

Zerfass, 'Practical Theology as an Operational Science'

Zerfass, R. 1974. *Praktische Theologie als Handlungswissenschaft*. In H. F. Klosterman and R. Zerfass, *Praktische Theologie Heute*, 164-177. Translated by A. R. Tucker and W. Schwär. München: Kaiser Grönewald.

[164] A consensus is currently being reached in Practical Theology that it is an Operational Science. This may initially seem a seduction solely motivated by a predicament. This is that Practical Theology stubbornly resists being categorized as merely an educational discipline for candidates for the ministry. The replacement of this clerical outlook by a universal ecclesiological one is not succeeding, because among others, it places an excessive demand on Practical Theology, and entails unavoidable conflict with Systematic Theology. It seems, therefore, that a third line of tradition is now wanting to be reactivated, namely the study of Practical Theology as a theory of "ecclesiological operations".

In actuality referring back to the history of the science is a belated recognition of the lengthy practical cooperation with the modern Operational Sciences. From the 1960s onwards the social changes of post-war society have changed the inner climate of the church. Under the pressure of societal criticism and inner church reform movements, it needs to react, reform, change, and decide as quickly as possible at many levels of church- [165] life simultaneously. This could only happen responsibly, if particularly, the non-theological components of these decisional processes were highlighted and brought into the decision making process. So Practical Theology hesitantly joined in the discussion and, initially very unsystematically, offered to help. Thus Practical Theology has slotted in, basic knowledge from the Operational Sciences into Religious Education, Pastoral Sociology, Homiletics, and Counseling methods.

For this it was honoured by theology's basic practitioners. It is only gradually that Practical Theology came to the conviction that reflection, whether it be theological or scientific, on this concrete interweaving of action in Christian ecclesiological praxis could be its indispensable, actual, theologically-framed task, provided that it could prove it was up to it.

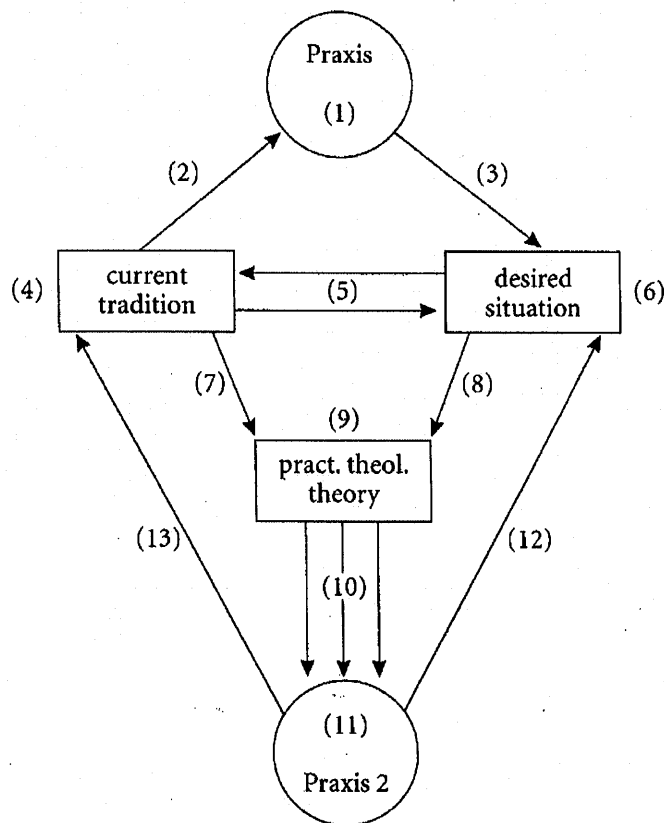
The focal point of the present scientific and theoretical discussion is therefore not really the question, "What praxis it needs to illuminate (be it clerical, church, Christian or religiously transmitted praxis)?" but HOW it goes about it. Everything depends as whether it is able to go beyond pure intuition, and the statements and recommendations which intuition produces, not by appealing to their plausibility but whether it can through precise and valuable specifications gain credit for itself. [166] In other words the scientific character of Practical Theology is decided in terms of methodology. This is the point of departure for an Operational Science which is now taken a step further (in this article). I will be demonstrating this with a model constructed in the form of a self-regulating circular system. This will present the

essential elements of the mode of reflection required in Practical Theology. This will become the framework in which some of the central problems of the present debate will be discussed. The consequences of this for Practical Theology Research and educational activity will then be shown.

In this the concept of the American pastoral theologian, S. Hiltner will receive special attention because he succeeded not only in developing the earliest but also the most interpretive operationally scientific model of Practical Theology. This model is being discussed today and warrants even greater attention, because the theory of science within Practical Theology is trying to move on from a secondary to a tertiary level of education.

1. An operational science model which corrects Christian ecclesiological praxis

What is a model? "A model is a set order of signs and interconnections which should correspond to a certain number of relevant characteristics within reality, in real circumstances."



In this sense the following model will ideally typify the basic structures of a correctional intervention in the interplay of action in Christian ecclesiological praxis.

*Explanation*¹

Praxis 1	the situation as found at present, as a concrete Christian and ecclesiological action
Arrow 2	the influence theological tradition (4) has on praxis 1
Arrow 3	the investigative procedure required to arrive at an empirical, situation analysis (6)
Arrow 5	the influence theological tradition has on the current situation and vice-versa
Arrows 7-8	the influence that theological tradition and the current situation have on the development of a new practical theological theory (9).
Arrow 10	the influence that 9 has on a new praxis (11) (Zerfass calls this "operational impetus" (Handlungsimpulse) which perhaps may be better translated as "operational influence.")
Arrows 12-13	the testing required of the new praxis against both theological tradition and the current situation and the influence that the new praxis may have on both.

[167]

a. Model Description

The starting point of an "operational science" orientated reflection in Practical Theology is by definition a concrete Christian and ecclesiological action (n. 1). If, for example, the number of church leavers increases or the attendance number at the worship services decreases, a critical interruption of established structural patterns produces pressure for action. ("Something must be done"). Thereby creating a climate conducive to reflection ("we need to think about what has to be done now"). The first reaction which provokes great tension in the field of praxis of the ecclesiological-sociology of everyday life, would in all probability be that one would try to deal with the source of unrest by recourse to searching for something from tradition's normal repertoire (n. 2). The church's praxis as "structured [168] action" lives on, in various ways, through its traditions. These include: unconscious internalized patterns of behaviour, thought models, norms of behaviour (which are found as handed down in the confessions of the church), dogmatics and church law (n. 4). When there are acute disturbances these are reactivated and brought into play to help you make a decision. At the moment it does not matter through whom and how this happens whether through the pastor, church councils, confessional movements or theological professors; whether by way of a decree, a demonstration or a morning devotion over the radio. What all these spontaneous reactions to the changes in the operational field have in common is that they all work on an intuitive principle. Whether they actually influence the praxis in the way intended is uncertain. Usually the mere recitation of tradition's demands within the ecclesiological tradition rather leads to an increase in the conflict. Often it is a mere question of the level of intensity of conflict which determines how long it will last until such a short-term

¹ Added by Dr A. R. Tucker; not in the article.

strategy of crisis management will be given up in favour of one which is more precise. This means using the methods of Operational Science to conduct situational analysis.

The intention of an empirical situational analysis, especially when it is commissioned by churches, is to create a more adequate response to the situation that does more justice to it (n. 10), in response to the needs which have been exposed by the disturbance (n. 1) in the traditional operational structures. Situational analysis itself does not directly create the response, because the analysis of the collected data (n. 6) produces, in itself, no operational instructions but must first be confronted with the claims of tradition (n. 5), so that the sought for operational model does not just succumb to the pressure of the facts, but flows from the impetus of Christian tradition. Thus there must be a critical and constructive confrontation within the present operational field. The data must freely question tradition and tradition must freely question the material of the data, in order not to get bogged down in abstract reasoning. In this manner a tension will be created between the claims of tradition (what ought to be) and the present analysis (what is). This is necessary in order to create common ground, on which the new operational impetus (n. 10) can be legitimized both in terms of theology and the Operational Sciences. This is the task of Practical Theological theory construction. It tries to make known the presuppositions on which the new formulated operational impetus is based, and thereby clearly indicates the parameters from within which it claims authority.

Thus an operational implementation will be produced which will theoretically clear up the conflict in the operational field of the church. In all probability this will be more adequate in terms of the situation and also influence the praxis effectively in the desired direction (n. 11), whilst rectifying these naïve operational instructions coming from the reservoir of tradition. [169] Most of all the operational instructions can be tested through a follow-up analysis by way of a new situational analysis (n. 12) in order to fine tune the new theoretical framework (n. 9). Thus it can be made more productive for producing effective future operational instructions (n. 10). On the other hand a new praxis will also produce a deeper understanding of tradition, because it changes the horizon (perspective) from which the claims of tradition on the present are perceived. A better understanding of tradition will, in turn, help to arrive at, via the relay station of an improved operational theory, more precise operational models (n. 10) and thereby a 'better' praxis (n. 11).

b. Overall characteristics

The epistemological value of such models rests specifically on the fact that they, as is the case with maps, simplify. This simplification means that they present the seemingly important elements of structural relationships in a specific context. It therefore needs to be asked what the intentions and the limits of the model which has been constructed are. Our model intends, in the first place, to outline the constituent elements that play a role in correcting church praxis. The central heart is the triangle in the middle of the model, which is built up on the pillars "authoritative tradition"

(n. 4), "situational analysis" (n. 6) and "operational impetus" (n. 10). This triad is expanded through theory building (n. 9) and made into a self-regulatory control system, so long as it is clearly understood, that this newly induced praxis will also need criticism and control (n. 12), as well as opening up a new hermeneutical approach to tradition (n. 13).

In the vertical is the dimension of time (present and future as a tension-filled movement between praxis 1 and praxis 2). It also highlights the theory-praxis problem, as well as including a specified method of solving this problem. In the horizontal dimension the model gives expression to the tension between the influences of the humanities as opposed to empirical methods of expression. What is not in the model is the role that theology plays, specifically Practical Theology, in the process of correcting Christian ecclesiological praxis. To define this more closely is an important, heuristic function of the model. [170]

2. Two core problems with the scientific theory behind the model and Hiltner's solution.

a. Concerning the determinative function of Practical Theology

In the process of throwing light on and constructing changing Christological and ecclesiological operations, a three-fold effort is demanded on the part of theology:

- 1) It must bring into play tradition as a critical role player (factor) in the struggle between the present and the future.
- 2) It must take seriously the needs of the present, identify them theologically and transmit them as questions to be asked of traditions.
- 3) It must strengthen the motivation to change constructively ecclesiological praxis when confrontation is produced in the critical phase of realization.

Out of this, according to S. Hiltner, flows not only a quantitative, but also a qualitative difference in the relationship of the praxis to the individual theological disciplines. The exegetes, historians and systematicians busy themselves, strictly speaking, not with the praxis of the church, but with certain interpretative models, witnesses, theological interpretations of church praxis, and so-called social scientific methods of legitimization, which are designed to support the past actions of Christianity and regulate its present operations. They draw out that which is applicable that is found in specific traditional texts, and then examine that text, in terms of contemporary understanding. [171] Of course they can develop, a more or less, strong relationship to praxis. They can be inspired by problems and tensions in the operational field of church and society and make their contribution in these operational structures. However, because they use the methods of the humanities, they are compelled by the logic of the methods they use, which are solely committed to the reconstruction and interpretation of the witness of Christian tradition.

Hiltner contrasts them as the representatives of the "logic-centred branch of theology" to Practical Theology, as the sum of many disciplines, which directly

concern themselves with the praxis of the church. On one hand they analyze the conditions of present day church activities, in order to put questions to the theological disciplines, and on the other they transmit the critically reflected claims of tradition into church praxis. In that Practical Theology does not make traditional texts but present-day Christian ecclesiological actions as its point of departure and as its goal ("operation-centred branch of theology"), it must organize itself, methodologically, in an analogic manner, similar to that of a modern Operational Science. Through this the theological disciplines are divided into two elementary parts. "All attempts to categorize theological research without making this basic distinction, lead either to prejudice against praxis or to all studies that are praxis orientated being categorized, with an *a priori* assumption, as untheological".²

In the model Biblical, Historical or Systematic theology is primarily concerned with critically constructing what the demands of tradition (n. 4) produces and motivates (n. 2). This will be partly through dialogue with the Operational Sciences and by way of Practical Theological theory building (n. 9) based on ecclesiological praxis (n. 10). At the same time Practical Theology sees its task through a preparative investigative procedure (n. 3) a situational analysis (n. 6), which is then evaluated (n. 8) to build a new Practical Theology theory (n. 9) which can throw light on what the new praxis (n. 10) should be.

b. Concerning theory-building in Practical Theology

As was already clear in the description of the model that has been constructed, the operational influence (n. 10) of Practical Theological model that is reflected upon differentiates itself from the naive reactions caused by the demands of tradition, which are considered currently valid (n. 2).

Firstly, it does this by attempting to establish the conditions under which the operational influence can be valid. It is not necessarily "better" or more effective; definitely not in any given single instant. But it is more effective in the long term, because it (under the conditions assumed in the model) was formed on the basis of theologically and empirically ascertained knowledge. Therefore, at the least, within this framework, its effects can be estimated, controlled, corrected and evaluated in terms of later necessary measures (adaptations). To formulate such a conceptual framework is the task of Practical Theological theory building.

It has to establish on the one hand a system of coordinates, which allows the concrete fields and problems of ecclesiological praxis to be categorized. This will allow specific projects within research and counseling to be related to one another. It will also allow us to transfer knowledge from one field to another, thus allowing research in Practical Theology and teaching to be linked. On the other hand it must see to it, that the boundaries between the known and unknown are not blurred and therefore it makes hypothetical assertions.

² Hiltner, Seward; *Preface to Pastoral Theology*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1958, p128

It understands itself as “determining necessary essential knowledge under conditions of not knowing” in that “the unknown area are marked with hypotheses , delimited, demarcated and slowly reduced.”³

Over and above present-day discussion has formulated two central demands about theory building in Practical Theology.:-

- 1) It must integrate theological as well as operational scientific theory. It must also integrate the goals that tradition aims for as well as the theological framework of interpretation within which these values are presented. It is clear that without the integration of these theological preconditions the criteria for specific Christian actions would be missing in the operational model that needs to be established. [173] On the other hand the measured experience of the operationally, scientifically established situational analysis together with the scientifically theoretical premises which led to the establishment of this data must included in Practical Theological. Practical Theological theory building not only has to combine not only theological and operational scientific data, but also to combine together the appropriate technical language and elements of theory.
- 2) It must, if it wants to respect the openness, the plurality and multiple interpretations you can give to human activities, be basically satisfied with “medium range theories.” This means that it must firstly principally be prepared to work with partial, plural and provisional approaches. Secondly, that it must do this by erecting boundaries against the encroachments of systematic theology on the one hand, and against the Neo Marxist Social Science on the other. “The reality of ecclesiological praxis can be illuminated by theories of different value. No one theory can be used to produce an unambiguous understanding. Competition between theories, which identify different problems, is therefore a condition of epistemological progress in Practical Theology”⁴

The fruitfulness of S. Hiltner’s concept shows itself, not in the least, in that it fully recognizes both the demands and lets us recognize how, they can be complied with in the praxis of research and educational institutions. This is because he proposes that Practical Theology should, not as previously, orientate itself directly to the fields of church praxis, (as in the case with such subjects as homiletics, catachismatics, and liturgy) but that it should orientate itself through the dimensions of “organizing, communicating and shepherding.” It thus provides first and most importantly, categories by which worthwhile theory and practical theological essential knowledge may be ordered.

- 1) A first dimension, through which theological and operational theory elements can be relayed, is Hiltner’s organizing. [174] Under this heading he does not want us to

³ Ibid Hiltner

⁴ Hiltner

see it as the technical process of organizing but the totality of all processes, which go back to the New Testament commissioning of the church. These processes involve the gathering of the dispersed and creating unity in order to form the congregation. This commission, which involves a struggle for unity, cuts through the complex reality of ecclesiological activity. Therefore a practical-theology discipline needs to be there, which analysis the actions of churches and Christian groups, using sociology and social psychology as related operational sciences, which also concretely asks how far this organizing serves acts of repentance or visits of condolence or mixed marriages or concordats. In theological education one could summarise under this heading what was very disparately dealt with in church law, in the teaching and building-up of the local church (Gemeindeaufbau) in practical sociology and in ecumenical theory.

2) As a second fundamental prospective of practical theological theory building Hiltner proposes the category of "*communicating*". Where and how does Christian ecclesiological action promote or hinder the transmission of the gospel? In terms of this perspective, on the one hand, it is about investigating the praxis of the church. This, for example, involves illuminating the language of proclamation with the methods of modern communications science or to confront the classical theology of the sermon with the results and questions of modern media research. On the other hand it also involves, getting an even clearer picture of all the actions of the church which make statements, such as the Eastern block policies of the Vatican, the engagement of the church in the third world, the number of manses in the German Federal Republic. Here also the paths lead "from the perspective to the theological discipline." This is the way also that the classical pastoral theology subjects work, such as catechism, homiletics, adult education and also missiology, church publishing and public relations.

3) A third basic category of Hiltner's practical theological theory building is "*shepherding*". [175] This is to be developed in the perspective of the ecclesiological commission to confront suffering people. It is in this context that the theological and operational scientific influence is summarized, tested and conveyed. *Shepherding* is therefore not to be equated with the pastoral function of the pastoral office, or even understood as a function of that office. It is to be understood as a function of serving the unity of the church and the gospel but as an all pervasive dimension of church life. Therefore it is an "operational perspective" by which the praxis of church life can be analysed and corrected. Here Hiltner, a pastoral psychologist himself, in an attempt to correlate psychotherapy and counseling demonstrated the fruitfulness and difficulty of Practical Theological theory building. ... [176]...⁵

Last but not least , one could introduce within the body of teaching, a corresponding division of labour, which could help overcome the unproductive lack of interaction in Practical Theology. [177] The previous principle of regionalization (the service is the basis for the science of liturgy, overseas mission the basis for missiology, the sermon for homiletics, charity for the science of charity etc) can no longer be

⁵ Sections from pp. 175 and 176 are missing.

maintained. When disciplines such as church law and the Christian social sciences join with Practical Theology as happens presently within the framework of University reforms in some places, such disciplines could be properly integrated. This regionalization could be replaced by a dimensionalization of Practical Theology. If, therefore, agreements could be reached to the effect that, the Christian social sciences (including pastoral sociology, church law, ecumenical studies, and missiology) could agree, from the word "go" they could have a clear vision of the perspective of unified service (Organizing). Whilst religious education, catechetics, homiletics, the science of liturgy, adult education and media publicity could concentrate on reflecting ecclesiological praxis as a "word happening" (Wortgeschehen). Communicating, and pastoral theology together with the psychology of religion and the whole area of counseling in contrast to the above mentioned groups, sees the focus on people (shepherding) on its specific direction. The student of Practical Theology would not have to face eight but three basic foundations, which would be transparent in their independence and differing levels of co-operation. The unity and variety of Practical Theology could not only be justified in terms of faculty policy (or even historically), but could justify itself from the way that theology is exercised there, using the interwoven ecclesiastical praxis as a point of departure and in terms of the declared interest in reforms, which has to answer in an equal manner the claims of the present and also those of tradition. In ecclesia semper reformanda.