Integrated Theology: A Key to Training Thinking Practitioners

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Abstract

The thesis of this article is that the dominant models of theology in universities and seminaries are too fragmented to serve the purpose of training thinking practitioners for the church. The separation and isolation of the theological sub-disciplines is better suited to the needs and goals of a research university than to the objectives of a seminary or to the needs of the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. The article presents the call of four leading works on practical theology for more holistic approaches to the theological task, approaches that seek to bring the various theological sub-disciplines into constructive dialogue with one another. The article contends that developing integrated models of theological reflection and research is essential if we are to train students for pastoral ministry, where they need to be well-rounded theological thinkers rather than research specialists in a narrow sub-discipline. The article concludes with a call for evangelical theologians to take the lead in developing more integrated models of theological research—after all they are the people whose mission is to train pastors as thinking practitioners.

[1] The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the beliefs of the South African Theological Seminary.

Introduction

For those of us involved in theological education, there is a great need to return to an integrated vision of theology. The current fragmented structure of theology in many seminaries and universities has its roots in the modern[2] research university (Osmer 2008). It works well enough if the goal of theology is to research the minutiae of the Bible, but it is hopelessly inadequate for training leaders for service in the church (2 Tim 3:16–17). If the objective of a theological institution is to write scholarly articles, then it makes sense to separate, for example, the Old Testament department from say the missions department. However, if the goal is to equip church leaders who can lead the people of God to live faithfully amidst the complexities of contemporary life, then our study of the Old Testament dare not be separated from our study of New Testament, systematic theology, church history, practical theology, and so forth.

I have become convinced of three interrelated realities. First, the purpose of seminary training is to produce thinking practitioners[3] and practical thinkers, church leaders who can think theologically in the complexities of contemporary life. Second, the way many theological faculties and curricula are divided into isolated sub-disciplines is not optimally suited to this purpose. It is well suited to preparing academic specialists in narrow sub-disciplines, such as systematic theology or missiology, which serve the agenda of the academy more than the mission of the church. Third, seminaries need to address this need by

[2] In this article, the word 'modern' refers to the so-called modern period and worldview, in contrast to the so-called postmodern period and worldview. Therefore, 'the modern research university' refers to the rise of research-oriented universities during the modern period.

[3] Browning (1993) calls them 'reflective practitioners'.

developing viable models of holistic or integrated theology, teaching Christians leaders to draw on all the sub-disciplines to answer the critical questions, 'What then shall we do?' and 'How then shall we live?' (Browning 1993; Anderson 2001).

Needless to say, others have already recognised these problems and sounded a call for more holistic or integrated approaches to theology, and there are many encouraging signs of evangelical seminaries and Christian universities engaging in creative ways of developing holistic, interdisciplinary programmes. In this article, I shall summarise the manner in which several eminent theologians have made a similar call for more holistic ways of doing theology. I have singled out four influential texts on practical theology for this purpose, two emanating from an American context, and two from the South African, written by the following practical theologians.

1. Don Browning

Browning (1993), widely considered the father of American practical theology, argued for a fundamental practical theology. He was not asking for a new way of doing practical theology, but for a new way of doing theology, one that is thoroughly practical in its point of departure, its methodology, and its overarching objectives, but which at the same time encompasses within it all the essential components of theology. Browning (1993:7) states his ambition directly:

> The view of theology I have outlined should not be seen as simply a subspeciality called practical theology. On the contrary, it is my proposed model for theology as such. I will be claiming that Christian theology should be seen as practical through and through and at its very heart. Historical, systematic, and practical theology (in the more specific sense of the term) should be seen as

> subspecialities of the larger more encompassing discipline called fundamental practical theology.

Central to Browning's vision of how we ought to do theology is his belief that all theology moves from practice to theory and back to practice (a practice-theory-practice model). Browning contrasts his approach with that of theologians like Stanley Hauerwas, David Tracy, and especially Karl Barth (1936:47–70), who use a theory to practice model. Barth 'saw theology as the systematic interpretation of God's self-disclosure' (Browning 1993:4), which relegates the practical aspect to the application of God's self-disclosure. By contrast, Browning believes all theological reflection begins with practical concerns, which drive the theologian's interest and inquiry. The first step in the process is to provide a thick description of these theory-laden practices. Browning calls this descriptive theology. The next two tasks engage the situation in dialogue with the faith community's normative sources; this covers historical theology and systematic theology, which is where the process of theological reflection engages with traditional theological sub-disciplines, including church history, historical theology, systematic theology, and biblical studies.

Although Browning is considered a giant in practical theology, his vision of a holistic approach to theology, in which the sub-disciplines (he calls them subspecialities) are integrated into a unified, coherent process, has not found widespread acceptance. Browning is a giant within [the sub-discipline of] practical theology and, contrary to his stated wishes or intent, *his approach to theological reflection is generally treated as a model for doing practical theology, rather than as a practical model for doing theology*.

2. Louis Heyns and Hennie Pieterse

Louis Heyns and Hennie Pieterse (1990) wrote a primer on practical theology which remains in use in several institutions today, including my own. In attempting to define theology as a field of scientific study, Heyns and Pieterse note that God himself lies outside the scope of scientific inquiry, so he cannot be the object of theological study. Many Reformed theologians consider the word of God to be the object of study, but Heyns and Pieterse consider this to be too narrow a view. They argue that 'the object of theological study is human faith in God and human religious statements about God' (4). Based on this view of the object of theology, they point out that 'theology is a variegated science. It studies the Bible, analyses the religious statements of churches and individuals, discusses the church's witness, traces its history and evaluates the religious praxis of congregations' (5). These various tasks give rise to the traditional subdivisions within theology, such as biblical studies, systematic theology, church history, practical theology, and the science of religion. Next follows their crucial statement for the purposes of this article:

> Theology should not be subdivided into independent fields of study to the extent that it becomes no more than the aggregate of all these sub-disciplines. *A field of study is not a section of theology; it is a particular perspective on theology.* … theology is an indivisible whole (Heyns and Pieterse 1990:5, italics added).

They then use two diagrams to illustrate these opposite ways of viewing the relationship between the sub-disciplines of theology. *Figure 1: Fragmented Theology* (Heyns and Pieterse 1990:5, Fig. 1.1) shows an inadequate view. In this conception, theology as an academic discipline is the sum of its sub-disciplines, and each of the sub-disciplines is conceptualised as operating rather independently.

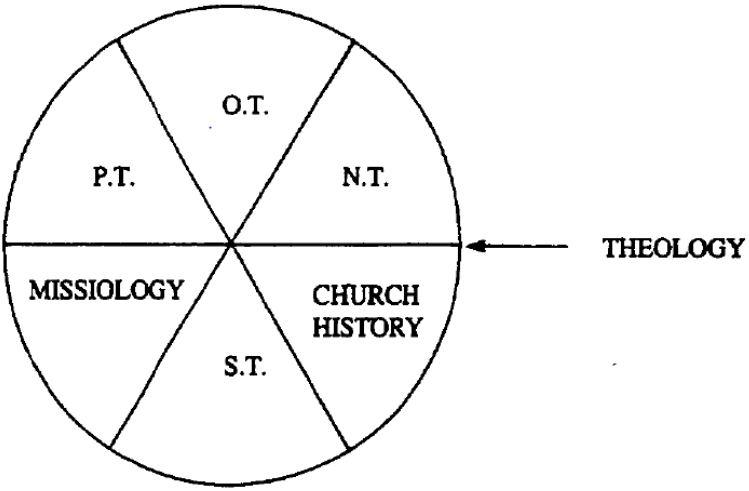

Figure 1: Fragmented Theology

Figure 2: Holistic Theology (Heyns and Pieterse 1990:5, Fig. 1.2) represents the preferable way of viewing theology and its sub-disciplines. Theology is a single field of study, and each sub-discipline provides a certain perspective on it. Each sub-discipline is 'concerned with the whole of theology' (6). They are right to view theology as a single discipline, with the various sub-disciplines providing different perspectives on the whole. There will always be a need for academic specialists who work exclusively within a single sub-discipline, and their specialised research is of undoubted value to the church and its leaders. Obvious examples are experts in textual criticism, biblical archaeology, and Bible translation. Their specialised research in a single sub-discipline contributes valuable perspective for all theology, and in so doing serves the church. However, for those training to be general practitioners in church ministry as opposed to academic specialists in a single sub-discipline, their education is impoverished if

they are not taught how to bring insights from all the sub-disciplines together.

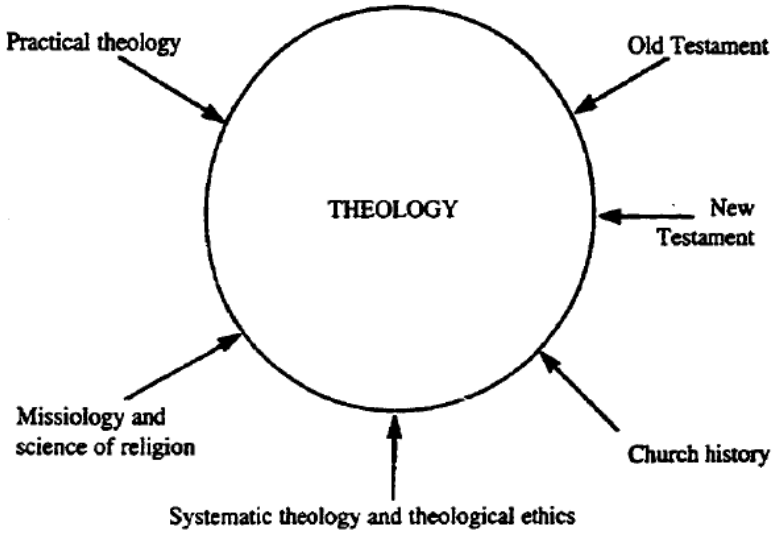

Figure 2: Holistic Theology

The remainder of Heyns and Pieterse's book is devoted to practical theology as a sub-discipline of theology. They do not proceed to argue for integrating the sub-disciplines; they merely sound a caution against viewing any sub-discipline too separately from the remainder of the theological endeavour.

3. Jurgens Hendriks

More recently, Jurgens Hendriks, Professor of Practical Theology and Missiology at the University of Stellenbosch, expressed a similar view. In articulating his 'basic assumptions', he wrote:

> The researcher believes that theology, basically, **is one discipline** (and should not be divided into its many sub-disciplines), and **missionary** by its very nature. All theological sub-disciplines must be taken into account in the process of doing theology (Hendriks 2004:21, emphasis in original).

Hendriks (2004:21–34) proceeds to describe his vision of what integrated theology looks like. He argues that it should be Trinitarian, faith-based, church-based, scriptural, missional, contextual, and practical. All theology is missional in that it is inherently focused on God's purpose for human beings and creation. 'Missional' describes the purpose of theology—it seeks to understand God's purpose for situations within the framework of the overall mission of God. The ultimate objective of [all] theology is to discern the will of God so that the people of God might respond faithfully and strategically. In this sense, Hendriks concurs with Browning (1993) that theology ought to be fundamentally practical. His model focuses on the study of praxis, which he defines as 'reflective (prayerful) involvement in this world' (22). His model is designed to study the praxis of faith communities (local churches) so as to discern the will of God for their participation in God's ongoing work in the world.

This leads Hendriks (2004) to advocate a hermeneutical-correlational methodology for doing theology, that is, a methodology that 'correlates or compares various perspectives and initiates a dialogue between them' (21). He contends 'that theology is hermeneutical by its very nature. It depends on the interpretations that fallible people try to make of both their reality and normative sources, such as the Bible, creeds, and Christian traditions' (29). Congregations seek to understand how they should 'participate in God's missional praxis' (30) through 'constructive dialogue or correlation between their interpretations of the realities of the global and local context and the faith resources at their

disposal' (30). Scripture and tradition (including the history, memory, and story of a faith community) are important dialogue partners (faith resources) in this process. In other words, the hermeneutical-correlational method analyses texts and contexts and brings them into 'dialogue' with one another. The goal is what Fowler (1995:6–7) calls a 'fusion of two horizons'—the way in which the interpreted social reality of the faith community and the interpreted normative texts come together 'to provide vision and guidance for an anticipated future' (Hendriks 2004:30).

What does all this mean in simple terms? Basically, Hendriks has developed a model for doing theology that studies the practical issues facing congregations in order to determine how congregations should participate in the mission of God, that is, how they should respond to the situation. It is an integrated model in that it seeks to bring all the theological sub-disciplines to bear on the theological study of congregational praxis. His model is, however, pure practical theology (sub-discipline) in that he seeks to the analyse the beliefs and practices of communities of God's people in a way that is transformational, experiential, unsystematic, contextual and situational, and interdisciplinary, to use some of the terms Pattison and Woodward (2000:13–16) list as the characteristics of practical theology.

4. Richard Osmer

Osmer (2008), the Thomas W. Synnott Professor of Christian Education in the Department of Practical Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary, argues forcefully and convincingly that the traditional 'silo approach' to theology is a relic of the modern period. It was only suited to the needs of the modern research university, and does not adequately serve the needs of the church in a postmodern era, or even that of the

research university operating within the framework of a postmodern perspective on research.

Osmer (2008) outlines the forces at work that led to the rise of the encyclopaedic approach to theology. With the tides of secularisation and scientific research sweeping through the philosophy of modern research universities, theology was fighting for its survival within the academy. Enter Schleiermacher (1830), who argued that theology should be reorganised into three specialised fields: philosophical theology (104–119), historical theology (120–186), and practical theology (187–219). Philosophical theology would use the methods of philosophical research, historical theology (which subsumed biblical studies and church history) the methods of historical research, and practical theology could apply the scientific findings of other disciplines to the life of the church, especially the clerical ministry. (If he had been writing after the rise of the social sciences, he would likely have conceptualised the nature and methods of practical theology differently.) Schleiermacher's goal was to show that theology is indeed a scientific discipline which rightly belongs in the modern research university, largely because it uses accepted scientific methods of research.

Although Schleiermacher's three-fold division did not prevail, Osmer believes that it led directly to the division of theology into four sub-disciplines: biblical studies, systematic theology, church history, and practical theology. Osmer (2008:§2795) notes that this is the birthplace of the encyclopaedic model of theology, which has four major characteristics:

1. Theology is divided into specialized, relatively autonomous fields.

2. Each field pursues its distinctive tasks along the lines of a modern research discipline, with a specialized language, methods of inquiry, and subject matter.
3. The goal of theological scholarship is the production of new knowledge.
4. The specific task of practical theology is to relate the scholarship of the other theological disciplines to the work of clergy and congregations.

The unfortunate result of this was that the theological sub-disciplines became silos, each focusing on the pursuit of new knowledge by means scientific, discipline-specific research methods. Application was left solely in the domain of practical theology, which was viewed as an applied science. This development enabled theology to continue to exist in the modern research university, but 'it is questionable whether it is adequate to the challenges of our postmodern context' (Osmer 2008:§2808). Osmer believes that significant changes in the understanding of research in the postmodern era make the encyclopaedic (silo) model obsolete and ill-suited as a contemporary approach to theological research and training. Osmer does not formally argue for integrated theology, though he does believe that it is now impossible for the theological sub-disciplines to survive in isolation (silos). The sub-disciplines can retain their identity, but they must be in constant dialogue with other fields of study, theological and non-theological.

Osmer (2008) does offer a model of practical theology that approaches an integrated model of theology. It brings practical theology into dynamic interaction with various academic fields. First, the descriptive-empirical task uses the methods of the social sciences. Second, the interpretive task 'engages the social sciences, natural sciences, and philosophy to place particular episodes, situations, and contexts in a

broader explanatory framework' (§2882). Third, the normative task dialogues with systematic theology, Christian and philosophical ethics, and 'normative social theory' (§2882). Last, the pragmatic task 'engages with action sciences like education, therapy, organization change theory, and communication theory' (§2883).

In summary, Osmer has argued for the abolition of the silo mentality that the encyclopaedic model produces. He envisages all theological sub-disciplines becoming more interdisciplinary and more practical in their approach. He offers a model of practical theology that is heavily weighted towards dialogue with other disciplines, though it is insufficiently focused on biblical exegesis for my preferences. Osmer rightly argues that the kind of interdisciplinary, dialogical model he has proposed is much better equipped for teaching Christian leaders to think theologically and holistically.

Conclusion

This survey has noted how a handful of prominent theologians who have called for a return to a more integrated vision of theology, lamenting the fact that over-specialisation and excessive separation of the sub-disciplines is not ideal for the task of training Christian leaders for the church. Although the voices considered above differ significantly, there are some noteworthy points of agreement. First, they are all considered practical theologians. It seems that practical theology is the branch of theology most concerned with bringing the various theological sub-disciplines together. Second, they have all developed models of theological research that embrace the practice-theory-practice movement. Third, they all wrote as academicians working in theologically liberal institutions, and embracing (to varying degrees) liberal approaches to the theological task.

It is encouraging to note that a number of evangelical seminaries and training organisations are doing excellent work in the area of developing holistic, interdisciplinary training programmes. Some noteworthy examples include the ministerial training programmes offered by George Fox Evangelical Seminary (USA), Nairobi International School of Theology (Kenya), and the South American Theological Seminary (Brazil). Singapore Bible College, by nature a more traditional seminary, is grappling with integration, and an organisation called More than a Mile Deep (MMD) is developing an entire theological curriculum based on an action-reflection-action pedagogy. The International Council for Higher Education (ICHE) works alongside theological institutions to promote integrated and contextual learning. These institutions have recognised that strict adherence to the encyclopaedic model of theology is not ideal for training reflective practitioners. They have adapted their training to help graduates integrate insights from various theological sub-disciplines as well as from other academic fields.

Where little work has been done, at least to my knowledge, is on *the development of models of evangelical theological research that effectively integrate the theological sub-disciplines*. The likes of Browning, Hendriks, and Osmer have provided some blueprints from a liberal perspective, but I know of no similar work that has developed anything comparable from an evangelical perspective.

I close with the words of Lee Gatiss (2005, 'About'), the editor of *The Theologian: The Internet Journal for Integrated Theology*:

> 'Theological integration' is one of our prime concerns – to integrate biblical studies, doctrine, and pastoralia in creative and useful ways, avoiding the over-specialized nature of much seminary and

> theological college education in order to produce more rounded and effective theologians and preachers for the 21st Century.

What we need now are evangelical models of theological integration well-suited to the formation of thinking practitioners.

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