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A METHODOLOGICAL PROPOSAL FOR PROGRAMMED QUAKER PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

DEREK BROWN

I propose that a practical theology research paradigm, utilizing both inductive empirical and deductive theological modalities, can facilitate confessional practical theological and ecclesiological research with the increased partnership and cooperation of congregations in programmed Friends meetings. And there is a need for such efforts. Jen Buck has provided case studies of unbalanced hybridity between Evangelical Friends theology/ecclesiology and other theo-denominational paradigms.¹ Her image of “colonization,” used to describe the subordination of one doctrinal/cultural position by another, accurately describes the outcome of the uneven and contentious dialectic that is observed between the “evangelical” and the “Friends” identities within local and yearly meetings, with non-Quaker theological influences colonizing the ideological and identity-space left by a lack of familiarity of, or adherence to, or results in an active distrust of the Quaker distinctives by programmed Friends meetings.

I have previously argued that this ethotic disconnect has its origin in the adoption of the pastoral system, in which the pastoral role was not adequately integrated into Quaker ecclesiology.² This incomplete integration, coupled with the subsequent influx of extra-denominational clergy, meant that the Quaker ethos did not properly shape the pastoral role and, reciprocally, Quaker distinctives were not promoted or maintained by Quaker pastors. While further research is necessary, I hypothesize that there was also a lack of congregational understanding of the role of pastor within the Quaker view of the “priesthood of all believers,” leading not only to an increased passivity by members but also an ecclesialogically-underdeveloped conceptualization of pastoral ministry.

The collective result of this, along with a myriad of other interrelated factors, is a perception that Christian, pastoral Quakerism has lacked a theological and ecclesiological framework to understand pastoral ministry within the broader ethos and distinctives of Quakerism. Even Friends scholars situated firmly within the evangelical sphere appear to struggle articulating a theological and ecclesiological paradigm that is distinctly “Quaker.” In Arthur Robert’s chapter on Evangelical Quakers in the *Oxford Handbook*, the movement’s theology and ecclesiology is often described in contradistinction or concordance with other theological-denominational models, such as Neo-Wesleyan sanctification and Presbyterian-type polity, rather than on its own terms.³

I propose that practical theology, as both theological discipline and as an interdisciplinary research methodology, could be utilized to form a conceptual framework that both maintains the current reality of Friends pastoral ministry while also providing a normative ideal that promotes the valuable distinctives of Quakerism within their Christian framework. The reason I use “practical theology” instead of “pastoral theology” is not only to segue into a methodological discussion but also to highlight that the proper realization of the poly-charismatic, poly-participatory, and polycentric nature of Quaker ecclesiology within a local programmed meeting requires the understanding, acceptance, and engagement of all the members; not just to participate and contribute one’s spiritual gifting, but also to properly partner with, support, and provide accountability to the pastor, in a way that promotes egalitarianism and prevents authoritarianism.

Practical Theology: A Brief Survey

While “practical theology” suffers from a myriad of definitions, it is helpful, even if somewhat reductionistic, to view the discipline as split between two schools of thought: the Schleiermacherian deductive model and the Browning interdisciplinary inductive model.⁴ Schleiermacher claimed that “if one tries to make do with a merely empirical apprehension of Christianity, one cannot really

know it,” and thus his practical theology aimed not at “apprehension” but the implementation of the theoretical and theological conclusions of philosophical and historical theology (the other two fields in his framework).⁵ The abstract origin of this “theory to practice” paradigm led to criticism that it might suffer from a “removal from the reality of practice.”⁶

A later alternative gained primacy through the work of Don Browning (and others). The Browning, or inductive, model sought to replace the “theory to practice” with a “practice to theory to practice” model, utilizing interdisciplinary methods (but primarily the social sciences) to observe phenomena and case studies occurring in contemporary ministries or faith communities.⁷ The benefits proposed by this model included an increased scholarly rigor through methodological validity and analysis while offering theory creation and praxis modification within the case studied.⁸ Utilizing Kershner’s categories of Quaker theology and philosophy, this model would fall within the “internal-constructive” category, for it is offering, at its conclusion, new and innovative expressions of worship, ministry, and faith community.⁹

The Browning, or inductive empirical model, has been the dominant modality of practical theology research.¹⁰ However, the deductive, theologically-driven practical theology has a small contingent of adherents who believe that the inductive model is too reliant on social science methods and has become less transcendent in its outlook, and thus have begun crafting constructive practical theologies around a Schleiermacherian paradigm.¹¹ And while some may perceive the deductive theological modality as inferior, a relic of a time before interdisciplinary methodological innovations, I would argue that further exploration is necessary, for perhaps the deductive model can also be of use in the ecclesial conceptualization and articulation of pastoral ministry.

Hans Kung's *THE CHURCH*

An example of a deductive practical theology can be found in Hans Kung's *The Church*.¹² Kung, a Swiss Roman Catholic theologian, created a practical theology with a scriptural and theological starting point, moving forward towards a normative expectation of ecclesial structure and behavior. Below are some relevant points of this ecclesiology and practical theology:

- 1) A monarchical episcopate is unbiblical.
- 2) Access to God is ultimately unmediated.
- 3) The priesthood of all believers (non-gender restricted) is a primary ontological reality of the Church.
- 4) The church must be pneumatologically-sensitive and poly-charismatic.
- 5) Any ecclesiology must be non-hierarchical.¹³

However, despite his inherent critique, Kung does not lead the reader away from Catholicism, nor does he call for abolishing the ecclesiastical offices, but only their reform. Regardless of its ultimate impact, the point is that the articulation of a biblical practical theology promoting an egalitarian, gender-neutral, non-sacerdotal, charismatic Roman Catholic ecclesiology could not have occurred, in my opinion, with just empirical analysis at the starting point in the lived experience of contemporary Catholic tradition, dogma, and praxis. It had to begin in the abstract, in the theological ideal, and push forward from there.

In the same way, when conceptualizing a future Quaker practical theology, perhaps the way forward is not just a richer analysis of the current “lived religion” of programmed and unprogrammed Quakers, or a critique of the ecclesiological decisions of past Quakers, but also the efforts of Quakers (scholars, pastors, everyone) to articulate theological and ecclesiological ideals, and the ecclesial forms and structures needed to promote and maintain those ideals. However, further exploration on this topic is necessary.

Endnotes

- 1 Jennifer Buck, “Multi-Denominational Belonging and Quakers in Evangelical Friends Church Southwest,” *Quaker Religious Thought* 125, no. 3 (2017), <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/qrt/vol129/iss1/3>.
- 2 Derek Brown, “A Friendly Ecclesiology: An Exploration of the Adoption and Integration of the Pastoral System by Kansas Yearly Meeting of Friends.” (Ph.D. diss., Johnson University, 2016).
- 3 Arthur Roberts, “Evangelical Quakers, 1887–2010,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Quaker Studies*, eds. Stephen Angell and Pink Dandelion (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 114–115.
- 4 See Schleiermacher’s *Brief Outline of Theology as a Field of Study*, quoted here from Frederich Schleiermacher, *Brief Outline of the Study of Theology*, trans. by William Farrer (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1850); Don Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology: Descriptive and Strategic Proposals* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991).
- 5 This translation taken from *Fredrich Schleiermacher, Brief Outline of Theology as a Field of Study, Third Edition*, trans. Terrence Tice (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 10.
- 6 Christian Grethlein, *An Introduction to Practical Theology: History, Theory, and the Communication of the Gospel in the Present*, trans. Uwe Rasch (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2016), 12.
- 7 Browning, *Fundamental Practical Theology*, 9.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 47ff.
- 9 Jon Kershner, “Comparisons and Divergences in Contemporary Quaker Theology and Philosophy,” in *Quaker Studies: An Overview: The Current State of the Field*, eds. C. Wess Daniels, Robynne Rogers Healey and Jon Kershner (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 54.
- 10 C. Hermans & W.J. Schoeman, “The Utility of Practical Theology: Mapping the Domain, Strategies, and Criteria of Practical Theological Research.” *Acta Theologica* 35, suppl. 22 (2015), 9. Hermans and Shoeman noted the “deep consensus” on this issue.
- 11 For example, Andrew Root, *Christopraxis: A Practical Theology of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014); Graham Buxton, “The Failure of Functional Theologies of Ministry and the Promise of a Relational Alternative,” *Ecclesiology* 1, no. 3 (2005): 27–43.
- 12 Hans Küng, *The Church*, trans. Ray & Rosaleen Ockenden (New York: Sheen and Ward, 1967).
- 13 *Ibid.*, 402ff; 368–369; 370–372; 379ff, 421ff; 363ff.