

DISCERNMENT

Theology and the Practice of Ministry

Volume 9 | Issue 1

Article 1

A Practical Theology of Created Space: Contextualized Theology for Pastoral Crisis Ministry

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Recommended Citation

Fisher, Gabriel () "A Practical Theology of Created Space: Contextualized Theology for Pastoral Crisis Ministry," *Discernment: Theology and the Practice of Ministry*. Vol. 9: Iss. 1, Article 1.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.acu.edu/discernment/vol9/iss1/1>

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Theology and the Practice of Ministry

A Practical Theology of Created Space: Contextualized Theology for Pastoral Crisis Ministry

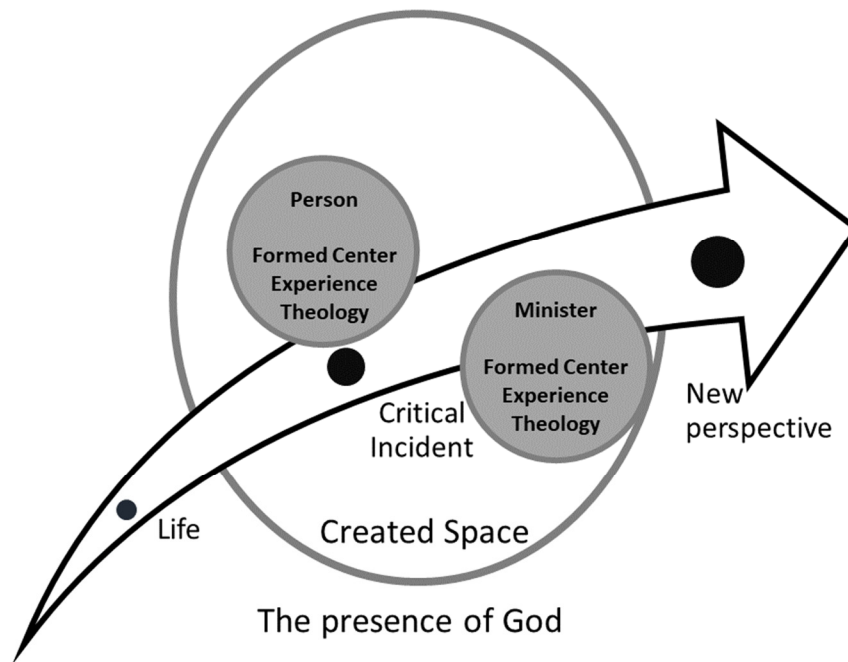
Gabriel Fisher

Abstract: This is a practical theology of created space that attends to the questions raised by critical incidents and contexts by cultivating dialogue among experiences, beliefs, perceptions, and theology. This confessional approach works from the conviction that God is active and present within our experiences and that we are called to participate in the compassionate ministry of Christ. A created space represents a holding pattern of listening and dialogue where attention is given to the other person's experiences, beliefs, present concerns, and our own formed center using the resources of spiritual theologies.

Crisis, serious illness, and terminal stages of life are spaces where our questions, goals, concerns, hurts, challenges, beliefs, and operative theology come to the forefront of our minds. This is the world that pastoral care inhabits, and it reaches beyond chaplaincy to congregational ministry, non-profit leadership, and other forms of missional engagement. Robust pastoral care is not a side concern or detour from the more pressing matters of theology and ministry. Instead, it is fertile ground for theological reflection, praxis, and living into the way of Christ. As I served in hospice care, I discovered a need for an accessible practical theology. This essay presents this practical theology for the consideration of ministers, chaplains, non-profit leaders, and any wishing to theologically engage various forms of crisis ministry. My goal is to develop a deeper understanding and awareness of four areas: (1) a better grasp of God's presence and activity, (2) a clearer awareness of our own convictions and perspectives, (3) a more accurate understanding of the critical incident and relevant details, and (4) discernment of a better way forward.

This is a practical theology of created space that attends to the questions raised by critical incidents and contexts by cultivating dialogue among experiences, beliefs, perceptions, and theology. This confessional

approach works from the conviction that God is active and present within our experiences and that we are called to participate in the compassionate ministry of Christ. A created space represents a holding pattern of listening and dialogue where attention is given to the other person's experiences, beliefs, and present concerns and our own formed center using the resources of spiritual theologies.



A centering theological conviction is essential to protect the endeavor of pastoral care from becoming solely an exercise in social scientific inquiry. However, the nature of crisis situations demands attention to a broad range of critical incidents and therefore necessitates a framework that is flexible enough to interact with people who are not situated within one specific faith community or any faith community. This approach to practical theology is informed by the spiritual theologies of the contemplative and incarnational traditions, which provide a wealth of resources for pastoral practice.¹ The interaction between the contemplative and incarnational traditions within this practical theology also softens the

¹ Richard J. Foster, *Streams of Living Water: Essential Practices from the Six Great Traditions of Christian Faith* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1998), 25, 239.

unhelpful dichotomy that has developed in the field between privileging theology or privileging practice as a starting point for reflection.²

These two theological traditions provide a mechanism within created space for constructive dialogue.³ The following sections will offer a brief orienting and operative definition of practical theology. I will then describe the nature of created space, present a proposed practical model, and end with a brief analysis. My aim is to provide an accessible yet grounded approach.

Defining an Approach to Practical Theology

Where do we plant our flag for beginning the task of practical theology? Do we begin by consulting doctrine, or do we start with listening to experience?⁴ For practitioners, the starting point is unavoidably themselves. Personal experience is the lens that cannot be sidestepped, whether in the experience of divine revelation or human activity. In a broader sense, though, there is the theological conviction that God's initiative precedes our reflection.⁵ In other words, Christ's ministry is already at work in the world as God calls us to participate and pay

² This dichotomy refers to the conversation concerning the proper starting point for the task of practical theology. While there are many nuances, the two poles are represented by beginning reflection with a doctrinal articulation on the one hand or a lived experience on the other.

³ "Spiritual theology is that part of theology that, proceeding from the truths of divine revelation and the religious experience of individual persons, defines the nature of the supernatural life, formulates directives for its growth and development, and explains the process by which souls advance from the beginning of the spiritual life to its full perfection." Jeffrey Greenman and George Kalantzis, eds., *Life in the Spirit: Spiritual Formation in Theological Perspective* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 32.

⁴ "One of the things that marks Practical Theology out as distinct from the other theological disciplines is its beginning point within human experience. However, we must be careful what we mean by such a suggestion. Taking human experience seriously does not imply that experience is a source of Divine revelation." John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (London: SCM Press, 2016), 6. These authors illustrate the tension that comes from locating the proper starting point in reflection. For those wishing for a more theocentric beginning, the concern is that normative theological sources will be overridden or overlooked in discussion in favor of personal experience, which now functions as the new normative source. On the other side of the aisle, there is a concern that theological reflection that begins with doctrinal articulations will fail in truly listening to the context and will form practices based on preconceived beliefs rather than critical reflection.

⁵ For discussions on God's initiative in the task of practical theology see Ray S. Anderson, *The Shape of Practical Theology: Empowering Ministry with Theological Praxis*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 29.

attention.⁶ There are many burning bush moments when God reaches into our ordinary experiences and calls us to greater significance. How do we move forward without getting stuck in the quicksand of the debate?

In response, I offer my operative definition for practical theology: *practical theology is the task of understanding and participating in the ministry of God by bringing the diversity of experience into conversation with theological sources, spirituality, and our own formed center.*⁷ This definition is like the wooden framing of a house; it gives structure to my specific approach of created space. The term “task” indicates that practical theology is concerned with a continual theological engagement with life and God.⁸ The next two descriptors of the definition, “understanding and participating,” are connected and allude to the contributions and postures of the contemplative and incarnational spiritual theologies. I will say more about these terms in the section concerning theological commitments. The last phrase of the definition seeks to reconcile the above concerns within the field of practical theology. I use the word conversation, because it resists the unrealistic dichotomy between divine activity (including revelation) and human experience. It is more productive to create space to pay attention to whatever God is presenting than to plan an unmovable flag at one end or another of a dichotomy. The diversity of human experience naturally brings attention to the need for critical reflection, while also acknowledging that even critical reflection emerges from preexisting theological convictions and divine activity. This position differs from rigidly starting the theological task with either revelation or human experience and lays the groundwork for a constructive third approach that I am calling created space.

A Practical Theology of Created Space

One way to visualize created space is by walking up to a table and chairs and inviting a person standing there to join. We both bring our formed centers with us as we take our seats. Hanging in the air is a critical

⁶ Christopher James, *Church Planting in Post-Christian Soil: Theology and Practice*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 141.

⁷ This definition was originally embedded in the context of hospice chaplaincy.

⁸ Specifically, practical theology operates within the process of discipleship and its purpose, growing into the likeness of God. Greenman and Kalantzis argue that the task of theology is “not merely to clarify ideas about God, but to inform, guide, and nurture the actual love of God.” In this sense, practical theology has warrant to engage lived experiences with pastoral purpose. Greenman and Kalantzis., *Life in the Spirit: Spiritual Formation in Theological Perspective*, 34.

incident and sitting on the table are our mechanisms for dialogue. Emerging out of this interaction are new perspectives for ministerial practice.

Formed Center

As we walk up to the table, we take note of every detail presented to us: the location, the conversation partner's state of being, and ourselves. I do not come with empty hands and/or a vacant mind but bring with me every other part of my day, which affects my mood and perspective. My presence in this situation represents what I am calling a formed center. A formed center entails my experiences, my beliefs and theology, my values, and the components that make up my sense of being.⁹ The presumption of being able to enter created space with a posture of objective neutrality is mistaken for three reasons. First, it does not seem credible to set aside the aspects of ourselves that are intrinsic to our perspectives. This level of transcendence simply does not belong to our finite nature. Second, attempting to set aside our formed centers creates levels of unawareness rather than analytic clarity, since we may not notice where our biases are guiding or hindering the conversation. Third, attempting to enter created space without dealing with our formed center removes a valuable resource necessary for constructive, honest, and respectful dialogue. Our own perspectives are not automatically detrimental to deep listening. With proper attention and honesty, our own contributions become fertile ground for the theological task as well. The first step in engaging created space is, therefore, to name and cultivate my formed center. What does this entail?

The biblical metaphor of a tree putting down roots in search of water is particularly helpful for the above task of creating space for discernment.¹⁰ The practical theologian is not necessarily searching for a new theory to apply, although a new theory may be beneficial. Rather, the practical task is to develop a deeper understanding of God at work in the current situation, to note the contributions of own's formed center, to describe the critical incident and context, and to discern a way forward. Thus, the proposed first step in navigating these goals is to develop a contemplative posture. The contemplative posture demonstrates an attentiveness to the

⁹ These components include the social, cultural, biological, and psychological aspects of a person's life.

¹⁰ "Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked . . . their delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law they meditate day and night. They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season" (Ps 1:1-3 NRSV). "But I am like a green olive tree in the house of God. I trust in the steadfast love of God forever and ever" (Ps 52:8).

presence of God and a desire for a life of intimacy with God.¹¹ Paul provides encouragement for this practice when he writes to the Colossians, “set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth” (Col 3:2). The verb φρονεῖτε (phroneite) carries some intentional nuance meaning to “give careful consideration to something” or “to be intent.”¹² By contrast, the word is used elsewhere in Philippians to describe enemies of the cross who are intent on earthly things.¹³ To set one’s mind on a focal point implies a commitment to a certain way of life. Contemplation in this manner is a loving response motivated by the grace we have received and the conviction of 1 John that “we love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19).¹⁴ Called by grace, we gradually learn to grow closer to the source of that love and to the people for whom God cares. In addition, there is a growing sense of wonder at who God is, what God has created, and where God is present.¹⁵ Contemplative attention allows dialogue to proceed from preexisting and ongoing spiritual formation.¹⁶ This posture serves as a motivation and rationale and allows a set of guiding values to emerge, to which I now turn.

Guiding Values

The imagery of a tree putting down roots captures the contemplative nature of practical theology as an intentional kind of understanding that requires investment, patience, and a posture of benevolence.¹⁷ The level of investment present within created space serves as a reflexive gauge for the practitioner. The reality is that our own emotions, level of capacity for creativity, and theological perceptions may derail any attempt at constructive dialogue before it begins. A crucial question to ask is to what extent the practitioner is invested in developing new perspectives and practices. Put differently, do practitioners see themselves in a prescriptive

¹¹ Foster, *Streams of Living Water*, 25.

¹² Frederick William Danker ed. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 1065.

¹³ Philippians 3:19.

¹⁴ Greenman and Kalantzis, eds., *Life in the Spirit*, 25.

¹⁵ Psalms 19 and 104.

¹⁶ Contemplative attention is historically cultivated by a prayer-filled life. Practices naturally include examen, *lectio divina*, meditative reading, communal prayer and reading, silence, detachment, simplicity, and gratitude, to name a few. For further discussions see Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices That Transform us* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2015); and Ewert Cousins, ed., *Bonaventure: The Soul’s Journey into God, the Tree of Life, the Life of Francis* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978).

¹⁷ Paul describes this phronetic posture in Phil 2:5, “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.”

or conversational role? How curious are we to learn? The level of investment required by created space includes a willingness to set aside preconceived solutions and to wait instead to discern where God is working.

This exercise of openness flows naturally into the second guiding value, patience. The image of a rooted tree once again helps adjust our necessary posture. It takes time for a tree's root system to take hold and to find water sources. Dialogue within created space is not a quick and easy solution. Interruptions to conversations are a common occurrence in crisis situations. The practitioner must frame conversational expectations for progress realistically and accept the opportunities as they are available. Aside from interruptions, dialogue is also full of the possibilities for cognitive dissonance, anxiety, frustration, misunderstanding, and offense. A confessional disposition of patience grounds itself in a commitment to forgive and bear with each other on the basis of being forgiven (Col 3:13). This does not mean that the other is automatically assumed to be the cause for forgiveness but rather that the practitioner should adopt a posture of grace for all the complexities of the situation. This challenging reality necessitates the third guiding value.

The practitioner must enter critical incidents with a posture of benevolence. This value is a commitment to the other person sitting at the table. Specifically, it is a commitment to change initial reactions to any deemed as being other. The shift in perspective is well illustrated by Jesus's words in the gospel of Matthew,

Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me . . . Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me (Matt 25:34–40 NRSV).

Walking into created space means adopting the practice of welcome that views others as if they were Christ. As with the value of patience, the confessional impetus is found in God's activity; namely, we welcome others because Christ welcomed us (Rom 15:7). Welcome is a theologically robust concept that addresses socioeconomic, cultural, and health concerns, and constantly invites tangible practice. The practitioner is challenged to avoid abstraction and instead, practice benevolence and welcome in the context

presented in front of him/her.¹⁸ The three values of investment, patience, and a posture of benevolence help guide dialogue toward constructive ends, especially in the presence of higher levels of anxiety. Now that the formed center and guiding values are addressed, the next issue to consider is the role of another's experience.

The Role of Experience

What is meant by experience within created space? I offer an operative usage knowing that answers often focus on (1) specific practices, (2) perspectives, or (3) interrelated systems.¹⁹ Crisis situations are frequently not located in just one faith community but involve multiple backgrounds. Most naturally, questions arise out of diverse episodes, situations, and contexts.²⁰ Critical incidents are prominent locations for engaging experience.

This raises the question of which aspect of the conversation has more authority? Is my approach correlational, meaning that experience presents a question to which theology offers an answer, or does experience also have normative and prescriptive contributions? Experience has contributions to offer that are understood within the boundaries of created space for dialogue.²¹ Practical theologians enter a critical incident with their own beliefs, values, formation, and understanding (formed center). Likewise, those involved in the critical incident bring their own frameworks. Created space means that theological sources are brought to bear on experiences, but experiences also bring new insights to preexisting theological understanding and practice. This concession means simply, yet importantly, that a person's experience holds value. Experiences are not distracting clutter in need of removal so that theological realignment can occur. Rather, lived experience, even the ordinary, is a location for God's activity and theological reflection. Listening to another's perspective becomes a potential act of theological praxis and pastoral care.

¹⁸ I use welcome as a key explanation of the value benevolence. The concept warrants greater exploration, but my intention here is simply to highlight its role in generating focused conversation when created space is engaged.

¹⁹ Dorothy Bass and Craig Dykstra, eds., *For Life Abundant: Practical Theology, Theological Education, and Christian Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 27–31.

²⁰ Richard Osmer defines an episode as an incident that comes out of everyday life, a situation as a longer pattern of events or relationships, and a context as the social systems at play. Richard R. Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 11.

²¹ With this assertion, I am taking the position that our perception is what is malleable and that at some level there exist propositions with truth value.

Conversations around experience and theological engagement often generate anxiety in terms of what conclusions dialogue may reach. I will more directly address this concern in a later part of the discussion. Created space recognizes the need for adjustment and growth within our own theological perspectives but also acknowledges the nature of God, which is unchangeable and, in some ways, a mystery. Dialogue with experience requires honesty about our own formed center and commitments. Therefore, it is helpful at this point in the conversation to name the key theological commitments of this contextualized pastoral approach using narrative—God’s presence and the call to compassion.

Theological Commitments: God’s Presence

The concerns that arise out of crisis situations, naturally involve interpersonal relationships with other people and God.²² The narratives found in texts and experiences provide context for theological reflection and dialogue within created spaces. Narratives become a natural meeting place for theology, spirituality, and experience. Eleonore Stump warns against the disservice of using narrative either as examples of philosophical ideas or mere support for a premise.²³ Rather, narrative represents its own form of knowledge. This knowledge is less concerned with propositional inferences and coherence.²⁴ Instead, narrative involves a knowledge of persons and an interpretation that presents, suggests, offers, and invites.²⁵ In an attempt to invite reflection on the commitments undergirding this approach to practical theology, I will offer an analysis of two narratives from the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Considering the pastoral context, I believe that the use of stories is better suited for the conversation.

Earlier I wrote that a practical theology of created space is informed by the spiritual theologies of the contemplative and incarnational traditions. The question of where to turn to contemplate God’s activity and presence is, interestingly, most clearly displayed in the incarnation. It is, therefore, through the life of the incarnated Christ that the church learns how to contemplatively participate in ministry.²⁶ In this section, I will begin

²² Eleonore Stump, *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 24–25.

²³ Stump, *Wandering in Darkness*, 372.

²⁴ Stump, *Wandering in Darkness*, 48–49.

²⁵ Stump, *Wandering in Darkness*, 27, 47.

²⁶ Consequently, it is through the practical theologian’s participation within a faith community that he/she gains a framework and model for engagement with critical incidents. Developing a supporting ecclesiology is beyond the focus of this article.

by elaborating upon the contemplation of God's presence and then move toward participation in the compassionate ministry of Jesus Christ. The goal is to explore the theological grounding for this practical theology of created space.

Earlier, I introduced a biblical guiding metaphor for the task of practical theology as a tree putting down roots. This metaphor applies to pastoral care in that mature and sustainable ministry is akin to stretching toward a deeper awareness of God like tree roots reaching for sources of life. The ultimate object of this reaching is to know and experience that God is with us, which is a central conviction to my work in pastoral care.²⁷ This belief is not meant to remain as an abstraction but, instead, to invite constant concrete expression. The beginning narrative in the Gospel of Matthew explores this proposal. I will, therefore, give attention to this text as a helpful biblical reference point.

I will consider a complete section of text from the prologue (1:18–2:23). This section of text is composed of at least four literary moves: (1) 1:18–25 recounts Jesus's birth proper, although the actual event is only mentioned through allusion; (2) 2:1–12 includes the announcement of a king and the search for the baby boy; (3) 2:13–18 describes the exile or escape of Joseph and his new family to Egypt, and (4) the final passage, 2:19–23, tells of their return to Israel. Within these four moves, three dominant themes emerge: the fulfillment of Scripture, divine guidance, and the naming of Jesus.

The first theme, the fulfillment of Scripture, occurs five times in this section.²⁸ Matthew is showing that the circumstances around Jesus's birth are significant to more than one seemingly unimportant family; they are connected to the larger story of the people of God. Specifically, the prophetic words of God are finding fulfillment, which in the most basic sense means that God is at work. Matthew connects his telling of Jesus's birth to the larger story within the Hebrew Bible. Those of us reared in modern methods might feel surprised by his interpretive moves, because Isaiah, Micah, Hosea, and Jeremiah each had their own contexts within which they wrote. They were surely addressing their own contemporary

²⁷ Ulrich Luz, *The Theology of the Gospel of Matthew*, New Testament Theology (New York, Cambridge University Press, 1995), 2.

²⁸ Matthew 1:21–23 ties the virgin birth to a fulfillment of Isa 7:14; 2:5–6 quotes Mic 5:2 as an explanation of Jesus's birthplace; 2:15 relies on Hos 11:1 as a rationale for the escape to Egypt, and 2:17–18 cites Jer 31:5 to reflect on the massacre that occurred behind them in Israel. Finally, 2:23 alludes to an unsure source to explain Jesus's home in Nazareth.

circumstances as well. However, Matthew's approach is clearly to view Scripture and history through a Christological lens. The Gospel writer sees God's activity as a continuous movement that allows new interpretations to arise, which may be an instructive insight for contemporary contexts as well. Therefore, the Scripture fulfillment theme implies that events in history are not meaningless but have a soteriological aim. Said differently, theological weight is carried not simply by propositional statements but also by lived experience.

The second theme is the action and guidance of the angel of the Lord. The angel intervenes in this section five times.²⁹ The action of the angel not only moves the narrative forward but also supports the first theme. God is actively working in the lives of people, particularly in the lives of those who are in need, which becomes the setting for divine activity.

The third theme is the naming of Jesus. In this short section, the Matthean text gives Jesus eight different titles and descriptions, including Messiah (1:18), Jesus, one who saves (1:21), Immanuel (1:23), King of the Jews (2:2), Ruler (2:6), Shepherd of my people (2:6), my son (2:15), and the Nazorean (2:23).³⁰ Each name unpacks the role of Jesus. He will save, lead, guide, and nurture God's people. However, one name in particular shows that his role and identity go beyond ministerial function. As Matthew makes clear in 1:23 (an allusion to Isa 8:8), Jesus is not just another judge or leader; rather, Jesus is the embodiment of God among God's people. God is with us. It is not difficult to sense that this story is a mirror of another period when God's people were in need of deliverance. Jesus's birth and the surrounding events remind the reader of the birth of Moses and the cruelty of Pharaoh.³¹ Joy and suffering are bound together within the story. The prologue of Matthew and its harsh telling of the nativity recall Israel's past when God heard its cry and responded faithfully.

These three dominant themes in the prologue of Matthew tell a similar story; namely, God is active and present with people in the tangible details of life. This conviction informs the understanding of this practical theology for pastoral care, that God remains faithfully active and present

²⁹ In Matt 1:20–21, the angel reassures Joseph to continue in his marriage to Mary. Through the angel, Joseph is warned both to flee to Egypt (2:13–15) and to return to Israel (2:19–20). Dreams offer guidance on two occasions, once to Joseph as he is warned to avoid Galilee on his way back and once to the wise men as they are warned about returning to King Herod. The proximity of these dreams to the other encounters with the angel lead the reader to view them as divine as well.

³⁰ This wording is taken from the New Revised Standard Version.

³¹ Luz, *The Theology of the Gospel of Matthew*, 25.

even in the hardest circumstances. The beginning of ministry is to put down roots in contemplation of this foundational conviction. However, a notable concession in this gospel story is that suffering is not avoided. There is still loss, and from some perspectives within the story, it is difficult to see God's presence or to perceive a way that the good is overcoming the bad. Interestingly, the narrative does not wave a pious wand over painful experiences but gives the reader space to notice the clear moral evil that is occurring. A reflective practitioner will notice that both God's revelation and divine hiddenness are present within the same story. The narrative invites readers into this narrative to observe the activity of God and the range of resulting experiences. The text presents a model for a contemplative pastoral posture. Consequently, how should one respond?

Theological Commitments: The Call to Compassion

While action is not the object of contemplation, the natural result is to respond faithfully.³² The shift from contemplation to compassionate response is demonstrated for us in the beginning of Luke's gospel, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (4:18–19 NRSV). Luke places his version of this story, found also in the other Synoptics, at the beginning of Jesus's ministry so that it functions as an interpretative lens for what is to come.³³ Luke is declaring that the nature and focus of Jesus's ministry is on these representative and literal categories of the poor, the captive, the blind, and the oppressed. He strengthens and concretizes the point in the next passage when he describes Jesus restoring a man in Capernaum who was suffering from an unclean spirit (4:31–37). The good news was coming to people who needed it most. Every encounter with hurting people following this passage challenges the reader and hearer to consider the tangible nature of the gospel and gives a framework for approaching the vast experiences of humanity. Jesus's ministry receives a special commendation through the first line of the Isaiah passage which reads, "The Spirit of the Lord" (4:18). The presence of the Spirit validates Jesus and his ministry as the work of God. Luke Timothy Johnson notes that the anointing of the Spirit

³² Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Prayer* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1955), 288–89.

³³ Robert C. Tannehill, *Luke*, ANTC (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 90–91.

symbolizes God's power displayed in people throughout Israel's history.³⁴ This anointing not only reaches backward as a connection to the past but also forward beyond the event of the resurrection. At the beginning of Acts, Jesus assures his timid disciples that they too will receive power through the Spirit to continue his work (1:8). The compassionate ministry begun by Jesus in the synagogue in Luke's Gospel continues in the work of all disciples through the Holy Spirit, including those in the present day.

This call to ministry does not set aside the practice of contemplation but is, rather, rooted in it. Prior to the recorded ministry of Jesus, he is led to the wilderness by the Spirit (Luke 4:1). His forty days of fasting is centered on spiritual wrestling through which he clings to the Father. The image of a tree putting down roots toward life-giving water is a fitting illustration of what occurs in this passage. How much more important are those roots in the wilderness? The participation in the compassionate ministry of Christ is an extension of the practice of contemplation. Alternatively, it is in the contemplation of God's presence and activity that we learn how to respond tangibly. These two narratives of Scripture serve as an invitation to explore the contributions of the contemplative and incarnational spiritual theologies for pastoral care. They provide grounding for this approach to practical theology and represent a wealth of resources from which to continually draw. However, they also invite serious consideration of experiences. The representative categories mentioned earlier point to the details of lives that are not inconsequential but rather the location for theological praxis. The compassionate response grounded in contemplation is to intentionally create space for the stories present in critical incidents. At this point, I have discussed four aspects of the practical theology of created space: the formed center, the guiding values, the role of experience, and the key theological commitments. The next question is to consider the aim of created space. The following section will name four primary goals of the practitioner that aid in developing a deeper understanding and awareness in pastoral care.

Goals of Created Space

First, we want a better grasp of where and how God is at work. Unavoidably, our formed center will provide a set of assumptions about how God is working. However, the contemplative posture encourages an openness to maturing perspectives that may result from intentional,

³⁴ Luke Timothy Johnson, *Prophetic Jesus, Prophetic Church: The Challenge of Luke-Acts to Contemporary Christians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 42.

patient, and benevolent dialogue. Second, we want a clearer awareness of our own convictions and perspectives. Interpretive frameworks are deeply embedded within the history of our formation. Uncovering the nuances of our own understandings is an ongoing task for practitioners. Third, we want a more accurate understanding of the critical incident and relevant details. We loosen our grip on the attitude that claims a definitive grasp of the situation based on our previous training or experiences and, instead, we commit to listening anew. Finally, we want to discern a better way forward. The importance of naming this goal is that it dislodges us from the prescriptive role in the situation. While we bring a level of expertise, this position should encourage learning and discovery rather than squelch it or delay it by imposing uncritical solutions from outside. Deeper understandings of God at work, of our own perspectives, of the situation, and of better ways forward provide focus for practitioners offering pastoral care. Now that an explanation of a theology centered on created space is offered, the following sections will propose a theological model to discuss its efficacy for crisis ministry.

The Four Question Model

While there are a variety of well-documented models for engaging the task of theological reflection, crisis situations need an approach that is simple, accessible, and teachable to those participating in various crisis ministries. Richard Osmer presents four tasks framed as questions which fit these concerns well.³⁵ This reflection process includes the descriptive task (what is going on?), the interpretive task (why is this going on?), the normative task (what ought to be going on?), and the pragmatic task (how might we respond?). This framework is a natural response to the prompting of crisis situations as it leaves room to make interpretive lenses explicit, and it provides an organic entry point for dialogue with theological sources.³⁶ Osmer's model is especially relevant because it moves beyond description and reflection and naturally encourages intervention. Finally, Osmer's model is applicable because of its ability to move between differing

³⁵ Osmer, *Practical Theology*, 4.

³⁶ They offer a helpful warning about operational models stating they tend to become too unidirectional and do not account for the theological work that is done throughout the whole process. These authors advocate the need to make explicit the theological lenses at play within every stage and to resist an overly linear process. Kathleen A. Cahalan and James R. Neiman, "Practical Theology in the Classroom," *For Life Abundant: Practical Theology, Theological Education and Christian Ministry*. ed. Dorothy C. Bass and Craig Dykstra (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 84.

theologies. By his own concession, it is not necessary to adopt his theological position to utilize his articulation of the four tasks.³⁷

A challenge implicit in pastoral crisis ministry is creating common spaces where key theological convictions are not shared among participants. The process can stall when assumptions are made, and convictions and values are not named. This dilemma is relevant to the normative task of determining what ought to be going on. While this dynamic is present in any theological conversation, the situation is potentially more acute in crisis contexts, which are not always confined to one faith community. The result is that there is not always an accessible shared language of theology and practices for use in dialogue. Additionally, there is the potential for overreliance on one mode of divine revelation to the point that the theological perspective suffers reductionist pitfalls. These challenges are possible weaknesses but also have the potential to cultivate rich reflection. The way forward is to name the tendency toward reductionism in our perspectives and to acknowledge the presence of diverse theological assumptions in conversations.³⁸ The potential tension in discourse that comes within the created space is not only unavoidable but can also be beneficial to generating insights. Considering these challenges, practical theologians must enter the created space with the contemplative posture discussed earlier. It is one thing, though, to talk about difficult dialogue and created space and another to engage it. Osmer's model helps concretize this approach to practical theology. However, more discussion is needed concerning its efficacy for pastoral care in crisis ministry.

³⁷ Osmer, *Practical Theology*, 27.

³⁸ William J. Abraham, Jason E. Vickers, and Natalie B. Van Kirk, ed. *Canonical Theism: A Proposal for Theology and the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008) is a helpful starting point for discussing the topic of theological sources. The proposal states that over time the church developed a full canonical heritage of resources from which to pull for use in the life of faith. A couple of clarifying notes are necessary at this point. First, the canonical heritage developed as the work of the Holy Spirit. Second, through the work of the Holy Spirit, the heritage functions soteriologically to restore the church to the image of God. This second point provides a definition that allows each canon to function in a ministerial way rather than as an epistemic argument. Finally, canonical heritage refers to the full resources of the church including scripture, doctrines, church fathers, liturgy, etc. The situations in which pastoral care is offered are innumerable, and the faith backgrounds we encounter are equally as varied. Pulling from the full array of sources, or at least developing an awareness of these sources, is a necessary ministerial approach. The contribution of the Canonical Theism proposal is a reminder of the breadth of resources the Holy Spirit has made available for the work of God's ministry.

Discussion

The two biblical narratives presented earlier provide an opportunity to consider common concerns for pastoral practice during crisis. At play in these stories is the relationship between God's presence and revelation and God's hiddenness.³⁹ In the gospel narratives there is a keen sense people are encountering God's activity. It is through the giving and receiving of the Holy Spirit that ministry is enacted; in fact, the presence of the Spirit is itself an act of revelation. Similarly, those belonging to the representative categories of humanity (e.g., poor, captive, etc.) encounter divine activity through Jesus's ministry, which is Spirit-led. Finally, there is the fulfillment of Scripture within the story that serves as a revelatory reference for the new work of God. These experiences offer points of reflection for the ways in which God makes Godself accessible.

However, there is also implicit within the story the idea of God as unknown or even hidden. Each of the representative categories in Luke and the people in the background of Matthew's Gospel experience isolation, substantial life limitations, potential shame, and distress. These people are portraits of suffering. They are lives in which closeness with God may not be realized. Similarly, within Jesus's own life, he receives the anointing of the Spirit but not before experiencing God's silence in the wilderness. Each life within this narrative offers an invitation to immerse oneself in an array of worldviews.⁴⁰

This problem of hiddenness, among other issues such as the problem of evil and suffering, are common to crisis situations.⁴¹ These are acute pastoral questions oriented from a multitude of formed centers of different people within the context of distress. The combination of analytic inquiry and spiritual searching create a unique pastoral challenge. The practical theology of created space provides guidance in approaching these situations. First, what does the practitioner's formed center tell him/her about God's presence or absence? Taking the time to work out these

³⁹ Hiddenness here refers to an experiential phenomenon of the felt absence or unavailability of God, especially during times of suffering. Michael C. Rea, *The Hiddenness of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 18–19. See Rea for further discussion on the hiddenness problem.

⁴⁰ Stump, *Wandering in Darkness*, 374.

⁴¹ For detailed discussions on the problem of evil and suffering see Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977); Richard Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); and Mark Wiebe, *On Evil, Providence, and Freedom: A New Reading of Molina* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2017).

reflections during times of calm clears the way for attending to the intensity of the moment. Second, what is the actual concern and experience of the person in the conversation? Answering this question requires the values of investment and patience to help another navigate the challenge of clearly articulating central concerns during distress. Third, what values are underlying the practitioner's interactions? The guiding value of benevolence becomes indispensable in creating space to freely express the concern without fear of repercussion. Matters that touch on central beliefs (such as those relating to God's nature and activity) are particularly susceptible to emotional barriers and misunderstanding. Created space provides the necessary holding pattern to address and express concerns as acute as the problem of hiddenness.

The purpose of this brief discussion is simply to present a particularly severe concern to demonstrate the efficacy of a practical theology of created space as a response.⁴² Theological approaches to pastoral care need refinement by the high acuity of situations commonly encountered by practitioners. Efficacy is demonstrated by the approach's ability to ground the practitioner and enrich pastoral engagement with deeper understanding and awareness.

Summary

The practical theology of created space attends to the questions raised by critical incidents and contexts by cultivating dialogue among another's experiences, present concerns, and the practitioner's own formed center through conversation with the resources of spiritual theology. This confessional approach is grounded in the conviction that God is active and present within experiences and that practitioners are called to participate in the compassionate ministry of Christ. Investment, patience, and benevolence serve as the guiding values. The stated goal is to develop deeper levels of understanding and awareness, resulting in better ways forward in pastoral care. While various models are worth exploring, this article uses Osmer's four-question model to substantiate this framework. My hope is that this practical theology will provide an accessible yet grounded approach to engaging various forms of crisis ministry.

⁴² A full theological exploration of the specific topics is beyond the scope of this article.

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