

former requires the 'stage whisperer' to remind them of the script and the plot and to challenge and encourage them to return to the text as originally given. Of course, performers have scope for improvisation and innovation, and sometimes that improvisation brings out new, hidden and 'forgotten' aspects of the original text. Nevertheless, performers always perform within boundaries, scripts and recognizable and accepted narratives which to go beyond, would require the creation of another play. Practical Theology recognises and respects the diversity of interpretation within the various expositions of the performed gospel and seeks to ensure and encourage the Christian community to remain faithful to the narrative of the original God-given plot of the gospel and to practise faithfully as that narrative unfolds. Practical Theology therefore finds itself located within the uneasy but critical tension between the script of revelation given to us in Christ and formulated historically within scripture, doctrine and tradition, and the continuing innovative performance of the gospel as it is embodied and enacted in the life and practices of the Church as they interact with the life and practices of the world.

The significance of experience

Practical Theology takes human experience seriously. One of the things that marks Practical Theology out as distinct from the other theological disciplines is its beginning point within human experience. However, we must be careful what we mean by such a suggestion. Taking human experience seriously does not imply that experience is a source of revelation. Experience and human reason cannot lead us, for example, to an understanding of the cross and the resurrection. Rather, in taking experience seriously, Practical Theology acknowledges and seeks to explore the implications of the proposition that faith is a performative and embodied act; that the gospel is not simply something to be believed, but also something to be lived. Human experience is a 'place' where the gospel is grounded, embodied, interpreted and lived out. It is an

interpretive context which raises new questions, offers challenges and demands answers of the gospel which are not always obvious when it is reflected on in abstraction. Human experience is presumed to be an important locus for the work of the Spirit.¹ As such it holds much relevance for the continuing task of interpreting scripture and tradition and the development of our understanding of theology and faithful practising. By beginning its theological reflection within the human experience of life with God, rather than in abstraction from such experience, Practical Theology takes seriously the actions of God in the present and as such offers a necessary contextual voice to the process of theology and theological development.

A provisional definition

It will be helpful to begin with a provisional definition of Practical Theology which will guide us through this chapter:

Practical Theology is critical, theological reflection on the practices of the Church as they interact with the practices of the world, with a view to ensuring and enabling faithful participation in God's redemptive practices in, to and for the world.

There are four key points that should be highlighted within this understanding. First, practical theological enquiry is *critical*. It assumes that the various practices that are performed by the Christian community are deeply meaningful and require honest critical reflection if they are to be and to remain faithful to the 'script' of revelation. In opposition to models which view Practical Theology as applied theology, wherein its task is simply to apply doctrine worked out by the other theological disciplines to practical situations, within this definition Practical Theology is seen to be a critical discipline which is pre-

1. 1 Corinthians 6:19: 'Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own.'