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Theology in Parish Life

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Theology in parish life

Theology has distanced itself from the issues of daily life, but this was not always so. The Protestant Reformation sought to transform lives through theological reform by proclaiming God and His ways to common people with evangelistic fervor. Theology changed political, economic, and social life. The eighteenth-century Enlightenment altered that influence, seeking to reform society through reason and science. Universities multiplied, sciences formed their divisions, and theology was assigned to the academy.

In the European Enlightenment, especially in Germany, a new kind of university arose and with it came the notion that a university is organized by its “sciences”; that is, by discrete, corporate bodies of knowledge and inquiry, each with its jargon, methods of research, and distinctive subject matter. Given these developments, it was inevitable that if theology were to have a place in the universities, it, too, would have to be a “science” in this new sense of the word.¹

By the twentieth century, theology was recognized as a scholarly enterprise for universities and clergy rather than for Christians or their parishes. This narrowing of theology was at first inclusive of clergy, then the notion of special science led to a professionalization and gradual distancing of professional theologians from pastoral life.

As an academic field, it existed in contrast (and sometimes competition) with biblical studies, ethics, history, and practical theology. In this sense it was part of the minister’s education. However, the actual exposure of the student to this very specific and sometimes formidable subject tended to be limited to one or two introductory courses. “Theology” is officially part of what clergy study. Unofficially, it has become distant and marginal.²

In the modern age, the pastor is introduced to theology in the seminary and expected to disperse a survey knowledge, while theology itself is the property and function of the theologian. Thus, a linear view of theology to practice has been established for pastoral ministry.

This linear view of theology to practice and the consequent distancing of theology from parish life is both untenable and unbiblical. Parish life demands an organic approach to theology among Christian believers. Edward Farley offers, “Theology is a deliberate, focused, and self-conscious thinking that has its origin in faith’s need to interpret itself and its situation. Theology is stirred into existence as believers struggle for clarity and understanding.”³ I agree. Theology is as essential and universal to the Christian experience as is prayer, worship, and service.

I am suggesting the term *interpretive theology* as a means for representing theology in parish life. Interpretive theology is the reflectively

acquired wisdom of God formed in a particular life situation. Reflection in interpretive theology describes a process that seeks meaning through Scripture, faith, narrative, and a spiritually grounded experience. Special revelation providing truth about God in inspired Scripture is primary and central to the integrity of interpretive theology. By *faith*, I mean the merged expression of our Spirit-led personal hope in God with the beliefs of our faith tradition. By *narrative*, I mean the larger story that provides the framework for meaning making. By *spiritually grounded experience*, I mean prayerful reflection in the midst of a particular situation, characterized by seeking God in prayer, dialogue with others who share faith, critical thinking, and pleading for God’s understanding.

The term *wisdom of God* in interpretive theology suggests that theology is more than knowledge. Theology transforms the way one goes about living.

What is distinctive about interpretive theology? Engaged in interpretive theology, every believer is called to find meaning through theological understanding. That distinction is also its promise. A Christian movement remains healthy only when believers seek theological understanding in the process of their daily lives.

Interpretive theology does not detract from the centeredness of inspired Scripture. To declare that Scripture expresses its meaning within human experience is not to limit it by human experience. Interpretive theology does not remove the center of our atonement

from Christ but identifies the importance of hearing the gospel in the moment. Thus, the Gospel writers interpret the life of Jesus so that we, those who accept Christ, might believe and follow in the context of our situations.

The sources of interpretive theology

Scripture is the starting point and center of interpretive theology. Truth exists apart from human experience. Our human efforts to understand truth, however, are flawed and dependent on divine guidance. Thus, a high view of

examination of the power of narratives to form human experience, relates, “The contexts that make sense out of human action are stories or narratives. To explain an action is simply to provide the story that gives the act its context.”⁴

Throughout redemptive history, God has revealed Himself to His creation within the narrative of a specific historical context, transforming the narrative into a vehicle for inspired truth. The primary Scripture narrative is the gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ. At other times, narrative is more humble and limited from a human perspective; it

history, and practices. Over time, these divisions formed distinct definitions and hardened their boundaries. An underlying inference accompanying this departmentalization was the idea that theological education is a linear progression from theory to practice.⁵

A more organic vision for ministerial development is needed. Why? Because the theory to practice assumption and concurrent departmentalization is a reflection of the ever-present division of life itself into the realms of spiritual and practical. We accept these premises precisely because they fit our common

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Scripture does not confine interpretation to merely transporting ancient meanings. The Scriptures do not dissolve thinking in the present like the wave of a magician’s wand. A high view of Scripture as an inspired source coexists with a reflectively acquired wisdom of God formed in the midst of common life.

The faith of our community, though not normative, contributes to the formation of our lives. Interpretive theology is bound up with the redemptive initiative of God in our shared lives and will thus have something to do with the history and tradition that have formed our faith community.

The traditions of our Christian faith arose through the narratives, symbols, and events of those who moved through the spaces of their history. The traditions may be seen as earlier acts of interpretation. They live in the rich ambiguities and temporal meanings of human experience and summon us to reinterpretation in the time and place we experience.

Interpreting meaning within a situation requires placing it in the context of a larger narrative. Brad Kallenberg, in his

can be seen as formative in the process of meaning making but not normative.

Spiritually grounded experience is respected as a source for theological understanding—not apart from Scripture, faith, and narrative but merged with those sources. Experience is spiritually grounded when we submit our lives to what God seeks to communicate to us within a situation. That happens in prayerful reflection with Scripture, dialogue with the faith of others, critical thinking characterized by pleading for God’s understanding, and listening for God in prayer in the midst of the experience.

These four sources—Scripture, faith, narrative, and spiritually grounded experience—represent the sources of interpretive theology but are not a closed-end list. The varied sources of interpretive theology underscore the complexity of making sense in life.

Pastors as interpretive theologians

Preparation for professional ministry in the modern age evolved into four areas: Bible, theology, church

human perspective. If one believes life is thus divided, the prevailing premise in preparing ministers for ministry in the church works. But if one reflects seriously on the question of meaning within life’s experiences, as one inevitably must, this requires an organic interpretive theology.

Training pastors for the engagement of interpretive theology takes on an urgent tone when culture is critiqued. Especially in Western culture, humans today are looking outside of religious institutions for spirituality. Meaning making captivated by compartmentalized theology distinct from life experience is approached with suspicion.

Why does the church resist the idea of the pastor as theologian? Because we tend to form the idea of the minister around specific practices: preaching, counseling, leading, organizing, or teaching. The minister is defined by doing certain things. We imagine the theologian differently: scholars and professors, papers and discourses, and books with peculiar sounding titles.

Another explanation is the broadly accepted distinction of professional

ministry from the church membership. In Protestant Christianity, this characteristic is especially disturbing; a theology of “every believer a minister” is espoused while in practice a separation is maintained.

Understanding the pastor as an interpretive theologian is made easier if we contrast the attributes of the pastor who has denied this characteristic. The first attribute of such denial is reflection of secular culture. Apart from theological engagement, pastoral ministry becomes a reflection of life made relevant in secular culture.

The second attribute is the captivity of the church to bureaucracy. Institutions of our society (government, business, schools, and the church) take on necessary and orderly bureaucratic roles. Without interpretive theology, a pastor interprets success around the definitions these institutions provide: statistics, meetings, stewardship, or buildings. This captivity can lead a minister to abandon the meaning making role of the interpretive theologian and still be considered a success in ministry.

The third attribute is moralism. A pastor may define what should and should not be done to establish esteem as a good citizen in a specific society. One becomes a standard bearer, fulfilling one’s obligation to the congregation and community. In such moralism the definitions of civility formed by culture replace the more spiritually grounded characteristics of Christlike living.

The fourth attribute is individual salvation marked by isolation. In the absence of interpretive theology, personal salvation is seen as separate from reflection on public issues such as education, health care, justice, and the environment. In such separation, the witness of the gospel in public life is hindered.

Henri Nouwen calls for the restoration of theology inseparably woven into the life of the minister.

Without solid theological reflection, future leaders will be little more than pseudo-psychologists, pseudo-sociologists, pseudo-social

workers. They will think of themselves as enablers, facilitators, role models . . . , and thus join the countless men and women who make a living by trying to help their fellow human beings cope with the stresses and strains of everyday living.⁶

A pastor cannot fulfill responsibly his or her calling without engaging in interpretive theology. Ministers are people themselves who experience illnesses, their families, economic challenges, justice, grief, and other life issues. They must interpret their lives. Faithfulness demands theological thinking. But there is more.

Attaining interpretive theology in parish life

The sources of interpretive theology must be engaged within the present moment of life experience by the one living the life, not by professional proxy. Faith develops when the Word finds a hearing in the events of life and the believer engages in the interpretive process.

The idea of interpretive theology thus repudiates the theology-believer distinction. To remove interpretive theology from the life of the believer would be to ask him or her to assign his or her thinking to pastors or scholars in the university. Craig Dykstra defines theology in parish life as “wisdom, which includes, in my view, not only insight and understanding, but also the kind of judgment, skill, commitment, and character that full participation in practices both requires and nurtures.”⁷ Those matters in life itself are the dialectic of interpretive theology in the experience of the believer.

Tools of interpretive theology

How is interpretive theology attained in parish life? Obviously, time with Scripture and learning the accompanying hermeneutical skills are primary and the first tools. Pastors, and indeed all who believe, are called to develop appreciation for the Word

of God among those who would be disciples. Pastors develop theological understanding among those they serve.

Listening is the second powerful tool exercised by the professional minister and developed as an attribute of the believer in the parish. Within every faith community are stories that carry the values, beliefs, and practices of the people. These must be heard and interpreted. In her extensive work on the art of listening, Nancy Ammerman calls these narratives “the building blocks of individual and collective religious identities.”⁸

Rituals are among the important narratives in a faith community. Edward Farley asserts the theological process of parish life through examining ritual in the following:

Sacramental activities include not only the typical Protestant sacraments of divine presence in the church (baptism and Communion), but ritual and liturgical activities occurring in the dramas, perils, crisis, and turning points of human life (marriage, burial, sickness, departures, and so forth). Caring activities are conducted not simply toward individual members of the community of faith (of pastoral care), but include the church’s postures, agendas, and strategies toward all social corruption and oppression. . . . Any adequate account of the nature and agenda of these activities would involve the exercise of the dialectic of theological understanding toward each one.⁹

The common rituals not bound up with doctrinal experience, such as the manner of arrival for worship, greetings, governance, or fellowship and displays of hospitality, take on a narrative in themselves of the values and beliefs of a parish. They provide a ground for interpretive theology.

Conversation is a third tool. Interpretive theology acknowledges that people come to faith through judgments of their conscience shaped through open and free dialogue in the context of their life situations.

Faithfulness is an understanding of life, not a mere expression of loyalty to the institutions of the church. Conversation thus must be reckoned within influencing matters of ecclesiology; the idea of faith being formed in our conversations around our situations eschews a strictly authoritarian view of the church. Belief is formed through examining experience and testing sources within a context of community with conversation a part of that examination.

Critical thinking is a fourth important tool of interpretive theology. When a person decides not to shop where clothing produced by child labor is sold, that is critical thinking in a life situation. For a pastor, the leadership challenge of meaning making in such life issues is expressed in example and exhortation. The goal in exhortation is that critical thinking along the lines of interpreting the gospel becomes a part of reflective life in the parish.

Conclusion

Interpretive theology is the reflectively acquired wisdom of God formed in a particular life situation. The reflection necessarily assumes and claims an interpretive process that seeks meaning and illumination through the joined sources of Scripture, faith, narrative, and spiritually grounded experience.

This requires an organic approach to theology that defines the life of one engaged in pastoral ministry. Identifying ministry as a practice becomes inadequate. The linear idea of theology to practice is rejected. Both pastors and parishioners are called to be theologians who live in relationship with God and recognize His saving work in the midst of the common events of their daily lives.

Serving a parish competently implies forming the interpretive process that seeks meaning and illumination within the life of the believer. Tools in the process of interpretive theology are first the engagement with the Word, then

listening, conversation, and critical thinking. Rather than approached as a distinct element, theological formation is integrated throughout the life of the parish.

Theology and ministry are joined. 

- 1 Edward Farley, *Practicing Gospel: Unconventional Thoughts on the Church's Ministry* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 4.
- 2 Ibid., 5.
- 3 Ibid., 3.
- 4 Nancey Murphy, Brad J. Kallenberg, and Mark Thiessen Nation, *Virtues and Practices in the Christian Tradition: Christian Ethics After MacIntyre* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 23.
- 5 Farley describes specialization in theological education and the theology to practice assumption with its influence on theological understanding in chapter 7 of *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 151–174.
- 6 Henry J. M. Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1989), 86.
- 7 Barbara G. Wheeler and Edward Farley, eds., *Shifting Boundaries: Contextual Approaches to the Structure of Theological Education* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1991), 65.
- 8 Nancy T. Ammerman, "Religious Identities and Religious Institutions," in *Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*, ed. Michele Dillon (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 216.
- 9 Farley, *Theologia*, 189.

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The power of united prayer

We are seeing the young and old falling in love with prayer and experiencing revival as they experience united prayer at our ARME Bible camps. We have often seen young people coming back to the prayer meeting room, saying, "I can't stay away. I'm addicted to this place."

Allyson, a 14-year-old, visited the prayer meeting room one day, then she came back the next day and spent eight hours there. This is her testimony: "I was raised a Seventh-day Adventist and have always attended meetings and Bible camps. I grew up knowing our doctrines and professing to have a relationship with

God. However, something was always missing, it was never real for me. After coming to the prayer meeting room, I realized why I had no power in my life. I was missing prayer; I was missing a genuine and powerful prayer life."

In another prayer meeting room, an individual anonymously left a watch and a note behind that read: "This watch is not considered lost but surrendered. I should not have purchased it, and I confess it has become an idol to me. I knew better than to have bought it when I did, and I no longer can keep it. God has revealed to me it is only one layer

between Him [and] me . . . and now I have one layer less."

People are experiencing revival and reformation through the power of united prayer.

— MARTIN KIM IS THE COMMUNICATIONS DIRECTOR FOR ADVENTIST SOUTHEAST ASIA PROJECTS AND SERVES AS PRAYER DIRECTOR FOR ARME MINISTRIES.

- 1 ARME is an acronym for Adventist Revival Movement for the End Times.
- 2 For more information about united prayer, please visit www.unitedprayer247.com.

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