**Introducing Practical Theology**

**Mission, Ministry, and the Life of the Church**

**Pete Ward**

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Ward is an ambitious writer and theological educator. This is demonstrated in this well organised volume that will find its way onto core student reading lists as a guide to the literature which seeks to explore the practical nature of theological knowledge. It succeeds in enabling the reader to understand what has happened in the field of Practical Theology, and especially the nature of empirical research and theological reflection.

Ten chapters seek to deal with some of the orientating ideas, methods and writers in the field for an audience of students, practical theology teachers and other interested general readers. There is an energy to democratise theology, to reimagine the ‘clerical paradigm’ and recover this discipline as transformational for both Church and academy. The dynamic between theory and practice, doctrine and experience are opened up in a discussion about deepening encounter, learning and the nurture of judgement.

The reader is offered a framework within which we attend to and honour the lived experience of religion as people attempt to put theology to work. There is an attractive tolerance of ambiguity and complexity as the task of the theologian is to be always in the middle of things. Learning should equip us to be confident in the fundamental categories of belief if theology is to survive in our competitive marketplace of ways of constructing meaning.

One of the particular qualities of this text is its commitment to the practice of faith. Theological reasoning is understood as taking place within the context of spiritual life and prayer. There is a constant pushing of boundaries to move the reader out of complacency. Theology is described as ‘a liturgy for the work of the people – praising, arguing and turning to God for many purposes’ (p44). Do not, argues Ward, reduce the complexity of the Gospel or, indeed underestimate its capacity for transformation.

Chapter 4 is especially stimulating in what Ward describes as ‘lived theology’. Practices are bearers of theology as we acknowledge that lived theology is performed, complex, contradictory and not always good (p66). Ward describes strategic pastoral theology ( p80) as a countercultural attention to people and their concrete situations within which action takes place. The context within which we listen, attend to the human and seek change becomes a critical part of our desire to transform society.

Chapter 6 is an adept summary of theological reflection offering a critique of some of the key models and writers. Ward’s ‘Theological Reflections: Some Guidelines’ (pp 114-118) are quite brilliant and will be put to use in my own context. This chapter would have been strengthened with a couple of case studies of worked examples.

Ward offers a discussion of the relationship of practical theology to other theological disciplines (chapter 7) and an approach of the discipline as a ‘conversation’ about culture (chapter 8). Ward ends this introduction by moving his reader back into action. Chapter 9 offers a framework within which the reader might begin to engage in small scale empirical research. The book is completed with guidance on how to write an academic paper in academic theology (pp174-177). There is a comprehensive bibliography and index.

There is a unique quality to this book that will establish itself as a trusted guide in the field. Ward has an authentic and persuasive voice in asking his reader to attend to theology in the everyday. He challenges those of us in the field to renew a commitment to the substance and content of theology for mission alongside the discipline’s commitment to models and process. Above all Ward urges his reader to put theology to work!

We wait to see what might come next for Ward. His voice needs to be heard and responded to in the life and discourse of the ecclesial community where theology continues to be marginal. Ward’s writing is persuasive that we need to dig deeper both into the Christian tradition, and indeed into the human experience that is pregnant with theological treasure.

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