

Christian Grethlein. *An Introduction to Practical Theology: History, Theory, and the Communication of the Gospel in the Present*. Translated by Uwe Rasch. Waco: Baylor University Press, 2016. 264 pages. \$34.95.

Condensed from the larger German version, Christian Grethlein's introduction on practical theology argues for the importance of the discipline with regard to ecclesial practices, the communication of the gospel, and as a foundational theological field. While many of the sources utilized and provided by Grethlein are German or speak to the German context, he engages more broadly with practical theology in the United States and in Catholicism. The multiform approach is consistent with the work's emphasis on a plurality of ways to communicate the gospel. Grethlein focuses the task of practical theology as "critical reflection on praxis...expressed in the theoretical concept of communication" (4).

The work consists of three parts. Part 1, Historical Introduction to Practical Theology, explores the independence of practical theology as a field in the contexts of Germany, the United States, and Catholicism. These historical and contemporary contexts are crucial to the communication of the gospel, especially as globalization and ecumenism are increasingly influential (7). A great strength of Grethlein's is his ability to summarize and synthesize diverse contexts and disciplines in order to show how they shed light on practical theology in general and communicating the gospel in particular. Grethlein introduces the reader not only to the important voices and to schools in the field of practical theology but to the tension and continuity between them as well. Ultimately, he argues that practical theology needs to be "a theory of balance" between studying particular practices and contexts in regard to the totality of spiritual practices, constraint of theological research methodology and non-theological means, and "the practical-theological discipline to theological praxis...in conflict with the multiperspectival approaches that lifeworldly complexity requires" (59).

Part 2, Practical Theology as the Theory of the Communication of the Gospel, reviews the shifts in various forms of communication theory based on "psychology, semiotics, sociolinguistics, ritual system, and action theories as well as poststructural approaches" (67). He reveals how communication theories have shifted from unidirectional approaches to dialogical ones focusing on "mutual understanding" (74). The survey leads to the conclusion that communicating the gospel "requires symmetrical constellations" yet this must contend with "functionally...unavoidable asymmetries" (75). To communicate the gospel and God's reign, Jesus used "teaching and learning, communal celebrations, and helping for living" (90). These three modes were continued throughout ecclesial history and still exist in the modern context as means by which to communicate the gospel. The concrete nature of each reveals that empirical sciences, as well as theology, can inform praxis. A task of practical theology is to consider how revolutions in media, especially the internet, lead to a new contextualization of these modes. This is especially crucial with regard to shifts away from "religion" to "spiritual" or non-religious (104, 183).

After surveying the vast complexity of practical theology throughout history and in its recent forms, in addition to methods of communication, Grethlein's work culminates in Part 3, Methods for Communication of the Gospel. He explores how the development and contextualization of the liturgical year and church buildings reveal the importance of time and space to contextual communication of the gospel (191). Leading to God being "neither 'concept' nor 'experience,' but concretely subject, goal, and origin of communication" (189). Throughout the entire book, but especially in part 3, Grethlein offers commentary on how the discipline of

practical theology needs to adapt in different settings around the world. Beyond contextualization being a historical necessity for concretization, he views the decrease of church membership and the rise of electronic media, wiki churches, as revealing essential questions to practical theologians' task of communicating the gospel in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

While the explicit section devoted to homiletics (217-221) is only a few pages, the book's attention to communicating the gospel in the present setting is directly connected with the task of preaching. Thus, the work offers insight into how preachers and homileticians can engage with the broader field of practical theology to inform their tasks. The insights throughout the book point toward a dialogical form of preaching that communicates the gospel in concrete ways to real people. The emphasis on open-ended communication and multi-perspectival approaches, grounded in social sciences and theology, provides profound rationales for dialogical forms of preaching.

Students, teachers, and practical theologians will find this work immeasurably helpful. Grethlein offers key insights into developing areas of practical theology that need to be considered. The survey of history, theology, and social sciences provides a foundational introduction to practical theology. Readers in the United States will find this text valuable; however, its reliance on a German bibliography restricts English speakers from further exploring many of the sources and theories he describes. This is limiting to the overall task, as much of the work is introducing theoretical concepts to the reader who can further the task by contextualizing concrete modes of communicating the gospel. Nevertheless, Grethlein provides more than enough in this clear translation to be introduced to the task of communicating the gospel from the perspective of practical theology. While there is no single way to do practical theology or to communicate the gospel, Grethlein offers a necessary framework that is open and concrete. The work is a valuable and timely reflection on practical theology that I would recommend to those in the field.

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