

Review of Richard Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction*

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Osmer RR 2008. *Practical theology: an introduction*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

1. Purpose

Osmer's² primary purpose is to equip congregational leaders to engage in practical theological interpretation of episodes, situations, and contexts that confront them in ministry. A secondary purpose is to equip theological educators to train students in the skills of practical theological reflection.

2. Summary

Osmer proposes a model of practical theological interpretation with four tasks:

1. The *descriptive-empirical task* asks, 'What is going on?'
2. The *interpretive task* asks, 'Why is it going on?'

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² Richard Osmer is a professor of Christian education at Princeton Theological Seminary.

3. The *normative task* asks, 'What ought to be going on?'
4. The *pragmatic task* asks, 'How might we respond?'

The book is organised around these four tasks, with one major chapter devoted to each task. In addition, there is an introductory chapter which introduces the four tasks and places them within the framework of congregational leadership, and an epilogue dealing with teaching practical theology in Christian higher education.

In the interests of helping students embarking on research in the field of practical theology for the first time, I shall offer a fairly detailed, chapter-by-chapter summary of Osmer's book.

Introduction: The Four Tasks of Practical Theology

Although he is conscious it will be used by academic practical theologians, Osmer's book is intended primarily for *congregational leaders*. He embraces Gerkin's (1997) model of pastoral leadership, namely, the pastor as *interpretive guide*. His primary objective is to equip leaders³ to be effective interpretive guides for their congregations by teaching them how to engage in practical theological interpretation of episodes, situations, and contexts.⁴ Osmer offers the four tasks of practical theology (see *Figure 1*) as a model that interpretive guides can use to interpret episodes, situations, and contexts theologically.

³ Osmer prefers the term 'congregational leaders' to 'pastors' because the role of interpretive guide is not restricted to pastors.

⁴ Osmer consistently distinguishes between episodes (single incidents or events), situations (broader patterns of events or relationships in which episodes occur), and contexts (the social and natural systems in which a situation unfolds).

Task	Descriptive	Interpretive	Normative	Strategic
Question	What is going on?	Why is it going on?	What ought to be going on?	How might we respond?
Function	Priestly listening	Sagely wisdom	Prophetic discernment	Servant leadership

Figure 1: The four tasks of practical theology

Osmer uses the concept of the hermeneutical circle (or, better still, the hermeneutical spiral) to clarify the relationship between the four tasks (see Figure 2). Although the four tasks are distinct, they are also connected. The interpreter must constantly move between tasks, which leads to an interpretive spiral.

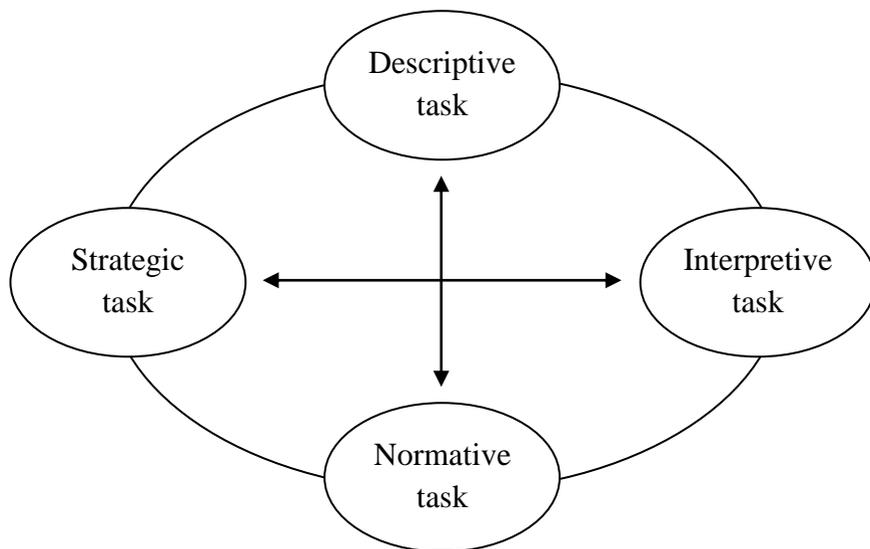


Figure 2: Relationships between the four tasks

Osmer embraces the belief that all scholarship is hermeneutical, that is, it is not neutral and objective, but is an interpretive experience affected by preunderstanding. 'All interpretation begins with preunderstandings that come to us from the past' (22). He supports Gadamer's (1975) five-stage depiction of hermeneutical experience, namely, (a) preunderstanding, (b) being brought up short, (c) dialogical interplay, (d) fusion of horizons, and (e) application. It is the experience of being brought up short that causes people and congregations to question their preunderstandings; in such settings, interpretive guides can apply the four tasks of practical theological interpretation to discern God's will in a particular setting.

Chapter 1. The Descriptive-Empirical Task: Priestly Listening

The first task is *the descriptive-empirical task*. Practical theology begins with episodes, situations, or contexts that call for interpretation. Therefore, practical theology invites 'students to interpret the texts of contemporary lives and practices, ... "living human documents"' (32). The descriptive task seeks to answer the question, What is going on?

Osmer grounds the descriptive task in terms of 'a spirituality of presence' (33-34). 'It is a matter of attending to what is going on in the lives of individuals, families, and congregations' (34). He refers to such attending as *priestly listening*.⁵ In a congregational setting, priestly listening can be informal, semiformal, or formal. While valuing informal and semiformal attending, Osmer focuses on formal attending, which he defines as 'investigating particular episodes, situations, and contexts through empirical research' (38). He argues that qualitative

⁵ The term is based on the idea that true intercessory prayer involves more than praying for people; it involves listening closely to their needs so that one can represent their needs to God. In other words, it begins with priestly listening.

research methods do not necessarily treat people as objects, and are thus consistent with priestly listening.

The remainder of the chapter is devoted to explaining how to conduct empirical research. His discussion, which is pitched at the level of novice researchers (especially congregational leaders), is amongst the most helpful portions of the book. His proposed research design has four key elements: (a) the purpose of the project, (b) the strategies of inquiry, (c) the research plan, and (d) reflection on the metatheoretical assumptions.

The purpose of the project. Osmer emphasises the importance of being able to state the primary purpose of the study in one short paragraph, and the need to identify two or three key research questions related to it. That would refer to the specific purpose. He also lists five *general* purposes of research, namely, basic, applied, summative, formative, and action research. Most academic research falls into the category of *basic research*, which aims 'to contribute to fundamental knowledge and theory' (49).

The strategies of inquiry. The first strategic choice is whether to adopt a qualitative, quantitative, or mixed method. Quantitative is ideal for extensive research, while qualitative is best for intensive research. A combination, previously frowned upon, is now considered acceptable. Osmer proceeds to discuss six specific types of research: (a) narrative research: telling individuals' stories; (b) case study research: studying a small number of cases in depth; (c) ethnographic research: describing a cultural or social group; (d) grounded theory research: developing a theory related to the context of a phenomenon; (e) phenomenological research: seeking the *essence* of an activity or experience for a group of people; and (f) advocacy research: contributing to social change (with an explicit political agenda).

The research plan. 'A research plan involves decisions about the following: (1) the people, program, or setting that will be investigated, (2) the specific methods that will be used to gather data, (3) the individuals or research team that will conduct the research, and (4) the sequence of steps that will be followed to carry out the project in a specific time frame. Inevitably, decisions about these matters involve trade-offs, determined by the constraints of time, financial resources, and the availability of those being studied' (53).

Osmer lists and briefly explains six methods of empirical research, namely, interviews, participant observation, artefact analysis, spatial analysis, demographic analysis, and focus groups. He also offers a helpful summary of the four general steps in the empirical research process: (a) data collection, (b) data transcription, (c) data analysis and interpretation, and (d) research reporting. In the data analysis phase, the objective is to discover patterns and themes in the data.

Reflection on the metatheoretical assumptions. Osmer calls this 'reflexivity'. There is a double crisis confronting empirical research: (a) representation: observation itself is theory-laden, so representation of data is never purely factual; and (b) legitimation: the criteria for legitimising research vary, 'depending on the kind of research being conducted and its guiding purpose' (57). Therefore, researchers need to reflect self-consciously on their metatheoretical perspectives, such as their views on the nature of reality (ontology), knowledge (epistemology), and science (philosophy of science).

Chapter 2. The Interpretive Task: Sagely Wisdom

The interpretive task seeks reasons for the phenomena that were observed in the descriptive task. The key question now becomes, What is it going on? Here the interpretive guide must identify the issues

embedded within the episodes, situations, and contexts he has observed, and draw on theories from the arts and sciences to help him understand the issues.

Osmer refers to this process as applying 'sagely wisdom'. Sagely wisdom requires the interplay of three key characteristics: thoughtfulness, theoretical interpretation, and wise judgement. *Thoughtfulness* is the quality of a leader who is committed to reflecting deeply about the questions that life throws at him, especially when experiences of being brought up short challenge his congregation's preunderstandings.⁶ *Theoretical interpretation* denotes the ability 'to draw on theories of the arts and sciences to understand and respond to particular episodes, situations, and contexts' (83). Osmer emphasises the fact that all theoretical knowledge is fallible and is grounded in a particular perspective, and must be used with a full understanding of these limitations. *Wise judgement* is 'the capacity to interpret episodes, situations, and contexts in three interrelated ways: (1) recognition of the *relevant particulars* of specific events and circumstances; (2) discernment of the *moral ends* at stake; (3) determination of the most *effective means* to achieve these ends in light of the constraints and possibilities of a particular time and place' (84). Wise judgement relates to Aristotle's idea of *phronēsis*. 'It involves discerning the right course of action in particular circumstances, through understanding the circumstances rightly, the moral ends of action, and the effective means to achieve these ends' (84).

Osmer grounds his interpretive task in two strains of biblical wisdom literature, namely, Israel's wisdom tradition and Jesus Christ as God's hidden wisdom revealed. Israel's wisdom literature (specifically Job,

⁶ Thoughtfulness also refers to treating others with kindness and consideration; Osmer embraces the dual meaning of the term.

Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes) models 'deriving general insights from the observable patterns of nature and human life' (89). Much like the human and social sciences, the wisdom writers carefully observed everyday life and formulated theories based on their observations. The practical theologian does the same, and also draws on the theories of others, both biblical and scientific. The other key strand of wisdom is Jesus Christ. The scriptures portray him as 'Wisdom incarnate, who reveals God's secret Wisdom' (98). Jesus provides a radical, counter-cultural framework within which Christians must interpret wisdom literature. As sage, Jesus 'qualifies our reliance on experiential, creation wisdom alone. While the church continues to learn in the wisdom way, reflecting on the meaning of the discernable patterns of life, it places such knowledge in a new and different theological context: the redemptive wisdom of Christ. This wisdom has strong elements of reversal and subversion, pointing to the counterorder of God's royal rule' (100).

Osmer argues that interpretive guides should judge theories according to 'a communicative model of rationality' (100-103), which contains three basic elements: (a) *argumentation*: people offer rational arguments in support of claims, leading to consensus or dissensus; (b) *perspectivalism*: the reasons offered are always ground in a particular perspective; and (c) *fallibility*: scientific theories are fallible; they should be offered with humility and used with caution. Furthermore, the communicative model of rationality offers three ways to evaluate scientific theories, according to their root metaphor, their disciplinary perspective, or the soundness and strength of their arguments.⁷

⁷ On the final point, Osmer contrasts dialectical arguments with dialogical arguments (121-122). He also devotes six pages to discussing the parts of an argument (122-127).

Chapter 3. The Normative Task: Prophetic Discernment

The normative task asks, What ought to be going on? It seeks to discern God's will for present realities. Osmer refers to this task as *prophetic discernment*. Although the Old Testament prophets spoke normatively for God, they were also interpreters of past traditions and present revelations. The term 'prophetic discernment' is intended to capture 'the interplay of divine disclosure and human shaping as prophetic discernment. The prophetic office is the discernment of God's Word to the covenant people in a particular time and place' (133). 'Prophetic discernment involves both divine disclosure and the human shaping of God's word' (134-135).

Prophetic discernment uses three methods to discover God's word for the present: (a) theological interpretation, (b) ethical reflection, and (c) good practice.

Theological interpretation, as it forms part of Osmer's normative task, must not be confused with the traditional disciplines of biblical studies, biblical theology, or systematic theology, which study the scriptures on their own. While theological interpretation is informed by biblical and systematic theology, it 'focuses on the interpretation of *present* episodes, situations, and contexts with theological concepts' (139). It draws on theological concepts, such as the distinction between Law and Gospel in the Lutheran tradition, to interpret present events and realities.

Ethical reflection refers to 'using ethical principles, rules, or guidelines to guide action towards moral ends' (161). Since 'present practices are filled with values and norms' (149; cf. Browning 1991), and those

While not particularly advanced, his overview of this important topic could be helpful for novice researchers, such as new MTh candidates.

values and norms are often in conflict, interpretive guides must 'develop ethical principles, guidelines, and rules' (149) to channel behaviour in episodes, situations, and contexts towards moral ends. He can draw on the communities own traditions for principles to guide its conduct.⁸

Good practice plays two very different roles in Osmer's model of prophetic discernment. First, the interpretive guide and draw on models of good practice, whether past or present, to 'reform a congregation's present actions' (153). Second, analysis of present examples of good practice 'can generate new understandings of God, the Christian life, and social values beyond those provided by the received tradition' (153).

Osmer closes this chapter with a lengthy discussion of how to engage appropriately in cross-disciplinary dialogue. His treatment of the subject, which is a little too complex to summarise here, would be valuable reading for anyone engaged in reason which brings practical theology into dialogue with other disciplines (or even other sub-disciplines or theology). Osmer summarises several models of cross-disciplinary dialogue in an attempt to answer the question, 'How is the worldly wisdom of the arts and sciences appropriately related to the Wisdom of God?' (162).

⁸ Osmer commends Ricoeur's (1992) 'three-part account of the moral life' as an aid to ethical reflection. In his three-part account, '(1) the identity-shaping ethos of a moral community that is embodied in its practices, narratives, relationships, and models; (2) the universal ethical principles that a moral community uses to test its moral practices and vision and to take account of the moral claims of others beyond this community; (3) the *phronesis*, or practical moral reasoning, that is needed to apply moral principles and commitments to particular situations' (Osmer 2008, 149).

Chapter 4. The Pragmatic Task: Servant Leadership

The objective of this chapter was to provide congregational leaders with guidance for leading congregations through the process of change. It seeks to answer the question, How might we respond? Osmer explores various aspects of leadership (e.g. task competence, transactional leadership, and transformational leadership), but frames the overall task as *servant leadership*.

Perhaps because I read this book from the perspective of an academic in the field of practical theology rather than from the perspective of a congregational leader needing to guide a congregation through change, I found this chapter the least helpful in the book.

Epilogue: Teaching Practical Theology in Schools of Theology

The epilogue addresses seminarians about how to teach practical theology in a way that promotes competent theological reflection and interpretation. He criticises the 'encyclopaedic paradigm'⁹ of theological training for creating a disciplinary 'silo mentality', which is better suited to the needs of a research university than to the goal of preparing pastoral practitioners capable of practical theological reflection. He urges that the excessive isolation of the various sub-disciplines be replaced by models that encourage cross-disciplinary dialogue and thinking. By cross-disciplinary he has in mind both

⁹ The encyclopaedic paradigm is the division of theology into separate specialisations, typically biblical studies, church history, systematic theology, and practical theology. 'Each task pursues its distinctive tasks along the lines of a modern research discipline, with specialized language, methods of inquiry, and subject matter' (233). The goal of the first three disciplines is to produce new knowledge, whereas 'the specific task of practical theology is to relate the scholarship of the other theological disciplines to the work of clergy and congregations' (234).

intradisciplinary dialogue (between theological sub-disciplines) and interdisciplinary dialogue (between theology and other fields of study).

Osmer laments that educators' obsession with covering content is the single biggest barrier to true learning; pressure to process more data prevents students taking the time to integrate what they have learned into their thinking. To combat the overemphasis on mastery of content and disciplinary segregation, he proposes that educators make greater use of 'case studies and critical incident reports to practice practical theological interpretation in relation to particular episodes, situations, and contexts' (227).

3. Evaluation

How are we to evaluate and appropriate Osmer's four-task model of practical theological reflection in the context of an evangelical institution, such as the South African Theological Seminary.

3.1. Strengths

There is much to commend Osmer's approach. He has produced a useful and helpful introduction to practical theology. These are some aspects I appreciated about Osmer's book.

1. His objective of equipping congregational leaders to engage in practical theological interpretation of episodes, situations, and contexts affecting their congregations and members is refreshing. This model of doing theology 'in ministry' would be an invaluable skill for all pastors to master. Seminaries intent on equipping graduates for the realities that confront pastors should seriously consider training students to engage in this kind of thinking throughout their curriculum.

2. The fourfold model of practical theological thinking is a useful and simple tool in itself. Even without formal training in their proper application, congregational leaders would benefit greatly by pondering the four questions thoughtfully: What is going on? Why is it going on? What ought to be going on? How might we respond?

3. His treatment of the descriptive-empirical task is the best introduction to empirical research for theological students that I have seen. For first time master's or doctoral students in practical theology, the book is worth buying just for this helpful orientation.

4. When compared with standard textbooks on practical theology (e.g. Heyns and Pieterse 1990; Browning 1991; Heitink 1999; Hendriks 2004), Osmer is surprisingly reader-friendly. He strikes a rare balance, grounding the presentation in scholarship without over-burdening ordinary readers with technical terminology and philosophy.

5. I wholeheartedly support Osmer's call for theology to begin to break away from silo mentality, that is, the overemphasis on specialised sub-disciplines. Theological educators must embrace a more integrated model of theological interpretation, training thinking practitioners who can serve the church effectively as exegetes of the world and the word.

3.2. Weaknesses

Given its purpose and perspective, the book has few real weaknesses. What I consider 'weaknesses' arise from two sources. First, Osmer approaches the tasks of practical theology from a liberal Protestant perspective, whereas I prefer a conservative evangelical approach. Second, he has written for congregational leaders, but I hope to appropriate his model for seminary-based research projects. These are some elements of the book that I found disappointing.

1. The fact that the book is geared more towards congregational leaders than practical theologians is both a strength and a weakness. It contributes to its user-friendliness and practical value for pastors, but limits its value for students who hope to use it as a primer for thesis research (admittedly, that was not its intended use).

2. I would like to see greater emphasis on the scriptures, especially in the normative task. To be fair to Osmer, there is a reasonable focus on scripture, and his model is certainly usable even by those who hold more conservative theological views. However, he relies more heavily on theological concepts and on theories from the arts and sciences to guide practical theological interpretation than on in-depth study of scripture. For anyone with a high view of scripture, even practical theology must be exegetical theology.

3. I am distinctly uncomfortable applying the label 'normative' to new understandings of God or Christian life and values derived by observing contemporary models of good practice. For Osmer, all theories and theologies are fallible and perspectival, so such new understandings would be held lightly. However, for the overwhelming majority of faith communities in Africa—and indeed in my theological views—Christian doctrines and ethical norms are deemed to be based on the infallible word of God, and hold an authority akin to the very word of God. While believers recognise that human interpretations of the scriptures are imperfect, they place great stock in views based on scripture. For such communities, fallible human observation and evaluation of models of good practice is too shaky a foundation upon which to base new understandings about God. This is not to deny that such believers may perceive God at work in models of good practice, as a result of which they may perceive the teachings of scripture in new ways, which deepen their understanding of God, his will, and his ways.

4. I was particularly disappointed with Osmer's chapter on the pragmatic task. My disappointment may say more about my context than his content. I was hoping to find a system for developing a theological theory of action based on the three foundational tasks, closing the circle of reflection from praxis through theory and back to praxis. Instead, I found a discussion of how to lead a congregation through change.

4. Recommendation

Is *Practical Theology: An Introduction* worth reading? Definitely. It is an excellent introduction to the tasks of practical theology, and is well worth reading. I will prescribe for many of my MTh candidates in practical theology. It is a must read for thinking pastors committed to practical theological reflection.

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