

## Practical Theology: The Interaction Between Revelation, Practice, and Context in the Mission of the Church

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**ABSTRACT:** It is well established that practical theology is a discipline that examines how divine revelation intersects with human experience and ecclesial practices to address contemporary challenges. This article aims to explore the interaction between revelation, practice, and context in the Church's mission, emphasizing the relationship between theological reflection, hermeneutical interpretation, and contextual application. It examines how ethnographic methods and critical reflection contribute to a more relevant and effective ministry. The article argues that practical theology is not merely an academic pursuit but a dynamic and transformative process that integrates divine revelation with the lived experiences of believers, ensuring the ongoing relevance of the Gospel message in today's social context.

**KEYWORDS:** practical theology, divine revelation, theological practice, ecclesiology, critical reflection, contextual application, the mission of the Church, community transformation

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### Introduction

Friedrich Schleiermacher, considered the father of modern theology, asserts that "theology is a positive science, whose parts cohere into a unified whole only through their common relation to a specific mode of faith, that is, a particular form of awareness of God" (Schleiermacher, 2000, p. i, 1). Grenz (1994/2000, p. 3) explains: "He reorganized various academic approaches into a tripartite curricular structure: biblical (the doctrine supported by different authors and biblical books), historical and systematic (the development of doctrine and the understandings of the contemporary church), and practical (the application of doctrine in the life of the church)". In this light, theology can be defined as the science of knowing God, a process shaped by context, history, and tradition. The primary role of the Christian theologian is to present a coherent account of the essential themes of faith: the nature of God (theology), humanity and creation (anthropology), the identity and work of Christ (Christology), the activity of the Holy Spirit

(pneumatology), the function of the Church as an expression of faith (ecclesiology), and the fulfillment of the divine plan for creation (eschatology) (Grenz, 1994/2000, p. 3).

Swinton and Mowat (2006) further elaborate on this definition, stating that theology "profoundly influences the types of practices that are developed in response to revelation and the extent to which these practices remain faithful to that revelation" (p. 46). Therefore, it can be stated that practical theology assumes the role of analyzing how biblical teachings are applied in daily life. It is considered "the crown of theological study" because the correct application of biblical teachings requires contextualized interpretation and action within the life of the faith community (Schleiermacher, 2000, p. 15). Similarly, Anderson (2001, p. 22) argues that practical theology must ensure, "that the public proclamations and praxis of the church in the world faithfully reflect the nature and purpose of God's ongoing mission for humanity and, in doing so, authentically respond to the contemporary context in which the church carries out its ministry." This highlights the transformative dimension of practical theology, which goes beyond mere academic discourse to become a living discipline dedicated to the continuous reinterpretation of divine revelation in relation to human reality.

Augsburger emphasizes the necessity of a relevant theology, stating that "theology does not mean much when someone is constantly struggling" (Koranteng-Pipim, 2005, p. 217). Samaan (1990, p. 78) complements this pragmatic perspective by asserting that "we must reach people, but we must be careful to reach them as Jesus did: where it hurts and when, but most importantly, where and when it hurts the most." Swinton and Mowat (2006, p. 7) reinforce this perspective, stating that practical theology is "a critical and theological reflection on the practices of the Church as they interact with the practices of the world, with the goal of ensuring and facilitating a faithful participation in God's saving action in, toward, and for the world."

Practical theology represents an essential conceptual framework in which Scripture, human experience, and church practices interconnect to address the concrete needs of believers. It not only provides a coherent application of doctrine but also facilitates authentic participation in God's mission in the world, remaining sensitive to the difficulties, sufferings, and challenges faced by each generation.

### **The purpose of practical theology: critical evaluation, theological reflection and contemporary application**

As previously mentioned, the primary objective of practical theology is the application of biblical teachings in the context of everyday life through a critical and theological analysis of the interaction between divine revelation and human reality. This involves a continuous process of interpretation and application, in

which the church's practice is evaluated and refined to remain faithful to its spiritual mission. In this process, human experience occupies a central place, as embedded theology—the naturally and unconsciously formed theology described by Doehring (2006)—serves as the foundation of the theological beliefs and assumptions that shape people's lives and practices. These beliefs are "accumulated over time, sometimes unconsciously" (p. 112) and become particularly evident in times of crisis, moments that facilitate transformations in one's representation of God. According to Rizzuto (1979, p. 90), "Each individual creates, throughout development, an idiosyncratic and deeply personalized representation of God (...) which cannot be eliminated; it can only be repressed, transformed, or utilized."

Since "the private and unconscious process by which an individual forms that representation [of God] (...) may not align with the God offered by official religion" (Rizzuto, 1979, p. 90), practical theology invites believers to engage in deliberative reflection, which is "the understanding of faith that results from a careful reflection on embedded theological beliefs" (Stone & Duke, 1996, p. 15). This process, as Doehring (2006) emphasizes, requires a critical evaluation of embedded theologies with the goal of constructing new theological understandings that are relevant to the contemporary context, based on a thoughtful reflection on one's values and beliefs (p. 112). Thus, the process of reflecting on embedded theology engages the Christian in theological practice, transitioning from an implicit faith to one that is consciously articulated. Grenz (1994/2000, pp. 1–2) affirms that "when we move beyond casual reflection on faith and consciously seek to systematically articulate our beliefs, we step into the discipline known as 'theology.' (...) Every Christian is a theologian."

A potential risk in this process lies in overemphasizing human experience, elevating it as the standard for theological interpretation. Cooper-White (2012) argues that "human experience is an authoritative source for theology" (p. 24). While human experience holds a central place in practical theology, it cannot be considered a source of revelation but rather an essential tool for theological reflection and application. Swinton and Mowat (2006) clarify this by stating, "To take human experience into account does not mean that it is a source of revelation" (p. 6). Therefore, although experience significantly contributes to the process of theological interpretation, the supreme authority always remains Scripture. Therefore, practical theology must provide a relevant theological framework that guides the church in its mission to address the spiritual, social, and moral needs of the community. This is achieved by integrating biblical teachings with the experiences of believers, ensuring that church practice remains neither rigidly dogmatic nor merely pragmatic.

Although "theology is (or should be) the primary source of knowledge that guides and provides the hermeneutical framework within which practical theology carries out its task" (Swinton & Mowat, 2006, p. 6), Anderson (2001) acknowledges that in his pastoral experience, he discovered that theoretical

theology alone was insufficient. He suffered from what he described as a "practical theology deficiency syndrome", which he recognized in his inability to translate theological concepts into concrete solutions for the daily lives of believers (p. 12).

The same struggle was experienced by Osmer (2008), who, early in his pastoral career, encountered a situation for which he had not been adequately prepared during his theological studies. He admits, "I wish I had known something about practical theology at the time. (...) My theology courses in seminary focused primarily on church doctrine, providing me with little practice in using theology to interpret specific incidents or contexts" (Osmer, 2008, pp. 12, 16). To ensure an authentic and well-grounded practice, Swinton and Mowat (2006) identify four key aspects of practical theology (p. 6), as follows:

- It is an analytical field, capable of questioning assumptions and practices that are considered normative. This involves an ongoing process of reflection on the practices of the church, evaluating them in light of biblical revelation and the contemporary context.
- It is a theological reflection, with theology as its primary source of knowledge. Scripture remains fundamental in interpreting and guiding ecclesial practices.
- It investigates not only the practices of the church but also those of the world, analyzing the interaction between them. This enables the church to address contemporary challenges with discernment and to actively engage with society.
- Its primary objective is to ensure authentic Christian practices that remain faithful to the Gospel. Faithfulness to the Gospel is the central principle of practical theology, ensuring that any ecclesial initiative or action reflects the teachings of Christ.

Osmer (2008, p. 18) identifies four essential tasks of practical theological interpretation—empirical, interpretive, normative, and pragmatic—designed to answer the following questions: "What is happening? Why is this happening? What should happen? How might we respond?"

Pastoral leadership within a church "requires competence in ministerial tasks such as preaching, teaching, administration, and pastoral care. However, it entails more than just these functions. Effective leadership demands individuals who can perceive the broader picture—leaders who think in terms of the entire congregational system and the church's relationship with its context" (Osmer, 2008, p. 18). Only in this way can a pastor respond to the challenges of ministry effectively and faithfully. Osmer (2008, p. 18) states that pastoral leadership within a church, "requires competence in ministerial tasks such as preaching, teaching, administration, and pastoral care. However, it entails more than just these functions. Effective leadership demands individuals who can perceive the broader picture—leaders who think in terms of the entire congregational system

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In conclusion, the goal of practical theology is to apply biblical teachings to daily life through critical reflection and continuous evaluation. This ensures that church practices remain faithful to the Gospel and relevant to contemporary society. Human experience serves as a framework for application, not as a source of revelation, and the balance between theory and practice facilitates the transformation of communities and strengthens the Christian mission.

### **Theology and practice: the transformative dynamics in Christian ministry**

As we have seen, practical theology involves a constant interaction between theory and practice, which are interdependent and complementary. In this process, individuals can transition from embedded theology, which is formed unconsciously and expressed through deeply ingrained beliefs, to deliberative theology, as Doehring (2006, p. 112) asserts. This process requires a critical evaluation of elements such as beliefs, values, and hopes. Theory provides a conceptual and normative foundation, while practice allows for the continuous testing and application of theological teachings. This dynamic interaction transforms both faith communities and theology itself in an ongoing process of learning and adaptation.

Barth (as cited in Anderson, 2001, p. 14) emphasizes that "the task of theology (...) is to clarify the presuppositions of ecclesial praxis." Thus, theology should not be an isolated theoretical endeavor but rather a hermeneutical framework that guides the actions of the faith community. Anderson (2001, p. 14) expands on this idea, stating that the purpose of practical theology is "to interpret Scripture, tradition, and practice so that both the practice of the church and that of the world may be transformed."

Anderson (2001, p. 14) highlights the limitations of abstract theology, which, in his case, "could speak, but (...) could not walk." He confesses, "My sermons were strong in presenting the attributes of God, but weak in applying them to the daily life of faith." Thus, theological discourse must be anchored in everyday reality. Barth (as cited in Anderson, 2001, p. 14) takes this idea even further, asserting that "praxis comes first precisely because God 'is not the fifth wheel on the wagon, but the wheel that drives all the others'." Therefore, the church's actions must be motivated and guided by divine revelation, and theology must develop through interaction with real life. Anderson (2001, p. 14) explains: "At the heart of the discussion on the nature of practical theology lies the issue of the relationship between theory and practice. If theory precedes and determines practice, then practice tends to focus primarily on methods, techniques, and strategies for ministry, lacking theological substance. If practice takes precedence over theory, ministry tends to be based on pragmatic outcomes rather than

prophetic revelation. Some will argue that all good practice includes theory. Others will contend that theory without good practice is an invalid theory."

Theology must, therefore, provide a relevant hermeneutical framework, avoiding isolated theoretical discourses. The relationship between theory and practice becomes a dynamic partnership in which human experience and divine revelation collaborate to enrich the understanding and application of Christian teachings. This approach goes beyond merely adapting theory to practice. It is an active partnership between the divine and the human, stimulating deep theological reflection and spiritual inspiration, as exemplified by the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. Ward (2012, p. 12) explains: "What practical theology accomplishes is not the adaptation of orthopedic devices to theoretical concepts to make them walk. Rather, theology happens when a divine partner joins us in our journey, stimulating our reflection and inspiring us to recognize the living Word, just as occurred with the two disciples walking on the road to Emmaus on the first Easter day." Although "God and the revelation that God has given to humanity in Christ represent the true starting point for all practical theology," theology remains an interpretative activity carried out "by fallen human beings, contextually situated, and influenced by a variety of personal and denominational agendas" (Swinton & Mowat, 2006, p. 9). Therefore, constant critical reflection on theological interpretations is necessary to prevent the distortion of divine teachings.

Thielicke (as cited in Anderson, 2001) states that "the Holy Spirit (...) enables the human subject to be receptive to the truth of the revealed divine Word" (p. 21). In practical theology, the Holy Spirit plays a crucial role, illuminating the understanding of Scripture (1 Corinthians 2:10-12) and guiding its application in daily life (John 16:13). Thus, divine revelation must be interpreted responsibly, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, avoiding excessive influences from contemporary culture while still addressing the real needs of people.

In conclusion, "human experience in general, and the experience of the Church in particular, have significant interpretative importance for theological development" (Swinton & Mowat, 2006, p. 9). Practical theology is more than an academic endeavor; it is a continuous learning process in which theory and practice collaborate to cultivate an authentic Christian life and a relevant mission in the contemporary world.

### **Practice in the contemporary context**

Given the central role of the Holy Spirit in guiding and illuminating the theological process, practical theology must dynamically engage with contemporary realities while maintaining its fidelity to divine revelation. It is called to respond to the challenges posed by the social, cultural, and economic changes of the modern world. As Doehring (2006) states, "knowledge about God must be

continuously reconstructed to remain relevant in complex historical contexts" (p. 114). Adaptability thus becomes crucial for ensuring that the divine message remains meaningful without compromising the authenticity of biblical teachings. In this regard, Wells (1985, p. 2) emphasizes that "biblical revelation was given within a specific cultural context, but it is meant to be heard in our present context as well." Swinton and Mowat (2006, p. 38) argue that "the postmodern perspective suggests that there is no objective reality. There are only our subjective perspectives." Furthermore, Thieliicke (as cited in Anderson, 2001) asserts that "to frame divine revelation under the influence of modern thought, with its claim to possess universal truth, is theologically regarded as arrogance" (p. 21). Thus, theology must balance the validation of human experiences with the affirmation of divinely revealed truth. In a relativistic culture, the biblical message cannot be subordinated to cultural standards but must be upheld as the absolute norm. Because "the church is never static and cannot permanently institutionalize practices that have proven effective in a particular time and place," its continuous evolution is necessary to remain relevant (Ward, 2002, p. 1). However, Ward (2002) warns that "not all changes are good or right" (p. 1). This is why the church must discern between necessary contextual adaptations and those that compromise the essence of the biblical message.

Throughout history, the concept of the church has evolved significantly, and its current structure can be seen as an inherited legacy rather than a predetermined model. Ward (2002) introduces the idea of a "liquid church," a model adapted to a highly mobile society in which many do not identify with traditional church structures. Such a church must address the spiritual needs of those outside the Christian community, with fellowship as a central element of its vision. Ward (2002) concludes, "We need more variety in church life" (p. 4). However, this diversity must not dilute the core message of the Gospel by reducing divine truth to human subjective judgment. In this regard, Anderson (2001) asserts that, "Practical theology, in today's culture where modern and postmodern thought struggle for supremacy, requires a critical and cautious reflection on the hermeneutics of divine revelation. (...) On the other hand, allowing culture and social conventions to dictate what is normative while ignoring the compelling and profound reality of God's personal revelation is merely a disguised form of modernism. Helmut Thieliicke would consider both approaches as forms of Cartesian thinking, where the human subject remains the criterion for divine truth (p. 21)." The mission of the Church in the contemporary context must reflect the ongoing application of divine revelation. This process requires a creative adaptation of Scripture to address the social and spiritual needs of society. As Paulien (2004) states, "Scripture must be applied in creative ways to the problems of today's world" (p. 72). However, this application does not imply an arbitrary reinterpretation but rather a responsible adaptation, informed by a deep understanding of the contemporary context.

Ecclesial practices must remain faithful to the Gospel while addressing the pressing issues of society with discernment, compassion, and innovation. In this way, the Church's mission remains authentic and transformative, fulfilling its calling to bring the light of Christ into a constantly changing world.

### **Interdisciplinarity in practical theology: ecclesiology and ethnography**

As a discipline that connects theological teachings with the reality of faith communities, practical theology employs research methods from the social sciences, particularly ethnography. Integrating these methods is not an easy task, as it must respect the integrity of both disciplines (Swinton & Mowat, 2006, p. 3). However, when done correctly, it provides a valuable perspective on how religious beliefs are manifested in everyday life.

Ecclesiology examines the structure, functions, and mission of the Church, analyzing the relationship between God and ecclesial communities. Ethnography, a scientific social method, investigates culture and social behaviors through direct participatory observation. Fiddes (2012) argues that in today's society, ecclesiology and ethnography must be combined to capture the dynamics of church life. Ethnographic methods, such as participatory observation and in-depth interviews, provide a profound understanding of both social and spiritual dynamics.

The integration of ethnographic methods into theological research offers a more complex perspective on church practices. Qualitative methods allow for the collection of relevant data on the spiritual experiences of believers without overshadowing the authority of Scripture. Sârbu and Străinescu (2012, pp. 13–14) explain: "Sociological research can be grouped into two different approaches: quantitative and qualitative. The differences lie in how data is collected and the types of observations made. Sample examination is an example of quantitative research, whereas small ethnographic case studies represent qualitative research."

Churches, as living and diverse organizations, function within a constantly changing socio-cultural environment. The integration of ethnographic methods is essential for understanding their context of existence. Thus, ethnography becomes a valuable tool for exploring how faith and church practices translate into the daily lives of Christian communities (Fiddes, 2012, pp. 13–17).

Fiddes (2012, pp. 33–35) identifies three main objectives in the integration of ecclesiology and ethnography:

1. The development of shared interpretative models: These models should integrate theological, social, and cultural perspectives, providing a deep interdisciplinary approach.
2. An open theological approach and academic integrity: Theological research must remain open to new perspectives while maintaining the integrity of faith and adhering to academic standards.



3. Practical application: Testing ecclesiological methodologies involves direct observation of ecclesial practices and the implementation of conclusions in pastoral contexts to bring about meaningful change.

Ultimately, "the concern of the theologian working in the field of ecclesiology is to find the theological dimension within the worldly forms of community, to reflect on the presence, nature, purpose, and activity of God" (Fiddes, 2012, p. 30). Ecclesiology should not be an abstract exercise but a process of theological reflection that identifies and interprets God's presence within the social, cultural, and spiritual structures of the community.

Fiddes (2012, 35) argues that "sharing the interpretation of data between researchers and those being studied should make a difference in people's lives and in contemporary world situations." The theologian thus becomes a mediator between divine revelation and communal realities. The integration of empirical and ecclesiological approaches may be contested due to methodological differences, generating varying degrees of anxiety within an academic context. Despite such challenges, ecclesiology remains a distinct field of interest, moving beyond the cynical label of being merely "the gentle art of running a successful church" (Cupitt, as cited in Ward, 2012, p. 35).

In conclusion, theology cannot disregard the findings of ethnographers. It is essential for theology to facilitate a dialogue between ethnography and ecclesiology (Fiddes, 2012, pp. 13–17), creating an applicable theological framework where divine revelation and the experience of the faith community interact constantly. This process fosters a relevant and transformative practical theology, capable of addressing contemporary spiritual and social challenges.

### **Practical dimensions of Christian ministry: responsibility, faith and pastoral care**

Practical theology becomes truly meaningful when it materializes into actions that address the real needs of believers. A compelling example of this is pastoral care, which focuses on supporting the vulnerable (McClure, 2012, p. 269), embodying the application of divine compassion in everyday life. McClure (2012) emphasizes this dimension, stating that pastoral care is, at the institutional level, "one of the primary responsibilities of religious leadership" (p. 269). As a branch of practical theology, pastoral care integrates theory, theology, and practice to provide spiritual support to the faith community, becoming "a theology of presence intentionally applied and embodied, especially in response to suffering" (McClure, 2012, pp. 269–270). This responsibility extends beyond moral support, requiring deep engagement in the spiritual life of those experiencing hardship. In this context, Nouwen (1972, 99) highlights the fundamental task of the minister: "Perhaps the main task of the minister is to prevent people from suffering for the wrong reasons. Many people suffer because of false assumptions on which they have based their lives. These assumptions are that there should be no fear or loneliness, no

confusion or doubt. But these sufferings can be addressed creatively only when they are understood as integral wounds of our human condition. Therefore, ministry is a profoundly confrontational service. It does not allow people to live under illusions of immortality and perfection. It continually reminds them that they are mortal and broken, but also that, with the recognition of this condition, liberation begins.”

Nouwen (1972) emphasizes that authentic ministry does not allow people to live under illusions of perfection but instead guides them toward acceptance of the human condition and a genuine spiritual life. Augsburger (as cited in Koranteng-Pipim, 2005) argues that pastoral care must address deep despair, which arises from the cunning attacks of the forces of darkness on human vulnerabilities: “An uncomfortable reality that we must take seriously is that we are all victims of the devil’s cunning attacks. He knows our particular weaknesses very well, is more than willing to exploit them, assails us where we are most vulnerable, causes defeats and failures, tarnishes reputations, and makes us feel humiliated and ashamed—as much as possible and in ways that far exceed our imagination—bringing a bondage from which liberation may seem almost impossible. I hope I do not make my readers uncomfortable, but sometimes there is an undercurrent of despair that must be confronted with equal urgency (p. 218).”

Augustine provides a comprehensive description of the pastoral role, highlighting the wide range of responsibilities undertaken by spiritual leaders: “The unruly must be rebuked, the discouraged must be encouraged, the weak must be supported, the contentious must be confronted, the traitors must be guarded, the ignorant must be instructed, the lazy must be awakened, the quarrelsome must be restrained, the proud must be humbled, the litigious must be reconciled, the poor must be helped, the oppressed must be liberated, the good must be approved, evil must be endured, and all must be loved” (Augustine, *Sermo CCIX*, as cited in Straub, 1983, p. 37). This vision outlines a complex pastoral model in which the minister serves as an actively engaged spiritual guide within the life of the community. Swinton and Mowat (2006, p. 9) warn that theologians who ignore context may fail to address people’s real needs. They emphasize that “one of the primary critical tasks of practical theology is to recognize distorted practices and call the church back to the theological significance of these practices, helping it to faithfully engage in God’s mission” (p. 13).

Baxter (1979, 56) highlights the importance of the pastor’s own spiritual life, urging, “For the sake of your people, watch over your own hearts.” He asserts that only a pastor who is personally aware of their relationship with God can authentically serve others, as “a pastor can hardly offer the grace that he does not personally know” (Purves, 2001, p. 90). McClure (2012, p. 273) adds that “every good pastoral minister must know how to pay attention (to observe and listen), how to diagnose (to be able to theologically interpret the cause of suffering and discern what is needed), and how to intervene (to provide accompaniment,

guidance, and support)." Derrida (1995, p. 6) connects this pastoral responsibility to the dimension of authentic faith, stating that "responsibility and faith go together, no matter how counterintuitive it may seem to some, and both should, at the same time, surpass mastery and knowledge." This connection underscores that Christian ministry is not based solely on theological knowledge but on a genuine calling to self-giving and profound personal commitment. Baxter (1974, p. 97) asserts that "if God were to reform only pastoral ministry and set ministers to their duty with zeal and faithfulness, the people would surely be reformed. All churches either grow or decline depending on the state of pastoral ministry—not in terms of wealth or worldly greatness, but in knowledge, zeal, and ability for their work."

Rebuke, encouragement, support, and confrontation thus become fundamental components of authentic pastoral ministry, combining theological truth with concrete application in the lives of believers. In this way, practical theology becomes a meeting space between divine truths and human challenges, providing a dynamic framework for both personal and communal transformation. By employing research methods and committing to deep reflection, practical theology ensures that the Christian life not only survives in the modern world but thrives.

## Conclusions

In conclusion, "practical theology is fundamentally concerned with the discovery of truth" (Swinton & Mowat, 2006, p. 7), seeking to integrate divine revelation with the everyday reality of believers. It provides an essential framework for applying the Christian faith in a way that is both sensitive and relevant, taking into account the complexities of contemporary life. Through reflection on Scripture, tradition, and human experience, practical theology explores theological truth within today's social and cultural context, ensuring that biblical teachings remain vibrant and transformative. Thus, practical theology goes beyond the academic sphere, becoming both a spiritual and missional imperative. By critically reflecting on ecclesial and social practices, it corrects distortions and offers relevant pastoral solutions guided by biblical principles. Faithfulness to the Gospel and its application in diverse contexts are fundamental to maintaining an authentic ministry. The ultimate goal of practical theology is the transformation of both personal and communal life through a continuous interaction between theory and practice. In this process, the church becomes an active agent of God's mission, offering a living testimony and a meaningful presence in the world.

Ultimately, practical theology fulfills its purpose when it makes God's action visible in human reality, creating a bridge between heaven and earth, between revelation and experience. Through a deep understanding and responsible application, the church is called to remain relevant, dynamic, and faithful to its divine calling to bring hope and healing to a constantly changing world.

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