



DYNAMICS OF CHRISTIAN WORSHIP



**WORSHIP AND THE  
WORLD TO COME**

**EXPLORING CHRISTIAN HOPE  
IN CONTEMPORARY WORSHIP**

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## WHAT IS PRACTICAL THEOLOGY?

**WHAT KIND OF BOOK IS THIS?** Is it a practitioner manual? Is it a textbook? Is it descriptive or prescriptive? The short answer is that it is a work of practical theology.

But the term needs explaining. As a friend once quipped, “Practical theology? That sounds like an oxymoron!” Yes, it often seems like it. Theology can seem like an obsession that bears little fruit in the real world. It is easy to imagine theologians quibbling about esoteric ways of talking about the sublime. But the truth is, nothing could have more bearing on daily life than what one believes about God. This is not to say that academic theology doesn’t sometimes get bogged down in debating minutiae; it is only to say that everyone is living with some kind of theology, whether we are aware of it or not. Practical theology tries to bridge the kind of theology that is dealt with in abstract or theoretical terms and the kind of theology that is lived or embodied.

We might say, then, that practical theology, at its most basic level, is the attempt to integrate theory or doctrine and practice.<sup>1</sup> But the term itself can mean different things in different contexts. It is worth outlining four dominant models for placing theory and practice in a dialogical relationship, following the insights of Paul Ballard and John Pritchard and noting the particular shape each takes when integrated in practical theology.

The first is the applied-theory model, which views all practice as a form of applied theory.<sup>2</sup> When the term *practical theology* was initially introduced in

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<sup>1</sup>Paul Ballard and John Pritchard, *Practical Theology in Action: Christian Thinking in the Service of Church and Society*, 2nd ed. (London: SPCK, 1996), 54.

<sup>2</sup>Ballard and Pritchard, *Practical Theology in Action*, 55.

academic settings, what was primarily meant was applied theology. Practical theology, as Friedrich Schleiermacher and others saw it, was the branch that emerged from the trunk of historical theology and the root system of philosophical theology. The question, in a deductive approach, is which theory to bring to bear on the practice; or, in an inductive approach, which theory is implicit in the practice.<sup>3</sup>

The second model is the critical-correlation model, applied to practical theology most notably by Don Browning. In this model, theology is often paired with the social sciences, where social anthropology can help shed light on human experience or behavior, and theology can help reflect on how this experience or behavior relates to God. James Whyte describes this as a three-fold engagement, rather than a dialogue, between “theological disciplines, the social sciences and the actual situation.”<sup>4</sup>

Third is the praxis model, which is primarily concerned with actions and outcomes that aim to be transformative. The praxis model begins with a concrete situation but assumes that no activity is value free and thus critiques every aspect, including the researcher.<sup>5</sup> This analysis is then filtered through a theological imperative in order to develop a new praxis.

Finally, there is the habitus/virtue model, which draws on classical ethical teaching on virtue as a learned habit. The habitus/virtue model moves the paradigms of theory and practice beyond the cognitive and the active and into the communal.

Ballard and Pritchard warn against choosing one model to the exclusion of others. This would distort or restrict theological activity. Rather, they suggest viewing each model as a pathway into the process, a process that is necessarily complex. In fact, for them, these four models are not even to be seen as disparate but rather as “strands which are often woven together and affect each other.”<sup>6</sup> Let us turn now to a few methods for integrating these models.

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<sup>3</sup>Emmanuel Lartey, “Practical Theology as a Theological Form,” in *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology*, ed. James Woodward and Stephen Pattison (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 129; Ballard and Pritchard, *Practical Theology in Action*, 46-47.

<sup>4</sup>Ballard and Pritchard, *Practical Theology in Action*, 55, 62.

<sup>5</sup>Ballard and Pritchard, *Practical Theology in Action*, 55, 66.

<sup>6</sup>Ballard and Pritchard, *Practical Theology in Action*, 55, 57.

## THE PASTORAL CYCLE

The pastoral cycle is a tool that takes into account the contributions and flaws of the four models Ballard and Pritchard list above while also providing a structure that has room for both flexibility and diversity.<sup>7</sup> Though the cycle may have derived from various other models and thus there are other permutations of it, it is given clear definition by Ballard and Pritchard as a series of four phases. The first is *experience*, where a specific situation is chosen and named. The second is *exploration*, where an analysis occurs. Third is *reflection*, where the analysis of the situation is set against the backdrop of beliefs in general and theology in particular. Last is *action*, where initiatives for ministry application are outlined and outcomes of those actions are determined.

Richard Osmer provides a list of the four tasks that practical theology must undertake. Though he does not reference Ballard and Pritchard or the pastoral cycle, the list bears a striking resemblance to the four phases of the cycle. The first task is the *descriptive-empirical task*. This is about gathering data or information in order to “discern patterns and dynamics in particular episodes, situations, or contexts.” The second task is the *interpretive task*, which employs theories from nontheological disciplines, specifically the social sciences, in order to understand and explain the occurrence of particular patterns and other dynamics. Third is the *normative task*. Here the goal is to use theological concepts to add another layer of interpretation and to construct an ethical norm. Finally, there is the *pragmatic task*, which involves determining strategies of action to influence or change the situation. Osmer sums up these four tasks as four questions: “What is going on? Why is this going on? What ought to be going on? How might we respond?”<sup>8</sup>

For all of its promise, however, the pastoral cycle has its limitations. Pete Ward points out the irony in the tendency of the cycle to “reinforce the dislocation between reflection and the everyday”; “experience is effectively distanced and distilled through analytical moves.”<sup>9</sup> This is largely due to the multistage approach, as though each component—experience, analysis, reflection, and action—could be separated from the others. Furthermore, Elaine Graham

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<sup>7</sup>Ballard and Pritchard, *Practical Theology in Action*, 74.

<sup>8</sup>Richard R. Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 4.

<sup>9</sup>Pete Ward, *Participation and Mediation: A Practical Theology for the Liquid Church* (London: SCM Press, 2008), 35.

argues that practical theology in a postmodern context means that theology should function less like disembodied concepts and more like a faith that is enfleshed in practices and community. Where practical theology once moved from theory to practice, Graham's goal is to move from practice to theory. In her words, her proposal is "to reconstitute pastoral theology as the theorization of Christian practices."<sup>10</sup> The pastoral cycle as Ballard and Pritchard and Osmer articulate it allows theory—or theology—to interrogate practice and experience but does not make room for it to flow the other way around.

Emmanuel Lartey, however, adds a fifth stage to the cycle, which addresses the concern to let practice inform theory. His first phase is also called *experience* and deals with the concrete. His second phase is called *situational analysis*, which explicitly calls for "social and psychological analysis" but also makes room for other perspectives. In fact, he is clear that this should be "multi-perspectival rather than inter-disciplinary," since the researcher cannot adequately represent the complexity of different disciplines. The third phase, as in Ballard and Pritchard's model, engages in *theological analysis*. Lartey recommends specific questions for this phase: "What questions and analyses arise from my faith concerning what I have experienced and the other analyses of it?" "How has Christian thought approached the issues raised?" and "Is there a prophetic insight which may be brought to bear on the situation?" Lartey points out that this analysis should engage with both the personal and "with the traditions of Christian faith." The fourth phase is what makes Lartey's version of the cycle different from Ballard and Pritchard's and Osmer's. In what he calls *situational analysis of theology*, Lartey makes "faith perspectives . . . the subject of questioning by the encounter and the situational analysis." This rests on the premise that such experience and situational analysis "may offer more adequate reformulations of Christian doctrine."<sup>11</sup> His final phase, like the final phases in Ballard and Pritchard's model, calls for response.

## LIQUID ECCLESIOLOGY

One of the ways to address the rigidity of the pastoral cycle is to allow the movements between the situation and the theology to be more fluid. This is

<sup>10</sup>Elaine Graham, "Practical Theology as Transforming Practice," in Woodward and Pattison, *Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology*, 109.

<sup>11</sup>Lartey, "Practical Theology as a Theological Form," 132-33.

something of what Ward means when he calls for a liquid ecclesiology. Ward writes, “When ministers preach sermons, design liturgies, choose hymns, make pastoral decisions, plan programs of mission, and so on, they are already participating in the expression and circulation of theology.” Thus theological reflection is not actually a “distinct moment”; rather, “theology and theologizing of all kinds takes place within and reflects the interests and commitments of individuals and communities.” Furthermore, what is needed on the part of the researcher is not an objective perspective—as if that were even possible. Instead, theology that seeks to interact with the “lived reality of the Church,” as practical theology seeks to do, “requires a familiarity with the life and expression of the Christian community.”<sup>12</sup>

In many books on the contemporary church and its practices, critiques are all too often thinly constructed even while the theological basis for the arguments and prescriptions is rich. Ward sees this as “methodological laziness in ecclesiology.” “We base whole arguments on anecdote and the selective treatment of experience. We are prone to a sleight of hand that makes social theory appear to be a description of social reality—which it of course is not.”<sup>13</sup>

Ward proposes a liquid ecclesiology, which represents a “shift in the theological imagination from solidity or from ‘Solid Church’ to fluidity and ‘Liquid Church.’” This fluidity is a characteristic of both the divine being and human culture. Thus “Liquid Ecclesiology focuses on the way the divine life passes through the walls and links Church with the wider society.” It is a

cultural theology in the sense that it seeks to interact with patterns of practice and thinking that are operant in the lived expression of the church. Liquid ecclesiology is theological and theoretical, but it develops theology through a deep interaction with cultural expression and the lived. Liquid Ecclesiology is a theology that takes cultural expression seriously as one part of the paradox of the Church.<sup>14</sup>

This proposal is not without objections or cautions. John Webster argues that even in empirical study of the church and its practices, there ought to be a “hierarchy of understanding between the origin of the Church and the phenomena

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<sup>12</sup>Ward, *Participation and Mediation*, 48-49.

<sup>13</sup>Pete Ward, *Perspectives in Ecclesiology and Ethnography* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 4.

<sup>14</sup>Pete Ward, *Liquid Ecclesiology: The Gospel and the Church* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2017), 9-11.

of the Church.” More than a specific methodology, Webster wants a hierarchy of knowing: dogmatics over social-scientific inquiry. Yet Ward argues that the “dichotomy between empirical or culturally-generated theological perspective and those developed by scholars working from texts is . . . a false one.” Taking the perspective of critical realism, Ward maintains that theologians must acknowledge epistemological relativity even in doctrines, negating the notion of a “fixed reference point for ecclesiology.” Even a theologically oriented epistemology, whether applied to texts or to empirical data, requires a “positioning in relationship,” which is in essence what is meant by faith. Thus Ward, like Clare Watkins and her colleagues, repeatedly uses Anselm’s phrase “faith seeking understanding” to describe an approach to theology that takes the theology encoded in text and preserved in tradition and the theology embodied in practice with equal weight.<sup>15</sup> To Helen Cameron along with Watkins and colleagues we now turn for a methodology that treats practice theologically.

## THEOLOGICAL ACTION RESEARCH

What is needed is a way to delineate what we mean by theology, to distinguish dogmatics from embodied or lived theology. In their book *Talking About God in Practice*, Cameron, Deborah Bhatti, Catherine Duce, James Sweeney, and Watkins propose a method of relating theology and practice that they call theological action research, and an accompanying model for doing practical theology that holds in harmony the four voices of theology.<sup>16</sup> Before describing the four voices, it is helpful to note the five characteristics of Cameron’s theological action research method, since the four voices function as a way of delivering on one of these aims in particular.

The first characteristic of theological action research is that it is theological “all the way through.” Theology cannot appear only after the data has been gathered, since “the practices participated in and observed are themselves the bearers of theology.” This goes along with Ward’s criticism of the pastoral cycle as dividing theology from practice artificially. Second, theological action

<sup>15</sup>Ward, *Liquid Ecclesiology*, 16-17, 21, 23-26; Clare Watkins, with Deborah Bhatti, Helen Cameron, Catherine Duce, and James Sweeney, “Practical Ecclesiology: What Counts as Theology in Studying the Church?,” in Ward, *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, 180.

<sup>16</sup>Helen Cameron, Deborah Bhatti, Catherine Duce, James Sweeney, and Clare Watkins, *Talking About God in Practice: Theological Action Research and Practical Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2010), 2.

research is to be located in the heart of the four “distinct, but interrelated and overlapping ‘voices’” of theology because of a conviction that within the diversity there is coherence. This leads to the third characteristic of theological action research, that theology must be disclosed through a conversational method where the voices are placed in conversation with one another so that they can be heard together. Fourth, theological action research is meant to be a “formative transformation of practice.” Like all practical theology, there must be a change that results. Cameron and colleagues see one of the key places of change as being the “change of learning and changed attitudes” of the researcher, who in the case of practical theology is a reflective practitioner. Finally, theological action research is a method that allows practice to “contribute to the transformation of theology.”<sup>17</sup> Like Ward and Graham, Cameron moves practical theology out of the paradigm of modern theology, where the tradition is largely fixed and unchanging, and into the context of postmodern theology, where theology is seen as dynamic and fluid. I am cautious about theological action research because of this final characteristic. The theology of the church must have certain fixed aspects.

## THEOLOGY IN FOUR VOICES

The model of theological action research Cameron and colleagues propose is helpful because of its view of theology in four voices. These voices are not independent of one another, though they are distinct. The first is what Cameron and colleagues call normative theology. This refers to that which the group that is being studied names as its theological authority, an authority that informs and corrects operant and espoused theologies. Some examples of a normative theology would be the Scriptures, the creeds, official church teaching, and in some cases even the liturgy. The second voice is espoused theology. This is the theology that is “embedded in a group’s articulated beliefs.”<sup>18</sup> There is some similarity here with what Jeff Astley has called ordinary theology, the way people talk about theology ordinarily and in the course of life.<sup>19</sup> Third, there is the voice of operant theology. This is the theology that

<sup>17</sup>Cameron et al., *Talking About God*, 51, 58-59.

<sup>18</sup>Cameron et al., *Talking About God*, 54.

<sup>19</sup>Jeff Astley, *Ordinary Theology: Looking, Listening, and Learning in Theology* (Surrey, UK: Ashgate, 2003).

is “embedded within the actual practices of a group.”<sup>20</sup> Naming it this way helps us take seriously Ward’s claim that every decision, program, practice, and more within the life of the church is a participation in “the expression and circulation of theology.”<sup>21</sup> The fourth and final voice is formal theology. This is the theology of the academy, of the so-called professional theologian. It is possible, and in fact likely, that this voice may resonate with the voice of normative theology. Yet Cameron and colleagues make clear that the voice of academic theology has the distinct role of offering an articulation of the faith and of the tradition.<sup>22</sup>

Watkins, writing with Bhatti, Cameron, Duce, and Sweeney in a later work, describes the need for an “authentic ecclesiology”—one that is able to speak truthfully about concrete realities, and faithfully about the historical and present promise of the work of the Spirit, enlivening what we understand to be ‘the body of Christ,’ the church.” Their proposed four-voices method was developed in answer to the question of how to give practices their “proper place within the theological discourse of the church” in order to develop an “authentic ecclesiology.”<sup>23</sup>

The four-voices method is shaped by a desire to “listen” to practices as “embodied works of theology.” Watkins and colleagues see the temptation in traditional systematic-theology work to only study practice as a way of unearthing a question or a challenge and then to employ the resources of theological tradition to supply the answers. But if practices are themselves “bearers of theology,” then these voices must be held in conversation with each other. Even what they call formal and normative voices of theology must function as “one voice in an ongoing conversation, in which all voices, in their distinct and proper ways, are understood as theological.” They ground this approach in the doctrine of the Spirit as both the promised guide for the church and the God who is radically free to act through many means. Thus for the church to be charismatic for Watkins and colleagues, its theology must be “multivoiced.” Practical ecclesiology “requires ongoing conversation as the appropriate pattern of theology,” where the maxim “faith seeking

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<sup>20</sup>Cameron et al., *Talking About God*, 54.

<sup>21</sup>Ward, *Participation and Mediation*, 48.

<sup>22</sup>Cameron et al., *Talking About God*, 55.

<sup>23</sup>Watkins et al., “Practical Ecclesiology,” 168-69.

understanding” results in the “recognition of an ecclesial faith as something necessarily communal, discursive.”<sup>24</sup>

Yet there is a danger here. The Creed leads us to say of the Spirit that he *has spoken* through the prophets. There is a certain fixedness to the faith. So, even as I find the four voices a helpful way of naming the theology found in a practice, I don’t hold to the view that voices are equally interpretative of one another. As will become clear by the end of the chapter, formal and normative theologies ought to ask the final questions of espoused and operant theologies.

## ETHNOGRAPHY AND THEOLOGY

Since practical theology involves theological reflection on a particular experience or practice, different tools from the ones theologians are used to using are required to analyze the experience or practice adequately. “Genuine attentiveness to people and genuine engagement with the complexities of their lives are only possible through research methods that take theologians beyond the desk and the library and into those lives,” Elizabeth Phillips argues, and therefore practical theologians must be “serious apprentices of sociologists, anthropologists, philosophers, and historians.”<sup>25</sup> Because of its communal, physical, and repetitive nature, contemporary Christian congregational worship can be studied as a ritual. Ritual studies, traditionally the domain of sociologists and anthropologists, is one way for the practical theologian to gain an illuminating perspective on congregational worship. Phenomenology and ethnography are also methods from philosophy and social anthropology that may guide the study of congregational worship.

The turn toward ethnography in theology gained prominence with James McClendon’s 1974 work, *Biography as Theology*, in which McClendon, according to Phillips, suggests that the “task of theology is ‘investigation of the convictions of a convictional community.’” This was followed by George Lindbeck’s argument in *The Nature of Doctrine*, which proposed a cultural-linguistic model of theology as a way of understanding religion as a culture with a language. Stanley Hauerwas, influenced by McClendon, has “advocated the narrative description of specific congregations as an important task for

<sup>24</sup>Watkins et al., “Practical Ecclesiology,” 170, 178, 180.

<sup>25</sup>Elizabeth Phillips, “Charting the ‘Ethnographic Turn’: Theologians and the Study of Christian Congregations,” in Ward, *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, 105.

both theologians and congregations themselves,” as Phillips writes.<sup>26</sup> Max van Manen writes about a “phenomenology of practice” as “research and writing that reflects *on* and *in* practice, and prepares for practice” in his own book, which he views as itself a “phenomenology of phenomenology.” Phenomenology begins with a sense of wonder, an awed curiosity, which turns into a question about the nature or meaning of a particular experience. To do phenomenology is to “start with lived experience, with how something appears or gives itself to us.”<sup>27</sup>

Van Manen, however, makes a point to distinguish ethnography from others “forms of meaning in social inquiry.” In his view, psychological, sociological, ethnographic, biographic, and other forms of the social sciences or human sciences have explanation as their aim, while phenomenology seeks to provide description and interpretation.<sup>28</sup> He concedes that ethnography does share some overlapping features with phenomenology but maintains that their purposes are different. Even so, it is difficult to imagine doing phenomenology without the aid of ethnography.

Ethnography is the description of a particular people, culture, or sub-culture with the goal of discovering “cultural meanings.”<sup>29</sup> The archetypal form of research within ethnography is participant observation. Charlotte Aull Davies writes that the “hallmark of participant observation is long-term personal involvement with those being studied, including participation in their lives to the extent that the researcher comes to understand the culture as an insider.” Even so, ethnography relies on more than participant observation; it requires a “cluster of techniques” that grant the researcher access into the culture and meaning-making narratives. Thus “key informants” are needed who can translate, interpret, narrate, or relate their experiences. This can occur through structured, semistructured, or unstructured interviews. It is important to select people who would be somewhat representative of the larger group. Davies also finds it better to choose not leaders but rather “outsiders” who have become “more aware

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<sup>26</sup>Phillips, “Charting the ‘Ethnographic Turn,’” 97-98.

<sup>27</sup>Max van Manen, *Phenomenology of Practice: Meaning-Giving Methods in Phenomenological Research and Writing*, 879, Kindle. ed. Janice Morse (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast, 2014), locs. 508, 726, 850, 879.

<sup>28</sup>Van Manen, *Phenomenology of Practice*, loc. 1142.

<sup>29</sup>Van Manen, *Phenomenology of Practice*, loc. 1145.

of the assumptions and expectations of their own society, often because they flaunt them or fail to fulfill them.”<sup>30</sup>

One question that arises in the use of ethnographic methods is about the role of the theological tradition—the normative and formal voices—in evaluating the espoused and operant theologies that ethnographic work helps to uncover. While ethnography is a valuable way to study the complexities of Christian practice and to name the theology that is embedded in practice, it provides no framework for evaluating those constructions of meaning. Hauerwas, as Phillips writes, has argued that social-scientific methods are “unhelpful to . . . theologians” when they “methodologically preclude the theological claims necessary for the church’s intelligibility.” Thus Phillips sees the challenge of practical theology being now not a question of whether theologians can use the social sciences but rather “how theologians can deeply engage with and thickly describe social groups and realities—as social scientists have done—while not accepting the premise of social sciences, but allowing research to be shaped by theological traditions and normative concerns.”<sup>31</sup>

Because of this rejection of the premise of the social sciences and because theologians do not engage in ethnography with the kind of comprehensive approach that anthropologists employ, Phillips suggests that the term *theological ethnography* be used to denote “theological practices of thick description.” Theological ethnography belongs to the wider field of study often referred to as congregational studies, where practitioners have theological interests as primary and are thus often referred to as practical theologians.<sup>32</sup> Theological ethnography requires taking social-scientific methods seriously while retaining theological priorities.

## PUTTING THEORY AND PRACTICE TOGETHER

What are to make of all this, then? The kind of practical theology I’m trying to do here looks like putting theory and practice in a mutually interrogative relationship with each other. I aim to uncover the theology of hope that is encoded in contemporary worship songs and is experienced in contemporary

<sup>30</sup>Charlotte Aull Davies, *Reflexive Ethnography: A Guide to Researching Selves and Others*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2008), 77, 81, 90.

<sup>31</sup>Phillips, “Charting the ‘Ethnographic Turn,’” 99.

<sup>32</sup>Phillips, “Charting the ‘Ethnographic Turn,’” 102-3.

worship services by engaging in theological ethnography. Though this work does not follow the same sequence, I approached my research with Lartey's version of the pastoral cycle in mind, choosing an experience and moving from situational analysis to theological analysis of the situation to situational analysis of the theology and concluding with a response. Cameron's theology in four voices serves as the method for naming the kinds of theological content I encounter, from the normative and formal to the espoused and operant. Though the theology is multivoiced, I am not treating each voice with equal weight; to borrow a metaphor from music recording, some voices are louder in the mix than others. I am allowing the normative and formal voices to interrogate the espoused and operant voices. Perhaps another way to think of this is that some of these voices are the melody; the others will either be in harmony or in dissonance.

Having outlined the kind of practical theology we are endeavoring to do here, I will now offer a brief overview of the history of contemporary worship and propose three paradigms for congregational worship today.

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