

Introduction

A Theobiographical Starting Point

There was an apple tree that sat just beyond the yard of the first house in which I grew up.¹

At least in my memory, this apple tree sat right between my house and the house of Benjamin—my first friend. Its low-hanging branches served as the canvas in which my first friendship was painted. As far as I can remember, Benjamin was a good friend, the perfect companion with whom to spend my fourth and fifth years.

Our friendship took the shape of all good childhood friendships: playing. We climbed and pretended, eating apples right from the tree, throwing the rotten ones from the ground at the older neighbor girls. That tree became our universe, a place to be together. Like monkeys in our habitat, we felt as powerful as children can when we climbed the tree's branches. I can remember nothing we talked about, even now I can't remember the sound of Benjamin's voice, but his person, because he was my friend, is somewhere lodged in me. I've taken him with me.

But the idealistic heaven of the apple tree couldn't protect us from forces that indiscriminately crush bodies of children and the hearts of their parents. Benjamin was my first friend, and he was my first friend to die. Cancer got him.

One day he was fine, running and playing, laughing and singing, and the next day a lump appeared in his armpit. Then cancer over took his body, and within months the happy, healthy child was thin as a rail, weak and bald. Once able to outclimb me to the top of that apple tree, he now couldn't even stand.

1. I'm stealing the phrase "theobiographical starting point" from Pete Ward in *Participation and Mediation: A Practical Theology for the Liquid Church* (London: SCM, 2008).

Marlen, his mother, fought hard for him. Marlen was a European caught in the Midwest; she had relocated after marrying Benjamin's dad. She still spoke with a deep Dutch accent; she was an anomaly in this whitewashed suburb, a true manifestation of the Old World. Marlen was liberal, brash, and an outspoken and deeply committed (if that is possible) atheist. Culturally, Marlen was three or four decades before her time.

When Benjamin became sick, Marlen wasn't sure she could bear her fate, but bear it she did, with the force and will of a lion. Benjamin's sickness only dug in Marlen's atheism, forcing her to refuse even more forcefully a God who would create a world where she loved her boy so deeply, but lost him so horribly.

But Marlen's brokenness couldn't keep her spirit from yearning for something transcendent and bigger than herself to come, to arrive. She now hated a God she didn't believe in, cursed a Jesus she thought didn't care.

It may be true that there are no atheists in foxholes, but it seems just as true, or maybe more so, that there are no atheists in children's hospitals either. While the soldier in a foxhole pleads with God to save him, the parent in the children's hospital does just as much pleading. But after pleading relentlessly hits against the cold wall of impossibility, the pleading turns to cursing. In the wake of parents' misery God surely exists, but sometimes as a brutal thief.

After Benjamin's death Marlen wore her theistic rage like a cloak around her atheism. She claimed her atheism all the more; she lived like a prophet from the Old Testament blaming God for forsaking God's people, giving diatribes about the stupidity of an invisible Man in the clouds and the ignorance of people who see religion or faith as anything other than a language game given to you by your family and its culture.

As fate would have it, Benjamin's little sister would become my little sister's first friend. Elizabeth and my sister now ran and played as Benjamin and I had.

One warm summer night Elizabeth had an experience. Only a very small child herself, and only a few months after Benjamin's death, she awoke to tell her mommy that she had seen Benjamin in her room in the middle of the night and that he was standing with Jesus. She explained that Benjamin kissed her and told her to tell Mommy that he was OK, that Jesus had him.

Marlen, the rigid European atheist, burst through our front door early that morning with tears in her eyes, repeating as she tried to catch her breath, "Benjamin is OK! Elizabeth saw him. He is OK; he is with Jesus."

The very thought that her boy was bound in something she didn't believe was enough. It was a real experience to her, an experience ministered to her by her small daughter, an experience of God, of divine action, that was so real

it gave her broken heart comfort. The woman who did not believe in God grasped onto this experience with both hands, trusting it as real, *believing* that Jesus had really come to her daughter to minister to her. Like Saul and the blinding light (Acts 9), or Peter and the vision of the sheet filled with animals (Acts 10), or Mary Magdalene witnessing that the once-dead Jesus now lives (Luke 24), the experience of God's presence, the divine act, shattered what was believed. It came to her in the most concrete and lived experience of her own suffering of nothingness. It was real, she just kept saying; she "believed up against her unbelief" (Mark 9).

Like some forbidden fruit that correlates so shockingly close to the story of Genesis, being with Benjamin, loving Benjamin, gave me, even as a child, the awful knowledge that I and all those I loved "will surely die." I saw clearly that I was no creator, but a creature that must face nothingness. Because of Benjamin, I knew, even as a child, that I possessed the knowledge that Adam and Eve were never meant to know, the knowledge of good and evil, the knowledge of life and death. Watching Benjamin die, I could hear God speak a word of judgment, with an apple in my hand as the token of our friendship, holding it for my emaciated friend, I heard God say (or maybe it was the voice of death itself), "Now *you* shall surely die."

With my paradise lost and Benjamin dead, my childhood experience was haunted. I needed a minister, someone to share this experience with me, but in the aftermath of his death and my seeming resilience I was left alone to bear my experience of nothingness. The denial-based Midwestern culture in which I was raised lacked the capacity to confront such realities with children. No one said anything, imagining I was fine as I ran around the neighborhood with my hand in a baseball glove.

I'm not sure how many months it was after Benjamin's death that they started, but they started with force. Nothingness had snatched my friend from our apple tree and now I feared, I knew, it was coming for me. Some months after Benjamin's death I started having terrible dreams, frightening dreams that seemed to blur the line between awake and asleep. I had deep, dark experiences. I was being haunted and often "awoke" screaming that something was in my room, that something was after me. It felt so real that, once awake, I couldn't sleep again, shaking in fear, terrified of what might meet me when my eyes shut.

The only way to get me back to sleep was for my mom to pray for me, to minister to my person through prayer. And pray she did, often sitting on my bed for hours, praying all the while I worked myself back to a place of sleep. She prayed for me, but, with the help of the old Lutheran ladies at church, she

also taught me to pray. Frozen in fear, I'd call my mom, demanding that she pray with me. I'd say, "*please, please, Mommy, pray with me,*" grabbing her hands. I wouldn't wait—I'd just start speaking, praying and praying. It seemed to be the only thing to help me stand up against the reality of nothingness. The only thing to witness toward an experience of new possibility, the only thing that I believed brought Jesus close to me. But still the fear was palpable.

When we moved to a new house, leaving the apple tree behind and all the heartbreak it now represented, I suppose Benjamin's death was seen to be behind us. He had lived two doors away from us in our old house—just one house sat between his and ours. Now, in our new house, on our new street, two houses away rested a hole, a cavernous dug-out foundation for a new house. Our first summer in our new house, I had few friends. I was the new kid in a new neighborhood, still carrying the afflictions of haunting nightmares.

I found myself those lonely summer days wandering around that hole, walking its perimeter, throwing rocks into what my childhood self saw as its gaping belly. I think I was fascinated with this hole not only because I was bored, but also because it sat at the same distance, in the same direction as Benjamin's house had. It just simply seemed so fitting that now in this new house a hole, a dark pit sat in its place, as if Benjamin and his family had been sucked from the earth.

I'd roam around that hole, peering into its center, like staring down the nothingness that existed in the world. And, oddly, its greatest appeal, its beckoning for me to come and explore it, almost always came at dusk. Just as the dark was coming, I would hear it whisper to me to come and see, to come and dip my foot into its yawning mouth.

On a summer night in the upper Midwest, the sun does not begin its descent until 9:30 p.m., a time when bedtime is near and the prospect of bad dreams hovers. So I'd walk out to that hole as an odd way of facing the darkness that haunted me, moving me to visit the hole, a hole left where Benjamin once lived.

My dusk walks into my existentialism didn't comfort my mom. She made no connection between Benjamin and that hole; rather, like any good mom, her fear was the danger of a fall and a concussion, so she'd warn me, "Andy, stay away from that hole; it's dangerous." Yet, it called to me. So one night as dusk was descending toward black, I walked over and stood next to the hole, throwing three rocks at its center, staring into its belly, and bending my knees to spit into this hole I despised without knowing why.

But, as I extended from my crouch to propel my loogie into the eye of the hole, my feet lifted from the ground, returning inevitably to a different place,

closer to the edge of the hole. And when my toes touched the loose ground, the hole swallowed me into its nothingness. Like a scene from a movie, I slid down, knowing I had just done the one thing my mom had directly warned me against, the thing I knew she was most anxious about. Dropping down its wall into the hole's nothingness, fear gripped me.

Now, in my enemy's grasp, the fear overtook me as dusk faded completely into darkness. In retrospect, I was in little danger. A few more minutes or a few loud yells and adults would have come looking for me. But in the moment, even in my memory, the fear enveloped me. I had come eye-to-eye with nothingness, with the danger that had threatened me, that I imagined had taken Benjamin.

Finding myself now in the pit of nothingness, I did the one thing anyone else would: I ran! With every effort to hold back my tears I ran for the wall of the hole, trying to free myself, but every effort to reach the top led only to my sliding back down into the belly of nothingness, kicking as the nothingness seemed to grab and pull me back.

The tears could no longer be contained as fear pushed big, round drops from my intensely frightened eyes. I looked again at the walls of the hole, scanning its sides for another way out. Stuck with the nothingness that took Benjamin, feeling its eyes penetrating me as it followed ever more, I returned to the action my mom taught me brought the nearness of the ministering Jesus. I had learned from my night torment that I needed Jesus to minister to me, to bring divine action into my nothingness and secure my being. Prayer was the action that drew me into the ministering action of Jesus.

So I prayed for Jesus to come and minister to me. Praying, I felt moved to turn, walk, and sit at the very middle of that hole, the middle eye that I loathed, the middle that represented all the nothingness in the world, that had so concretely taken my friend.

I sat there and I prayed, at the foot of the cross. I pleaded with God to free me from this hole, to rescue me from this nothingness. Like some modern-day Joseph and his fancy coat, I pled with God to minister to me, to rescue me from this hole—from all the nothingness that threatened me.

I then heard two things, as real and concrete as could be, spoken to my spirit. I heard God say I was loved, that Jesus would always be near me to minister to me, that God smiled at the thought of me, that God's delight could not be shaken and Jesus would *always* be for me, coming to me. And then I heard God say, "Run, run, run, run!" Yet, it was not the call to run from something but to it—to the very presence of Jesus that was present to minister to me. So in my Kangaroo tennis shoes I took off like lightning, lightened

enough by the embrace of God in the ministering action of Jesus to race up the side to the top of that hole, never stopping as I ran from the belly of the hole's nothingness to my own front door.

Bursting through it, I could do no other than proclaim, to witness to the act of God, to herald the ministering action of Jesus as real. I shouted that Jesus had come to me, meeting me in my experience of hell. So like a mini tornado I swung the screen door open and shouted, "I fell in the hole and prayed and Jesus rescued me! Jesus got me out!"

I announced it with the excitement and shock of Mary Magdalene seeing the angel at the tomb of Jesus. I proclaimed with the same assurance and joy that she did to Peter and the others. I was *not* speaking of a mishap, of the fall into a hole—a situation truly not needing a miracle—but I was testifying to much more: I was confessing that I had been in hell, that I knew it, but in that hellhole I had found Jesus, right there, right where Benjamin's house once sat. It was in that very hell that Jesus found me, ministered to me, and acted to save me. Jesus was real to me in that hole. I screamed over and over, "Jesus rescued me! Jesus rescued me!" My nightmares never returned.

TOWARD PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

If practical theology is committed to the concrete and lived, then these experiences of divine encounter, *real* experiences of the presence of God like Marlen's and mine, must make their way into the center of practical theological reflection. If practical theology is to be *practical* (attending to concrete experience) but yet *theological*, then it must make central the encounter of divine and human action. It is my hope in this project to reimagine practical theology through the experience of divine action. The centrality of divine action has not in my opinion been central to practical theology—leading some, as we'll see, to wonder about what makes practical theology theological. My goal in this project is to push practical theology headlong into the theological, but to do this without losing the centrality of the concrete and lived, of the experiential. It is then these experiences, like Marlen's and mine, like Saul's and Peter's, that become central to, and yet often have been neglected by, practical theology.

Because practical theology is about the concrete and lived, I must be upfront and start this project by articulating what it is about my own experience that moves me into this project, seeing both the vitality and missteps of the field.

I have three competing narratives that make practical theology of interest to me and help me make sense of my experiences like the one in the hole. They are narratives that rest in my own biography but nevertheless point, in

my mind, to both the potential and peril of the field of practical theology itself. These narratives overlap, making it possible for someone like me to be drawn from one to another. But they also compete.

These three narratives center around (1) practical theology itself and its attention to the concrete and lived, coupled with my upbringing in (2) evangelicalism and (3) my theological heritage in an equally significant neo-Barthianism, laced with strong Lutheran propensities.² As I will articulate below, many evangelicals, Lutherans, and Barthians (for their own distinctive reasons) have *not* embraced the reimagining of practical theology that began in the last decades of the twentieth century. And many of them have looked at this reimagining with a raised eyebrow, for while practical theology seeks the concrete and lived, it has not always been able to see experiences like mine as real.

MY NARRATIVE

Raised in a conservative Lutheran *evangelical* community,³ a community whose discourse surrounded (almost equally) Luther and Dobson, the small catechism and the Willow Creek association, a certain pietism that connects the heart, head, and hands was clear in my upbringing.⁴ Faith was to be lived; it was to

2. “Nevertheless, while there is a good deal of diversity, there remains a good deal of continuity. Irrespective of the theological and methodological diversity, the common theme that holds Practical Theology together as a discipline is its perspective on, and beginning-point in, human experience and its desire to reflect theologically on that experience.” John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (London: SCM, 2006), v. Fowler says something similar: “Practical theological approaches are contextual, local, and stay close to experience.” “The Emerging New Shape of Practical Theology,” in *Practical Theology: International Perspectives*, ed. Friedrich Schweitzer and Johannes van der Ven (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1999), 85. Bonnie Miller-McLemore continues, “Methodologically practical theology begins with the concrete and local.” “Introduction: The Contributions of Practical Theology,” in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, ed. Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 7.

3. Practical theology attends to the embodied and concrete, and therefore I present my narrative that leads me into this project. I do this as a way of showing the very personal elements that shape this project. I seek to present this as a way of revealing my experience and not claiming it as conclusive (for instance, my whiteness). My experience and positions in this text are no doubt impacted by this reality. But, even because they are, it is possible that my experience is real, and while it needs to be put in conversation with those with different background, I’m seeking a way to uphold *real* experience while attending to the particularities of gender, race, and the like that so impact our interpretation of these experiences.

4. I’m seeking to draw a distinction between “evangelical” and “Evangelical” throughout this project. My own story has its roots in “Evangelicalism” defined as a sociological category. I will not shy away from how this background has affected me for good or for ill. I have tried to be as critical as affirming of this part of my background. Yet, I’m most interested in making a case not for the cultural Evangelical

be put into action. And it was to be put in action because God was active. We were sinners, but God acted for us. God in Jesus Christ lived with and for me, calling me to *live* as a disciple.

EVANGELICALISM

Finding myself in a classic evangelical college in the mid-1990s directed me deeper into the commitment that faith must be lived. This commitment came with enough weirdness, spiritual elitism, and misguided theology to fill a book. But it also came with a commitment, bound in a form of discourse, that God was active, that we talk about God as moving and living, as a reality who impacts our being, and therefore God deserved to be the subject of active verbs connected to our lives.⁵ I had personal experience with this living reality in the most emotive of ways; I had concretely experienced the presence of Jesus with me.

This attention to the concrete and lived made practical theology an ever-intriguing discipline to me. It *appeared* to connect the experience of faith with deep reflection, fusing the academy and the congregation, the church and the world. Its practicality touched my own narrative of faith, but its theological and intellectual depth pushed me into deeper reflective contemplations than my upbringing had invited. Practical theology became a vehicle for thinking deeply about faith and God on the ground and in experience, experience like what happened in the hole.

I was first introduced to the field in an evangelical institution, Fuller Theological Seminary, where I discovered for the first time that such a thing called practical theology existed. This was exhilarating, not only because I had found a new personal and intellectual love, but also because at Fuller practical theology itself was a rebel, a discipline given attention by only a few (perhaps one or two) faculty members and their half-dozen doctoral students. It was no mainstream field in this evangelical institution. And for a lowly MDiv (and then ThM) student to be invited into such closed conversations was thrilling. Like love at first sight, one glimpse of practical theology's possibilities and its evangelical avant garde nature and I was overcome, infatuated. It connected the concrete, lived experience of my upbringing with an intellectual, reflective disposition that I yearned for.

Yet, while I'd marry myself to practical theology, eventually completing a PhD in the subject at Princeton Theological Seminary and then teaching it

experience but for the broader theological evangelical experience, as a theological sense that God through Jesus Christ comes to us in our lives even today as a true reality.

5. As my colleague Roland Martinson often says.

at Luther Seminary (both mainline institutions), my love affair with practical theology was not always smooth. As I ventured deeper into the field, I began to understand why practical theology could never find firm footing in an evangelical institution like Fuller (or even a Lutheran one like Luther Seminary, for that matter). Not only was the discipline's reemergence in the last decades of the twentieth century propelled by thinkers from more liberal universities and divinity schools, but their very theological starting point invited evangelicals with one hand (with a concern for the concrete and lived) while also repelling them with an inability or unwillingness to talk about the agency of God, to see experiences like Marlen's and my own as real encounters with divine action.⁶

PRACTICAL THEOLOGY AND DIVINE ACTION

As I'll argue in the chapters below, practical theology has developed an incredible and admirable ability to discuss the complication and wonder of human action. But the field has been less imaginative (or attentive) to divine action (to the concrete and lived experience of God) in a way that doesn't equate it to or conflate it with human action. This struggle has left even stalwarts in the discipline like Bonnie Miller-McLemore to wonder about the normative theological nature of the field. She has even wondered what is theological about practical theology.⁷ Miller-McLemore has called discussions around theological normativity a necessary growing edge for the field.⁸

6. Stephen Pattison also worries about practical theology losing its theological heart and becoming too enamored with human action through the social sciences. "In particular, I worry that this kind of emphasis may collude with a loss of theological focus and interest in the sort of conceptual and imaginative work that practical theology might engage with." *The Challenge of Practical Theology* (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2007), 245. Ted Smith asks something similar, "If theories of practice have been especially useful for the descriptive moments in practical theology, it is not clear just how they should be related to constructive or systematic theological claims." "Theories of Practice" in Miller-McLemore, *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, 252.

7. "Of course, we must have something interesting to say: 'The primary justification for inclusion is the ability to produce an interestingly different angle on life.' This is where practical theologians face a challenge. No one says practical theology is not normative, constructive, or Christian. But do we have something theologically interesting to say? For decades, practical theologians have argued that attention to practice has a yield for theology but specifying this or even getting around to it has been difficult. If practical theology has been partly about transforming academic theology, then it has to show what it has contributed to theology as theology." Bonnie Miller-McLemore, "Misunderstanding about Practical Theology: Presidential Address to the International Academy of Practical Theology," presented at the 2011 conference of the International Academy of Practical Theology, Amsterdam, 2011, 58.

8. "Reformulating the final misunderstanding—that practical theology is largely, if not wholly, descriptive, interpretative, empirical—sounds a little like stating the obvious: practical theology is in fact theology. However, there are benefits of a more explicit correction as follows: As theology, practical

This project then seeks to push practical theology more fully in the direction of divine action (normativity), asserting that doing so does not undercut practical theology's commitment to the concrete and lived but takes it deeper into the experiences like those with which this chapter starts. The heart of the field (and, one might argue, the heart of ministry) is to attend to the encounter of the divine and the human, recognizing them as two *distinct* forms of action that nevertheless associate; this means being open, at least in part, to the idea that the field of practical theology may need to take a deeper ministerial turn as much as an empirical one.⁹ This, needless to say, moves us headlong into normative theological conversations, into claiming boldly the *theology* in practical theology.¹⁰ This is something dangerous to do in light of the establishment, but worth the risk, in my opinion, because of the field's severe theological deficiency.¹¹

theology is normative. It makes demands on those who practice it to live by the sacred and transcendent convictions it professes. Greater clarity about our theological and not just our practical contribution is one of our challenges but success in this realm will advance the discipline and its value for religious communities and the common good." *Ibid.*, 59.

9. I'm with Karin Heller on this concern and need for practical theology, she states "The constant temptation of practical theology is to come up with a mere translation of God's Word into a language style proper to each community, nation, and culture. The danger faced is to substitute human speech for God's speech. The challenge of practical theology, then, is to reply to this persistent temptation in two ways. First, practical theology has to approach the biblical text in a way that does not nullify God's Word. Second, it has to consent to a constant verification of man's speech about God, Christ, God's people, and ministers by an ongoing return to Scripture and to practical life." "Missio Dei: Envisioning an Apostolic Practical Theology," *Missiolog: An International Review* 37, no. 1 (January 2009): 53.

10. "It is important to return to Paul, the cross, and the great inversion implied in the incarnation because in academic theology we are constantly in danger of forgetting that the foundations of our subject matter and its *raison d'être* are a-rational, deviant and evangelical. Although we use the tools of critical reason and scholarship to understand religious faith and practice and its significance, we are explorers within a faith tradition; some of our most distinguished and creative predecessors have been labeled as mad!" Pattison, *Challenge of Practical Theology*, 283. Hawkes continues down the road on which Pattison has started us, "But truth is not simply logical; theological truth is certainly not. Nor is the understanding of truth reached purely by logical processes. This is understood now even by the philosophers of natural science. Scientific theories are not reached by 'simple' induction (still less by deduction). Frequently the process of theory-building involves the exercise of creative imagination which intuits a hypothesis, which must then be tested and can never be finally and absolutely proven. The hypothesis, or theory, always remains open to revision; and is always an approximation to rather than a complete description of reality." Gerald Hawkes, "The Role of Theology in Practical Theology," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 49 (December 1984): 47.

11. Gordon Mikoski points to the theological challenges confronting practical theology. "As a cognate problem, practical theology has wrestled with the ways in which it is an authentically theological discipline. The Protestant emphasis on the authority of scripture has helped the field avoid devolution

Perhaps this is unfair. To say that practical theology is theologically deficient is to overlook a number of projects that have spilled ink on chapters addressing their theological frames. But what is interesting is that so often these theological conversations use theology as a frame to attend to human action (conflating the divine with the human). For instance, one of the most popular theological (call it *doctrinal*) perspectives in practical theology is creation. Since Don Browning's work, it has been nearly paradigmatic to use creation as the link between the human and the divine, or really between the human and the theological tradition. While other thinkers have turned to other (doctrinal) perspectives, it appears that the purpose of doing so is *not* to actually use the doctrine to speak of God's independent action, but to add texture to the presentation of human action. In other words, practical theology has become a discipline fluent in talking about concrete human action (practice), but hesitant in speaking of God's action and nature from the locale of the concrete.

MOVING WITHIN AND BEYOND A NEO-BARTHIANISM

My own narrative chafes against this unwillingness to talk of God's action; in the same years that I was falling in love with practical theology, I was being introduced to the work of Karl Barth. Coming from a hyperspiritualized evangelical college, where spiritual growth was a competitive sport, reading the great Swiss theologian was liberation. It was freedom to read of God's action stated so boldly and creatively. It was freedom to see the beauty of God's action done for me and to recognize that my action, while important, paled in comparison to the action of the triune God. While I had perspired pushing myself to spiritual growth, Barth opened my eyes to see all the work was God's own. Barth claimed that God's action comes upon us as an event of reconciliation. I had experienced this in the hole; I believed in the most lived way that Jesus had come to me and rescued me, not so much from the hole but from the nothingness in the world.

While Barth has been an enemy of many practical theologians, who feel perhaps that his perspective on the wholly Otherness of God is too firm to allow for human practice, he nevertheless gives us rich themes to speak of the possibility, of a realism, of God's action in the world, that ministers to mothers in despair and finds little boys who are lost in nothingness. I'll argue below that

into merely empirical social research into human experience of all things religious. Often, however, practical theology defines itself against the abstract and disconnected pontifications of systematic dogmatic theology. In seeking to correct or supplement such theology by attending to lived contexts, practical theology has often underdeveloped the theological dimension of its work." "Mainline Protestantism," in Miller-McLemore, *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, 562.

this is fundamental to the concrete and lived nature of practical theology but is so often missing from the field's presentations.

Yet, outside of a discussion on Barth's articulation of the *concurus Dei* and its grounding for thinking of the partnership of divine and human action, this project will be appreciative, but critical of so-called Barthian practical theologians, asserting that too many have used Barth's perspectives as a cul-de-sac for their own thought; rather than the catalyst to construct more generative accounts of practical theology and its core in purview of divine action.

Therefore, one of my core dialogue partners in this work will be Eberhard Jüngel, who, while indebted to Barth's thought, is no simple commentator. Rather, Jüngel, while drawing on *some* of the material Barth gives him, builds his own constructive theological structure from those pieces. In part 2, I'll follow Jüngel, using him like he does Barth to construct my own perspective on practical theology. Following the path where Jüngel moves through Barth, I'll accompany the former in seeking to place practical theology on a lived articulation of justification.

TOWARD JUSTIFICATION

To move toward justification is not to make practical theology live as a slave of doctrine. Practical theology has defined itself over and against an applied theology that seeks to simply draw out the practical from the doctrinal, for instance. So my goal here is *not* to make justification applicable by accommodating Jüngel to practical theology. Rather, standing inside a practical theological perspective called *Christopraxis*, I'll use Jüngel as a mutual dialogue partner to see justification not simply as a static doctrine of thought but as an epistemological perspective that articulates a concrete, lived reality of God's ministering action in the world.¹² Justification, I'll argue, is the shape divine

12. James Fowler discusses this move away from applied or trickle-down theology. "That older arrangement of the division of labor in theological education rested upon an unfortunate understanding of the relation between theory and practice. The description of practical theology as applied theology indicates the problem: We were working with a 'trickle-down' understanding of applied theology. The assumption was that the creative work in theology went on in the fields of Biblical Studies, Historical Studies, and most especially, Systematic Theology. Ethics, because it touched on the practical and political, had a somewhat ambiguous position. Unconsciously, theological faculties absorbed the positivist bias toward what could be called pure reason, scholarship that proceeded in accordance with the canons of pure research in the sciences. In theological education the results of scholarly inquiry and constructive interpretation in the so-called classical disciplines of theology would be appropriated and applied in the work of church leadership and pastoral practices. That is what I mean when I say that practical leadership and pastoral practices. That is what I mean when I say that practical viewed its work as derivative and second-hand. In this perspective pastors and educators were encouraged to think of themselves as

action takes in the concrete and lived world, coming through nothingness to give new possibility.

In other words, I see justification as the epistemological articulation of an ontological reality of divine action and human impossibility (this points to critical realism that will support my perspective and will be discussed in depth in relation to practical theology in part 3). Justification, in this work, is not a container of thought (as it so often is in *some* Lutheran contexts) but an existential, ontological *reality*. It is an epistemological “best account” of an ontological state (both for God and human beings). This project then is a *realist practical theology* (as we’ll explore in part 3, allowing experiences of Jesus like those articulated at the beginning of this chapter to be central in practical theological construction), and justification is the epistemological account of this reality. So, then, I’m not *applying* justification as a static idea but using it as lens to explore a dynamic reality, like that of an atheist celebrating the presence of Jesus. Justification as a lens allows me, in a critical realist way, to favor ontology over epistemology, asserting that what is most real (even real outside of our epistemological account) is human impossibility, the hole, and God’s free action for us, to minister to us from nothingness to new possibility (we will explore this in depth in part 2).¹³

Justification has rarely if ever (at least in the English-speaking world) been the framework for thinking about practical theology, and it is easy to see why. Justification, especially in its Luther-inspired form (in the perspective of the *theologia crucis*) sees the human agent as utterly stuck, and stuck so severely that all human forms of thought and action are bent toward impossibility (this is the human being’s ontological state). All human action is caught in a fever dream of circularity, leading in only one direction—toward death—with no possibility inside the human agent or its natural history for the fever to break.

In a field overemphasizing the human forms of action (practices constructed or reappropriated by human agents in socially constructed milieus), it is no wonder that justification has been ignored, for justification through the *theologia crucis* claims that human action (practice) is covered in impossibility.

consumers . . . of theology, but not as producers. And the laity were viewed as passive receivers of this second-hand theology transmitted by pastors and educators.” “Emerging New Shape of Practical Theology,” 76.

13. “Christian faith is the language of a community of which the depth grammar is described in its doctrines.” R. Ruud Ganzevoort, “Narrative Approaches,” in Miller-McLemore, *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, 217. This is similar to my understanding of justification, though I would push the definition a little further to articulate doctrine as an epistemological best account of an ontological reality.

The cross is the end of human action; it claims only God and God's action can save (or even sustain the good). A practical theology from the cross then radically shifts the ground practical theology stands on. From this perspective, human action through justification is to receive the divine act, to receive the ministering presence of the living Jesus. And distinct forms of human action themselves must come after (as responses) to the divine act to save the human out of impossibility and death (or better, through death). It is after experiencing the nearness of Jesus in my hole of nothingness that I'm called into action, to run and to testify that Jesus is found in places of death, making them stages of resurrection, of new possibility.

The conservative Lutheran community in which I grew up gave me an ability to pray to a living and active God, and (in contrast to my college pietism) the old Lutheran ladies taught me that this piety was not bound in what I did. Rather, it was a pietism built on justification, and therefore it came with a deep existential core—not only in the sense of faith meaning something to my personal being, but also in the seeking for God, finding God in human impossibility (something Jüngel himself explores, as we'll see). While it was a pietism that meant faith was lived, it was nevertheless bound within a radical conception of justification as a commitment that human action has no inner redeemable natural core, that all human action, all practice, needs to face its impossibility. No human practice could justify, no human action can run itself out of the hole; only the act of the personal ministering God found in the cross of Christ could justify.

It claimed a deep level of realism: it stated that no matter what thought forms we construct or what new practices we take on (even in their goodness), there is a deeper reality, concretely bound in our death, that we cannot escape. Justification as a frame for practical theology, as I'll argue below, gives us a realism both of the human condition and God's free act in it that recalibrates practical theology away from empirical social constructionism and toward a critical realism where generative visions of divine action, truth, ontology, and reality may be articulated. This logic of *theologia crucis*, of the theology of the cross, stands as a reality (as the real) and thus rests in opposition to many of the core practical theological conceptions that have recently defined the field.

So I will try something very difficult and yet central to the theological commitments of those of us with evangelical, Lutheran, or neo-Barthian propensities in our background, as well as those of us who have concrete and lived experiences (a realism) of Jesus' presence coming to us; I will try to construct an understanding of practical theology that sees at its core an attention to divine and human action, a perspective that affirms such transcendent

experiences as concrete and lived and therefore essential for practical theology to affirm and interpret theologically. Therefore, the construction of this project could be called a *Christopraxis practical theology of the cross*.

But before we can get to the constructive heart of the project (parts 2 and 3), it will first be important for me to set the terrain of the field itself, exploring in the next three chapters what practical theology is by first examining both its strengths and weaknesses (chapter 2). Chapter 3 will examine some concrete cases of encounter with divine action, listening to other people's voices of divine encounter like my own presented at the beginning of this chapter. Chapter 4 will, then, explore some of the most dominant models in the field, models I will mine for their attention and construction for normative visions of divine action.