

Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore. *Christian Theology in Practice: Discovering a Discipline*. Grand Rapids, MI & Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2012. 322 pages. \$25.94.

In her book, *Christian Theology in Practice: Discovering a Discipline*, Bonnie Miller-McLemore presents a helpful and compelling case for a more inclusive theology that draws explicitly from the disciplines of practical theology in general and pastoral theology in particular. Accomplished in both pastoral theology and practical theology more broadly, Miller-McLemore draws on her decades of scholarship to articulate the growing import of these fields upon the theological academy. She argues that scholars writing in these arenas have “disrupted conventional theological boundaries” (1) and that such a disruption has opened up the guilds to attend more closely to the lived reality of human persons. A central component of her book maps such a disruption; but her book is prescriptive as well. Miller-McLemore avers, “We need to move away from hierarchical interpretations, where one of the three forms of theology triumphs over the other as crown or roots, and move instead toward a more organic, ecological reading of the tree as an instance of circular and mutually interdependent movement” (3). These twin moves toward description and prescription converge upon a central preoccupation: to articulate the multivalence of theology across the theological and disciplinary spectrum.

Christian Theology in Practice is written for students and professors working in seminaries and undergraduate departments of religious studies, as well as doctoral students and future teachers in religious practices and practical theology. Her declared intention in writing to this particular set of readers is to curb a long-standing bias in religious and theological studies to write for an elite network of relatively isolated academic readers. As a pastoral/practical theologian, Miller-McLemore holds academic theology in close correspondence to the myriad faith practices arising therefrom; thus, she writes for academics in the hope that by disrupting our discipline of specific conversations we will in turn broaden our conversations to include a much wider range of people.

In her move to articulate the multivalent nature of practical theology, Miller-McLemore challenges the widely held notion that practical theology is merely a *field*, understood as an arena marked by common activities and interests. Practical theology is certainly a field within the theological academy, but Miller-McLemore suggests that it is also something more. Practical theology is a *discipline*, which entails a particular mode of vision and a way of being in the world. Thus her subtitle—*Discovering a Discipline*—marks an important orientation at work in the book, namely, to share a compelling vision for how theology is practiced in the academy.

The book is comprised of a range of essays that Miller-McLemore wrote over a twenty-year period, which mark the evolution of practical theology as a field of knowledge as well as a discipline at work throughout the guilds. The essays are organized into three sections: pastoral/practical theology as a complex “web” of interrelated concerns; pastoral/practical theology as an epistemological mode of engagement with the world; and a helpful presentation of gender as a category of analysis/disruption in pastoral and practical theology. Each of these sections is strong, and her chapters quickly but concretely introduce the major concerns that each essay addresses and situate those concerns within a wider framework of pastoral and practical theology.

One of the features of Miller-McLemore’s book that I most appreciated was the abiding commitment to liberation and justice that emerges even when these are not central to her argument. For instance, in chapter six she discusses the commonalities between pastoral theology and liberation theology—a new point of connection for me. Moreover, Miller-McLemore calls

for such a passion for justice to transcend the *field* of pastoral theology, showing that pastoral theology can serve as a harbinger for such an inclusive framework oriented to the lived realities of the marginalized and oppressed.

Scholars of preaching will find her essays on practical theology particularly illuminating—she literally wrote the definition of practical theology (see Chapter 4)—and her essay challenging the bifurcation between academic and clerical paradigms is instructive. She argues instead for a “multiplicity of ways of knowing” (162) that resists such unhelpful binaries. Homileticians will also find much of value by tracing the development of feminist theory within pastoral theology, which both overlaps and diverges from such developments in homiletics.

At day’s end, *Christian Theology in Practice* practices what it preaches. Miller-McLemore exhibits a graciousness to her various interlocutors and a critical assessment of her own work, all while making a strong case for a reorientation of academic theology. Such humility and reflexivity embody the best of what she has contributed to pastoral and practical theology and it does much to engendering support for her continued work in these arenas.

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