

Cowan, 'Guidelines for Doing Research in Practical Theology'

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Part 1: Introduction to practical theology

"Practical theology" has a comfortable ring to the ears of most Americans, known as we are throughout the world for our no-nonsense, down-to-earth attitudes. But our usual associations to the word "practical," that is, "useful" or "applicable" or "relevant to everyday concerns," while not unrelated to its meaning in our course title, are misleading in this instance. In order to eliminate the confusion, the course could have been entitled "Introduction to a Theology of Praxis." But that would only have substituted one kind of ambiguity for another.

You will discover as our course unfolds that the hallmark of "practical theology" is the insistence that the point of theological interpretation is not simply to contemplate or comprehend the world as it is, but to contribute to the world's becoming what God intends that it should be, as those intentions have been interpreted by the great theistic traditions. Now the view that theology has a concrete contribution to make to the actual world might seem like common sense to you, but in all likelihood your Christian religious instincts have been primarily formed by the perspective of classical theism, namely, that religious interpretation is about knowing or contemplating the essence of things as they really are, above all, the essence of God. The difference between contemplative and transformative theologies has indeed made a difference in the history of the Christian tradition, and the title "practical theology" signals someone's intention (in this case the faculty of Loyola's Institute for Ministry) to stress the "world-making" vocation of theology.

Practical theology stresses the *correlational*, *hermeneutical*, *critical* and *transformative* character of doing theology. This is a *correlational* method because it works by holding two things in reciprocal relationship—the vision and values of our religious traditions ("the world as it should be") and the state of the actual world in which we live ("the world as it is"). It is a *hermeneutical* method because it recognizes and highlights the role of interpretation in reading our world and our traditions. It is a *critical* method because it requires that we explicitly evaluate the inherited understandings that guide our interpretations and actions. Finally, it is a *transformational* method because its constant concern is to bring the real world into greater harmony with the Creator's intentions.

The major steps in one method for doing practical theology are outlined below:

Part 2: Major steps for doing practical theology

I. Articulating concerns, identifying issues

1. We carefully consider the world as it is and then lift up some aspect of it which particularly concerns us, articulate the nature of our concern, including our “gut” reactions, and subject our initial response to appropriate critical reflection.
2. We name specific issues that are related to or underlie our identified concern, and choose one issue as our focus.

II. Interpreting the world as it is

1. We make a brief initial description of the situation in which our concern resides and identify resources that will deepen our understanding of the situation that concerns us.
2. We undertake a disciplined, practical investigation of what is causing the situation with which we are concerned with a view to understanding it well enough to affect it positively.

III. Interpreting the world as it should be

1. We carefully select some aspect of our faith tradition—scriptural text, theological classic, church teaching, etc.—for an initial reading and response, including our “gut” reactions to it.
2. We undertake a historically and critically informed exegesis of the material chosen from our traditions so as to come to a deeper understanding of its significance, one that takes us beyond initial impressions and responses.

IV. Interpreting our contemporary obligations, acting accordingly and evaluating our action

1. We consider what would constitute faithful and feasible responses to the situation that concerns us in the light of the aspect of the tradition to which we have paid attention, and choose one from the list of possibilities.
2. We plan an adequately detailed intervention based on the possibility that we have chosen, implement it carefully, and rigorously evaluate both what practical difference it made and its religious adequacy.

So this is what we mean by “doing practical theology”: discerning and articulating a current concern, attending carefully with our heads and hearts to the world as it is and to the world as our faith traditions teach us it should be, asking “what must we do?” in the light of that attention, doing it, and then evaluating what we have done. This disciplined rhythm of reflection-action-reflection by members of a community of faith is practical theology. It is at the center of the vocation to which members of communities of faith are called.

Two important clarifications regarding the method of practical theology will be helpful at this point.

First, who does practical theology? Do not be misled by the fact that during this course you will be undertaking practical theological reflection personally, with a particular concern of yours as the starting point and will receive an individual grade based on the quality of your work. That is an artifact of our educational system. It is not the isolated individual who does practical theology, but persons acting in their capacity as members of a community of faith. In fact, the power of practical theology is most fully actualized when it is done, not individually, but collaboratively, by members of congregation ministry teams, small Christian communities, congregations as a whole or faith-based community organizations. The subject of practical theology is not "I" but "we." The subject of practical theology is a community of faith. This is a difficult notion to grasp in an individualistic culture.

Second, the faith traditions and social worlds interpreted in practical theology are indeed complex realities. This is indicated by the fact that scholars devote their entire lives to relatively small facets of them. For example, some scholars are experts on John's gospel, others on the theology of Augustine, others on Catholic social teaching; other specialists focus on urban poverty, public transportation or local government. This kind of deep but narrow expertise cannot be required of Christian disciples or their leaders, nor would such a requirement be appropriate. While your L.I.M. courses will be deeply shaped by scholarship in the Jewish and Christian traditions, the humanities and the natural and social sciences, the point is not that you become scripture scholars or urban sociologists, but rather that your practical abilities to read your tradition and your world--and to empower others to do so--are enhanced by serious study of the work of experts.

The goal of the LIM faculty for your studies is not that you achieve expert status in the relevant disciplines, but that your practical wisdom--your capacity to act faithfully and effectively in the real world--be deepened by accessing what experts know. Christian discipleship, ministry and leadership must be informed by the work experts, but not be dominated by it. Our point might be put in this way: Experts have their place in the work of practical theology, and must be kept in their place! Responsibility for theological reflection leading to committed action rests finally not with church officials or academic scholars but with members of local communities of faith.

While you will become familiar with the history behind practical theology through your reading and our conversation in this course, you will learn this method primarily by engaging in it. Depending on your life experience thus far, some parts of the method will likely be more familiar and comfortable for you than others. But even the familiar parts will take on new depth and significance as you begin to appreciate how they can be brought together in a powerful, practical whole. The method which you will be learning this semester will re-appear in various forms throughout your studies in L.I.M. and will provide the framework for the "Pastoral and Educational Praxis" closing course.

Part 3: Using three major steps for conducting research

(1) Interpreting situations

1. Identifying the situation of your concern

Define your concern as specifically as possible and give some indication of its severity. Use research data where possible (percentage of low birth-weight babies, graduation rates, literacy levels, etc.), as well as accounts from those involved (see sources below).

2. Doing empirical research (a power analysis)

A. Identify those with a stake in the situation of your concern. This might include: individuals (specific or types of); institutions (schools, workplaces, congregations, community organizations); governmental bodies (local, state, federal); cultural groups (African American, liberal Protestant, Latino, Roman Catholic); socio-economic classes (working poor, middle class, upper class); and locations (block, neighborhood, city, state, region, nation).

B. Do a power analysis using those identified in A.

1. What side of the issue does each line up on (allies or opponents)?
2. How much power to affect the situation of your concern does each have?

3. Developing a picture of the history of the situation

Has the situation of your concern always existed? If not, what factors contributed to it? When did things begin to change? Why?

Three Kinds of Resources for Interpreting Situations

1. Researchers and theoreticians
2. Wise practitioners
3. Persons directly affected by the situation

(2) Interpreting scholarly resources

Using Scholarly Resources for Interpreting the Tradition: Some Practical Hermeneutical Considerations

1. Distinguish scholarly from devotional resources, using the publisher, the author's credentials, and the work's stated purpose as clues. The former are appropriate secondary sources for practical theology, the latter usually are not.

2. Consider the level of technical difficulty (degree of understandability) of your chosen sources. Keep stretching yourself to learn by reading challenging sources.
3. Grant experts their place within your interpretations, then keep them in it.
4. Do your research on the tradition with the intention of understanding it more deeply in its own integrity (vs. seeking "official" support for what you already think).
5. Remember the need for suspicion as well as retrieval in interpretation.
6. Don't be thrown by differences of interpretation in secondary sources. Given the plurality within your faith tradition (e.g., Paul's vs. Mark's vs. John's theology) and the different interpretive methods within academic research (e.g., historical vs. literary methods), differing and even conflicting interpretations of the same element of tradition by scholars are to be expected.
7. Remember that living within a tradition means continually moving from your grasp of it as a whole (your background understanding of it), to your interpretation of some part of it, then back to the whole again. Every receptive and disciplined interpretation of an element of your faith tradition will deepen your appreciative and critical understanding, not just of the specific item you are considering, but of the tradition as a whole. This deepening of background understandings can stop when you know everything the tradition has to say about every possible situation of concern.

(3) Action planning: a practical framework

[Please note: The following outline of action steps presumes that you have already carefully considered and specified your concern, interpreted the situation of your concern adequately, and prayerfully selected and thoroughly interpreted some element of your faith tradition which addresses your concern.]

1. Use a brainstorming process to generate a list of possible interventions which would respond to your concern.
2. After evaluating the feasibility and faithfulness of each possibility, choose a "short list" of promising options.
3. After considering their relative feasibility and faithfulness, choose one from the list of options.
4. If further interpretation of situation, tradition or both is necessary before proceeding to plan your intervention, do it.
5. Develop a written plan of action steps along with a reasonable time-line for their implementation.
6. Develop a written plan for evaluating each action step as you proceed, as well as the whole intervention when it is completed. In doing so, consider how to evaluate specifically both the effectiveness and the faithfulness of your intervention.
7. Implement your intervention.
8. Evaluate your intervention.