates of correlation who are less clearly distinguishable into either of these tendencies see: Campbell, Fowler, Hawkes, Karrer, Osmer, Poling & Miller, and Zerfaß.

³¹E.g., Wilhelm Gräß & Dietrich Korsch, *Selbsttätiger Glaube: Die Einheit der praktischen Theologie in der Rechtfertigungslehre* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1985), 65–66; Hawkes, “Relationship Between Theology and Practice,” 29; Mette, *Theorie der Praxis*, 9–15, 257; Otto, *Grundlegung*, 74; and Weymann, “Gegensatzerfahrungen,” 455.

³²Gollwitzer, “Theorie und Praxis im theologischen Denken,” *Evangelische Kommentare* 10 (1977): 522–25. For a survey of the various concerns coalescing around the call for recovering a more “practical” approach to theology, see Maddox, “Recovery of Theology as Practical,” 659–65.

question; a situation which, as Schubert Ogden has noted, has not yet been adequately addressed.³³

Would Practical Theology remain as a relatively distinct “moment” or “discipline” in the practical theological enterprise, perhaps entrusted with the specific task of analyzing the contemporary setting in which Christian praxis takes place?³⁴

Would Practical Theology be transformed back into Moral Theology, focusing specifically on the ethical dimensions of Christian faith?³⁵

Would Practical Theology move to the center of the theological enterprise, becoming the point through which the other disciplines enter into critical correlation with contemporary life?³⁶

Or, should we instead be concerned to overcome the artificial separation of tasks that developed in the university setting and simply emphasize the practical nature of theology as a whole?³⁷ In this case, there would be no Practical Theology as such (though there might be a role for “Practical Theologians” who specialize in clarifying the relationship of such a reconceived theology to Christian ministry³⁸).

The adjudication of such questions remains on the future agenda of the discussion of Practical Theology. Hopefully, this discussion can provide continuing help in overcoming the lamentable chasm between most professional theology and the general praxis of the Christian communities.

³³Ogden, “Prolegomena,” 18.

³⁴Note Mette’s thesis that Practical Theology is a theological *handlungswissenschaft* within a theology as a whole construed as a practical science (*Theorie der Praxis*, 9). Farley adopts a similar position in “Interpreting Situations.”

³⁵Ogden (“Prolegomena”) sees this as a real possibility. Such a move is likely for most of those who identify the subject field of Practical Theology as “Religious/Moral Life in the World.”

³⁶Gollwitzer suggests this possibility (“Theorie und Praxis,” 525). It is also apparent in recent proposals for Practical Theology to take responsibility for developing an “Elementary Theology” that provides the essential content of Christian faith in terms appropriate to present life and issues. These proposals are somewhat reminiscent of the earlier model of “Popular Theology.” Cf. Peter Biehl, “Theologie im Kontext von Lebensgeschichte und Zeitgeschehen,” *Theologia Practica* 20 (1985): 155–70; Hans Stock, “Elementare Theologie als Voraussetzung religionspädagogischer Praxis,” *Der evangelische Erzieher* 29 (1977): 328–42; Stock, “Elementartheologie,” in *Handbuch religiöser Erziehung*, ed. W. Böcher (Düsseldorf: Patmos Verlag, 1987), 452–66; and Jürgen Werbick, *Glaube im Kontext: Prolegomena und Skizzen zu einer elementaren Theologie* (Einsiedeln: Benziger Verlag, 1983).

³⁷The strongest advocate of this agenda is Thomas Ogletree, “Dimensions of Practical Theology: Meaning, Action, Self,” in *Practical Theology*, ed. Browning, 83–101.

³⁸Possible models might be: Joe Holland & Peter Henroit, *Social Analysis: Linking Faith and Justice* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1980); and James D. Whitehead & Evelyn Eaton Whitehead, *Method in Ministry: Theological Reflection and Christian Ministry* (New York: Seabury, 1980).