

Introduction

What is the nature of God as revealed in the communities that follow Jesus Christ and what practices best express faith in God? This is a question of practical theology. In this book, I respond to this question

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on three levels: first, as a practical theologian; second, as a baptized member of the Christian church; and, third, as a follower of Jesus Christ in solidarity with those who have suffered violence in their lives. In the following section, I address these three levels of theological reflection about the nature of God:

(1) Practical theology and the nature of God; (2) Christian life and the nature of God; and (3) Surviving violence and the nature of God.

THREE LEVELS OF THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

1. What does practical theology contribute to the theological disciplines and the church about the nature of God in Jesus Christ?

Practical theology is a discipline of theological reflection that gives sustained attention to the movement of God's Spirit in the everyday lives of contemporary Christian communities for the sake of more

faithful practices. In dialogue with biblical, historical, and systematic theological reflection, practical theologians ask questions about God's ongoing self-revelation through the witness of faithful believers. Out of this reflection comes wisdom and programs that inform the church and the theological conversations among scholars and church leaders.¹

In recent decades, practical theologians have written many essays about the methods by which we understand religious experience and God's actions in human lives.² As a result, practical theology has gained recognition as a branch of theology alongside biblical, historical, and systematic branches. However, establishing practical theology as a method of theology appropriate for academic research does not answer some important questions: What do practical theologians have to say about God in Jesus Christ? If God speaks through the practices of communities of faith, what do practical theologians have to contribute to the doctrinal content of the theologies of the churches?

As a practical theologian, I believe that everyday practices of following Jesus Christ lead to revelation about the nature of God. That is, persons and communities who believe in Jesus Christ and dedicate

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themselves to following "the Jesus way" in their lives will be touched by God's love and power so that new witness emerges. This new witness will have continuity with the long history of God's self-revelation through Scripture, history, and the-

ology. But it will contribute new ideas and new practices as part of the ongoing conversation about God and God's will for humankind in the present and future. I believe that while God's character is consistent with past self-revelations, God's interaction with the world continues today and tomorrow. Given the limits of human faith and understanding, the scope of God's revelation is far beyond what we know, and novel forms of revelation are always happening if we pay attention.

The idea that God's revelation is ongoing and not completed in Scripture is a contested idea among believers and theologians.³ As a believer in the Reformed Protestant tradition, I believe that the Scriptures are the necessary revelation of God in Christ, and that the history of reflections of Christian communities in creeds and doctrines are authoritative for Christian life. I also believe that the reformation of

the church continues because God has more to say about the nature of love and power as humans are ready to hear it. *Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda*—that is, “The church reformed, always reforming.”⁴ Every day is a new challenge for believers to understand God, and God is actively trying to reach us with new understandings that fit our changed situations.

Within this project, my dialogue partners outside of practical theology will be in biblical and systematic theology. I focus especially on narratives of the Hebrew Bible and the Gospels as informed by feminist and liberation theology. Within systematic theology, my home is in process theology, an American theology that has grown in conversation with the philosophical perspectives of Alfred North Whitehead and other process philosophers. The reader will find frequent references to writers and ideas from these perspectives in my witness.⁵

2. *What is the nature of the trinitarian God and the ecclesial witness to Jesus Christ in the world?*

According to the long witness of Hebrew and Christian communities, God is faithful in the midst of the creative adventure of human life on planet earth. Scripture is a narrative of human surprise and shock at God’s word in particular situations. Human self-deception distorts efforts to comprehend God’s character and God’s will as it unfolds within history. Theology throughout history has too often become a form of distorted human self-understanding that hides rather than reveals the mission of God in history. One of my assumptions is that normative claims of theology must always be tested within the crucible of everyday human life and faith.

For Christians, human life depends on the constant presence of God’s love and power. Discerning the nature of God’s presence and will is critical to human survival and flourishing. In this sense theology is not primarily an academic discipline, but the struggle of believers and believing communities to understand and conform to God’s presence in their everyday lives.

What is the witness of believers and believing communities about God’s presence in their everyday lives?

In order to explore the constructive contributions of practical theology to Christian doctrines, I have organized this book into several

traditional categories of systematic theology—God, sin and evil, Christology, Holy Spirit and church, eschatology, and practices of faith. In each of these sections I share my witness to God in Jesus Christ based on my study of the Scriptures, and the tradition, as well as my study of practices of faithfulness within communities of faith. As a believer and a scholar, I confess my personal faith and also engage in conversation with other believers and scholars. The result is a beginning of a personal, constructive, systematic practical theology about the nature of God in Christ that is meant for believers and practicing Christians as well as scholars and theologians of the church. Those who are skeptical of the Christian faith may find my theological reformulation interesting because the ideas may take a different perspective from traditional Christians on the nature of human religious life.

3. What can the church learn about the love and power of God in Jesus Christ from the community of survivors of violence?

All theology is shaped by particular life situations. Theologians must be confessional about the particular communities that create the reference point for their reflections. My faith is particularly shaped by those who have been victims and abusers of domestic violence and other forms of violence such as racism, genocide, and colonial oppression. Some Christian survivors of violence describe experiences of descending into hell and meeting Jesus Christ who empowered them to survive, heal, and thrive. Out of their faith these witnesses have proclaimed religious insights for modern times. As I have journeyed with survivors of violence, I have come to the conviction that through these survivors God is revealing important truth in our time about the nature of human violence and the resilient love of God that empowers the church to be faithful.

My faith is also shaped by persons who have sexually abused others and sought healing and accountability for their sin. Sexual offenses are highly stigmatized in the United States; therefore, understanding the interior spirituality of persons who have abused others is an urgent and difficult task. I believe that the resilient spirit of some abusers reveals the resilient love and power of God.⁶

Victims of violence and those who use violence against others have existed throughout Christian history, but only recently have their voices been heard as a public witness to God's love and power. This is not the

first time that such a new religious witness has arisen in the history of the church. Believers who met Jesus on earth believed that they participated in a new revelation about the nature of God's love and power. Their New

What is the witness of Christian survivors of violence to God and to Jesus Christ in the world?

Testament witness to God in Jesus Christ has inspired many believers through history. Likewise, in many previous eras believers claimed that their lives were transformed through personal encounters with Jesus through faith.⁷ In this book

I am asking a practical theological question: What is the witness of Christian survivors of violence to the trinitarian God, and how do we understand their ecclesial witness to Jesus Christ in the world?

PERSONAL DISCLOSURE

I grew up in the liberal wing of the Reformed tradition as interpreted by the Anabaptist and Pietist communities.⁸ My father was a pastor in the Church of the Brethren in Virginia and Maryland during my formative years, and I learned orthodox Reformed trinitarian doctrine with a special emphasis on community service, pacifism, and social justice. My mother was the daughter of a pastor. She worked for several years for the progressive national office of the Church of the Brethren during the time when they organized relief efforts in Spain during its civil war and lobbied with the government for conscientious-objector status for members of our denomination in anticipation of World War II. As a young adult, my theology of nonviolence and social concern was re-formed in the U.S. civil rights and peace movements of the 1960s. After almost a decade of pastoral ministry, I moved into graduate theological education and became an advocate of process theology. In graduate school, I was strongly influenced by feminist, liberation, and gay theologies. I have studied practical and pastoral theology and counseling in the United States, Europe, Central America, and Asia, and I have written about intercultural understandings of the gospel. I am currently a retired minister of Word and Sacrament in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). All of these various religious influences have brought me back home to my

childhood faith: How can I understand the trinitarian God of love and power who teaches community service, justice, and nonviolence in a complex world of beauty and terror?

I have personal reasons for my concern with human violence. I was born in the United States during World War II, raised in a pacifist tradition, nurtured in the nonviolent resistance of the civil rights movement, and shaped by my work as a pastoral counselor in the prevention of domestic violence movement. The contradiction between the love and power of God on the one hand and the consequences of human violence on the other hand troubles me greatly. I have spent much of my ministry working with abusers and survivors of violence. Through the resilient love of survivors and the courageous spiritual quest of some abusers, I have come to believe that salvation and healing from the effects of violence is possible through the grace of God. Two persons have become especially important influences, and they will be present in many of the chapters that follow. Linda Crockett survived child abuse by her mother and became a significant community leader in the prevention of domestic violence movement; Linda and I have journeyed together for fifteen years. Philip (a pseudonym) has suffered a life-long depression based on deprivations of his childhood and social oppression. As an adult, he abused his power by sexually molesting two adolescent boys. We have journeyed together for twenty-five years through many challenges of his life.

During some periods, the churches have courageously stood with survivors of violence and made a strong witness against the abuses of the powerful. At other periods, the church has compromised its witness to Jesus Christ by choosing abusive power over love and healing. In a post-9/11 world, the churches have an opportunity to be witnesses to the nonviolent love of Christ and the resilient hope that comes from faith in God.

This book is a summary of my own witness after more than sixty years of discipleship to Jesus Christ. My personal creed, provided below, contains a summary of my beliefs from my personal life and professional ministry. Every candidate for ministry in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is required to write and defend a brief statement of faith. Several times I have been questioned by groups of representative Presbyterian believers in order to be approved for ordained ministry. My statement of faith is in my denominational tradition. The chapters following the statement of faith further articulate my theology. I hope

to give a convincing presentation of what I believe is most true about God in Jesus Christ as a contribution to the larger conversation about the nature of God within the Christian churches.

TO THE READERS

The blend of faith practices and scholarship in this book could be helpful for any thoughtful Christian as he or she develops a theology that is both personal and conversant with other voices. Indeed, I encourage leaders of faithful communities everywhere to engage in the discipline of uncovering the implicit theologies at work in your communities and articulating them for a wider public conversation. In this way, we give voice to the hidden things that God consistently communicates to humans but are often blocked by finitude and sin.

I invite the reader to join me on this journey. Our lives and faith are embedded in long histories and complex social situations. It is not simple to state our faith—God is complex and multifaceted; the world is complicated and confusing; we ourselves are inevitably ambiguous and contradictory. To find our way as human beings, we need ways of thinking and practices of faith that can help us keep our balance in the mist of uncertainty and violence.

Resilience and ambiguity have become important to me in my faith journey. Resilience refers to the indomitable will of human beings to find creative solutions in the midst of the deep contradictions of life. Ambiguity refers to the contradictions that confront human beings every day of our lives. I believe that resilience and ambiguity are built into creation and can be understood as part of God's character. These ideas give me hope that we humans can find our way in this world with God's help. This book is an attempt to summarize the way I have found so far. I hope my work will also empower you to summarize the way you have found.

What is your witness to God in Christ and what evidence do you find in the practices of Christian communities?
