Theology in Practice: Context for Minister Formation

Brady Bryce
Abilene Christian University, brady.bryce@acu.edu

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Sometimes ministers complain that seminary did not adequately prepare them for ministry. Students may fail to see how the classroom connects with their ministry dreams. Churches occasionally ask, “What are they teaching students in seminary?” Even seminary faculty consider whether their intentions for learning result in actual minister formation.

Edward Farley laments the problem that the typical result of seminary is not a theologically educated minister.¹ Thirty years after publication of *Theologia*, seminaries still wrestle with the challenge of preparing students for ministry, serving ministers and churches, and dealing with Farley’s challenge to recover theological understanding in seminary education. This preparation issue fails to mention other issues such as minister moral failure, fatigue, quitting, or avoidance of the path to ministry.

A brief background of contemporary theological education and definition of theology will suggest a context for the theological education of ministers. The intent is to provide a practical theological basis for the preparation of ministers.

Partitioning a Discipline

Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834), sometimes called the father of modern theology and practical theology, opened his 1811 “brief outline” with these thoughts:

Theology is a positive science, the parts of which join into a cohesive whole only through their common relation to a distinct mode of faith, that is, a distinct formation of God-consciousness.”²

His scientific three partition approach to theology as a field of study (philosophical, historical and practical) is often blamed for the division of theology from practice. In other words, this naming of the practical category perpetuated a separation between practice and theory in theology, establishing distinct

disciplines rather than presenting a unified discipline of theology. In time, seminaries continued the separation by expanding his three categories to four, dividing his historical category into biblical texts and Christian history. His philosophical category is renamed "theological." Finally, the infamous practical category broadly identifies preparation for congregational ministry. Most seminaries still model Schleiermacher’s encyclopedia with these four curricular pillars (biblical, historical, theological and practical). By treating theology as a science, we have multiplied the distinctions within theology. The common academic practice of elaborating distinctions especially as applied to theology leaves the discipline in lifeless parts.

It is interesting to note how Schleiermacher’s partitions are manifested in actual church practice. Schleiermacher believed that theology is not the responsibility of all people in the church, but theology is the responsibility of the clergy or theologians who participate in the leadership of the church for the purpose of promoting the church’s well-being. His assertion makes sharp the edge between clergy and laity for the purpose of improving the operation of the whole. This separation makes sense if Schleiermacher intends to uphold the vocational function of those set apart for ministry. However, questions arise in the contemporary mind about making the distinction today, when the priesthood of all believers reigns and new churches abound to meet people’s needs in Protestant American Christianity. The problems compound for contemporary seminaries preparing ministers at a time when the vocational identity and importance of a minister is unclear or when people avoid the profession of ministry altogether.

Assigning the blame for separation to the shoulders of Schleiermacher may be commonplace, but distinctions between practice and theory have a long prior history (mentioned briefly below). His idea of conceiving of theology as formation into a distinct way of being conscious to God is appealing in its potential to represent a more ancient understanding and practice. The pursuit of God awareness seems comparable to the church fathers’ aim and a contrast to the typical concerns of contemporary Protestant discussions for relevance, performance, or pragmatics. However, while initially drawn to theological training that develops “God-consciousness” for the purpose of caring for souls, his refrain unfortunately relates to individuals developing a field of study rather than pursuing God. The omission of pursuing the knowledge of God leaves theological education in greater need of an appropriate God focus in ministerial training, possibly by restoring theological understanding to the task of ministry formation. A noted Schleiermacher scholar and translator relates that “For Schleiermacher, theological study has no ultimate value in itself separate from

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3 Schleiermacher held the first chair of practical theology at Berlin. Specialized theological disciplines seem to have increased in the years since this appointment.
4 Schleiermacher, 2.
5 Ibid., 6.
6 Ibid., 101.
its practical aim." In other words, his God consciousness may focus on mere practice overlooking faith or pursuit of God. While developing the practical concern of theology, the father of modern theology and practical theology found ways to leave God behind and turn religious practice into science, further perpetuating the partitioning of the discipline of theology. Returning our attention to God in theology is one way to coalesce these partitions for minister formation.

It seems that a clearer understanding of ministerial identity in relation to God is needed, one that goes beyond merely protesting Catholicism or perpetually defining the church or ministry based upon the needs of the moment. Kathleen Cahalan defines the practice of ministry by locating ministry within the life of a disciple. While all Christians share the common vocation of discipleship with a specific identity, commitment, and living response to call, not all disciples share the vocation of ministry. She makes sense of the vocational difference between minister and disciple: “Ministry is the vocation of leading disciples in the life of discipleship for the sake of God’s mission in the world.” As a Catholic practical theologian, Cahalan may bridge one divide in understanding ministry between Catholics and Protestants. The Protestant desire to uphold the “priesthood of all believers” is noble in that it identifies the service or ministry that all believers may do, but it fails Christianity when the unique vocation of minister is minimized. The Catholic practice of upholding calling and the priesthood is commendable in the esteem given to this calling, yet sometimes the work of ministry is limited to professional priests. Christians share the fundamental vocation of disciples who are followers of Jesus first, yet there are also followers of Jesus who lead in service as ministers.

Recognition of the common ground that ministers and Christians share as disciples of Jesus avoids diluting the vocation of ministry and reestablishes the often-neglected place of discipleship. Mixing the understanding of discipleship and ministry can lead to improperly treating a minister as a “professional Christian.” Ministers must live as disciples and share the same struggles as church members. A more intentional expectation of discipleship may help Christians avoid simply assuming that the Christian life of discipleship is merely for ministers. Thus the necessary components of minister formation must include both discipleship formation for the minister and learning to lead other in discipleship formation.

In the early 1990s, the Catholic Church reviewed the formation of priests in light of present conditions. Pope John Paul II stated in an apostolic exhortation that “the Synod desired to ‘contextualize’ the subject of priests, viewing it in terms of today’s society and today’s Church in preparation for the

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7 Terrance Tice, editor's postscript in A Brief Outline, 146.
8 Kathleen Cahalan, Introducing the Practice of Ministry (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2010), 22.
9 Ibid., 28.
10 Ibid., 50.
third millennium.”11 Almost a decade prior to the dawn of the third millennium, the Pope felt it necessary to re-examine and clarify how priests may be formed going forward. This move came after twenty years of regular attention to this need. In 1971 the first of five editions of “the Program of Priestly Formation” was published. This first edition identified four categories (academic program, pastoral formation, spiritual formation, and community life) along with arenas where these were to be expressed and explored.12 The first four editions show progressive development through re-arrangement of material and addition of new material. However, in the fifth edition (2006), the Pope’s directives become more clearly stated as four areas of priestly formation: human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral.”13 These four categories seem to designate intertwined fibers for attentiveness to God.14

Catholicism clearly describes ministerial identity. As one might expect, the Eucharist provides the orienting practice for directing attention to God, which represents life lived in careful focus upon God. This attention on the threefold ministry of word, sacrament, and pastoral care establishes a God-focus through the importance of Scripture, Eucharist, and coordinating community gifts to build up the church.15 These three primary functions allow for a dynamic interplay between minister action and minister identity. In other words, the virtues ministers nurture in their life are manifest in the life of the community.

Present-day discussions of the tensions in ministerial vocational identity, as well as the struggle to understand the discipline of practical theology, are not new conversations about the relationship of thought and action. A third example traces back to the twelfth century, when monastic and patristic approaches yielded their influence to scholasticism. Leclercq’s work shows how monastic culture held together love of learning and the “desire for God” rather than treating these in opposition. He notes that two sources of medieval monastic culture were written texts and religious experience, which he expresses succinctly:

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14 I notice a subtle separation between academic and spiritual. This separation may assume that academic formation cannot be (or is not) spiritually formative. Schleiermacher created a similar separation. I am interested in viewing theology as a cohesive God-focused attentiveness for the purpose of caring for people. This may need to be expanded at another time.

The content of monastic culture has seemed to be symbolized, synthesized, by these two words: grammar and spirituality. On the one hand, learning is necessary if one is to approach God and to express what is perceived of Him; on the other hand, literature must be continually transcended and elevated in the striving to attain eternal life.16

Grammar and spirituality are best practiced as interplay between complementary ventures. Trouble may arise in pursuing one to the exclusion of the other. In my thinking, the danger comes as God becomes a topic of study rather the one with whom we are active participants in learning.

This pursuit of learning furthers knowledge and faith. When learning combines love of wisdom and love of God, our faith is offered humbly as knowledge. In this knowledge, interaction with God is surely part of the process. Or as Leclercq writes,

It is God really who does the teaching; consequently, it is to Him that we must pray. In this light, just as there is no theology without moral life and asceticism, so there is no theology without prayer.17

Thus drawing separations between study and prayer may be artificial and an inadequate representation of monastic living.

So far, this brief treatment surfaces several issues: the effects of separating theology (even practical theology) into slices, the blurred vocation and identity of ministers when reduced to a uniform priesthood of all believers, and discipleship as a fundamental identity and necessary practice of ministry. Next, we turn to define theology, explore a theological principle as basis for minister formation, identify a contextual understanding of preparation, and suggest an approach.

Theology Has a Subject

At some point in many seminary courses, the professor drops the question “what is theology?” which initiates a discussion that may eventually bounce to Anselm’s classic definition “faith seeking understanding” or a host of topics. However, God is the subject of theology. This cannot go without saying. I take this one step further. God is the one with whom we are in relationship. Simply defining theology as “God words” or moving to more entertaining nuances of theology can be ways people avoid the necessity of relationship with God. In speaking with John Cassian, the Holy Abbot Germanus remarks: “Every art and every discipline has a particular objective, that is to say a target and an end peculiarly its own,” which is the kingdom of God and the necessary purity of heart to reach it.18 Germanus states succinctly that “to cling always to God and

17 Ibid., 5.
to the things of God—this must be our major effort, this must be the road that the heart follows unswervingly.” I define theology as discourse concerning God. Prayer is a place where we are open to what is outside of and beyond the self. This God discourse must be good discourse that necessarily pursues knowledge of God that is shown by loving God with heart, soul, mind, and strength, and in loving your neighbor as yourself.

Theology and the study of theology suggest a context. One may not enter the classroom of theology as if it were an empty room with blank whiteboard, awaiting our important work. The walls, the tables and chairs, the modes of communication, and the terminology all indicate we enter a conversation in progress. This context of theology demands that we become aware of “the other.” Primarily this other is God, the uncontrollable aim of our study and pursuit. Secondarily, and more visibly, “the other” is manifest as a stream of people within the Christian tradition and also those outside it. This context for theology demands considerate attentiveness to God, to others, and to the self.

The theological basis for this definition arises from how Jesus framed the teaching of his Abrahamic faith. Jesus regularly was asked to identify the starting point for instruction, or the penultimate teaching. The gospel accounts render the question in three ways: what is the greatest command, what is the first command, and what is the way to eternal life. Jesus consistently replied that we are to love God and love our neighbor as ourselves. In the gospel of John, Jesus provides a related, or reworded, command to “love one another as I have loved you.” Love understood in the classic sense is the supreme virtue of willing what is best for others. Love is not the narrow field of romantic love. It is pursuing the excellent or virtuous path of what is best for others. These others to love include the “one anothers,” or believers, the neighbors, or near ones, and even the enemies opposing or persecuting us. The gospel writers are not alone in reflecting the importance Jesus places on love. For James, love is the royal law and for Paul love is the sum of the law. If ministers are set apart as servants of Jesus and the gospel of Christ, then it seems that such a vibrant, holistic theology needs embodiment as the self-emptying love exemplified by Jesus.

The virtue of love acts as a teacher and even the means of interpretation. John Chrysostom stated, “love is a great teacher, and able both to withdraw men from error, and to reform the character, and to lead them by the hand unto self-denial, and out of stones to make men.” This kind of love may not only transform non-believers as Chrysostom notes, but by implication also should be transforming believing servants of Jesus. Augustine values love as something of a hermeneutical key:

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19 Ibid., 42.
22 James 2:8.
23 Gal 5:14; Rom 13:8–10.
24 John Chrysostom, Homily XXXIII, on 1 Cor. 13:4, NPNF, 200.
“Whoever, then, thinks that he understands the Holy Scriptures, or any part of them, but puts such an interpretation upon them as does not tend to build up this twofold love of God and our neighbor, does not yet understand them as he ought.”

Theological interpretation of Scripture is supported by the virtue of love, which has a way of uncovering the spirit of the text. When people are brought into the school of God’s love, the power of love for transformation goes beyond a single discipline. In other words, followers of Jesus deeply love God and show it by loving others. Disciples have been invited to partner in the mission of God to make disciples of everyone first by being a disciple and then by leading disciples into relationship with God.

While love may seem basic, the theological foundation of love provides the enduring context of ministry. The Trinitarian relationship of God, Jesus, and Spirit, living in a community of love, is the point of reference for preparing ministers to live in relationship with God and others. Love of God, others, and self offers a template for exploring most settings.

There is no fear in love. Any idea can be considered, each person welcomed, and every path explored. Paul states the importance and greatness of love. He even claims that many of the more glamorous expressions of knowledge will end, but love is endlessly pursued for all time. This theology of love may be expressed in the practice of attentiveness. Students are brought to attentiveness to God, others, and self through the learning program. The context of relationship with God in community is inescapable in a theological seminary (even if one is a non-Christian) because the topic is God. Learning is a true communal context because in learning one explores things outside the self and cannot remain isolated. We are in a community with others who see things differently and stand in a long stretch of history where understandings of, and relationship with, God has continued to be worked out. Thus relationship with God, relationship with others, and self-knowledge are fundamental outcomes of expressing love. The virtue of love is a worthy nail upon which to hang minister formation.

**Theology Suggests a Context**

If God is the subject of theology with whom we live in relationship, modeling the interactive love of God, then this suggests a context for the theological formation of ministers. The label contextual education (CE) is a newer designation for minister formation. Definition of these two words set up my working definition. First, the word context generally refers to the place or conditions in which something exists or occurs. We understand that education involves acquiring knowledge, habits, and skills. Thus contextual education places significance on how location influences meaning and therefore learning.

I define CE as an active process of formation for ministry in which student-ministers practice ministry in a context and reflect upon the practice of ministry.

26 1 Cor 13.
This definition assumes contextual education is active rather than passive reception of information. People must be actively engaged participants in ministry in order to learn ministry. This ministry learning demands active participation rather than merely being an open crate ready to be packed with information.

Second, CE is formative because change comes as habits and practices develop. While one may have interest and ability in ministry and the shared Christian duty to serve (minister), new habits and practices must develop for expanding ministry competency. This is especially true of those in ministry developing the vocation of equipping other disciples.

Third, CE is located in a place where one can do ministry. The classroom is not the sole learning setting. There should be expectations on students to be involved in church and active in the practice of ministry while in school. One cannot step back from life, church, and ministry to simply study ministry in a detached manner. Ministry is the environment of the whole of life.

Finally, while much is learned through independent study, practice within community requires reflection on the practice of ministry. This is a corrective to ideas that reduce learning to simply “doing ministry” or “study about ministry.” While we learn by imitation or memorization, these remain infantile learning endeavors unless we move toward reflexivity in practice. Student-ministers must identify themselves within a setting and then reflect on their own practice of ministry. Students must learn the necessary skills to reflect on what went well or poorly in order to adjust future practice. Satisfaction comes not in simply doing a ministry activity, but understanding more deeply why it is done and how it is located in a wide collection of ministry practice.

Believing that general knowledge has limitations, Lave and Weinger mark the distinction between a learning curriculum and a teaching curriculum. A teaching curriculum is designed for instruction. A learning curriculum is a “field of learning resources in everyday practice viewed from the perspective of learners.”27 Deep learning is a student-practiced learning, where professors give attention to how people learn in practice beyond the content of what they learn.

While intending to recapture the idea of apprenticeship in “communities of practice” with legitimate peripheral participation, Lave and Weinger avoid labeling it a pedagogical strategy or technique by emphasizing learning over mere teaching.28 Simply put, it is a way of learning that draws novices into “communities of practice” with experts, moving the novices from the periphery to active participation. While they may overly devalue the importance of lecture, teaching, and general knowledge (which have a necessary function), the intent to refocus on the end result of learning is an important reminder for theological schools and seminaries.

28 Ibid., 29, 40.
This definition for CE may be expressed as a three-part process in a specific setting: practice, reflection, and attentiveness. First, we begin with practice. A context to do ministry is required of students, rather than something optional or delayed to a future period at the end of, or even after, theological training. Student-ministers must be active in ministry. When one ministers, all three of these (attentiveness, practice and reflection) are in play. Often ministers are more prone to (and expected to) act by solving problems rather than attend or reflect. When less focus is given to one of the three, then practice is put in peril. Practice without attention and reflection leads to burnout. On the other hand, one danger of further academic work is to become so reflective that one is paralyzed and inactive. This passivity is avoided by active practice of ministry while in school.

Second, reflection on the practice of ministry helps hold practice accountable to critique and evaluation. Looking back at action and even on assumptions prior to practice helps students evaluate theologically what is going on in a given situation. A necessary realization is the importance of context in ministry. The community affects the process and is affected by practice. The process of developing a theological imagination brings coherence to the thought and action in community, leading to sound judgment. Wisdom comes through thinking and acting about practice.

Finally, this reoccurring process develops attentiveness to God in practice and in reflection. The permeable interplay between practice, reflection, and attention preserves the value of each precisely through awareness of God. When reduced to practice, ministry easily narrows to focus on the self and the pragmatics of how well one did or did not do. If ministry is partnership with God, then necessary attention needs to be given to the activity of God within a community. Otherwise, ministers assume the role of being the expert with the answers rather than helping develop other disciples who are reflective practitioners seeking God and God’s activity. This moves beyond the measurement of results to dependence upon God. For example, one may be an active listener or attend to context through ethnographic research. The practice of attentiveness is not one of arrival, but an ongoing and repeated practice.

Theology Compels a Practice

In light of this brief portrayal of contemporary minister formation, a proposal is necessary. If the fundamental context of theology is attention to God, neighbor, and self, what practice would further the development of attention upon God by ministers? Assuming that ministers need to develop attentiveness to God and help disciples nurture a similar consciousness, I propose that one key practice of seminary is to teach people to pray. This does not mean teach people about prayer, prayer methods, a history of prayer, or biblical references to prayer, but teach people to practice prayer. In prayer, people learn to address their lives to God. Evagrios of Pontus wrote, “If you are
a theologian you pray truly. And if you pray truly you are a theologian.”

The indispensible connection between prayer and theology in ministry formation is one that pursues knowledge as relational and open-ended.

Theology and prayer have a common focus upon God because “without a constant personal commerce between ourselves and the object of study, theology would diminish its scope and wilt away, until it was confined to the encounters of other ages . . . an easy descent to a study of religious ideas.”

For me, prayer is the avenue of this engagement between God and humans. While an obvious religious practice, prayer pursues knowledge of God. Hauerwas asserts:

Not only is knowledge of self tied to knowledge of God, but we know ourselves truthfully only when we know ourselves in relation to God. We know who we are only when we can place ourselves—locate our stories—within God’s story.

Seminary should provide a “located-ness” to students. Prayer helps students identify who they are in relationship to God within community and in their neighborhood and nation. In stated contrast to the work of Schleiermacher and his interpreters, Dallas Willard insists that knowledge of God is more than a feeling, but is a real body of knowledge. Knowledge is the ability to represent something as it actually is on an appropriate basis of thought and experience. One can come to know God. Christianity is a body of thought and experience about knowledge of God that is as valid as other disciplines such as biology or physics.

The ministry interests of today’s students range as broadly as the number of students in a program. A seminary cannot teach all skills or knowledge needed to thrive in every ministry context, yet it is responsible to promote learning. Gregory the Great writes, “No one presumes to teach an art that he has not first mastered through study. How foolish it is therefore for the inexperienced to assume pastoral authority when the care of souls is the art of arts.”

Seminaries cannot promise to provide every skill a student will need any more than a computer science department can provide all future technological needs to its students. However, seminaries can prepare a certain kind of

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30 Roland Walls, “Prayer and the Study of Theology,” keynote address at New College, the Faculty of Divinity, the University of Edinburgh fall 1972 or 1973 as published in The Secret Seminary, Brendan Pelphrey (Brendan Pelphrey, 2012), 246.


33 Ibid., 15.

prayerful people who are able to enter, engage, and thrive in different ministry settings.

An active life of prayer before God sits at the center of a disciple’s existence. Prayer is the core spiritual discipline, an interactive communication with God. Prayer pursues knowledge of God through dialog and listening, silence and speech. Prayer is a way of being still and present before the one who is greater and wholly other than we are.

Prayer also becomes a relational discipline in ministry. As ministers pray to God for others, they fulfill the command to love God and love neighbor as the self. Not only does this represent the greatest command, first command, and path to eternal life for a disciple, it is also the practical orientation of ministry. While love of God is deeply personal, love must be manifest in community. Loving our neighbor includes comfortable relationships (family and friends) and uncomfortable relations (with enemies, adversaries), and the unknown others (who are affected by our choices or those who persecute and terrorize). The love we show to our neighbor in the face of opposition or praise is an opportunity to see our deeper love of God put to the test of willingly working for the good of others.

Closing

This paper leaves questions unanswered and left to explore. How might schools focus on developing God attentiveness in students? How do we teach prayer? In what ways might Protestants, Catholics, and Orthodox Christians learn from one another about minister formation? How do faculty appropriately track minister formation? In what ways might churches and schools develop disciples with theological understanding? These unexplored questions will inform future research and writing.

This brief treatment of the dilemma of theological education relates the importance of students coming to knowledge of God in prayer. Theology can continue to cultivate the pursuit of God in prayer and interactive relationship with God. Ministers need preparation in nurturing the prayerful life of a disciple in order to more fully pursue the knowledge of God. Perhaps this may help churches deal with the anemic discipleship and the primary and often slighted work of development of disciples. The life of discipleship comes through a prayerful focus upon God in life. Ministers must learn to address their lives to God in prayer and within the CE process of ministry formation.
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