

The Practice of Practical Theology: Key Decisions and Abiding Hazards in Doing Practical Theology

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Abstract: Practical theology is now an established way of doing contemporary theology. It is carried out in a variety of ways, but as here understood, its practitioners follow some form of hermeneutic circle and claim to make connections between the world of human action and the Christian tradition that result in transformative practice. Underlying the process of practical theology are a number of theological decisions that distinguish this methodology from other theological methodologies. The process of doing practical theology also includes a number of points at which this essentially spiral process can be sidetracked in hazardous ways. This paper looks at the process of practical theology with the intent of identifying both its presuppositions and its potential hazards.

Key Words: practical theology; theological methodology; theological evaluation; scripture and theology; context; transformation

The term 'practical theology' is used in a number of different ways. I use it here in the sense of a theological process that follows some form of hermeneutic circle with a claim to make connections between the world of human action and the Christian tradition that result in transformative practice.

In this sense it has roots in the methodologies of liberation theology.¹ The term 'practical theology' has been used more widely recently to imply a methodology similar to the one I adopt here.² But it is also used in a more general sense to mean 'theology and something else,' i.e. some combination of theology and another discipline such as psychology or sociology, or as theology that is closely related to activity in church or society without implying any specific methodology.³

This paper is about doing practical theology and it has a very practical purpose. A way of doing theology that begins with the world of human action and has practical

¹ C. Boff, *Theology and Praxis: Epistemological Foundations* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1987); L. Boff, and C. Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1986); P.C. Phan, "Method in Liberation Theology," *Theological Studies* 61.1 (2000): 40-63; J.L. Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1977).

² D.S. Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology: Descriptive and Strategic Proposals* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1991); N. Darragh, *Doing Theology Ourselves: A Guide to Research and Action* (Auckland: Accent, 1995); P.O.C. Killen and J.D. Beer, *The Art of Theological Reflection* (New York: Crossroad, 1994); R.A. Kinast, *What are They Saying about Theological Reflection* (New York/Mahwah: Paulist, 2000); J.A. Mercer, *Welcoming Children: A Practical Theology of Childhood* (St Louis, MO: Chalice, 2005); C. Sedmak, *Doing Local Theology: A Guide for Artisans of a New Humanity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002); J. Woodward and S. Pattison (eds.), *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000).

³ D.B. Forrester, *Truthful Action: Explorations in Practical Theology* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000); T.A. Veling, *Practical Theology: "On Earth as it is in Heaven"* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2005); M. Volf and D.C. Bass (eds.), *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2002).

consequences for better practice sounds attractive. We have enough experience now however with this way of doing theology to know that this good intention often fails. When it does fail its effects are not neutral. They may rather be deceptive in that they provide good camouflage for bad practice.

There is a tendency among academic theologians to be less than obvious about how they come to their theological conclusions. We could argue that theology is really an art form in the sense that it depends upon insight and creativity rather than on some method or technique. We could argue that theology does not have to be practical in the sense of leading to decisions about our attitudes and behaviour. It may rather be an explanation of Christian faith, a commentary on other theologies, an investigation of God as beauty or truth, a form of Christian self expression, or even a kind of contemplation.

I do not dispute any of these approaches to theology. I do maintain though that a very reasonable expectation that Christians in general and theology students in particular can have of academic theology is that somewhere there they will be able to find an explanation of how practical theology is actually done. Good, inspiring theology is not the result simply of good methodology any more than great art or great sports achievements are the result of just good technique. But it is unlikely that these performers could be successful if they, during the course of their careers, had not learnt a great deal about good technique, i.e. if some teacher or trainer had not shown them how to go about it.

The role of theology teachers in academic institutions is not just to inform students what other theologians have written, nor even to teach them the art of critiquing the writings of other theologians. This turns theology into commentary on endless commentary. The role of the theology teacher is also to teach students how to do theology themselves. This is not just a matter of exposing students to good theology and hoping they will guess how it is done. It is a matter of being very explicit about the methods of practical theology, and at the same time of being self-critical about those same methods.

This is not to say that all theology has to follow the methods of practical theology, nor that all practical theology even has to be about hands-on method. It does mean though that theology as an academic discipline has at some time and place to account for its methods at a level that is very close to the ground and accessible to as many people as possible. Theology is not simply about arriving at theological conclusions, it is also about teaching other people how to arrive at their own conclusions and about arriving at conclusions in such a way that other people can see how we got there.

This paper has three stages:

- (1) a brief outline of a process for doing practical theology;
- (2) a first level evaluation in the form of an explication of the theological decisions that lie behind each of the steps in that process; and
- (3) a second level evaluation in the form of the common hazards that accompany particular instances of that process.

A PROCESS FOR DOING PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

It may help the orientation of this paper to suggest distinctions between 'practical' theology on the one hand and 'applied' theology or 'local' theology on the other. I would use the term 'applied' theology for theology that relates established Christian beliefs to contemporary living. Practical scripture commentaries or lectionary based homilies or spiritual conferences, for example, often do this. Scripture or Christian beliefs are the

starting point for this kind of theology rather than the questions of contemporary living. 'Practical' theology on the other hand, begins not from Christian beliefs but from contemporary living and part of its process is to re-investigate assumed Christian beliefs.

'Local' theology is concerned with the local context as is 'practical' theology in most cases. But 'local' theology may not always be about transformative practice. It can be, for example, an investigation of local theological writings or of the theology implicit in local art, novels, films, etc. 'Practical' theology on the other hand is specifically concerned with a result in transformative local practice rather than knowledge of local theology itself.

I propose here a particular step-by-step process for doing theology in a 'practical' way, i.e. in a way that begins from contemporary practice, then investigates the Christian sources in order to arrive at a transformative practice. I do not claim that this is the only way of doing it. My intention here is to make as explicit as possible a hands-on method that I have used for many years both for myself and in working with students and practitioners. This is only a tool, a technique. It does not in itself produce good theology, but it does help people get on with doing it rather than waiting for academics or church leaders to tell them what to do. It does help theological and ethical decision-making and it does help avoid some of the common mistakes in coming to theological or ethical conclusions.

I propose only an outline here. My main focus in this paper is the evaluation of such a process rather than a detailed explanation of the process itself. I do need nevertheless to give here a brief outline of the process itself in order for the evaluation to make sense. Several authors propose methods that are similar but differ at various points in the process. I hope the evaluations I suggest here can be adapted fairly easily to methods that differ in detail but have a similar overall intent.

THE PROCESS

Briefly, the process begins from the analysis of a particular context by researchers who are themselves part of that context. This analysis requires a description, normally non-theological, of an area of interest within the contemporary context for the purpose of deciding on a significant ethical issue within that area of interest. The researchers need, in the course of this analysis, to pay attention to their own position within that context, and to take note of analyses that have been made in different but related contexts. Once a decision has been made on the contemporary issue to be investigated, the researchers formulate this issue into a question (a 'pivotal question') that can be addressed to Scripture and Christian Tradition. The researcher then reads the Christian sources in the light of that question, taking into account accepted principles of scriptural interpretation, in the hope of arriving at a response. If a scriptural and traditional response can be arrived at, the researcher seeks a contemporary application that will transform contemporary action in the original context.

The process suggested here moves through the following steps or stages: Starting point ⇒ issue ⇒ pivotal question ⇒ rereading Scripture/Tradition ⇒ response ⇒ making choices.

In this brief outline form, the process may appear rather mechanical. It is mechanical however only in a sense similar to that of learning the grammar of a new language. For adult learning, once a speaker has acquired some sense of the language, the grammar provides a quicker and more efficient way of becoming fluent and creative in the language than does continuing trial and error learning or observational learning.

TWO LEVELS OF EVALUATION

There are two levels of evaluation we can make of practical theology. The first level is an evaluation of the process of practical theology itself. There is more than one way of doing theology and behind each step in the process lies a decision among several alternatives. This level of evaluation consists in identifying the antecedent decisions that determine each step of the process. These are such decisions as whether doing theology requires engagement in the struggle for justice or not, whether the researcher is a key element in the context or can be conceived to stand in some way objectively outside it, whether the Christian Scriptures are in some sense normative for Christian behaviour, etc. At this level the underlying decisions are systematic and foundational. At this level, evaluation asks the practical theologian to account for, or at least make explicit, the decisions that have produced the process.

A second level of evaluation is closer to the ground and occurs internally to the process. Having accepted the usefulness of the process of practical theology, we can still examine the steps made in any particular instance of it to see whether the conclusions reached are the result of a coherent and careful process rather than mistakes or deceptions. At this level the potential hazards are lapses in method that would not invalidate the method itself but might invalidate a particular attempt at it.

FIRST LEVEL EVALUATION: DECISIONS UNDERLYING THE PROCESS OF PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

My purpose in this section is to identify the decisions that underlie the process I have outlined above. At each step in the process a prior decision has been made for one option among several alternatives. A decision for one of the other alternatives would have resulted in a different process. My intention here is simply to identify these decisions and their alternatives rather than enter into debate about them. Such identification makes the process as transparent as possible and opens up the possibility of debate even though this paper does not itself enter into those debates.

For the sake of clarity, even if at some cost to the fluidity of the actual process, I shall divide the process into six stages and deal with the prior decisions under these six headings: i) starting point, ii) issue, iii) pivotal question, iv) rereading Scripture/Tradition, v) response, vi) making choices.

Starting Point Decisions

a) A Starting Point for Theology is the Contemporary, Local Situation

Practical theology begins with the contemporary local situation in contrast with other possible starting points such as a scriptural text, official church documents, or a philosophical system. This also presupposes that universal solutions, that is, solutions based on the nature of human beings, cannot be assumed to be relevant to the researcher's context. All proposed 'human' solutions have derived from other particular contexts and their relevance needs to be proven not assumed.

b) Non-Theological Knowledge is Required at the Beginning of this Process

The nature of this information may vary and commonly includes social science research, biological or physical science research, engagement in the struggle for justice, personal involvement in social concerns. Some theology is constructed on the basis of personal introspection or on knowledge of theological writings themselves, or on knowledge of the

Christian sources or on knowledge of a local philosophy or spirituality. The decision made here requires a cross-disciplinary element in theology in contrast with theologies that do not require this.

c) The Researcher Already Holds a Position – Political, Social, Ecclesial, Gender, Educational – Within the Context, and this Position Influences the Course of the Research

The researcher needs to account for this researcher bias. This influence may be positive in that the researcher brings other kinds of knowledge to the theological reflection. It may also be negative in that the researcher may also bring biases into the research process. This accountability contrasts with theologies that treat the theologian as outside of the process of thinking and research.

d) Contexts are Different but not Isolated – We Can Learn from Research Conducted in Different but Related Contexts

This process insists on a context-sensitive starting point as distinct from those theologies that begin with general premises about the world or about human nature. But it also requires attention to other contexts and the research already conducted there as distinct from theologies that are overly protective of their own uniqueness.

Issue Decisions

a) An Issue-Focused Perspective in Theology is Preferred

The process proposed requires discernment of the most significant ethical decision in the area of interest of the researcher. An issue-focused analysis is designed to avoid the problem of vague abstraction or a theological interaction with the contemporary situation that does not affect practice. This focus on issues contrasts with other styles of theology such as those focused on beauty, or in the form of contemplation, or that seek to explain the contemporary relevance of Christianity, or that are commentary on existing theologies or church documents.

b) The Process Proceeds Best with a Simple Clear Statement of the Most Significant Ethical Issue

The information gathered in the area of interest is analysed to produce the most significant issue therein. The issue is an ethical one, i.e. about a choice for human attitude or action that is not yet clear. Practical theology has the goal of transformative practice. For this reason it expects an ethical outcome in contrast with theological methods not so focused on practical outcomes or behavioural change, such as those whose main intent is to explain Christian beliefs to new audiences.

Pivotal Question Decisions

a) Scripture does not Provide in any Simple Direct Way an Instruction on Christian Living in the Contemporary World

The statement of a contemporary issue cannot be addressed directly to Scripture. It requires a restatement of the issue in the form of a question that provides a pivot between the contemporary issue and Scripture. A pivotal question restates as closely as possible the contemporary issue, but in a form that also respects the nature of Scripture as a sacred text. This contrasts with other theological methodologies that treat Scripture as containing codes of moral conduct directly applicable to contemporary societies. Similarly it contrasts with those methodologies that do not require specific attention to differences between the

cultural contexts of the scriptural books on the one hand and those of contemporary Christian living on the other.

b) Scripture is nevertheless in some Sense Normative for Contemporary Christian Attitudes and Behaviour

This acceptance of Scripture as having a normative value for Christian behaviour contrasts with approaches, such as secular theology, that treat Scripture as a collection of wise ancient documents that may be gleaned for their wisdom alongside other wise documents ancient or modern.

c) Similar but Adjusted Decisions may be Made about Subsequent Documents in the Christian Tradition if these are Considered Normative

This decision treats church documents that are subsequent to Scripture as in some degree normative but themselves subject to Scripture as the primary norm. The normative value of church tradition is ambiguous in new contexts such as Oceania because that tradition is already an adaptation of Christianity to some *other* context. The churches in these new contexts are still engaged in a discernment that involves part acceptance, part rejection of elements of the Christian tradition considered normative in other localities.

Scripture Decisions

a) The Whole of Scripture is Relevant in Seeking an Answer to the Pivotal Question

No general conclusions (only conditional conclusions) can be made that are normative for the contemporary Christian unless the whole of Scripture has been considered. Some texts rather than others will turn out to be relevant to the pivotal question. But no text can be selected as providing a response to the pivotal question unless all texts have been considered. This decision disallows a procedure that would make a selection of a few relevant texts or relevant books or relevant events on the basis of the researcher's prior knowledge, or some private agenda or preference of the researcher, or any basis that does not derive from the preceding contextual analysis. In this practical theology differs from biblical interpretation that makes selections of texts according to the private or peer-related agenda of the interpreter. This decision also disallows the use of commentaries in the first instance unless those commentaries derive from the same context as the researcher.

In practice a modified form of this decision can accept that Christians read the First Testament through the eyes of the New Testament. A modified form of the above decision then requires reading the whole New Testament but allows a reading of the First Testament limited to those texts that serve to interpret the relevant New Testament texts and themes.

b) For any Major Text Attention Needs to be Given to the Context of the Book, Its Literary Genre, the Writers/ Editors, and the Intended Readership

This decision simply says that the reader of Scripture needs to apply all the techniques of accepted scripture scholarship. This decision rules out any fundamentalist or 'spiritual' interpretations that disregard the principles of exegesis. It is at this point too that the reader will want to consult scripture commentaries written in other contexts, i.e. after, not before, the relevance of the texts to the pivotal question have been established.

c) The Researcher's Private Hypotheses or Preferred Outcome Influence the Reading

This is the second point at which the process recognizes a researcher influence in the process. In reading Scripture, the researcher will usually have or develop during the course of the reading a personally preferred answer to the pivotal question. The researcher needs to guard against this influence by taking deliberate and special note of any texts or themes that are contrary to the researcher's own hopes or hypotheses. This contrasts with other methodologies that allow objective scripture scholarship.

I have identified the above decisions in reference to the rereading of Scripture as the primary norm in this process. Similar but appropriately adjusted decisions apply to the rereading of Christian Tradition. I have not attempted here to work through the many different kinds of documents of Christian Tradition. In some practical theology research it is sufficient to have recourse to a church Tradition as source for a Christian response. Research, for example, whose purpose is to call a church's attention to its own Tradition in facing a contemporary issue could legitimately have recourse simply to that Tradition. An example of a research project of this kind is one that called on the Anglican Church in Melanesia to act on its own ecological principles in a situation where that church was in a position to influence public policy. Another example is one where the research made a similar call on the Catholic Church's social justice Tradition. Provided the research is transparent about its methodology, this still leaves open the possibility that another research project might re-examine that church's Tradition in the light of Scripture.

Response Decisions

There may be One or Several Scriptural Responses to the Pivotal Question

There is no guarantee that such a response exists or can be discovered. Often however there will be such a result that helps the researcher deal with the pivotal question whether in answering it, requiring it to be modified, or discovering some unacceptable responses. This principle of a hoped for but not guaranteed response contrasts with some researcher expectations that there should always be such a response. I am not aware however that this principle stands in contrast with other mainstream theological methods.

Making Our Choices

The Scriptural Response Needs to be Translated across Space and Time, across Culture and Context, into a Decision on the Contemporary Issue

There is no direct application of the scriptural response into a decision on the contemporary issue. An application of the scriptural response to the contemporary issue requires not just a language translation but a broader cultural translation. A fundamentalist approach to Scripture or church Tradition would ignore the need for such translation, but again I am not aware that this decision stands in contrast with other mainstream theological methods.

CONCLUSION

I have attempted in this section to list the theological decisions that lie beneath the process for doing practical theology. Making the presuppositions of a method explicit in this way contributes to an evaluation of the method in the sense that it makes confirmation or debate possible among those who agree with those decisions or who argue on the other hand that there are better alternatives.

SECOND LEVEL EVALUATION: POTENTIAL HAZARDS IN WORKING THROUGH THIS PROCESS

This section is concerned with a second level of evaluation. A second level evaluation is not concerned with the prior decisions that have gone into the process of doing practical theology but with the potential hazards that may occur in particular instances of following this process. This section is in a sense a negative exercise in that it looks for potential mistakes and blockages in the theological process, but it does so for the purpose of providing a guide for the researcher. I draw here on the mistakes and blockages I have found in my own attempts to do theological reflection on issues in society or in working with others on such projects using the process described above. We learn from our own mistakes, but it is so much more helpful if we can learn from the mistakes of others.

In this section I assume that a researcher has set out on a process of theological reflection and my purpose is to give prior warning about some potential hazards that may occur along the way. As in the previous section I shall set out this section under the headings of the six stages in doing practical theology: i) starting point, ii) issue, iii) pivotal question, iv) rereading Scripture/Tradition, v) response, vi) making choices.

The Starting Point

Researchers in practical theology often underplay the initial non-theological research required for the theological reflection to proceed successfully. Practical theology, in the sense I have presented it in this paper, begins from a concern about the actions and attitudes of the researchers themselves or those around them or the society in which they live. Let us suppose by way of example that a researcher is concerned with the justice of a country's immigration laws and practices. Theological reflection on this issue cannot proceed without legal and social information. What are the current laws? What is current immigration policy? On what criteria are some potential immigrants excluded? Is there a range of stories about unfair application of policy? Are there verified cases of abuse? This contemporary, local information cannot be discovered by thinking about it with good intentions or by relying on recent media reports. The theology researcher may be very lucky and find there already is some relevant social research on this issue. If this is not the case, the theology researcher, while not needing full scale social research, does need enough information to lead to a realistic discernment of the most significant issue in this area of concern. The first hazard then is that the researcher may simply not have enough preliminary non-theological information for the theological reflection to proceed.

A second hazard occurs if the researchers are insufficiently aware of their own position and attitudes towards the area of concern. Let us suppose by way of a different example that the area of concern is youth violence. What is the relationship of the researcher to this concern? Are the researchers themselves youth concerned for the safety of themselves and their friends? Are they concerned parents? Do the researchers live in a wealthy or poor neighbourhood? Are the researchers professional welfare or youth workers? Are the researchers church workers with or without significant numbers of youth in their communities? These different relationships to the area of concern affect the reflection upon it. Researchers who are engaged in a personal way in youth issues bring valuable experience to the reflection but they also bring their own bias to the research. Perhaps the greatest hazard occurs when the researcher has no personal ability to relate to or sympathise with the youth involved. A third and related hazard is insufficient awareness of who the research is *for*. If the research succeeds in proposing a transformative practice, whose practise will be transformed? Is it the youth themselves, is

it their parents, is it the schools, is it government youth policy, is it church leadership, etc? What is the point, for example, of a theological reflection directed to youth on how youth attitudes can or should change if the researcher has no access to those youth? What is the point of a theological reflection directed to politicians when those politicians do not, or cannot publicly, accept the Christian basis for the results of that reflection? This kind of hazard is avoided only if the researcher can give account for their own relationship to and investment in the area of concern.

The Issue

The two most common hazards that I am aware of here are a) a failure to state the issue in ethical terms, and b) a vague rather than precise statement of what exactly the issue is. Theological reflection deals with *ethical* issues, not technical or scientific issues or issues of fact. That is, it deals with issues about our actions and attitudes where it is not yet clear how we *should* behave where the 'should' is decided on a Christian basis. Theological reflection sometimes falters here because having engaged in some form of social scientific enquiry, the researcher remains within the bounds of those disciplines. Let us take the example of a researcher concerned with air pollution in cities. A researcher might decide, after some research including measurement of gas emissions, health hazards, etc. that the significant and immediate issue here is how to reduce gas emissions from motor vehicles. The theological research will falter at this point because the issue is not directly an ethical one. Theological reflection will not provide a solution to this issue. The issue as stated here is essentially technical—how to reduce gas emissions. There will also be legal, economic, and political implications. But the issue has not been formulated in ethical terms and the theological reflection cannot proceed. In such a case the hazard encountered here is not fatal, because it remains possible to reformulate this issue as an ethical one. This might be, for example, 'What moral arguments would persuade people to accept the costs of the technology that reduces gas emissions?' Or the researcher might take a different orientation and decide that the significant ethical issue for this research is rather, 'Should Christian congregations adopt a policy of rejecting private cars in favour of public transport?'

A second hazard here is that the statement of the issue may be vague rather than precise. A vague statement of the issue means that the researcher is unsure of what the issue really is. This will make the next step, the re-reading of Scripture difficult and frustrating. This vagueness often results from a lack of familiarity with the area of concern, i.e. the researchers do not have enough real information or are not sufficiently at home with the material to be able to discern where the significant issue lies. They may have a whole raft of problems or a general direction but no clear assessment of the most significant ethical issue within their area of concern. Let us consider the case of a researcher concerned with housing for low-income people in the situation where the state has accepted some responsibility for adequate housing on the basis that private enterprise does not adequately provide this and that bad housing produces subsequent problems in health, law enforcement, educational under-achievement, etc. Let us suppose our researcher has come up with the issue, Should we provide better housing for low-income families? The theological reflection again here falters with the vagueness of the issue. It is vague because it is a statement of general good intention, but has little point. Hardly anyone would debate this issue—who actually wants worse housing for low-income families? Practitioners in this field are not faced with whether housing should be better or not. They are dealing with much more detailed issues like how to balance the need for

more houses against a *better standard* of houses within a limited budget. Or again, who is the 'we' here? Is it the state? Is it the churches? Is it you and me? The theological researcher in our example considered here apparently lacks information about the real issues within this area of concern, or at least has failed to discern them. The theological process cannot continue on this formulation of the issue and has to seek more information about the real issues.

The Pivotal Question

The pivotal question restates as closely as possible the contemporary issue, but in a form that also respects the nature of Scripture as a sacred text. It usually requires some reformulation of the previously stated contemporary issue in order to arrive at a question that also can be addressed to Scripture.

The hazards in formulating a pivotal question arise mainly from treating Scripture as something other than what it is; by treating Scripture like, for example, an encyclopaedia, a dictionary, a way of confirming the researcher's already held opinions, or a compendium of contemporary moral rules. The hazards arise, in other words, from asking Scripture questions that it cannot answer. The most common ones in my experience are:

- i. asking questions of *fact* about the contemporary world;
- ii. asking questions of *definition* which only the researcher can answer;
- iii. asking questions about *significance* that only the researcher can decide;
- iv. asking questions to which the only answer is *yes* and hence continuing the research is pointless;
- v. asking questions using words or concepts for which there is no scriptural equivalent; and
- vi. asking 'how to' questions at a practical level.

Let me illustrate some of these:

A researcher is concerned with the employment of foreign workers on limited residence permits, and comes up with the pivotal question, Is the employment of foreign workers beneficial for the local economy? This is a question about the contemporary world to which Scripture can provide no answer.

A researcher is concerned with parenting and comes up with the pivotal question, How important is pre-school education? There are two problems with this question. Firstly it asks about significance. Questions about significance can sometimes be addressed to Scripture when there are many texts dealing with it, as for example, on the significance of wealth or poverty for the Christian. Mostly, however, the significance of an issue is one the researcher has to decide before or at the very beginning of the research. The importance of pre-school education has to be decided on social scientific or at least contemporary anecdotal evidence. If the issue is not significant for contemporary society, then why research it? Secondly, the question asks about 'pre-school education,' a concept foreign to Scripture and there will be no response from Scripture to a question in this particular formulation. There are of course some other related questions that could be asked of Scripture, such as the status children should be accorded in society or the way the powerful should treat the powerless, but these would require a different formulation of the pivotal question.

A researcher is concerned with vandalism and comes up with the pivotal question, How can we reduce vandalism to public buildings? This is a 'how to' question about the

contemporary world where customs and institutions are very different from those in the bible and there can be no Scriptural answer to this question.

Fortunately, in most of these cases, the mistake is not fatal and the process simply requires a reformulation of the pivotal question once the mistake has been recognised.

Rereading Scripture

Rereading Scripture in search for an answer to the pivotal question raises all the questions common to biblical hermeneutics. The most frequently occurring hazard in my experience is a failure to actually read Scripture. Students and practitioners of theology are so used to reading selected pieces of Scripture, looking up commentaries and dictionaries, doing word searches in libraries, that the proposal they should actually read the whole of the New Testament again themselves is often treated with incredulity. You don't mean actually read all the New Testament! Established attitudes to doing theology can here be dysfunctional for practical theology.

Other frequently occurring hazards can be named here as literalism, selectivity, the failure to contextualise the books themselves, and failure to address researcher bias.

Literalism occurs when a text with surface relevance to the pivotal question is seized upon as an answer. Students with quite sophisticated understanding of biblical hermeneutics frequently turn into literalists when faced with the practical task of rereading Scripture through the lens of a pivotal question. Texts such as 'Sell what you have and give it to the poor' or 'turn the other cheek' suddenly acquire literalist interpretations when answers are sought to questions about poverty or violence.

Selectivity refers here to an unwarranted preference for some biblical texts rather than others as providing a response to the pivotal question. In the process of practical theology, no text has an assumed priority over others. A key question in practical theology is *which* texts are relevant and which are not. One text does not establish anything unless there are no contrary texts or contrary indications in other parts of the bible. An example of this is where a researcher concerned with liberation movements chooses the texts on the event of the Exodus as the key to interpreting the will of God but ignores all contrary biblical texts. A similar and recurring example of this is when researchers considering environmental ethics resort only to the book of Genesis in their theological reflection as if no other book of the bible has anything to say on this issue.

A *failure to contextualise* occurs when, for example, a person researching the features of Christian community with a view to improving its styles of leadership draws conclusions from Scripture that fail to take into account the different make-up and circumstances of the communities of James, Paul's Corinthians and Matthew's Gospel.

I have previously noted the bias that researchers may bring to the research because of a failure to note their own position in the context they research. A second source of *researcher bias* can result from the researchers' sometimes subconsciously preferred or expected outcomes from the reading. This leads them to notice certain texts rather than others. An example here is a researcher who is concerned with how inclusive or exclusive a church community should be and notices all the inclusive texts in the New Testament, but fails to take specific account of the texts that exclude people from the company of Jesus or the New Testament communities. This kind of bias is compensated for by noticing particularly those texts that seem to contradict the researchers expected or hoped for outcomes.

I have focused particularly here on the rereading of Scripture rather than on the reading of subsequent documents of church Tradition for reasons noted above. The

hazards associated with reading official church documents are similar though perhaps more intense. Practical theologians seem to be more used to the principles of scriptural interpretation but tend to treat documents of church Tradition as trans-cultural and trans-historical. Hence in this latter case the probability of a non-contextual reading is more likely.

Response

The process of arriving at a scriptural or traditional response involves a synthesis and discernment of the major themes that come out of their rereading through the lens of the pivotal question. This is in itself a difficult task. Sometimes there is simply no adequate response. It may indeed be that the Christian sources have nothing to say in response to this particular question. But a 'no response' is more likely when the issue or the pivotal question has been too vague or inadequately formulated.

The principal hazard here is the temptation to a forced conclusion that does not derive from the themes of this scriptural and traditional rereading. In the face of no obvious response to the pivotal question, the temptation for the researcher is to resort, without perhaps realizing it, to providing one out of the researcher's own store of previous knowledge rather than out of this rereading. This is the response that should be there even if I can't quite find it at the moment! Examples of this are where a response is produced that reflects the researcher's own hoped for outcome regardless of the research process; or a response is produced from a few selected scripture texts without regard for contrary texts or non-supportive themes in the rereading.

Making Our Choices

The 'scriptural response' is a response to the pivotal question. It is not yet a response to the contemporary 'issue' which is the objective of the research. Once a satisfactory scriptural response has been arrived at, the final step is the decision about how this response in a text from a particular time and place translates into transformative practice in the contemporary context.

The principal hazard here is that the proposal for transformative practice may remain unrealistic. The scriptural response is idealistic in that it proposes actions and attitudes that do not yet take into account the strengths, limitations, possible consequences, existing compromises, potential allies, etc. of the contemporary practitioners.

CONCLUSION

This second level evaluation has been about hazards that may be encountered during the process of a theological reflection. There are of course other potential hazards that I have not recorded here. I hope that these will serve both as warnings along the way and as hopeful signals that mistakes and obstacles in this process are seldom fatal. Once noted they can be addressed or revisited so that with a little stamina the researcher reaches a successful proposal for transformed and transformative practice.

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