

Theological Education for Life Abundant
Remarks for the panel on purposes, February 27, 2009
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My task is to sketch the vision that informs this book and gives rise to this conference. As I begin, I confess to feeling some trepidation. For one thing, I must try to represent my coauthors, a brilliant bunch each of whom would surely say something different from what I'll offer. (I honor and thank you all, and especially Craig for his vision in pulling this together in the first place.) Further, I must speak of theological education before an exceptionally accomplished assembly that includes leaders in practical theology who were unfortunately not part of this particular effort, as well as scholars from other fields whose work I've read and respected for years. (I honor you as well and thank you for joining the conversation today.)

In a sense, this conversation began five years ago, when Craig Dykstra and I invited a group of pastors and theological educators to form The Seminar on Practical Theology and Christian Ministry. "The time is ripe for focused attention to what is usually called 'the practical field' of theological study," we wrote in our letter of invitation, citing renewed efforts in doctoral education and impressive scholarly growth during the last quarter of the 20th century. Other important ecclesial, social, and intellectual concerns would frame this focus, we continued: the need to foster life-giving forms of shared life in church and society; efforts underway to foster excellence in Christian ministry; and widespread academic interest in practices and practical thinking.

Half the seminar's members were theological educators teaching in what various schools call practical theology, the arts of ministry, or Area 4. The other members came in equal measure from parish ministry and other theological disciplines. Thus practical

theology, understood as a discipline or set of subdisciplines, was on the table all along, but it was not there alone. Serene Jones would never agree that her discipline—systematic theology—was not also “practical” theology (she meant engaged in concrete actualities and oriented toward the well-being of church and society). Further, the ministers in the group rapidly demonstrated that they brought to this table rich theological knowledge gained in the midst of practice. What were we to call that? Clarifying the character and purpose of practical theology as a discipline that shapes the teaching and scholarship of a few theological educators requires placing it on a field that includes others who share a common purpose, to use a helpful distinction from Kathleen Cahalan and Jim Nieman’s chapter—notably, theological educators in other disciplines, ministers, and people of faith seeking to live faithfully in their own contexts (*For Life Abundant*, p. 64, n. 1).

The effort to connect and order these varied players was one of the paths that led to questions of purpose. Theological schools educate ministers and send them forth to lead communities of people who in turn are sent out to live their faith in and for the world. Fair enough: this is “teaching for ministry.” The one-way trickle-down character of this portrait was soon exposed by the ministers in the seminar, however. Their ministerial formation did not happen entirely in seminary, they insisted; it began in the communities from which they came, and it would necessarily continue long past graduation. (This is actually one of the book’s major claims, and the focus of the fine chapters by Chris Scharen and David Wood.) Thus a circular flow of mutual influence appears among seminaries, ministers, and congregations. But is the flow like that of a recycling fountain that merely perpetuates the existence of a set of self-serving

organizations? Not if all these domains belong to God, who breaks open every closed circle and disrupts every self-generated contribution, and who promises new creation, reconciliation, and communion not only for those within the circle but for all.

Understood theologically, they are related as interwoven responses to God's active presence in and for all creation, known in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection and erupting in countless settings through the power of the Holy Spirit. Practical theology, theological education, Christian ministry, and discipleship in and for the sake of the world gain coherence and purpose through their participation in and orientation toward this eschatological reality.

A second path also led to questions of purpose, through a pattern of inquiry that both embodied practical theology and investigated it. Characteristically, this group was eager to turn its focus to practice. For the academics among us, no matter our field, that practice was teaching; for the ministers, it was work performed in congregations.

Describing our own actual practice and pressing one another on its theological content and norms: this is where we got traction. Later this morning you will undertake a similar investigation in your disciplinary groups.

The phrase "life abundant" emerged slowly, after several participants had articulated the hopes, the overarching aims, the most fraught and precious purposes, of their work. Consider these instances. No one says, yet, "life abundant." But adding them up, that is what we heard.

John Witvliet on teaching worship: "The point of this adventuresome multidisciplinary study is not simply to produce arrogant liturgical critics, but rather to deepen appreciation for how both God's creating and redeeming work and the faithful

Christian life are expressed in the complexities of ordinary liturgical assemblies. It is to form both worshipers and worship leaders to live each day ‘in over their heads’ in terms of the richness of both human experience and divine grace” (*For Life Abundant*, p. 134).

James Nieman on his course “Liturgy and Life”: “We sought to rekindle a wonder for how these ritual practices enact theology. Greater still, we hoped to awaken in future presiders a desire to teach not only about the rites but through them, less asking ‘what does this mean?’ than boldly inviting, ‘Come, taste and see’” (p. 162).

Bonnie Miller-McLemore on teaching pastoral theology: “Does this course only take apart or does it also offer ways to put back together? Does it only promote disengagement or does it allow for fuller reengagement?” (p. 187)

David Daniels (historical studies) and Ted Smith (homiletics): “We are especially interested in ways to use histories of practice in the process of educating people for ministries that lead communities into ways of life that are caught up in God’s great work of reconciliation” (p. 214).

Gordon Mikoski on teaching Christian education: “I want my students to learn to . . . foster the development of disciples who live not primarily for themselves, their families, or even for the church, but for God, the transformation of society, and the good of all creation” (p. 344).

And from Craig Dykstra, on pastoral and ecclesial imagination: “At the heart of the Christian life there lies a deep, somatic, profoundly personal, but very real knowledge. It is the knowledge of the buoyancy of God” (p. 55).

No matter your discipline, to craft a course toward a theological telos is actually to engage in one kind of practical theology: within a specific context, at a certain time

and amid certain people in all their diversity and particularity, a practitioner asks what distinct choices, what actions, may best foster movement toward greater life. For those who teach, clarity about this telos shifts teaching's focus away from mastering a given discipline for its own sake, calling forth instead a deliberate response to a question something like this: "What do the people in my class need to learn if they are to discern and foster life abundant?"

The telos of abundant life came to articulation late in the seminar's life, and we barely began to explore it together; its meaning can and should be contested. "Abundant life" has different resonance and shape in different theological and ecclesial traditions, and some will find other symbols more fitting to name the telos of Christian theological education. Think of the possibilities—the glory of God; the Kingdom of God; the reign of God; koinonia; shalom; liberation; beloved community; new creation. The dispute and clarification of telos could themselves be fruitful, allowing us then to frame further questions: What promise and what judgment does the telos present to the ways of life that actually emerge in and through institutions of theological education, churches, families, neighborhoods, public spaces, workplaces, and society? Who and what cries out to be drawn into the teleological arc, and what foreshadowings of fulfillment are already breaking through the surface of things? I am grateful for Ted Smith's work, in this book and elsewhere, which helps us to see that the horizon on which we are trying to understand our practices is an eschatological one: this horizon is a site of judgment as much as inspiration, disclosing the sin, gaps, and fissures in even the best-intentioned

efforts. Yet we live in hope, trusting that somehow God works in and in spite of us and our practices.¹

Let me offer a few suggestions about where a teleological vision might lead:

(1) A telos is not simply an end; it's an end that is inextricably woven into the means by which it is pursued. John Witvliet takes this into account in trying to teach worship classes that are worshipful in their ethos. A community doesn't get to life by dealing death, or to abundance by hoarding resources. The realized eschatology of John's gospel, where Jesus both promises and provides life abundant, points to the already / not yet quality of this telos.

(2) The telos of life abundant provokes questions about abundance of other kinds. For children of the God who put on human flesh, life abundant always includes that which is material. In John's gospel it comes with great baskets of bread and fish, extra casks of wine, a full pound of costly perfume. And yet material abundance can be curse as well as blessing. What is the role of material abundance in a life-giving way of life in 21st century North America? This kind of abundance supports this conference, enabled the development of this book and most other academic theological books, and shapes the lives of its authors and likely readers. We are entangled with death even as we seek to serve life. Surely a telos of abundant life fosters a yearning, and spurs action, toward plenty for all. In theological education that takes life abundant as its telos, those who are poor and marginalized are always with us. In addition, the present economic crisis is forcing questions of material abundance on North American theological schools in other ways just now, in the form of indebted students, fired workers, and diminished faculties,

¹ See also Ted A. Smith, *The New Measures: A Theological History of Democratic Practice* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), esp. pp. 258-262.

some of whom must reinvent and restructure what they offer. Might a teleological vision that looks beyond assumptions about what a theological school “must” have and be reframe the horizon on which necessary restructuring takes place?

(3) Human flourishing is clearly one dimension of the telos I’m trying to articulate. And so is the flourishing of all creation. Speaking here, Sally McFague’s environmental theology, *Life Abundant*, comes to mind.²

(4) However, the life abundant of the gospel also presses beyond flourishing of these kinds. Insight comes in the work of Charles Taylor, who, while prizing the care for human flourishing won in modernity, also insists that the good is truncated if it stops there, denying transcendence. “The point of things isn’t exhausted by life, the fullness of life, even the goodness of life,” he writes. “For Christians, God wills human flourishing, but ‘thy will be done’ doesn’t reduce to ‘let human beings flourish.’”³ As scripture, the church’s history, and, I hope, your own experience confirm, abundant life can emerge even in situations of suffering, even when death draws near.

(5) Attunement to life abundant could also deepen our capacity to perceive and receive abundance of other kinds. Where might we see the things that really matter overflowing, with a fullness that cannot be exhausted? A phrase from one of Charles Marsh’s books on the civil rights movement manifests this kind of vision, it seems to me: “Beloved community overflows the boundaries of the church in a way analogous to St. Augustine’s description of the divine love overflowing the triune God in the creation of

² Sallie T. McFague, *Life Abundant: Rethinking Theology and Economy for a Planet in Peril* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001).

³ Charles Taylor, “A Catholic Modernity,” in James L. Heft, ed., *Believing Scholars* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), p. 17.

the world,” he writes.⁴ For the theologian David Ford, overflowing abundance is a central image of God; he calls something like the move I’m attempting here a “hermeneutic of Pentecost.”⁵ Consider what we might see, using this hermeneutic—all of it enriching to theological education:

- an abundance of reality, taking form in the deep detail of the world as it is (something practical theologians of ethnographic persuasion might appreciate)
- an abundance of beauty, a reminder of God’s glory in creation and of the kinship between the arts and theology
- an abundance of meaning—imagine approaching with purposeful fascination the countless layers of meaning in a single book of Scripture, or in a sacrament, or in Christian practices as they emerge in daily life
- an abundance of voices and experiences

Each discipline in a theological school comes at such abundance in a characteristic way, reading it with methods that are themselves practices that have emerged historically. The various disciplines foreground different things and probe situations and texts, traditions and cries, in different ways, affording an abundance of perspectives. A major aim of this book and this conference is to claim that, in doing so faithfully, they are all also working toward the same end.

⁴ Charles Marsh, *Beloved Community: How Faith Shapes Social Justice, from the Civil Rights Movement to Today* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), p. 208.

⁵ David F. Ford, *Christian Wisdom: Desiring God and Learning in Love* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 65.