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Th.D. Seminar: Explorations in Practical Theology  
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## Practical Theology as a hermeneutical, moral enterprise:

### Browning's Movements in Practical Theology

In his book, *Fundamental Practical Theology*, Don Browning suggests a process by which “communities of memory” (such as churches) can better exhibit “practical reason” or practical wisdom.<sup>1</sup> He calls this four movement process, which he recommends for all theological inquiry and theological education, “fundamental practical theology.”

The first movement is called “Descriptive theology.” All of the practices of a religious community are “theory-laden.”<sup>2</sup> Thus, a “thick description” (or what I would call an “in depth description”) of these practices is needed in order to uncover the various meanings present in that practice. Browning suggests five dimensions of practical reason which should be probed: the *visional*, the *obligational*, the *tendency-need*, the *environmental-social* and the *rule-role*.<sup>3</sup> Each category corresponds to a different discipline in the social-sciences.<sup>4</sup> For example, *visional* corresponds to cultural anthropology. Analysis by all of these disciplines creates a more accurate description of what is happening in a community. Browning analyzes three different churches using

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<sup>1</sup> Don S. Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology: Descriptive and Strategic Proposals* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 2.

<sup>2</sup> Browning, *Fundamental*, 6.

<sup>3</sup> Browning, *Fundamental*, 106.

<sup>4</sup> Browning, *Fundamental*, 111.

this lens. Browning, influenced by Hans-Georg Gadamer, points out that these descriptions are not “objective” or “value-neutral.” Each of the disciplines and each of the people doing the analysis have biases. “The situations of our inquiries inevitably color not only our practical thinking but all pursuit of knowledge and understanding.”<sup>5</sup>

The second movement, “Historical theology,” includes the “traditional disciplines of biblical studies, church history and the history of Christian thought.”<sup>6</sup> It asks, “What do the normative texts that are already part of our effective history *really* imply for our praxis when they are confronted as honestly as possible?”<sup>7</sup>

The third movement, “systematic theology,” investigates “general themes” of the normative Christian texts in relation to “general questions” of the culture.<sup>8</sup> Drawing on Bernstein and Habermas, Browning also believes systematic theology should provide critical distance so that the validity of the normative claims can be tested. This is the discipline of “theological ethics.”<sup>9</sup>

The fourth movement of theology, “strategic practical theology,” is a microcosm of the greater four movement paradigm “fundamental practical theology.”<sup>10</sup> “No matter what our practical religious activity, it has implicit within it the movements of

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<sup>5</sup> Browning, *Fundamental*, 35, 37.

<sup>6</sup> Browning, *Fundamental*, 49.

<sup>7</sup> Browning, *Fundamental*, 49.

<sup>8</sup> Browning, *Fundamental*, 51, 52-53.

<sup>9</sup> Browning, *Fundamental*, 52. Cf. 96-97.

<sup>10</sup> Browning, *Fundamental*, 54-55. “These notes of the first three movements of a fundamental practical theology – descriptive theology, historical theology, and systematic theology – prepare us for the main concern of the book: a discussion of the structure and methods of what I am calling a strategic or fully practical theology” (54). “There are at least four basic questions that drive us to strategic practical theological thinking” (55).

descriptive, historical, systematic and fully practical theology.”<sup>11</sup> It includes “liturgics, homiletics, education, care, and social action ministries” and much more.<sup>12</sup>

Browning’s model contributes to practical theology in at least two ways. First, he is persuaded to make clear what churches are doing to an outside skeptical world. “I want secularists and philosophers to consider this book.”<sup>13</sup> His critical correlational or critical hermeneutical practical theology “not only confesses its narrative beginning point; it also accepts responsibility for advancing reasons for its plausibility.”<sup>14</sup>

Browning believes that “It is not that religious communities exercise practical wisdom in spite of their religious symbols and convictions; they exercise practical wisdom *because* of their religious symbols and convictions.”<sup>15</sup> Outsiders may be intrigued by the depth of wisdom they see in religious people. Religious people like the African-American pastor should know how to speak to them.

Browning’s second contribution is the way he integrates the social sciences while also questioning their objectivity. The psychologist and church consultant both enter their work of analysis with biases. Browning’s model may help mitigate those biases by encouraging that person to intentionally be aware of the other aspects of practical reason, historical theology and systematic theology.

Browning writes about the project where all of the experts analyzed Wiltshire Methodist church, “Some of my students, after reading the case and examining the myriad of analytic perspectives brought to it, often loved and appreciated the church

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<sup>11</sup> Browning, *Fundamental*, 9.

<sup>12</sup> Browning, *Fundamental*, 57.

<sup>13</sup> Browning, *Fundamental*, 2.

<sup>14</sup> Browning, *Fundamental*, 249.

<sup>15</sup> Browning, *Fundamental*, 10.

less.”<sup>16</sup> Browning tries to alleviate this in his own work by trying to create a model that better integrates the social sciences. But he is only partially successful in providing a more inspirational view of the church. His lack of emphasis on historical theology is part of the problem. He criticizes Barth’s concept that “The believing community should conform itself totally to the Word of God revealed in Scripture” because this is a theory-to-practice model.<sup>17</sup> But Barth’s idea is not wrong in itself. It simply needs to be qualified by a hermeneutical model like Browning’s, Farley’s or Groome’s. Browning’s analysis overly emphasizes the opposite extreme: practice influencing tradition.

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<sup>16</sup> Browning, *Fundamental*, 21.

<sup>17</sup> Browning, *Fundamental*, 7.