

Practical Theology

“On Earth as It Is in Heaven”

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What Is Practical Theology?

There is an inherent difficulty in describing practical theology. For a start, it is often dogged by what Edward Farley calls the “fragmentation of theology,” the division of theology into defined and specialized fields (as when we speak, for example, of systematic theology, or pastoral theology, or historical theology, etc.).¹ Into this scenario comes yet another branch called “practical theology,” which leads many to ask, “So what does practical theology specialize in?” However, there is an important sense in which practical theology is an attempt to heal this fragmentation of theology, such that it resists being slotted into yet another theological specialty.

In his book *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God*, Jean Leclercq paints a wonderful picture of monastic culture in which we get a feel for what theology was like before it became fragmented and specialized.² Leclercq evokes a time when study and the love of learning was part and parcel of the desire for God, and was never divorced from liturgy and prayer, human work and labor, contemplation of the scriptures, the search for wisdom (in philosophy and the arts), or pastoral concern and the “love of neighbor.”

While this may sound like a serene and untroubled scenario, it nevertheless presents an image of what practical theology is perhaps seeking to reclaim — a certain reintegration of theology into the weave and fabric of human living, in which theology becomes a “practice” or a way of life. This is what makes practical theology difficult to define, as though it were one “type” of theology as opposed to another “type.” It resists a certain branding or labeling, and makes its appeal to a more integrated theological sensibility that attempts to honor the great learnings of theological

wisdom with the desire for God and the coming of God's kingdom "on earth, as it is in heaven."

There is another particular difficulty with defining practical theology. In asking, "What is practical theology about?" we are asking about its "theory." In our highly specialized world, we have grown accustomed to first clarifying the "theory" of something and then, as a second step, seeking its practical application. However, as might be expected from its very name, the "theory" of practical theology, as Karl Rahner suggests, "indwells the practice itself."³ Theory "indwells" practice, not in the sense that we *put* theory *into* practice; rather, in the sense that it is only in the practice or doing of theology that we begin to realize and understand its meanings and its workings more deeply. As the Christian community, for example, engages in the practices of prayer, study, hospitality, forgiveness — as we do these things — we begin to deepen our understanding of what the kingdom of God is all about, and what it means to be a people of God.

Anyone who writes "about" practical theology faces the peculiar quandary of falling into either one of the "traps" named above, that is, turning it into a theological discipline that exists alongside other theological disciplines, or bringing it to theoretical clarity so that people can then know what to do with it. There is no assured way of avoiding this struggle, but we need to begin somewhere, and so in this introductory chapter I would like to present some "snapshots" of practical theology that attempt to open the scene for the chapters ahead. Practical theology is a large subject matter. Indeed, Rahner goes so far as to say that "*everything* is its subject-matter."⁴ So there is little hope of really capturing it; rather, there is the hope of "whetting our appetites" for the love of learning and the desire for God.

PRACTICAL THEOLOGY IS NOT A "THING"

"To think and act practically in fresh and innovative ways," writes Don Browning, "may be the most complex thing that humans ever attempt."⁵ Practical theology, as its name suggests, is less a thing to be defined than it is an activity to be done. In this sense, it resists our attempts to pin it down and define it. Practical theology is more "verb-like" than "noun-like." In many ways, we would be better to speak of "practicing theology" rather

than “practical theology.” So a better question to ask would be, “What does it mean to practice theology?”

Theology is often seen as a speculative enterprise in which people think about important questions concerning God, faith, belief, and the religious meaning of life. And most people, if you were to ask them about “practical theology,” would probably say, “Oh, that’s about applying our faith and our beliefs to life in the real world.” There is the “world of theology” — somewhat abstract and aloof — and then there is the “real world” where theological knowledge is applied and put into practice.

This is a fairly common understanding of theology. Indeed, it is reflected in the long-standing division of theology into two primary areas, namely, “systematic theology” and “pastoral theology.” Systematic theology is where we do all our theoretical work, and pastoral theology is where we apply this learning to the life of the church and the needs of the world. According to Thomas Groome, this is the standard paradigm of theology. We begin with heavy doses of theology’s theoretical disciplines (systematics, church history, scripture studies, etc.) and then tag on, almost as an afterthought, some training in pastoral skills in order to apply this theory to practice. Such a paradigm “presumes a one-way relationship between theory and practice with theory always the point of departure; theory is something from ‘outside’ to be applied and practice something to receive it.”⁶ Practical theology is an attempt to heal this division, so that pastoral theology is never simply an afterthought or a derivative of systematic theology. So that theological reflection can regain its intrinsic connection to life. So that we can overcome the artificial distinction between thinking and acting and become more serious about both.

LIFE IN THE WORLD

One of the greatest philosophers of the twentieth century, Martin Heidegger, delivered somewhat of a jolt to his contemporaries when he suggested that philosophy is concerned with our life in the world. Hardly a mind-blowing thought, you might say! However, Heidegger was suggesting that the Western philosophical tradition had spent so much time inquiring into life and its meaning that it had forgotten to attend to life itself. He spoke of this forgetfulness as a “forgetfulness of Being.”⁷ How

is it possible, one may wonder, to inquire into life's "being" and yet be forgetful of life at the same time?

Heidegger's response is that we have forgotten that "Being" carries the resonance of a verb rather than the "thingness" of a noun. We have tended to treat Being as though it were *something* that we can approach and gain knowledge of, as though it were *something* that we can know and apprehend, as though it were *something* "out there" that we can probe and analyze. Rather than seeing Being as a thing "out there" — aside and apart from us — Heidegger preferred to speak of our "being-in-the-world." He suggested that we do not stand over the world in order to know the world. We are not bare, thinking subjects who reach out to know a world of objects. Rather, we are absorbed and immersed in the world, never over against it as a subject to an object.

Life means living, and living is preeminently what we *do*. We do not simply exist; rather, we are alive and we *live* — and our living is vital and dynamic, whereas much of philosophy's talk about Being always seems so detached and lifeless. Heidegger sought to renew our appreciation of the verblike quality of Being — "to be" — not what is, but the verb, the very "act" of being. Knowledge of the world can never be detached from being-in-the-world, and if we want to know (if we want to understand), we need to engage our whole way of being — our memories, our feelings, our imagination, our thinking, our actions.⁸

In a similar fashion, practical theology suggests that we cannot separate knowing from being, thinking from acting, theological reflection from pastoral and practical involvement. Theology is always shaped by and embodied in the practices of historical, cultural, and linguistic communities. Our understandings always emerge from our practices, or from the "forms of life" in which we participate.

Practical theology does not really have a head for great systems of thought, even though it may admire these systems as one admires a great cathedral. There is something wonderful about towering thoughts, but even so they still cast a shadow. Our serene theories with their grand visions of life too often deny to knowledge any origin in the practical difficulties of life, but rather seek to transcend these difficulties into a vision of Being that is pristine and unaffected by human affairs.

What is typically called "systematic theology" is often tempted to gather everything into a "grand narrative" as though it already knew the

story's whole plot — the beginning, the middle, and the end. Systematic theology seems to soar on eagle's wings, flying high above life and offering us a spectacular, God-like view. What it then leaves for us is to take this grand vision and to apply it to our lives, a task typically associated with the role of "pastoral theology" — taking what we have learned in the great system and applying it to the more lowly and everyday practices of Christian living.

Life, however, is not very "systematic." As Rowan Williams suggests:

A religious discourse with some chance of being honest will not move too far from the particular, with all its irresolution and resistance to systematizing: it will be trying to give shape to that response to the particular that is least evasive of its solid historical otherness *and* that is also rooted in the conviction that God is to be sought and listened for in all occasions.⁹

According to the Brazilian educator and thinker Paulo Freire, the danger with intellectual systems is their tendency to confuse thought with existence. The speculative thinker forgets that knowledge involves passion, struggle, decision, and personal appropriation, that we must live and act out of our knowing. "Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention," writes Freire, "through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry people pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other."¹⁰

Practical theology wants to keep our relationship with the world open, so that we are never quite "done" with things; rather, always undoing and redoing them, so that we can keep the "doing" happening, passionate, keen, expectant — never satisfied, never quite finished. "Be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect" (Matthew). Perhaps practical theology — as a constant "doing" — is a passion for perfection in an imperfect world. Impossible! Yet that is probably why all the "perfect" systems are left feeling so uneasy and insecure when poets and prophets show up. Practical theology is suspicious of any theology that is too solid, too well-built, too built-up. Rather, it is a theology that is given over to a passion for what could yet be, what is still in-the-making, in process, not yet, still coming ("Thy kingdom come!").

THE PEOPLE OF OUR TIME

When theology pays renewed attention to life in the world, a wonderful theological creativity emerges. Rather than operating in a detached, abstract realm of theological speculation, practical theology seeks to pay attention to people's various life situations and contexts. It seeks to align itself, as the Second Vatican Council so eloquently reminded us, "with the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the people of our time, especially of those who are poor and afflicted in any way."¹¹

We can think, for example, of Gustavo Gutiérrez, the "father" of liberation theology. Born in Lima, Peru, he was a mestizo, sometimes condescendingly referred to as a "half-caste" (part Hispanic and part Quechuan Indian). He grew up in a poor village and suffered physically as a child, often bed-ridden, with a severe case of osteomyelitis which left him with a permanent limp. However, he managed to go to college, where he first studied medicine, but changed direction and took various studies in theology and philosophy leading to his ordination as a priest. Although trained in classical European theology, he found it increasingly difficult to reconcile this highly systematic theology with the situation of the poor and the oppressed in Latin America. His own social class and suffering helped him to see the world from the "underside of history," with the eyes of the poor — and he began to sketch a rough draft of what became a major theological work, *A Theology of Liberation*, of which Henri Nouwen wrote:

There is a little man in Peru, a man without any power, who lives in a barrio with poor people and who wrote a book. In this book he simply reclaimed the basic Christian truth that God became human to bring good news to the poor, new light to the blind, and liberty to the captives. Ten years later this book and the movement it started is considered a danger by the greatest power on earth.¹²

The story of Gutiérrez, "that little man from Peru," is a poignant reminder that theology — which means the "word of God" — is always addressed to particular situations of human life. It is also a poignant reminder that nothing that is genuinely human is alien to the gospel. On the contrary, the human story is the very "site" of God's revelation. This is why practical theology is always attentive to the *context* of human culture

and human experience in its unique singularity and concrete particularity. Not only is Gutiérrez's story important, but so is every human story — my story, your story, the stories of women, the stories of indigenous peoples, the stories of humanity embodied in diverse cultural expressions, the stories of the saints — because it is in the human story that we hear the word of God who, as the Christian tradition affirms, “was made flesh and pitched his tent among us” (John 1:14).

VOCATION

The great philosopher of dialogue Martin Buber tells a story about an event that became a fundamental turning point in his life.¹³ He was sitting in his office, seemingly enjoying the delights of studying and reading — a morning of “religious enthusiasm,” he calls it. Then an unknown young man came to see him. Buber responded to the young man with friendly conversation, but wasn't really present to him “in spirit.” He listened and was not disrespectful, but this was just another one of those usual visits from students, and he paid it no more or no less attention.

Later, not long after this visit, Buber learned that the young man had taken his own life. “I learned that he had come to me not casually,” writes Buber, “but borne by destiny, not for a chat but for a decision. He had come to me, he had come in this hour.” Reflecting further on this event, Buber says that he finally came to realize that religious experience is not meant to “lift you out of the world,” but to lead you into the world. He writes:

Since then I have given up the “religious” which is nothing but exception, extraction, exaltation, ecstasy; or it has given me up. I possess nothing but the everyday out of which I am never taken. The mystery is no longer disclosed, it has escaped or it has made its dwelling here where everything happens as it happens. I know no fullness but each mortal hour's fullness of claim and responsibility. . . . I do not know much more. If that is religion then it is just *everything*, simply all that is lived in its possibility of dialogue.¹⁴

Buber goes on to give the example of prayer, suggesting that when we pray, we do not remove ourselves or our lives from our prayer; rather, we bring our very lives to our prayer. Prayer does not remove us from

life; rather, when we pray, we “yield” or refer our life to God. We listen. We seek to align ourselves with God’s will, with God’s heart, with God’s good intentions for the world. And then, in the experience of prayer, a surprising transformation occurs, and we find that God is referring to us. “You are called from above,” writes Buber, “you with this mortal bit of life are referred to . . . required, chosen, empowered, sent. . . .”¹⁵

According to the Jewish philosopher and Talmudic commentator Emmanuel Levinas, life is *vocational*. It addresses me. It calls out to me. It asks after me. It asks me to respond, to answer, to say, “Here I am . . . for you . . . in the Name of God.” Practical theology shows a preference for the stranger in our midst, for the neighbor who is close to us, for the one who pleads for mercy or who cries out for justice, the one who says, “Love should be put into action!” This is when God comes between us and gets in my way, refuses to let me pass by — looks at me and commands me, pleads with me — respond! Act! “Going towards God is meaningless,” writes Levinas, “unless seen in terms of my primary going towards the other person.”¹⁶ How can we say we love God, whom we have not seen, unless we love a brother or a sister whom we have seen? (1 John 4:20–21). Or as Levinas puts it, “The invisible but personal God is not approached outside of all human presence. . . . It is our relations with men that give theological concepts the sole signification they admit of . . . without which they would remain empty and formal frameworks.”¹⁷

TO BE THOUGHTFUL AND ATTENTIVE

Practical theology displays a general wariness toward great systems of thought, yet it by no means advocates a simplistic return to theology as a “practical doing” over against theology as a “theoretical thinking.”

Thoughtfulness is important to theology, just as it is important to human living. We all know what it means to speak of a “thoughtful” person or, by contrast, a “thoughtless” person. A thoughtful person is someone who is concerned and who cares. When someone acts in an especially generous or caring way, we often say how thoughtful that person is. Yet when someone acts in a careless or reckless manner, we wonder how such a person could be so thoughtless in their actions.

Practical theology is more about “understanding” than it is about “knowing.” To understand is very different than to know. Indeed, an

“all-knowing” person often strikes us as arrogant. Who does not feel a resistance toward the “know-it-all”? On the other hand, the person who understands is usually someone who feels great sympathy, who listens and seems to understand what we are going through. The understanding person is compassionate — “suffering with” — rather than bellowing with supposed wisdom.

In a brief and yet beautiful essay, Simone Weil reflects on “the right use of school studies with a view to the love of God” (the title of her essay). “Although people seem to be unaware of it today,” writes Weil, “the development of the faculty of attention forms the real object and almost sole interest of studies.”¹⁸

Weil suggests that *thoughtful attention* is crucial to the pursuit of learning, and that this pursuit will, in turn, aid us in living attentive and responsive lives. She writes:

Not only does the love of God have attention for its substance; the love of neighbor, which we know to be the same love, is made of this same substance. . . . The capacity to give one’s attention to a sufferer is a very rare and difficult thing; it is almost a miracle; it *is* a miracle. Nearly all those who think they have this capacity do not possess it.¹⁹

Woody Allen once quipped that 90 percent of humanity simply “shows up.” We go about our lives almost in stunned resignation, hardly giving it a thought. In a similar way, the ancient philosopher Socrates said that a life lived *unreflectively* is a life lived in only half-measure. In other words, to truly live a full and worthwhile life is to *attend* to life, to be fully involved and immersed in life’s great project. Otherwise, our lives are only half-lived, just touching the surface, rather than attentively present and fully engaged. Only the one “who is capable of attention,” says Weil, “can do this.”²⁰

In his work on the Hebrew prophets, the Jewish theologian Abraham Heschel tells us that “the ultimate element of theological reflection is transcendent divine attention to man, the fact that man is apprehended by God.”²¹ The prophets *felt* this divine attention to humanity; they saw and felt the world as God sees and feels the world — with God’s eyes, God’s heart, God’s mercy and justice. “The primary content of the prophet’s consciousness,” writes Heschel, “is this *divine attentiveness and concern.*” He goes on to say that it is this “divine attentiveness to humanity, an

involvement in history, a divine vision of the world, which the prophet shares and which he tries to convey.” It is God’s concern for humanity that lay at the root of the prophet’s work. “Sympathy opens man to the living God. Unless we share His concern, we know nothing about the living God.” Prophetic theology “may be defined, not as what man does with his ultimate concern, but rather *what man does with God’s* concern.”²²

A WORK — NOT JUST “DOING”

In many ways, we live in a society that is always *doing*. Our lives are filled with busyness, and perhaps it is not surprising that this busyness is often linked with the constantly churning wheels of “business.” Our calendars always seem full — how many times have I heard the reply, “Let me check my schedule.” Moreover, we do all we can to ensure we don’t miss a beat of all this rushed activity, armed with our indispensable cell phones, e-mails, faxes, and beepers.

But are we about the “work of God,” of which Jesus says, “My Father is working still, and I am working” (John 5:17)? Jesus does the work his Father gave him to do (John 17:4), to “bring good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and to the blind new sight, to set the downtrodden free, to proclaim the Lord’s year of favor” (Luke 4:18). During his time, there were some who wondered if Jesus was the anointed one of God. Jesus simply pointed to his activity among the people — teaching, healing, loving, forgiving . . . (Luke 7:18–23). His work is “pleasing to God” (John 8:28) and reveals the very nature and activity of God: “the work my Father has given me to do . . . the very work I have in hand, testifies that the Father has sent me” (John 5:36).

The work of practical theology is *vocational* work, in which our purpose for being in the world is related to the purposes of God. We would miss the mark of practical theology if we associate the word “practical” with the gross pragmatism and busyness of our age, where every “truth” boils down to its “usefulness” or its “application” or its “relevance” — or is otherwise dismissed as irrelevant and useless. Practical theology can never be reduced to the appeal of the pragmatist, “Let’s get practical!” Rather, practical theology is a *response* to the call of God in which we come to realize that our purpose for “being in the world” is to respond to the “purposes of God.” And sometimes, the purposes of God are very different to the

purposes of the world. Indeed, as John Caputo notes, in the eyes of the world they can often seem rather foolish and impracticable:

From time to time, here and there, it happens that men and women respond, answer a call, spend themselves, using themselves up entirely for the Other. They spend years, maybe a lifetime, serving others, giving themselves up for the good of others. . . . Fools spend their lives working to feed and house the poor, or teaching in crime-ridden schools, or protecting defenseless wildlife; they lead a celibate life serving the peasants in Central America, only to be dragged out of bed one night and shot to death by right-wing gangsters; they spend the better part of their adult life in prison, refusing to cut a deal with a racist government, trying to make a point.²³

We may consider them fools, but in the end the lives of these obsessive and mad saints *do* make a point; we know that “what matters is the amazing grace, the amazing gift they make.” As St. John reminds us, “Those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be seen that their deeds have been done in God” (John 3:21). The work of practical theology is the work of the kingdom of God, and of the Spirit given to us: “Whoever has faith in me will do what I am doing, they will do even greater things . . .” (John 14:12).

TRUTH AND GOODNESS

Living attentive, thoughtful lives is important to practical theology. To try to live reflectively is to try to live in truthful ways — with integrity and honesty. It is to try to live responsibly, rather than with numbed silence or cold indifference. However, the test of truth is not so much measured against our great theories of life. Rather, truth is measured by the fruit it bears. When I am in the presence of a good and holy person, I am amazed at the truth I see — more than I have gleaned from books alone.

Emmanuel Levinas says that Goodness should always preside over the work of truth. The question of meaning and existence carries no sense on its own, unless it is first underwritten by the question of the ethical and the Good. This is the crux of Levinas’s insistence: Whether or not existence is ethical and carries the value of the “Good” is a more urgent question and claims priority over whether or not existence is meaningful

and carries the clarity of the “True.” “Morality,” writes Levinas, “presides over the work of truth.”²⁴ The Good must preside over the True, in the sense that the value of my life for you presides over the meaning of my life for me. The question of existence cannot be answered within the realms of my own self or from the resources of my own self-reflection. Rather, it is given to me by the other who *provokes* the question of my existence, even as I try to justify its meaning. It is given to me by the one who is suffering, even while I live. It is given to me by the stranger and the immigrant, even while I recline at home. What is always first, what is always prior, is not the meaning of my existence as “being-there,” but the responsibility of my existence as “being-for.” All of Levinas’s thinking hinges on this one crucial affirmation, that we are responsible for each other, that my existence is not an existence unto myself, but an existence “to you” and “for you.”²⁵

In the Jewish tradition, when the rabbis come across a difficult biblical text, they always look for the *ethical* message of the text, even when it is not especially evident. If the ethical message is not immediately apparent to them, it must be that they are not reading or interpreting the text correctly. They will stay with the text, bending and twisting it until its ethical import rings free. God’s word, the Torah, is always about the *way one should live*, and the meaning of a text is always determined according to its ethical truth.²⁶

In a similar way, in the Christian tradition, Augustine proposed that a basic principle of a *good* interpretation of scripture is whether or not the interpretation leads to a greater love of God and neighbor. The *good* interpretation will never lead one astray even if it may fall short of being the “true” or “correct” interpretation. Augustine writes that if someone “is deceived in an interpretation which builds up charity, which is the end of the commandments, he is deceived in the same way as a man who leaves a road by mistake but passes through a field to the same place toward which the road itself leads.”²⁷

Knowing the truth means little, according to St. Paul, unless it is infused with love. “If I have all the eloquence of men or angels, but speak without love, I am simply a gong booming or a cymbal clashing” (1 Cor. 13:1). Love and goodness must always lead the way, presiding over the work of theology, and not merely relegated into an “afterthought” — as happens, for example, when we create a subset of theology and call it

“moral” or “pastoral” theology. Questions of morality, ethics, justice, and mercy must accompany all our theological work, such that the “theoretical” and the “practical” are not originally distinguishable.

A CRAFT MORE THAN A METHOD

It is not uncommon to read books on practical theology that devote considerable time to the question of methodology, that is, how we can best proceed with the task of practical theology. Learning the various methods of practical theology is important, but we should be wary of turning these methods into a simple “how to.” Our world is inundated with “how to” books.

In his best-known work, the philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer draws a distinction between “truth and method” (his book’s title). Gadamer felt that our approaches toward reading and interpreting life were too captivated by methodological concerns.²⁸ He felt that we had become too preoccupied with finding the best methods to analyze human life, be it ancient texts, historical periods, other cultures, religious symbols. Getting the method right seemed as important, if not more important, than the truth we were seeking to discover. Moreover, our attachment to method gave us a smug sense that we were in control of our search and that all discoveries were finally in our hands.

In contrast to method, Gadamer preferred to speak of “truth” or “understanding.” Whereas method tends to distance us from what we seek to know — as though we were mere observers of life — understanding seeks to invite our very selves into the interpretive process. Rather than standing apart, analyzing and probing with our refined methods, understanding seeks to draw us in. Inevitably we will lose something of the “control” that our methods afforded us, but we will become more receptive and open to that which is seeking to speak to us, to show itself to us, to reveal its truth to us.

In an interesting passage, Martin Heidegger offers the analogy of a woodworker learning the craft of cabinetmaking. He writes:

A cabinetmaker’s apprentice, someone who is learning to build cabinets and the like, will serve as an example. His learning is not mere practice, to gain facility in the use of tools. Nor does he merely

gather knowledge about the customary forms of the things he is to build. If he is to become a true cabinetmaker, he makes himself answer and respond above all to the different kinds of wood and to the shapes slumbering within the wood — to wood as it enters into man's dwelling with all the hidden riches of its nature. In fact, this relatedness to wood is what maintains the whole craft. Without that relatedness, the craft will never be anything but empty busywork. . . . Every handicraft, *all human dealings*, are constantly in that danger.²⁹

Along with learning the “tools” and methods of practical theology, we must also develop an essential “relatedness” to theology, whereby theological practice becomes a way of life, where it enters our dwelling in the world and reveals “all the hidden riches of its nature.” Practical theology is a craft in which we continually “answer and respond” to the call and vocation of apprenticeship and discipleship in God's ways.

In philosophy this process is known as *phronesis* — a “practical wisdom” that is shaped over years of practicing the wisdom of a craft, a teaching, or a discipline that becomes a “way of life.” For practical theology, this process is known as a *habitus*, a disposition of the mind and heart from which our actions flow naturally, or, if you like, “according to the Spirit” dwelling within us.³⁰

ON EARTH

Practical theology necessarily attends to the *conditions* of human life. It is concerned with the unique, the particular, the concrete — this people, this community, this place, this moment, this neighbor, this question, this need, this concern. Vatican II's Pastoral Constitution (*Gaudium et spes*) reminds us that without attention to “the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the people of our time,” practical theology would have little or no connection to the coming of God's kingdom “on earth.” That same document tells us that “*at all times*, the Church carries the responsibility of reading the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel” (nos. 1, 4).

“At all times” is another way of saying that the theological task must be performed *each* and *every* time — not *once* and *for all time*. In many ways,

all good theology is practical theology — attentive, searching, responsive. Indeed, even the great classic works of theology (Augustine or Aquinas, for example) represent theological responses worked out in response to contemporary pastoral situations — bold and innovative attempts to listen to and understand present realities rather than simply regurgitating answers from the past.

There is nothing easy about practical theology. Trying to interpret present realities is an incredibly difficult and complex task. Often, it will require of theology a partnering with other disciplines, especially the social sciences, to help us get a better “read” of what is actually going on in our situation. Another valuable resource for “reading the signs of the times” can be found in our poets and songwriters, novelists and artists — those who are best able to unmask our cultural blinders to current realities.

It is easy to be lulled into our present, and to fail to notice how askew things really are. In Luke’s Gospel, Jesus says to the crowds, “When you see a cloud looming up in the west you say at once that rain is coming, and so it does. And when the wind is from the south you say it will be hot, and it is. Hypocrites! You know how to interpret the face of the earth and the sky. How is it you do not know how to interpret the present time?” (12:54–56). How indeed? There is a reproof in this question. We seem to be able to read and interpret that which is predictable and familiar to us, but when it comes to interpreting the present time, we “hear and hear again, but do not understand; see and see again, but do not perceive” (Isa. 6:9; cf. Matt. 13:13–15).

To read the signs of the times is one of the most difficult theological tasks, yet it is a theological imperative. Too often we do not behold the announcement of God in our present reality. Rather, we cling to what we already know of God, to tired and weary theological frameworks that have lost their sense of timeliness, to religious truths that lull us to sleep rather than provoke us to wakefulness. Any sense of expectation, announcement, or the coming of the kingdom is lost to us. Knowing the ways and purposes of God becomes as customary and familiar as forecasting the weather, yet we are cautioned to “stay awake” lest we hear but do not hear, see but do not see. This vigilance does not come easily because it challenges theology to be observant and mindful — to “think again” — to be alert and attentive. We are called to think and act for these times, for this reality, in the face of “the joy and hope, grief and anguish of the

people of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted . . . in deep solidarity with the human race and its history.”

AS IT IS IN HEAVEN

“Is there a way,” asks Emmanuel Levinas, “for the wisdom of heaven to return to earth?”³¹ While it is crucial that practical theology attend to the concrete *conditions* of human existence, it must seek to read or interpret those conditions in the light of “the kingdom of heaven.” What is the kingdom of heaven like? In many ways, the whole of the biblical tradition is an attempt to answer this question — or rather, to *provoke* this question — like the unsettling, demanding cries of the Hebrew prophets, or the disruptive parables of Jesus that keep turning things around, or the irritating lives of crazy saints with their impossible visions and out-of-place utopias.

When we pray, “Thy kingdom come,” we are subjecting the *conditions* of human existence, “on earth,” to the *unconditional* claims of God’s word, “as it is in heaven.” There are, for example, no conditions that limit or circumscribe the biblical message of mercy and justice, as though we could ever put up our feet and say, “No more is required of me.” Each new age and every new generation must wrestle again with the question of what it means to act with justice and yet to love tenderly and be merciful.

The biblical message is not timeless (or “heavenly”) in the sense that it has nothing to do with time or history. Rather, it is timeless in the sense that it proclaims a “surplus of love” or an “amazing grace” that knows no bounds, a love that refuses to be measured by the history of human events, but that continually bursts forth and breaks into human history as an immeasurable love that awakens, inspires, and agitates our lives.

Practical theology is an effort to always honor the appeal to human experience, drawing our attention to questions of history, culture, and society, urging us to respond to the real needs of our world, to the conditions of human existence, “on earth.” This is perhaps what is meant by the word “practical.” Yet it is practical *theology* — an effort to regain the transcendent appeal of God’s word to humanity, an appeal that calls out to us and asks us to be people of God, people of faith, people of hope, people of justice and mercy — a people living and acting on earth, “as it is in heaven.”

APPENDIX:
What Is Distinctive about Practical Theology?
Some Representative Quotes from Scholarship

St. Thomas University, Miami, recently launched a new doctoral degree in Practical Theology. To celebrate the event, I coordinated a Symposium on Practical Theology, bringing together some leading scholars in the field to discuss the shape and relevance of practical theology for the academy, the church, and society.³² We began one of our discussions with the following meditative reading, which offers representative quotes concerning the distinctiveness of practical theology. I offer it here as an appendix to this introductory chapter.

• • •

The joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the people of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted in any way, are the joy and the hope, the grief and the anguish of the followers of Christ as well. Nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo in their hearts. . . . We must be aware of and understand the aspirations, the yearnings, and the often dramatic features of the world in which we live. . . . At all times the Church carries the responsibility of reading the signs of the times in the light of the Gospel.

(*Gaudium et spes*, “The Church in the Modern World,” nos. 1, 4)

By Christian practices we mean things Christian people do together over time to address fundamental human needs in response to and in light of God’s active presence for the life of the world.

(Craig Dykstra and Dorothy Bass)³³

And when he saw the crowds he felt sorry for them because they were harassed and dejected, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, “the harvest is rich but the laborers are few. . . .”

(Matt. 9:36–37)

Practical theology is that theological discipline which is concerned with the Church’s self-actualization here and now — both that which *is* and that which *ought to be*. This it does by means of *theological illumination* of the particular situation in which the Church must realize itself in all its dimensions. . . . *Everything* is its subject-matter. (Karl Rahner)³⁴

There is only the demand — the properly theological demand — that wherever and whoever the practical theologian is, he or she is bound by the very nature of the enterprise as theological to show how one interprets the tradition and how one interprets the present situation and how these two interpretations correlate: either as identities of meaning, analogies, or radical nonidentities. (David Tracy)³⁵

At its best, theology means figuring out how to bring faith and life together. The theological method I recommend is that people reflect on their lives from the perspective of faith, and on faith from the perspective of their lives. Quite simply, I encourage *bringing life to faith, and faith to life*. (Thomas Groome)³⁶

Practical theology is a place where religious belief, tradition, and practice meets contemporary experiences, questions, and actions and conducts a dialogue that is mutually enriching, intellectually critical, and practically transforming. (James Woodward and Stephen Pattison)³⁷

Seeking God's presence involves theological reflection, the artful discipline of putting our experience into conversation with the heritage of the Christian tradition. In this conversation we can be surprised and transformed by new angles of vision on our experience and acquire a deepened understanding and appreciation of our tradition. In this conversation we can find ourselves called to act in new courageous and compassionate ways. (Patricia O'Connell Killen and John de Beer)³⁸

The underlying purpose of practical theological reflection is to sustain a disciplined conversation between a faith community's vision of the world as it should be and the often harsh realities of the world as it is, a conversation that leads to faithful and feasible action. (Michael Cowan and Bernard Lee)³⁹

You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time? (Luke 12:56)

We can no longer speak of culture and world events as areas *to which* theology is adapted and applied; culture and world events are *the very sources* of the theological enterprise, *along with and equal to* Scripture and tradition. (Stephen Bevans)⁴⁰

Knowledge emerges only through invention and reinvention, through the restless, impatient, continually hopeful inquiry people pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other. (Paulo Freire)⁴¹

A religious discourse with some chance of being honest will not move too far from the particular, with all its irresolution and resistance to systematizing: it will be trying to give shape to that response to the particular that is least evasive of its solid historical otherness *and* that is also rooted in the conviction that God is to be sought and listened for in all occasions. (Rowan Williams)⁴²

My Father is working, and I am working still. (John 5:17)

To think and act practically in fresh and innovative ways may be the most complex thing that humans ever attempt. (Don Browning)⁴³

When you try to tidy up unsystematized speech, you are likely to lose a great deal. . . . The meanings of the word “God” are to be discovered by watching what this community does — not only when it is consciously reflecting in conceptual ways, but when it is acting, educating, imagining, and worshiping. (Rowan Williams)⁴⁴

To venture a theological life is *to live theologically*. It is not so much to ask about the ways that theology can be made practical; rather, it is to ask how the practices of my life can be made theological. (Terry Velting)⁴⁵

Theology has to study its own workings, not in narcissism but in penitence. (Rowan Williams)⁴⁶

Why do you call me, “Lord, Lord” and not do what I say? (Luke 6:46)

We do not have a plan of action to propose, but we do know that if we can develop a true spirituality of the sacredness of others, we will find a way of creating a truly sacred human family wherein no one will be forced to live as an unwelcome alien; no one will be ashamed of the color of their skin, the shape of their eyes, or the size of their bodies; no one will be denied the basic opportunities of life; and people, institutions, and governments will truly care for the welcome of every single person. Thus will society become the temple of the Living God.

(Virgilio Elizondo)⁴⁷

The respect for the stranger and the sanctification of the name of the Eternal are strangely equivalent. And all the rest is dead letter.

(Emmanuel Levinas)⁴⁸

Any attempt to separate the love of God from the love of neighbor gives rise to attitudes which impoverish both.

(Gustavo Gutiérrez)⁴⁹

Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers and sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or a sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen.

(1 John 4:20–21)

We must take on the form of Christ, as Christ took on our own form.

(Robert Schreier)⁵⁰

For the desert monks, the question of how to bring one's life into conformity with Scripture was a burning question. They were convinced that only through *doing* what the text enjoined could one hope to gain any understanding of its meaning.

(Douglas Burton-Christie)⁵¹

In every age the community of faith must discover the shape of its ministry. We must discern how we are to be faithful to the gospel and effective in our mission: to celebrate God's saving presence and to contribute, by word and action and sacrament, to the fullness of this presence — the coming of the kingdom.

(Evelyn and James Whitehead)⁵²

In this sense practical theology is not an occasional, problem-solving technique but an ongoing way of doing theology and living the Christian faith.

(Robert Kinast)⁵³

Those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.

(John 3:21)