

FROM "APPLIED THEOLOGY" TO "PRACTICAL THEOLOGY"

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This article, which places its emphasis on "practical theology" rather than "applied theology," was prompted by my experience in observing a considerable amount of sermon delivery in both South Africa and North America. Although my focus is directed mainly toward concerns and developments (the "cutting edges," as it were) in the South African scene, the data which I present should have significance and application also in North America and elsewhere, where gospel preaching is an important element in the religio-sociological structure.

1. *Introduction and Orientation* *Terminology*

In my use of the term "practical theology" rather than "applied theology," or even, to some extent, "pastoral theology," I am making a conscious and definite distinction between practical theology as a science and the training and technical equipping of pastors for the gospel ministry. For the best results, a proper understanding and use of the latter should—perhaps, *must*—be undergirded by the former.

At this juncture I should make evident my definitions of "method" and "methodology," two terms that are frequently confused with each other (and thus wrongly used). By and large, a "method" refers to the way or the procedure by which certain aims and objectives are attained. "Methodology," on the other hand, denotes the scientific study of methods or procedures undertaken in the cause of research.

Objectives

In preparing this article I have had several objectives or goals in mind. First of all, I wish to set forth a bird's-eye view of some of the approaches in practical theology that are especially relevant to the situation in Southern Africa. Second, I briefly discuss some of the

characteristics of practical theology as a communicative theological operational science. And third, I call attention to some problems relating to applied theology, my purpose being to address these problems, not for negative criticism, but so as to construct a practical-theology approach that may assist the church in an essential area of its work.

*The Rise of Practical-Theology
Models in South Africa*

In the mid-1960s there was, especially in Germany, an intense discussion of fundamental questions in the discipline of practical theology—so much so, in fact, that this discipline suddenly took on an amazing new lease on life. The outcome in South Africa was the rise of numerous models of practical theology. Theologians such as H. D. Bastian reacted against Karl Barth's view that the "what" of theology is the determining factor while the "how" is of no real importance. Bastian appealed to practical theologians to shake off the chains of dogma and to stand on their own two feet.¹ The normative-deductive approach was rejected, and the need for praxis to correct and critically evaluate theory was stressed. Practical theology must follow the example of the modern operational sciences and adopt an empirical method. J. A. Wolfaardt, a colleague in the Department of Practical Theology at the University of South Africa, introduced practical theology as a communicative operational science, both to the University and to South Africa.

*2. Three Basic Approaches to Practical Theology as
a Theological Operational Science*

Three different approaches pertaining to practical theology as an operational science can be distinguished: (1) The empirical-analytical approach of H. D. Bastian and K. W. Dahm; (2) the approach of Gert Otto (and also N. Greinacher and Y. Spiegel), based on dialectics and the criticism of ideology; and (3) a hybrid or intermediate approach fostered by C. Bäumlér, R. Zerfass, and D. Stollberg.

Bastian's empirical-analytical approach (and also Dahm's) is explicitly associated with concepts from the critical rationalism of K. Popper and H. Albert. Theories based on this approach are characterized by their attempt to render the actions of the church scientifically verifiable. Methodological questioning is important, because every path to praxis originates in some theory or other. Bastian demands that theory and praxis, plus a scientific account of their interrelationship, be the chief motifs and bases for further theories in practical theology.

¹H. D. Bastian, "Vom Wort zu den Wörtern," *Evangelische Theologie* 28 (1968): 25-55.

Facts and theory do not exist independently; they interact and modify each other. Although Bastian draws a sharp distinction between practical theology and systematic theology, he does not want to dispense with the latter, for it has a part to play in deciding on the normative aspect of empirical research.²

Otto's approach is closely linked to the *critical theory* developed by Frankfurt School's M. Horkheimer, T. W. Adorno, and Jürgen Habermas. Otto differs from Bastian by rejecting empirical-analytical theories. In fact, he accuses modern theology of so gross a neglect of practice as to render it incapable of influencing the latter. According to him, theologians have been so busy with their own theological traditions that they have had no time to address contemporary society or the contemporary church. This produced a void in reflection on the relationship between theory and praxis. Further outcomes were a blind emphasis on action, a contentless pastoral praxis, and the establishment of practical theology as an applied science. To overcome these errors, practical theology should take up the premise of its wide social relevance and be redefined in terms of the interrelationship of religion, the church, society, and theology. Practical theology must be a critical theory of religiously influenced praxis in society.

The third approach occupies an intermediate position between the critical-analytical and the position set forth by Otto. C. Bäumlér believes in a combination of functionalism and critical theory, because this presents, in his view, the best solution toward the formulation of theories for practical theology. He believes that practical theology cannot take the whole of social praxis as its field of study. On the other hand, he wishes to do away with the dichotomous relationship between church and society that has governed the formation of practical-theological theories in the past, and which has given rise to a one-sided concentration on the church and its practice. Since social processes have a definite influence on the church, and vice versa, the object of practical theology is a Christian-churchly communicative operation in which social factors and processes play an important part. The principle that should govern practical theology is that of ideal communication as developed by K. O. Apel and Jürgen Habermas. The task of practical theology, according to Bäumlér, is to analyze the disrupted communication process and to design successful communication.³ This is the approach adopted by most of the practical theologians at the University of South Africa.

²See N. Mette, *Theorie der Praxis* (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1978), 173-174.

³See C. Bäumlér, "Praktische Theologie: Ein notwendiges Element der wissenschaftlichen Theologie?" *Theologia Practica* 9 (1974): 72-84.

In addition to the three approaches just described, there are some others, as well, in South Africa. According to Coenie Burger, two such additional approaches to practical theology characterize the South African scene: the "confessional" and the "contextual."⁴ Most South African Universities have been heavily influenced by the former, which is essentially a "Dutch-Reformed" approach to practical theology. The University of Potchefstroom is probably the most conservative school that holds this "confessional" approach, which may be briefly characterized as follows: (1) The study of the Bible is central, and it is the only norm and source of practical theology; W. D. Jonker suggests that practical theology stands in the service of the Word of God.⁵ (2) Guidelines for the service of the church are deductively derived from a theological theory based on Reformed theology. (3) The church and the service of the church are central. And (4) the training of ministers is the most important task of practical theology. J. A. Wolfaardt suggests that C. Trimp of the Netherlands and J. E. Adams in the United States may be included (up to a point) as representing this approach.⁶

The "contextual" approach, according to Burger, is characterized by the following: (1) The context and situational analysis of praxis is important. (2) There is a world orientation rather than a church orientation. (3) The task of practical theology is to bring about social change and a reconstruction of society. (4) The use of Scripture varies from a fundamentalist approach to a selective use of Scripture. (5) The community of believers takes precedence over individuals. (6) The major concern is not with the training of ministers but rather with equipping the community of believers. (7) The approach is ecumenical.⁷ Although D. Tracy is not a practical theologian, he could very well be classified under this heading.⁸

3. *Some Characteristics of Practical Theology as Communicative Operational Science*

Up to the present time, no real agreement has been reached on what practical theology actually is. The arena is almost a battlefield of opposing models that utilize, or are based upon, different philosophical

⁴Coenie Burger, *Praktiese Teologie in Suid Afrika* (Pretoria: HSRC, 1991), 59.

⁵W. D. Jonker, *In Diens van die Woord* (Pretoria: NG Kerkboekhandel, 1981).

⁶J. A. Wolfaardt, *Introduction to Practical Theology: Study Guide PTA200-W* (Pretoria: University of South Africa Press, 1992), 4.

⁷*Ibid.*, 61.

⁸See Wolfaardt, 8.

and theological presuppositions. I will therefore resist the temptation of offering "a recipe in three easy steps" for the construction of a practical theology model that will solve all the problems. Instead, I propose to give an overview of some of the main determinants of practical theology in South Africa.

The Role of Faith and Theology

I have to admit that one of the weightiest topics in the recent scientific dialogue regarding practical theology relates to the time-honored question, What, precisely, is "theology"? Any discussion of this question must, of course, revolve around the methodology of the particular theologian. Although we may agree with Daniel Augsburger on the need for the minister to be a theologian, theology is not the functional handmaid of the church, or for that matter of the minister. It is not simply a device to improve the minister's preaching or to find pragmatic ways of getting more members into the church.⁹ Theology studies statements of faith critically (in the sense of being analytical and synthetic).

Faith and theology are sometimes seen as incompatible, or else theology is viewed as a peculiar mixture of scientific statements and certain confessional and unevaluated intersubjective beliefs. According to P.J.R. Abbing, a distinction must be made between theology and mere statements of faith.¹⁰ For one thing, theological statements are more open to discussion and critical evaluation than are statements of faith. The diaconological (confessional) approach to practical theology combines theological arguments and statements of faith, and therefore it is almost impossible to subject it to intersubjective evaluation. On the one hand, diaconology does not accept rationality as a criterion for practical-theological statements. On the other hand, theology is concerned, not so much with answering people's questions, but with knowing the Word of God—and this, not as rational beings but as sinners.¹¹

In contrast to Abbing, E. Van Niekerk maintains that "theology is theoretical thought which, from the perspective of faith, pronounces and constructs models" in terms of three limiting (or defining) concepts:

⁹See Daniel Augsburger, "The Minister as a Theologian," *Ministry*, May 1990, 4-6.

¹⁰For a further discussion of Abbing's point of view on theology and statements of faith, see A. G. Van Wyk, "'n Evaluering van die grondslae van die Diakoniologiese benadering vanuit 'n Prakties-teologiese Perspektief" (D.Th. dissertation, University of South Africa, 1989), 42-43.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 44.

God, humanity, and the world.¹² And "faith," he points out, is a concrete, nonscientific experience in which all, clergy and laity, theologian and nontheologian, have equal claims to the perception of truth. Theology, then, is the theory of faith, the theological-theoretical reflection on faith. It is on a par with, but unlike, nontheological experience.¹³

Theology as a Science

Theology as a science involves analysis of a field of research that emerges from the context of a specific reality, but it is also a synthesis of that field with the overall context. In nonscientific experience, the reality of existence is treated as being in itself integral and total. Events, objects, social and theological factors, etc., are not dissected but left intact.¹⁴ J.W.V. Van Huyssteen states that a theology which chooses to see itself as a science must have at least some intersubjective control; it must attempt a self-critical scrutiny of its own premises. It cannot simply and unquestioningly present its own statements of faith on an authoritarian basis.¹⁵ Theology, as a human endeavor and within my own paradigm, does not lay claim to total, absolute truth; it does not endeavor to formulate dogmas, but testifies to a partial truth only.

Practical Theology as a Theological Science

An important objection with which the practical-theological enterprise is constantly confronted is this: Does practical theology have a distinctively theological character? Could it not be grouped with psychology, sociology, and/or communication? In regard to this question, I distinguish three approaches: the diaconological, the empirical-scientific, and the empirical-confessional. The last of these may be considered as a "hybrid" approach that utilizes certain concepts and procedures of the other two, without falling victim to the "one-sidedness" of either of them.¹⁶

¹²E. Van Niekerk, *Systematic Theology: Only Guide for STH401-R* (Pretoria: University of South Africa Press, 1988), 153.

¹³Ibid., 94-95.

¹⁴Ibid., 81.

¹⁵J.W.V. Van Huyssteen, "Systematic Theology and the Philosophy of Science," *Journal of Theology of Southern Africa* 34 (1981): 3-4.

¹⁶See A. G. Van Wyk, "'n Verkennende Gesprek rondom die Begrip Teologie in Verskillende Prakties-teologiese Benaderinge," *Praktiese Teologie in Suid-Afrika* 6 (1991): 76-85.

The diaconological approach is very much concerned with the fact that practical theology must retain its theological modality. This is only possible if practical theology centers upon "knowledge about God," and hence upon knowledge of the Word of God. Revelation (in the sense of "Scripture") is the only norm and source of practical-theological research. Human experience is classified as subjective.

Wolfaardt's approach to practical theology as an operational science, on the other hand, is concerned with human acts of faith as an object of study. Faith is regarded as something essentially human. Theology, as the theory of faith, is seen as the perspective of faith from which one can speak about God, humanity, and the world. It does not assume a confessional view of revelation, nor does the Bible function as its norm.

The hybrid stance considers the diaconological approach as being a one-sided and deductive approach. But although this hybrid approach as an operational science is concerned with praxis and with empirical research, it still operates in terms of certain confessional presuppositions. From its perspective, theology is seen as the study of people's statements about God and about faith in God. Because God cannot be objectivized, He cannot be the object of theology. In fact, this approach subscribes to Barth's "theanthropological" view of theology. And thus, theology is not only the science of knowledge about God, but it is also the science of knowing God. The theological field of study includes both that which happens between human beings and God and that which happens among human beings when they come to know God. The Bible is still the norm and source of study, though a knowledge of other sciences is also very important.

Practical Theology as an Empirical Science

Traditionally, the other theological disciplines formulate theological theories, while practical theology's task is that of applying or actualizing those theories in practice. In the Christian tradition, the church practices its theology from an OT, NT, systematic-theology, and, to a lesser degree, ecclesiological perspective. In its dialogues, practical theology is never invited to take part. This was not only the fault of the institution itself in being afraid of the empirical methodology of practical theology, but also the result of practical theology's being quite satisfied to be an applied theology.

Thus, practical theology was the builder of bridges between the theological theories of the other theological disciplines and the practice of the church. It became a technical subject (*theologia applicata*): The question of how to preach or teach, and how to reconcile theoretical

knowledge with the practice of faith, became the working area for practical theology, which in this model makes no contribution to the church's epistemology and theology. Those who attribute this kind of role to practical theology have all too often left the impression that practical theology needs not to concern itself with the *content* of what is to be preached. Biblical studies and systematic theology have assumed the sole right to ask basic questions about sermon content, with the only concern of practical theology being the preacher's delivery system (i.e., the technique) used in preaching and in other aspects of gospel ministry. Thus, practical theology has had the task of equipping people with the skills needed for a successful ministry, the adjective "practical" indicating the *application* of theology.

This concept, however, unleashed numerous problems. Traditionally, practical theology was seen as an applied science with no independent field of inquiry; it belonged rather in a training center than in a university. Applied theology and the confessional approach to practical theology (diaconology) came to be accused of duplicating the fields of OT, NT, and systematic theology.¹⁷ The question may even be asked whether it is not merely a reductionistic approach to systematic theology. In fact, today applied theology and diaconology are becoming increasingly viewed as making no epistemological contribution to the field of theology.¹⁸

However, practical theology is at present also being increasingly seen as a science. Although practical theologians would admit that it is a "how-science," the current trend among them is not the search for rules on how to preach, but rather a *scientific* description of certain events, processes, or actions. Let us take an example: The minister prepares a sermon about the atonement, a topic which is accepted *a priori* as relevant for the congregation. But he observes, to his amazement, that no one is really listening. Why not? Did he fail to provide enough striking illustrations? Did he lack enthusiasm? Did he stumble in his delivery? Perhaps so. But it is equally or even more likely that he was not addressing or connecting this message with the congregation's *Sitz im Leben*, the specific and total life situation of the listeners. Persons listening to a sermon are not merely a receiving set; their own situation contributes to the preaching event. That event is, in its very nature, a dynamic encounter between people and the "Word of God." Therefore, any pastoral action is not merely a form (treated by

¹⁷See J. A. Wolfaardt, *Praktiese Teologie: Inleiding in die Teologie* (Pretoria: NG Kerkboekhandel, 1978), 279-280.

¹⁸See A. G. Van Wyk, "'n Evaluering van die grondslae van die Diakoniologiese benadering vanuit 'n Prakties-teologiese perspektief," 43.

practical theology), plus a dogmatic content (formulated by biblical studies and/or systematic theology). Quite the contrary: It is a dynamic event which is in turn a product of both the message and the situation.

Practical Theology as an Operational Science

Practical theology is the science describing the structure and the functioning of certain events in the sphere of interpersonal relations within a religious context. For Christians, this context is the Christian church and its Judaeo-Christian heritage and nature.¹⁹ Thus, practical theology includes a concern with content and norms. It is, however, that part of theology which focuses on praxis, and therefore many practical theologians see it as an operational science. From its particular vantage point, it studies the religious faith of people and statements about God. It is an operational science because people's religious beliefs and actions and the operational fields that are created by them—such as worship, celebration, service (*diakonia*), and instruction—are the objects of scientific study.

Practical Theology as a Communicative Theological Operational Science

Most of the practical theologians at the University of South Africa regard practical theology as a communicative theological operational science. According to H.J.C. Pieterse, anyone who has "ever engaged in Christian religious praxis will know that Christians are continually communicating with each other, with their Lord, and with people outside their religious community."²⁰ He thus views as communication the basic action performed constantly by all believers. From the perspective of the Christian faith, God is the initiator of communication. Throughout the Bible, He communicates in words and actions. Jesus Christ is God's supreme communication with His people.²¹ Accordingly, practical theology as a communicative science is active in explaining, understanding, and theorizing about these communicative words and actions. J. Furet maintains that communicative actions in service of the gospel are the fundamental concern of practical theology.²²

¹⁹See J. Symington and J. A. Wolfaardt, *Practical Theology: Only Study Guide for PTH400-5* (Pretoria: University of South Africa Press, 1989), 9.

²⁰H. L. Heyns and H.J.C. Pieterse, *A Primer in Practical Theology* (Pretoria: Gnosis, 1990), 46.

²¹*Ibid.*, 48-52.

²²J. Furet, "Kroniek van de Praktische Theologie," *Praktische Theologie* 14 (1987): 260.

Hence, on a metatheoretical level, practical theology links up with the philosophy of Jürgen Habermas.

Pieterse states further that the cornerstone of this approach, the ideal of free people living in true communication without any domination, is not in conflict with the ideals of the Christian church.²³ And according to Wolfaardt, the most searching criticism of practical theology as an operational science comes from Wolfhart Pannenberg, as formulated by the latter's student W. Grieve: namely, that practical theology as an operational science functions with an operational theory. Grieve states that praxis theory, as it is developed under the pressure of contemporary interests and demands, implies an intentional theory of meaning as its operational theory.²⁴ The indissoluble link between meaning and action may be overlooked, and this has implications for the unity of theology.

How can the unity of theology be guaranteed if part of it is "constituted as theory of meaning and the rest as operational theory"?²⁵ According to Wolfaardt, it is important that practical theology should not be concerned only with a structural-functional approach, but that its field of research should be extended to communicative operations. From H. Peukert's research into developments in the area of scientific and operational theory and theology, the conclusion has emerged that the point at which these activities intersect is communication.²⁶ Wolfaardt indicates that this establishes a link between theology and other sciences, each from its own perspective.²⁷ The basic elements of this communicative experience are the following: (1) There is intentional action on the part of agents or subjects, who direct and orient themselves by the acts of other agents and subjects; (2) such action is mediated by historically and socially defined systems of symbols and signs and is used to explain and purposefully alter the communal situation; (3) the reciprocal acts constitute a communal world, the reality of which is related to the specific acts in question; (4) acts are time-bound, and therefore the identity of subjects is molded by their biographical backgrounds; (5) the reciprocal and reflexive acts of the participants are further influenced by socially and historically determined orientations which these participants have internalized;

²³See Heyns and Pieterse, 52.

²⁴See W. Grieve, "Praxis und Theologie" (Munich: Kaiser, 1975), 29-41.

²⁵Ibid., 137.

²⁶H. Peukert, *Wissenschaftstheorie, Handlungstheorie, Fundamentale Theologie* (Dusseldorf: Patmos, 1976), 321.

²⁷Ibid., 7.

(6) the time-bound nature of communicative acts implies the possibility of reflection on, and revision of, internalized orientations and social processes; (7) the reflexivity and reciprocity of communicative acts achieve their ultimate potential in a mutual renewal of possibilities; and (8) the agents, by freedom mutually recognized and granted in their relationship, accept one another as free subjects in solidarity.²⁸

Wolfaardt indicates, further, that against this background there are abundant interfaces between the empirical sciences and theology, and even more so between the operational sciences and practical theology. For a proper grasp of communicative acts in the theological perspective, cooperation with all the other theological disciplines is essential.²⁹ Such a delineation also distinguishes practical theology from, for example, ethics. Not all the acts of faith can be studied, but only those which are intended to transmit faith, either verbally or by means of symbols. This cancels the risk of a dilettantish approach to ethics. For instance, the question of abortion will not be discussed in depth in practical theology, though such a discussion is an act of faith. On the other hand, practical theology is perfectly entitled to ask what is communicated when the church makes a pronouncement on such a subject.

A practical theology that concerns itself with the theory of communicative acts has the effect of breaching the traditional divisions within the subject area. The communication of the faith is not limited to official activities of the church, nor even to the very form of the church, for communication that mediates the faith outside the church is also a valid object of study. In these terms, practical theology cannot lapse into a praxeology that has a merely technical interest in preserving the *status quo*.³⁰

Furthermore, practical theology as a communicative operational science takes an ideal communicative situation as a normative assumption. The normative core of a nonpreconceived act, innocent of coercion or deceit, is opposed to any tendency to deceive either oneself or the other, or to turn the other into a mere object. Peukert develops his theological theory of communicative acts in terms of this point of view and from the vantage point of the Judaeo-Christian tradition. To him, communicative acts in which the other is recognized, and at the same time is defended against humiliation and destruction, are the primary research area of a theory of theological interaction.³¹

²⁸Symington and Wolfaardt, 137.

²⁹Ibid., 8.

³⁰Ibid., 9-10.

³¹See Peukert, 320-321.

A very important issue in practical-theological communication theory is whether Christian actions (verbal, symbolic, or semiotic) promote or impair the recognition and freedom that God has given us toward one another. Within a theoretical framework, the question is not simply, How do we preach?; it is also, Is our preaching really mediating God's liberating power, or is it just a covert legitimization of either existing or would-be power structures?

Empirical Methods

Bastian's suggestion that practical theology should be an operational science with an empirical methodology has elicited strong opposition. Theologians such as Jonker, from the perspective of the diaconological approach, strongly oppose the empirical methods of practical theology.³² Jonker thinks that theology must be seen as theological hermeneutics in a practical context. The question which he and others have raised is this: How can practical theology as an operational science be considered theological if its methods do not involve biblical hermeneutics?

According to Pieterse, "every theological subject has its own field of study and its own methodological access to that field."³³ He argues that the exegetical approach studies a book (the Bible), making use of such sciences as linguistics and literature theory; church history studies the church by means of historical methods; and systematic theology studies the doctrines of the church in terms of hermeneutical and philosophical methodologies. He indicates, further, that a discipline cannot be identified as a theological subject because of the use of traditionally nontheological methods. Since practical theology is mainly concerned with communicative actions, the question may be asked, Why should practical theology not use a methodology appropriate for it and still be seen as a theological discipline? Pieterse's conclusion is that communicative actions can be studied only by means of empirical methodology.³⁴

Paul Tillich wrote that empirical theology as a theological discipline could never succeed for two reasons: (1) God as the object of theology belongs to a different order from that of scientific observation, and (2) it is impossible to verify assertions about God. J. A. Van der Ven's reply to this is that not God, but the religious relationship to God (religious praxis), is the object of study. According to him, only

³²See Jonker, 36-37.

³³See Heyns and Pieterse, 68.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 69.

through the study of religious praxis does theology have access to God, for it is only man's response, reception, and reaction to God's revelation that can be the object of theological research. In view of Van der Ven's empirical theology, experience plays a regulative role. It functions, not on the level of statements of faith; rather, it verifies or falsifies theological statements. Empirical research tries to determine whether theological statements really correspond to human experience.³⁵ The difference between a theology of experience and practical theology ("empirical theology," as Van der Ven prefers to name it) is that the former is concerned with integrating experience into its theology, whereas the latter endeavors to determine to what extent this really happens.³⁶

The accusation that practical theology uses a positivistic methodology is thus strongly rejected. Empirical studies are inseparably linked with theological theories, so that when practical theology measures certain phenomena and explains or describes these phenomena, it always does so in the light of a specific theological theory (or, perhaps, even on the basis of what is only a hypothesis). Therefore it rejects empiricism.

4. Practical Theology in Theory and Practice Methods in Practical Theology

Practical theology makes use of different empirical methods, one of these being the *Zerfass* model. This model, like any model, can be compared to a map in the sense that it reduces a vast, all-but-incomprehensible matter to intelligible dimensions. Thus we can, as it were, hold an entire country in the hollow of our hand, survey it, examine it, and understand it. A model is also a vital link between theory and praxis, since it permits intensive interaction between them by bringing them closer together. According to Heyns, the *Zerfass* model is indeed a useful one.³⁷ It functions as follows: (1) Starting out from a particular praxis, (2) it makes a situational analysis; then (3) in integration with tradition and Scripture, it forms a new theory; and (4) this process leads, in turn, to a new praxis. It is thus a model that moves full circle, and it does so repeatedly in an ongoing and ever-relevant progression.

³⁵See J. A. Van der Ven, "Ervaring en Empirie in de Theologie," *Tijdschrift voor Theologie* 27 (1987): 7, 157.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 158.

³⁷For a critical evaluation of *Zerfass'* model see Mette, 319-320. According to Mette the model of *Zerfass* is too static and cannot confront all the problems regarding praxis.

The Zerfass Model Illustrated

We may now illustrate by an example how the Zerfass model functions. Let us assume that a certain congregation suffers a severe drop in church attendance—a drop which generates a need for action. Our first question is, Why do people fail to come to church, and what causes them to do so? Since we assume that the members come to church because of a certain theological tradition, we review the church's faith commitments, its doctrines, its history, and so forth. This procedure helps us to clarify what is at issue.

However, at some point or other the answers that we have elicited may prove inadequate. Because we are not using an authoritative theological model, we cannot overcome the problem by simply declaring that church attendance is an imperative. The problem demands that we make an empirical situation-analysis, which will use well-prepared questionnaires, interviews, etc., to help determine why the level of church attendance has become unsatisfactory. Also required is the help of sciences whose concern is with the study of modern men and women, present-day society, etc.

Such considerations on the history of our worship service, the Bible, relevant theological subjects, and the confessions of the church cannot be disregarded. They must, however, be critically evaluated in the light of praxis. But on the other hand, they must also critically evaluate the praxis itself. This means that the two partners—the tradition and the situation (i.e., what the situation is *really* like)—must be in dialogue until some consensus is reached. From this dialogue we develop, in turn, a practical-theological theory. This theory then needs to be critically integrated into practice. Finally, the resulting new praxis has to be in dialogue with both the theological tradition and the situation, a dialogue which may well lead to a new theory and a new praxis.

The Theory-praxis Relationship in Practical Theology

According to Bastian, theory represents a synthesis between experience and understanding, rather than being a replica or mere reflection of it.³⁸ Therefore empirical research is not concerned with experience as such, but with experience interpreted in the light of theory. This is a concern which transcends experience and which makes an essential interpretation possible.

³⁸Bastian, 37.

*The Importance of Theory
for Practical Theology*

According to Van Niekerk, there are two different approaches to the importance of theory. The first of these, he feels, tends to "absolutise theoretical thinking." It refuses to admit that people are more than their theoretical ideas. The second is naive, for it refuses to see that "praxis is codetermined by theory."³⁹

Pieterse maintains that theory is indispensable to the practice of science. In theory, the researchers' outlook on life and reality, their values and norms, their confessional traditions, and the perspectives from which they make their decisions play a part.⁴⁰ Concerning the praxis-theory relationship, Wolfaardt points out that pastors are often "under pressure to act, they either do not have, or do not take time to explicate their theory. The danger now develops that nonreflected theory can become ideology."⁴¹

Most of the time, the person who deals with the practical situation will revert to theoretical rules of thumb, such as, for instance, that a gospel minister can preach on any topic provided that the sermon does not take longer than twenty minutes. Wolfaardt feels that "undoubtedly the practical situation" requires much more; it includes, for example, insight into "group-dynamics or therapeutic relationships."⁴² There is a desperate need for a practical-theological theory that embraces factors that are involved in the communication of the message. Van Niekerk argues that evangelical theologians in particular are opposed to anything that remotely smacks of theory. According to him, this opposition stems from the notion that theories are simply a hodgepodge of ideas arbitrarily thrown together, or that they treat only the abstract.⁴³

Often practitioners dislike theory because of the fact that theory questions their ideological praxis. And although there is a danger of overestimating theory, practical theology, as Wolfaardt points out, can hardly be "theoretical" enough.⁴⁴ It must discover trends in opinions and in restrictions that are so often taken for granted.

³⁹See Van Niekerk, 85.

⁴⁰H. J. C. Pieterse, "Praktiese Teologie Mondig?" *Skrif en Kerk* 7 (1986): 64.

⁴¹J. A. Wolfaardt, "Approaches to the Subject Called Practical Theology," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 51 (1985): 60.

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³See Van Niekerk, 85.

⁴⁴See Symington and Wolfaardt, 177.

In short, the theorist is a critic in the constructive sense. From the vantage point of a certain theory, he or she is constantly reconsidering praxis and questioning its established practices, so as to enable it to introduce improvements.

*The Bipolar Tension of
the Theory-praxis Relationship*

The theory-praxis relationship is the central question of practical theology. Van der Ven calls it the "*crux theologica practica*."⁴⁵ N. Greinacher maintains that the relationship between praxis and theory is one of bipolar tension.⁴⁶ This means that theory and praxis should be neither identical nor totally separate. The transition from theory to practice involves qualitative change. Whereas theory requires a constant critical evaluation from praxis, praxis must be transcended by theory.⁴⁷ The two have to be related like two poles influencing one another (a bipolar stress). This concept may best be illustrated by an ellipse. An ellipse has, of course, two centers or poles, and between them there is a tension which is in perfect equilibrium. If the tension relaxes completely, the poles move together, so that we have a circle with only one pole. If the tension becomes too great, the poles move too far apart, so that the result is two circles.

Traditionally, theory has been given priority over praxis. W. J. Janson feels that this has resulted in a platonic alienation between the Christian message and reality.⁴⁸ If we believe that God is active in the praxis of our church, then the praxis of our church must be of *fundamental* importance to our theology. In the past, practical theology was usually dominated by theories. These theories related to preaching, Christian education, pastoral care, and the like, were evolved from dogmatics, OT studies, or NT studies by means of a deductive normative approach. Liberation theology is a cry in the wilderness against a theology that operates only with theoretical utopian ideas.

Praxis must not, on the other hand, take priority over theory. An unbalanced emphasis on praxis has often been used by administrators to stabilize the *status quo* in the congregation and/or in the church

⁴⁵J. A. Van der Ven, "Practical Theology: From Applied to Empirical Theology," *Journal of Empirical Theology* 1 (1988): 7.

⁴⁶N. Greinacher, "Das Theorie-Praxis-Verhältnis in der praktischen Theologie," *Praktische Theologie Heute*, ed. F. Klostermann and R. Zerfass (Munich: Kaiser, 1974), 110.

⁴⁷W. J. Janson and J. A. Wolfaardt, *Practical Theology: Only Guide for PTA100-T* (Pretoria: University of South Africa Press), n.d., 120.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 118.

denomination. When "new" concepts or practices are introduced, a distress cry goes forth: "What will happen to the numerical growth of our church?" Or there may be a number of other similar clichés that emerge either from fear or from authoritarianism, rather than from rational study and intelligent consideration.

A real interaction between critical theological theory and critical praxis can take place only if practitioners drop their antipathy to theory and if theorists get rid of their claims to absolutism. Janson states rightly, in my opinion, that practical theology grows from dialogue among individuals and groups within the church, a dialogue which is devoid of any authoritarian compulsion.⁴⁹

Although the task of practical theology is to develop a theory of practice, it is not concerned merely with current praxis in the church. While it transcends the *status quo* of theory and ideological praxis in the life of the church, it is also concerned with anticipating, reflecting on, and embodying the church's future. Firet prefers to use the term "futurology." Practical theology does not want to remain a "counseling father"; it wants to become a "systematic prognostician." Thus, when practical theologians observe the preaching event, their concern would be whether the requirements of real communication are being met. Their question would be, Is this event structured in such a way as to provide an efficient and creative space where God, the individual human being, and the world in general can be involved?

5. Conclusion

Practical theology is intent on being part of the theological sciences. Although practical theologians would admit that it is a "how-science," its role is not that of searching for techniques or for rules on how to conduct religious meetings, etc. It is a procedure which involves scientific researching and description of certain events and communicative actions.

Practical theology cannot accept the claims sometimes made by other theological disciplines to the effect that they produce universal theories which can open up reality in its entirety and which are capable of interpreting all phenomena. According to this view, practical theology makes no contribution to the epistemology of the theological disciplines. Rather, practical theology is intent on being the theory of practice. It is intimately concerned with praxis in worship and faith. However, its approach to praxis is not pragmatic, but critical-analytical.

⁴⁹See Janson and Wolfaardt, 123.