The Church of My Dreams: A Practical Theologian's Perspective

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As Seventh-day Adventists seek to make sense of the shifting religious, cultural, and intellectual landscape beneath our feet, the church today has found itself in the throws of an identity crisis. Our face is set towards the promised *parousia*, our hearts are torn between the way things have been and the desire of where we want to be, and our minds struggle to comprehend the gravity of the present situation. There is a wide-ranging spectrum of beliefs and practices within global Adventism today unlike any period in the history of this church. Indeed, it is more accurate to speak of "Adventisms" than of any one representative form of the church as a whole. Such a portrayal invokes the prevalence of pluralism in its various forms.

Yet, pluralism as a description of the real challenge before us is insufficient because it assumes a world of competing outlooks, traditions, or claims to truth that is coherent and clearly defined. If pluralism is the problem and the church as we have it still relatively in tact, then all the church needs to do is reorganize and reprogram, and perhaps seek better leadership. However, the problem is much more abysmal than that. According to the moral philosopher, Alasdair MacIntyre, Western culture is not pluralistic as much as it is fragmented.[1] "It is incoherent; our lives are lived piecemeal, not whole," writes Jonathan R. Wilson in his commentary on *After Virtue*. "The disagreements that we have are difficult to resolve because we cannot locate them within some coherent position or single unified community. We do not live in a world filled with competing outlooks; we live in a world that has fallen apart."[2]

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[1] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 2008), 1-5.
[2] Jonathan R. Wilson, *Living Faithfully in a Fragmented World: From After Virtue to a New Monasticism*, 2nd ed. (Eugene: Cascade, 2010), 17.

MacIntyre's diagnosis is based on what he views as the failure of the eighteenth-century enlightenment project. By incisively tracing the history of Western moral traditions, he concludes that we have come to a critical juncture with one of two options. We can either choose Nietzche or Aristotle—nihilism and the will-to-power in rejecting conventional morality, or the revival of virtue and practices embedded in community.[3] The implications of MacIntyre's critique of Western culture for the church are many, and if fragmentation is at all an accurate portrayal of the contemporary Adventist experience, then *how* we proceed is equally important as where we see ourselves going. The purpose of this paper is not to describe what my "dream church" would look like, per se, but proffer a theological method for how we may get there. I contend that of all the disciplines and methods employed in faith's pursuit of understanding, the practical theologian is especially equipped to help mediate a way forward, assisting the church in living faithfully in a fragmented world.

I approach this topic partly as a churchman, having served in ordained ministry the better part of a decade in the Southern Union. While serving the church in this capacity, I also pursued a variety of degrees both in Adventist institutions as well as two mainline Protestant institutions, namely the Presbyterian Church (USA) and the United Methodist Church. Currently, I work as a professor of religion and spirituality at Loma Linda University—a diverse university in every sense of the term, educating students at the intersection of faith and science across every conceivable professional program in the fields of health science. These two, then (local church and academy), have in varying degrees and times comprised my religious orbit for the past twenty-two years. It would therefore be inconceivable for me to not recognize the interplay of these two in offering a reflection of my "dream church," for the deep challenge of fragmentation is felt in each sphere. After expounding on the dynamics of fragmentation as it relates to the interplay of the academy and local church by surveying numerous authors, I will seek to clarify the role of the practical theologian, and then conclude with some pragmatic suggestions.

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[3] See Alasdair MacIntyre, 109-120.

I. The Problem of Dichotomizing

According to Claire Wolfteich, ministerial students entering their academic programs are portrayed as intellectually curious, spiritually hungry, and driven with a real sense of calling.[4] However, when faced with the reality of academic demands and expectations, many students become so overwhelmed that they neglect prayer, family, friends, and even their own health. Further implications reveal a dichotomy between seminary curricula that also asks for integration of academic work and field studies, yet often provides no framework to do so. If this is what it means to "master divinity" then there is an obvious irony: the study of divinity leaves little time for God. As a result of an inability to manage this tension between the intellectual and the spiritual, theoretical and the practical, some aspiring ministers "find seminary halls graceless."[5]

Students, however, are only one side of the equation in theological education. Indeed, teachers constitute a crucial role as well, especially if students perceived them as the ones imposing what is experienced as a duplicitous curriculum. But professors, especially non-tenured junior faculty (such as myself), have their own challenges. Stephanie Paulsell paints a portrait of the contemporary teacher of religion who also faces a dichotomy, that of intellectual work and theological vocation. The "forces of commodification" in the academy often eclipse the passion for a particular subject matter that drives one to pursue a doctorate in religion in the first place, to the extent that specialized scholarship is experienced as incompatible with vocation.[6] Thus, "New faculty in theological schools can often feel confused, or even alienated, by the conversation about vocation, calling, and spiritual formation they encounter in their institutions."[7]

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[4] Claire Wolfteich, "Graceful Work: Practical Theological Study of Spirituality," *Horizons* 27, no. 1 (2000): 7.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Stephanie Paulsell, "Spiritual Formation and Intellectual Work in Theological Education," *Theology Today* 55, no. 2 (July 1, 1998): 230.

[7] Ibid., 231.

Discussions of this lived dichotomy extend beyond the university or seminary walls to that of the church as well. Succinctly put, there is a "sad gap between the academic pursuit of truth and the needs of contemporary spiritual seekers, inside and outside of the Christian churches."[8] Connecting academia and the church lies at the heart of another critique by L. Gregory Jones: "Preparation of men and women for ordained Christian ministry in most North American denominations has relied on a presumed division of labor."[9] Through the use of a working metaphor, Jones elaborates by describing theological education as a "relay-race." Initial formation of future leaders, in terms of beliefs and practices, begins in the church. The church then passes the future leader on to a seminary, who, after deconstructing what was previously learned and experienced, along with teaching "practical pastoral skills," sends many graduates back into a local church setting. According to Jones, the problem rests in an increasing awareness that the respective educational partners are not running their leg of the race very well.

The philosophical underpinnings for this dichotomy, experienced both by students and teachers in the academy, as well as the church, are articulated by David Tracy. While others like Ellen T. Charry acknowledge the dawn of modernity as a dividing line in the way Christians think about theology in general, Tracy more precisely speaks of three great separations in modern Western culture.[10] These separations in modern thinking have not only affected our ability to think theologically, but have also damaged our ability to reflect on clergy training. These include: (1) the separation of feeling and thought; (2) the separation of form and content; and (3) the separation of theory and practice. All three are related to one another and therefore address a pressing need for integration.

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[8] Claire Wolfteich, 8.

[9] L. Gregory Jones, "Beliefs, Desires, Practices, and the End of Theological Education," in *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life*, ed. Mirsoslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 185.

[10] Ellen T. Charry, "Educating for Wisdom: Theological Studies as a Spiritual Exercise," *Theology Today* 66, no. 3 (October 1, 2009): 296.

II. The Need for Integration

There is a desperate need for integration and collaboration on all levels, including student and teacher, academy and church. Virtually all of the aforementioned scholars reach back to pre-modern sources as a guide for healing the fragmentation of all syntheses modernity has bequeathed us. Tracy asserts how the ancients, medievals, and several of the scholastics all recognized, through their respective texts and schools, that the distinctions mentioned above must not be separated. In fact, they would have found such a separation not merely strange but self-destructive for true education. Furthermore, "Philosophy, as it is well known, was for the ancients, above all, a love of wisdom, an attempt at a unity of thought and a way of life."[11] Paulsell and Charry also call for a return to ancient sources, such as the Greek philosophers, the author of Proverbs, and medieval monastics as a guide for integration. Such integration will require intentionality to discover formative practices of reading, writing, teaching, and research—the *telos* of such an approach to academic work being spiritually formative.[12]

One of the ancient sources drawn heavily upon in this regard is Augustine of Hippo, though framed in slightly different contexts. Charry asserts that Augustine understood "theology [as] a spiritual exercise, not a scientific discipline undertaken for the sake of the care of souls beginning with himself."[13] Theology is to enable people to advance in the spiritual life—to know, love, and enjoy God better—to enable wisdom.[14] In this regard, contemporary theological education has so drastically strayed from this norm that spirituality and spiritual formation have been relegated to their own respective fields of study, and not considered part and parcel of the theological endeavor.[15] Similarly, L. Gregory Jones draws on Augustine's teaching of baptismal

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[11] David W. Tracy, "Traditions of Spiritual Practice and the Practice of Theology," *Theology Today* 55, no. 2 (July 1, 1998): 238. See also Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 1995).

[12] Stephanie Paulsell, 232; Ellen T. Charry, 298-301.

[13] Ellen T. Charry, 296.

[14] Ibid.

[15] On this point, see Mark A. MacIntosh's brilliant study, *Mystical Theology: The Integrity of Spirituality and Theology* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 1998).

catechesis as demonstrating one way to reunite dichotomous distinctions and thus provide a

more integrative alternative to the relay-race model of clergy training. For Jones, Augustine's

teaching of baptismal catechesis embodies "an exceptionally rich understanding of the interplay

between beliefs, desires, and practices," which Augustine would understand as one. [16]Thus, the

chief end of theological education is to cultivate "a love of learning and a desire for God," by

modeling the ongoing interplay of these three elements.[17]

The need for integration represents a crucial healing factor, but some scholars

emphasize the necessity of interdisciplinary collaboration within the academy in the formation of

future leaders. Although Serene Jones does not extract wisdom from the likes of Augustine, she

stresses the importance of integration through her research, teaching, and the task of

theological education as a whole. As a constructive systematic theologian, she insists that older

models of applied theology, where theological concepts are merely "applied" into concrete

situations, are not helpful. Instead, she opts for practical theology conceived in two modes—

"shared aspiration" among all the disciplines and a "distinct discipline"– as the way forward.[18]

Wolfteich concedes that even for the practical theologian, whose work is by definition

interdisciplinary, it can be overwhelming to draw on multiple disciplines and methods in the

study of even one subject, like spirituality. No one person can do it all. Nevertheless, there is a

need for scholarly collaboration so that research projects do not become mere accretions and

exercises in "reinventing the wheel," but cumulative.[19] In the end, there is a growing consensus

that all of the theological disciplines, including the so-called "practical" fields, must be made

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[16] L. Gregory Jones, 193.

[17] Ibid., 203. This phrasing, which L. Gregory Jones does not cite in his essay, actually comes from Jean Leclercq's classic study, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009).

[18] Serene Jones, "Practical Theology in Two Modes," in *For Life Abundant: Practical Theology, Theological Education, and Christian Ministry*, ed. Dorothy C. Bass and Craig Dykstra (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 210.

[19] Claire Wolfteich, 17.

more fluid to serve the needs of a postmodern situation and the church's mission to faithfully embody the gospel in a fragmented world.[20]

IV. The Promise of Practical Theology

One of the key concepts in MacIntyrian thought is the preference for "practice" in the effort to undo the long-standing separation of belief and practice. Unlike Gadamer's development of *phronesis*, where practice is integral for establishing human understanding as necessarily practical, MacIntyre viewed practice as even more foundational. According to Ted Smith, MacIntyre is "not so much trying to describe what it means for knowledge to be practical," as he is "using practice to name a kind of institution that can ground knowledge and values."[21] Thus for MacIntyre, practice is a "coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity" formed around pursuit of "goods internal to that activity."[22] This form of neo-Artistotelean virtue ethics emphasizes how "practices pursue the good in a coherent, traditioned way."[23]

As influential as MacIntyre's explication of practices has been, his perspective on practice must be placed within a larger cultural movement. In *The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory*, Theodore Schatzki locates "practices" as a major concept in current social thought. One of the reasons for its ubiquity across a large swath of disciplines, most notably in the natural, behavioral, and social sciences, is the impulse to move away from problematic dualisms in thinking, remnants of modernity. The apparent genius of practices is that they underlie both subjects and objects. Closely linked to the opposition of dualistic

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[20] Ibid., 18.
[21] Ted A. Smith, "Theories of Practice," in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, ed. Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore (West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 246.
[22] Alasdair MacIntyre, 187.
[23] Craig Dykstra and Dorothy C. Bass, "A Theological Understanding of Christian Practices," in *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life*, ed. Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 5-6.

thinking, another reason for the interest in practices is the hermeneutical turn in philosophy and

the social sciences to the everyday life-world.[24]

The centrality of practice in the wider cultural turn in academia signifies, among other

things, the inescapability of culture's role in any number of constructive projects. This is no less

true for theological disciplines, as practice is also beginning to figure more prominently.

Regardless of which practice theory Christian theologians draw from, Dorothy Bass suggests

there are at least four characteristics of any theory of practice that can be agreed upon: (1)

practices resist the separation of thinking from acting; (2) practices are social, belonging to

groups of people across generations; (3) practices are rooted in the past but are also constantly

adapting to changing circumstances; and (4) practices articulate wisdom that is in the keeping of

practitioners who do not think of themselves as theologically trained.[25] Bringing these together,

John Swinton offers a helpful definition. He articulates practice as a form of individual and

communal value-laden action that emerges from various contexts that shape the way one views

and encounters the world. In terms of Christian practices, he writes, "We practice what we

believe in quite literal ways. In this sense Christian practices are embodied theology which can

be read, interpreted, and understood in a way similar to the way which we read and interpret

texts."[26]

It is precisely here, in the science and art of reading and interpreting human texts that he

practical theologian locates her work, for the practices of lived religious experience constitute

the starting point of practical theology. As an academic discipline, practical theology has

evolved from the clerical paradigm, to a therapeutic model, to now an empirical-hermeneutic

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[24] Other prominent practice theoreticians include: Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1977); Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013); Etienne Wenger, *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity* (Cambridge, UK/New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

[25] Dorothy C. Bass, "Introduction," in *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life*, ed. Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 6.

[26] John Swinton, *Dementia: Living in the Memories of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 16-17, note 1.

model in which interdisciplinary theological reflection on the dialectical relationship of theory and

practice has assumed center stage.[27] In the words of Elaine Graham:

> [Practical theology has emerged as] a problem-solving and inductive discipline, which connects with practical issues in a way that illuminates and empowers. It also emerges as a way of reflection that draws on other disciplines in its analysis of experience in order to do justice to the complexity of the situation.[28]

Put another way, practical theology focuses on the "how to" within Christianity, but is guided by

an informed theory of "why to"—"why we ought to practice the Christian way of life in certain

ways in light of an interpretation of a particular social context and the normative claims of the

Christian community."[29]

So how do practical theologian's "do theology"? Richard Osmer describes a specific

direction that practical theology has been moving internationally as an interpretive theological

discipline. When examining the variety of approaches to practical theology espoused by

scholars around the globe, he writes: "four distinguishable but mutually influential tasks have

emerged as central to practical theology as a field."[30] These four tasks or movements of

Osmer's consensus equilibrium approach constitute a paradigm of reflective practice, which

inform each other within a hermeneutical circle or spiral (see diagram below). All four tasks

attend to four related questions and include: the descriptive task (What is going on?); the

interpretive task (Why is it going on?); the normative task (What ought to be going on?); and the

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[27] In his attempt to legitimize the discipline of theology worthy of the university by correlating theology as professional training akin to medicine and law, Friedrich Schleiermacher inadvertently caused a division within the theological encyclopedia. This isolated practical theology as the field of study concerned with the application of the other theological disciplines, namely philosophical and historical theology, and resulted in a division between theology and practice. Practical theology and its subfields (liturgics, homiletics, pastoral theology, religious education, etc.) were now primarily concerned with "tips" and "techniques" for the professional minister. See his landmark work: *Brief Outline of Theology as a Field of Study*, 3rd edition, rev. trans. of the 1811 and 1830 edition (Louisville: WJK, 2011). In *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2001), Edward Farley traces the history the results of Schleiermacher's project for the study of theology and theological education, namely the "clerical paradigm." The notion that practical theology is merely applied theology and is almost exclusively relegated to concerns of pastoral "tips, tricks, and techniques," is one of the devastating affects of his work.

[28] Elaine Graham, Heather Walton, and Frances Ward, *Theological Reflection: Methods* (London: SCM, 2005), 5.

[29] Richard R. Osmer, *The Teaching Ministry of Congregations* (Louisville: WJK, 2005), xiv.

[30] Ibid., xv.

pragmatic task (So what? How to?). It is important to note that one can enter into the hermeneutical spiral at any point and, because of the interrelated nature of the four tasks, will inevitably move back and forth between each "moment," especially within the descriptive-empirical and interpretive points on the circle. According to Osmer, "it is the mutually influential relationship of practical theology's empirical, interpretive, normative, and pragmatic work that allows this field to construct action-guiding theories of religious praxis."[31]
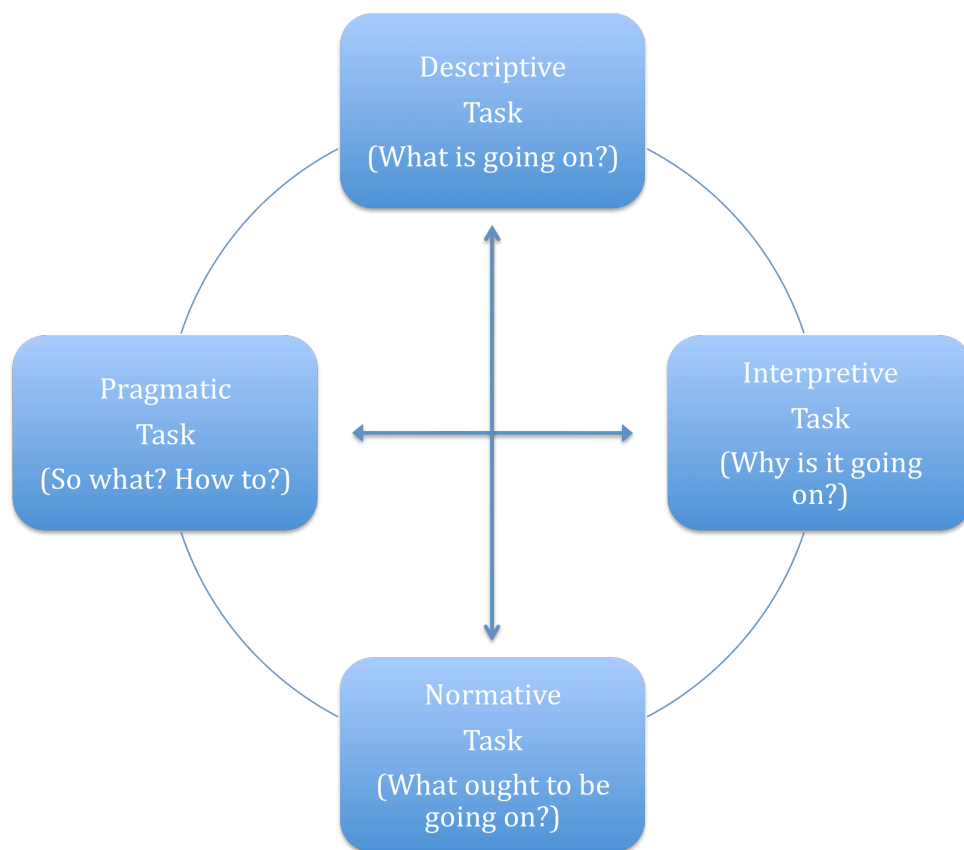

Figure 1: The Four Tasks of Practical Theology[32]

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[31] Richard R. Osmer, "Johannes Van der Ven's Contribution to the New Consensus in Practical Theology," in *Hermeneutics and Empirical Research in Practical Theology: The Contribution of Empirical Theology by Johannes A. Van der Ven*, ed. Chris A. M. Hermans and Mary Elizabeth Moore (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 152.
[32] Figure taken from Richard Robert R. Osmer, *The Teaching Ministry of Congregations*, 303.

V. Conclusion

As Serene Jones has already suggested above, in order to overcome the dichotomies bequeathed to us from modernity, "shared aspiration" among all the theological disciplines as well as the need for a "distinct discipline," is the way forward. Much good has already come from the work of practical theologians within Roman Catholicism, mainline Protestantism, as well as evangelicalism. Ellen T. Charry affirms how theological teachers are moving closer and closer to the necessity of being interdisciplinary and more intentional about partnering with local churches. They are also becoming more attentive to the real needs of their pupils in the academy, for many "students are more interested in nurturing their life in God than in the teacher's dexterity at mastering the material."[33] It is for these reasons that practical theology, with its insistence upon fully informed reflective practice, is beginning to undo the devastating separation between spirituality and theology, theory and practice, within the academy and church.[34]

In the "church of my dreams," my hope is that the same can/will be said about Adventism. To be sure, practical theologians "do not claim to exercise sole proprietary control" over the concerns I have outlined in this paper. However, because of the ways practical theologians put these concerns together in terms of method, the field "simultaneously builds bridges of understanding and collaboration in the wider academy, as well as with practicing religious leaders and others in the churches."[35] Thus if it is true that fragmentation, as MacIntyre describes it, is having its way within the Adventist church, then we must seek more collaborative ways of addressing this and not fall prey to the temptation of isolation within our own academic silos. The integrity of the gospel and the ability of the church to live faithfully in a fragmented world, awaiting the return of our Lord, are at stake.

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[33] Ellen T. Charry, 306.
[34] David Tracy, 240.
[35] Kathleen A. Cahalan and Gordon S. Mikoski, *Opening the Field of Practical Theology: An Introduction* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014), 2.

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