



Classification of Challenges and Solutions in Practical Theology: A Three-Level Approach (Meta-theoretical, Theoretical, and Practical)

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Abstract

Original Research



This study systematically classifies the challenges and solutions in practical theology within a three-level framework: meta-theoretical, theoretical, and practical. Despite developments since Schleiermacher, practical theology lacks an integrated framework addressing interconnected challenges across these levels. Using a descriptive-analytical and comparative-critical method, the research examines key definitions and four approaches: pastoral, social studies-based, theory-centered, and reformist. Findings reveal profound transformations: expansion from ecclesial to social contexts, a shift from applicative to critical-reflective methods based on religious praxis, and increased attention to socio-cultural dimensions. The classification shows that meta-theoretical challenges (modernity, hermeneutical crisis) shape foundational presuppositions; theoretical challenges (interaction with human sciences) create methodological tensions needing interdisciplinary solutions; and practical challenges (clergy education, institutional reforms) demand context-sensitive interventions. The study's main contribution is demonstrating the dialectical interconnection among these levels: revising epistemological presuppositions enables interdisciplinary methodologies, which facilitate practical reforms in clergy education. Solutions include linking religious narratives to contemporary issues, using social sciences to understand social structures, developing effective communication skills, and creatively employing new technologies in religious education.

Keywords:

Practical theology, religious praxis, three-level framework, meta-theoretical challenges, interdisciplinary methodology.

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Introduction

The emergence of modernity in the late eighteenth century brought fundamental transformations to the social and intellectual structures of Western societies, which had profound effects on the position and function of theological teachings in the lives of Christians. This paradigmatic transformation caused theological teachings, which for centuries had served as the main reference for guiding the individual and social lives of believers, to face serious questions regarding their effectiveness and relevance to the realities of modern life. Modernity, by presenting new patterns of thought and living, rapidly gained popularity among new generations and challenged traditional frameworks of religious understanding. The nature of the theological questions underwent fundamental changes, and the classical teachings of Christian theology were no longer capable of effectively responding to the spiritual and existential concerns of modern human beings.

Simultaneously with these intellectual transformations, the institution of the church and the performance of the clergy faced increasing criticism. Public trust in the authenticity and correctness of ecclesiastical teachings declined, and the gap between religious discourse and the lived experience of believers deepened. The inability of a significant portion of the clergy to establish effective communication with Christian communities and to understand their needs and challenges within the context of socio-cultural transformations became a determining factor in intensifying the sense of disconnection between theology and daily life. For instance, surveys conducted in Western Europe during the late twentieth century revealed that a growing number of young adults viewed church teachings as irrelevant to their lived concerns—issues such as mental health, economic precarity, and the environmental crisis—while the clergy continued to address traditional doctrinal questions that no longer resonated with their congregations (Bruce, 2002, pp. 106-117).

This situation confronted theologians with an unavoidable necessity: a transition from purely theoretical theology toward an approach that could bridge religious teachings and the practical realities of life. The response of many Christian thinkers to this challenge was the development and deepening of “Practical Theology” (Heitink, 1999, pp. 1-7).

Research Problem and Gap

Despite the significant growth of practical theology scholarship over the

past decades, a critical examination of the literature reveals a persistent gap: the absence of a systematic framework that simultaneously classifies challenges at multiple levels and maps corresponding solutions to each level. Osmer's influential work (2008) provides a four-task model for practical theological interpretation—descriptive-empirical, interpretive, normative, and pragmatic—but does not offer a classification of the challenges that practical theology itself faces as a discipline. Similarly, Browning's fundamental practical theology (1991) advances a theory-laden practice model but focuses primarily on methodological integration rather than systematic problem identification. Cahalan's work (2005) addresses educational dimensions but remains limited to the practical level without examining meta-theoretical foundations.

This fragmentation creates a significant problem for both scholars and practitioners: without understanding how challenges at different levels interconnect, proposed solutions often address symptoms rather than root causes. For example, many seminary reform initiatives in North American theological education during the 1990s and 2000s emphasized the addition of practical skills courses, such as preaching, counseling, and community organizing. However, these reforms often proved insufficient because they failed to address the underlying epistemological assumptions that defined valid theological knowledge (Cahalan, 2005, pp. 63-64). As a result, the field requires an integrated analytical framework that can: (1) classify challenges according to their level of operation; (2) identify the causal and dialectical relationships between levels; and (3) propose solutions that address the interconnected nature of these challenges.

Research Questions

This study addresses the following questions:

1. What are the primary challenges facing practical theology, and how can they be systematically classified within a three-level framework (meta-theoretical, theoretical, and practical)?
2. What is the relationship between challenges at different levels, and how do meta-theoretical challenges shape theoretical and practical problems?
3. What solutions correspond to each level of challenge, and how can these solutions be integrated to address the interconnected nature of practical theology's problems?

Distinction from Previous Studies

This research differs from existing scholarship in three significant ways. First, while studies such as Osmer (2008) and Heitink (1999) provide frameworks for conducting practical theology, this study focuses on the challenges facing practical theology as a discipline—a meta-level analysis that examines the field itself rather than its application. Second, unlike literature reviews that catalogue approaches descriptively (e.g., Magezi, 2019), this study adopts a critical-analytical stance, evaluating the strengths and limitations of each approach in relation to specific levels of challenge. Third, the three-level framework proposed here—distinguishing meta-theoretical, theoretical, and practical dimensions—provides a more granular analysis than the binary distinctions (theory/practice) common in the literature, enabling a more precise identification of where problems originate and where solutions must be directed.

The significance of this study lies in its potential to provide scholars and practitioners with a diagnostic tool for understanding the multi-layered nature of challenges in practical theology. By mapping challenges to specific levels and identifying corresponding solutions, this framework can guide more targeted and effective responses to the discipline's ongoing struggles with relevance, methodology, and institutional reform. The scope of this study encompasses the major Western traditions of practical theology, with particular attention to developments since Schleiermacher, while acknowledging that contextual applications (e.g., African practical theology as examined by Magezi, 2019) may require the adaptation of the framework.

Literature Review

The systematic conceptualization of practical theology originates with Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), who proposed a tripartite structure for theological knowledge: philosophical theology, historical theology, and practical theology (Schleiermacher, 2011, pp. 127-138). This foundational division enabled extensive transformations in the understanding of theology's nature and function, subsequently evolving through diverse interpretations by later theologians.

Contemporary literature reflects considerable diversity in approaches. Tucker (2011) empirically examines practical theology's role in strengthening local churches through case studies, demonstrating its effectiveness in solving social problems and modernizing educational programs (Tucker, 2011, pp. 1-10). However, Tucker's focus remains at the

practical application level without examining the theoretical or meta-theoretical conditions that enable or constrain such applications; nor does he address why practical theology succeeds in some contexts but fails in others.

Klaasen (2014) presents a dialectical framework using Aristotelian practical reason (*phronesis*) and Frankfurt School critical theory, proposing a cyclical model of continuous praxis-theory interaction where faith communities' lived experience forms the starting and return points of theological reflection (Klaasen, 2014, pp. 1-6). While Klaasen significantly addresses theory-practice relationships, his approach presupposes critical realism without examining how alternative epistemologies might reshape this cycle, illustrating the need for fuller meta-theoretical analysis.

Magezi (2019) provides a critical analysis of practical theology in African contexts, presenting an indigenization model responsive to postcolonial challenges and cultural-religious diversity (Magezi, 2019, pp. 115-135). His work valuably demonstrates how contextual factors shape practical theology's challenges and possibilities, yet it does not systematically distinguish context-specific challenges from those inherent to the discipline itself.

Osmer (2008, 2011) proposes an influential four-dimensional framework comprising: (1) the descriptive-empirical task (systematic data collection); (2) the interpretive task (interdisciplinary dialogue for deeper explanation); (3) the normative task (formulating theological-ethical criteria); and (4) the pragmatic task (designing practical programs) (Osmer, 2008, pp. 1-12; Osmer, 2011, p. 3). While Osmer's model excels at providing methodology—answering “how should practical theology be done?”—it does not systematically address “what challenges does practical theology face?” His framework operates primarily at the theoretical and practical levels, leaving meta-theoretical questions about epistemological foundations largely implicit.

The three-level analytical framework adopted in this study—inspired by contemporary philosophy of science and social theories—enables a comprehensive examination: the meta-theoretical level analyzes epistemological, ontological, and anthropological presuppositions; the theoretical level examines the principles and concepts that shape practical theology's conceptual framework; and the practical level focuses on operationalizing theological insights in specific contexts (Osmer, 2011, p. 1).

A comparative analysis reveals three patterns that justify this study's approach. First, existing studies tend to focus on single levels: Tucker and Magezi emphasize practical applications; Klaasen focuses on theoretical frameworks; and meta-theoretical analysis remains underdeveloped. Second, the relationships between challenges at different levels are rarely

examined systematically— while studies acknowledge multiple challenges, they do not map their causal or dialectical relationships. Third, proposed solutions match their analytical level: practical studies offer practical solutions, theoretical studies offer conceptual frameworks, but integrated multi-level solutions are rare.

These patterns reveal the gap this study addresses: the need for a framework that (1) operates across all three analytical levels; (2) examines inter-level relationships; and (3) proposes integrated rather than fragmented solutions. This three-level approach creates structural coherence, enables precise the identification of different approaches' strengths and weaknesses, presents a comprehensive picture of the complexities within this interdisciplinary field, and clarifies the dialectical relationship between theory and practice in shaping religious praxis.

Approaches to Practical Theology

Following the formation of practical theology as an independent discipline, a wide spectrum of approaches emerged, each emphasizing specific aspects of the field. Some theologians consider practical theology to be an extension of pastoral theology, emphasizing the pastor's role as a guide and companion. Another group has entered the empirical arena, studying believers' lived experiences using social science methodology. A third category examines practice-based theories through critical reinterpretation. Finally, a fourth group focuses on reforming the church institution. The common thread uniting these approaches is the concern for realizing theological doctrines in believers' practical lives.

First Approach: Practical Theology as an Extension of Pastoral Theology

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, practical theologians focused on empowering pastors to serve as effective preachers and shepherds for their congregations (De Roest, 2019, p. 91). Pastoral theology relates to the local life of the Christian community, where the pastor is responsible for caring for the spiritual and moral dimensions of individuals (Shedd, 1872, p. 320).

Pastoral care emphasizes that pastors must develop a deep understanding of their congregation's life and dedicate time to them, establishing authentic relationships (Bryant & Brunson, 2007, p. 117). Anderson (1997) states that this active presence can take various forms: counseling sessions, encouraging words, accompanying people during hardships, or providing a "ministry of

presence” during critical times—emphasizing physical and emotional presence without necessarily providing immediate solutions.

A concrete illustration of this approach can be found in the hospice chaplaincy movement, where pastoral caregivers accompany terminally ill patients and their families through the dying process. In such settings, the chaplain’s primary role is not to provide theological explanations for suffering but to be present as a compassionate witness—holding space for grief, anger, doubt, and hope. This practice exemplifies the pastoral approach’s emphasis on relational presence over doctrinal instruction (Anderson, 1997).

This approach links practical theology with caring practices and addresses the interpretation of individuals’ needs (Steyn & Masango, 2011, p. 2). When hardships arise, the pastor’s duty is to stand alongside people in sympathy, symbolizing divine accompaniment in human life.

Critical Assessment:

The pastoral approach highlights the relational and experiential dimensions of ministry, but it has notable limitations. It mainly focuses on practice while leaving theoretical and meta-theoretical issues—such as scriptural interpretation in contemporary contexts and the epistemological basis of pastoral authority—largely unexamined. It also assumes stable congregational settings, making it less adaptable to pluralistic and rapidly changing contexts. Furthermore, despite its emphasis on empathy, it offers limited guidance for addressing complex social, psychological, or ethical issues that require interdisciplinary engagement, suggesting a need for integration with other approaches.

Second Approach: Social Studies and Lived Experiences Approach

This approach, sometimes known as “empirical practical theology,” directs attention to social studies and empirical findings, emphasizing the connection between religion and the material world (Weyel et al., 2022, pp. 703-707). Contrary to common perception, this approach emphasizes a deep connection between theology and the empirical sciences.

Empirical methods have special importance here. Ethnographic discussions organize their foundations based on induction, observing phenomena in human society and evaluating the impact of living place, geographical locations, and social interactions (Šídlová, 2017, pp. 270-281). Proponents of this approach believe that practical theology should carefully describe individual and social realities, expressing the worldview resulting from these studies with

attention to theological issues (Browning, 1996, pp. 110-113).

An illustrative example of this approach is the Congregational Studies movement in the United States, in which researchers used ethnographic methods such as participant observation, interviews, and surveys to examine the lived religious practices of local congregations. For example, Ammerman's (1997) influential study of congregations facing neighborhood change showed that empirical research can uncover the gap between official theological positions and actual congregational practices, thereby offering practical theology data-driven insights for more effective pastoral and institutional interventions.

Another aspect is utilizing the successful experiences of believers in religious discussions. The church bases important issues such as worship and evangelism on successful experiences in practice (Schuringa, 2019, p. 3), providing a context for promoting Christian discipleship (Cahalan & Nieman, 2008, p. 70).

Critical Assessment:

The social studies–based approach strengthens practical theology through empirical grounding, but it faces key challenges. It struggles with integrating social scientific methods without adopting conflicting epistemological assumptions, risks both reductionism and theological isolation, and offers limited guidance for drawing normative theological conclusions. These issues highlight the need for clear hermeneutical and methodological criteria in interdisciplinary engagements.

Third Approach: Theory-Centered Practical Approach

This approach, sometimes known as “theory-oriented practical theology,” advances its discussions by relying on both theory and Scripture. Practical theology here pursues content as a strategy for theory development (Wijsen, 2023, p. 98). Some scholars argue that this approach has more application in theology faculties, where academics seek knowledge development rather than practical application (Wijsen, 2023, p. 100).

The process establishes a dialectical relationship between data sources (empirical realities from fieldwork) and knowledge sources (existing theories from secondary research). The Christian tradition is presented as thousands of years of human experience that cannot be ignored (Wijsen, 2023, p. 101). The theologian refers to theoretical frameworks using practical experiences, and findings are reflected back in practice (Browning, 1991, pp. 5-6).

A concrete example of this approach is Browning's (1991) study of a Chicago congregation confronting the AIDS crisis during the 1980s. He showed that the issue required not only practical action but also deeper theological reflection on hospitality, suffering, and biblical interpretation. The response emerged through a dialectical interaction between theory and practice, with each shaping and refining the other (Browning, 1991, pp. 5-6).

Practical theology does not set aside Scripture; rather, it seeks to construct theories that bring theology into practice. This requires interaction with non-theological disciplines, though this must occur in the light of Scripture (Meyer, 2018, p. 150). Research programs in this approach develop knowledge by evaluating how theological practice is achieved (Hermans & Schoeman, 2015, p. 13).

Critical Assessment:

The theory-centered approach preserves the normative authority of Scripture and tradition, but it faces several challenges. Bridging historical texts to contemporary practice requires robust hermeneutical frameworks. Additionally, it risks becoming disconnected from lived experience if its empirical engagement is weak, and it must continually balance theory and practice to avoid abstract imposition. Its main challenge lies in maintaining practical and contextual relevance alongside theological normativity.

Fourth Approach: Practical Theology Approach Based on Church Institution Reform

The church institution, as the primary reference point for expressing Christian doctrines, holds a very important position. If this reference suffers from weakness, people will lose trust in the religion. Schleiermacher was among the first to address this, believing practical theology should follow historical and philosophical theology (Schleiermacher, 2011, pp. 24-31).

Schleiermacher considers theology as the church with all its issues in relation to human life, committed to the rules of leadership in the Christian church (Gräb, 2005, pp. 181-182). The ultimate goal is to guide the church and resolve missionary problems (Schleiermacher, 1850, pp. 65-69).

A contemporary illustration of this approach is the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), which sought to reform Catholic Church structures in response to modern challenges. Its documents, particularly *Gaudium et Spes*, presented the church as a community in dialogue with the modern

world rather than in opposition to it. Reforms such as vernacular liturgy, greater lay participation, and ecumenical openness were all grounded in theological reflection on the church's nature and mission (Schleiermacher, 2011, pp. 24-31; Gräb, 2005, pp. 181-182).

Critical Assessment:

The reformist approach focuses on improving church institutions but faces challenges across all analytical levels. It presupposes contested views regarding the church's nature, requires sound hermeneutical frameworks to apply tradition to modern contexts, and must balance adaptation with theological identity. Its structural focus may also neglect relational and experiential dimensions, indicating a need to integrate insights from other approaches.

Correspondence of Practical Theology Definitions with Four Approaches

A comparative examination of practical theology definitions with the proposed approaches reveals meaningful relationships, demonstrating mutual influence between theoretical conceptualization and practical orientations.

Reynolds' simple definition, which introduces practical theology as a science dealing with the application of theological knowledge, is compatible with all approaches but corresponds most closely with the first approach (pastoral theology).

Bennett and Zoë's definition, which examines the interaction between faith, practices, and social realities, has a direct relationship with the second approach. Common concepts include "social realities," "interaction," and "lived experience."

Campbell's definition, which explores how religious function operates within social structures, is also related to the second approach with an emphasis on the sociological analysis of religious phenomena.

Cameron's definition, which examines religious practice through practical research in social and cultural contexts, aligns with the second approach, by emphasizing empirical methodology and field study.

Swinton and Harriet's definition, which defines practical theology as critical and theological reflection on church activities, aligns with the third approach. Common elements include "critical reflection," "theological concepts," and the "dialectical relationship between theory and practice."

Schleiermacher's definition, which considers practical theology to be the knowledge of the proper regulation of church affairs, is directly related to the fourth approach. Both emphasize institutional structures, the quality of church services, and the role of leadership.

Some definitions relate to multiple approaches, indicating complexity and overlap. This comparative analysis shows that definitions not only reflect specific approaches but have also played a role in their formation and development. The relationship is bidirectional: definitions are the products of existing approaches and, in turn, direct future development. This overlap indicates the interdisciplinary nature of practical theology, revealing the necessity of adopting a flexible and comprehensive approach in its study.

Challenges Facing Practical Theology

In examining the challenges of practical theology, it is necessary to distinguish between contexts and challenges. Contexts are the cultural, social, historical, and psychological backgrounds and conditions in which practical theology is formed. They are not inherently problematic; rather, they provide an environment for growth and change, while challenges are obstacles and problems that prevent the realization of practical theology's goals and thus require solutions. Contexts are more stable and changeable in the long term, such as the role of religious institutions or cultural traditions, whereas challenges are more dynamic and variable including issues such as the conflict between tradition and modernity, methodological crises, or the impact of modern media on religious beliefs. Contexts provide a foundation for the emergence of challenges, and practical theology must provide solutions within those same contexts. After the Enlightenment era, Christian societies faced serious challenges that resulted in reduced church attendance and a lack of responsiveness from the church.

Based on a structural analysis, the challenges of practical theology can be categorized within a three-level framework: meta-theoretical, theoretical, and practical. Each level has its own specific characteristics and issues while remaining in dialectical interaction with the other levels.

Before examining each level in detail, it is essential to clarify the interconnected nature of these three levels. The relationship between meta-theoretical, theoretical, and practical challenges is not merely categorical but dialectical and causal. Meta-theoretical challenges-concerning foundational epistemological and paradigmatic assumptions-shape the conditions under which theoretical challenges emerge. For instance, the hermeneutical crisis (meta-theoretical) directly generates the challenge of

how to interpret sacred texts in contemporary contexts (theoretical). Similarly, theoretical challenges condition practical possibilities: the unresolved question of theology's relationship with the human sciences (theoretical) constrains clergy education programs that seek to integrate psychological or sociological insights (practical). Conversely, practical failures can expose theoretical inadequacies, which in turn may reveal unexamined meta-theoretical assumptions. This dialectical structure implies that solutions at one level may prove ineffective if challenges at other levels remain unaddressed.

Furthermore, the four approaches to practical theology examined in Section 1 relate differently to these three levels of challenge. The pastoral approach operates primarily at the practical level, focusing on clergy competencies and congregational care; consequently, it is most directly affected by practical-level challenges such as clergy education. The social studies-based approach spans theoretical and practical levels, utilizing empirical methodologies while addressing lived experiences; it confronts theoretical challenges regarding interdisciplinary integration. The theory-centered approach engages primarily with theoretical challenges, seeking to reconstruct the relationship between theological concepts and practice. The reformist approach, while focused on institutional change (practical level), necessarily engages meta-theoretical questions about the nature and purpose of the church. The following analysis of challenges will indicate these connections where relevant.

Meta-theoretical Level

The meta-theoretical realm of practical theology deals with the analysis of presuppositions, epistemological paradigms, and socio-cultural structures that have a fundamental impact on the formation of theological theory and practice. This dimension includes the criticism of existing patterns and the proposal of alternative methods to respond to contemporary challenges.

The Secularization of Epistemological Foundations

One of the most important meta-theoretical challenges that provided the foundation for the formation of practical theology was the fundamental transformations resulting from modernity and the expansion of secular thought. Before the fifteenth century AD, the church attempted to exercise cultural and social dominance over society through influence in social institutions, but with the emergence of the Renaissance and the scientific revolution, this hegemony suffered serious destabilization, resulting in the

weakening of the church's social role (Ahanchi, 2022, p. 13). This transformation, which Taylor (2007) termed the "secular age," provided a context where traditional expressions and methods, as well as the propagation of religious beliefs by religious leaders, were no longer sufficient.

A clear example of this challenge is the transformation of European universities. Once centered on theology, universities such as Oxford, Cambridge, and Paris gradually marginalized it in the nineteenth century under the influence of the natural sciences, positivism, and academic specialization. Theology was either moved to seminaries or turned into religious studies, which examined religion empirically rather than theologically (Taylor, 2007, pp. 423-435). This shift reinforced the secularization of the epistemological foundations that practical theology must now address.

This challenge is fundamentally meta-theoretical because it concerns the very conditions under which theological knowledge claims can be considered valid. In a secular epistemological environment, the criteria for truth, evidence, and argumentation shift away from traditional theological sources (Scripture, tradition, and ecclesial authority) toward empirical verification, rational demonstration, and individual autonomy. Practical theology, as a discipline seeking relevance in this environment, faces a dilemma: adopting secular epistemological standards risks undermining its theological identity, while rejecting them risks irrelevance and marginalization. This dilemma manifests differently across the four approaches: the reformist approach (Section 1.4) is most directly affected, as institutional reform requires engagement with secular institutions and their epistemological assumptions; the social studies-based approach (Section 1.2) confronts this challenge when integrating empirical methodologies that presuppose naturalistic frameworks.

The universities present in Christian societies also found traditional methods of theology teaching inadequate when faced with new scientific developments (Osmer, 2011, p. 2). This became a foundation for theologians to pay serious attention to practical theology as a response to the legitimacy crisis of theology in the modern era.

The Experiential Turn and the Crisis of Textual Authority

Another meta-theoretical challenge was the emergence of movements such as Pentecostalism which adopted a revisionist approach to Christian history and thought. Historians of this movement, with a revisionist view of Christian history and thought, were supported by certain groups to reclaim and express what they claimed to be the true history of Christianity.

Simultaneously, biblical scholars in the 1970s and 1980s, in alignment with this movement, began placing their personal experiences, rather than the biblical text, at the center of interpretation (Yong, 2007, pp. 24-25). This approach, known in theological literature as the “Experiential Turn,” created a serious challenge to textual and traditional authority.

A striking example of the experiential turn’s impact on practical theology can be observed in the Charismatic Renewal movement within mainline Protestant and Catholic churches during the 1970s and 1980s. In these communities, believers reported direct experiences of the Holy Spirit—such as speaking in tongues, divine healing, and prophetic utterances—that they considered authoritative independent of, and sometimes in tension with, established doctrinal interpretations. Practical theologians were confronted with a fundamental question: should these experiences be evaluated by the standards of traditional biblical exegesis, or does the experience itself constitute a valid source of theological knowledge? The tension between experiential authority and textual authority became particularly acute in cases where believers’ reported experiences contradicted official church teaching, forcing practical theology to develop frameworks for adjudicating between competing sources of theological authority (Yong, 2007, pp. 24-25).

The experiential turn poses a meta-theoretical challenge because it fundamentally alters the sources of theological justification. When personal experience becomes the primary criterion for theological validity, the relationship between Scripture, tradition, and contemporary practice is reconfigured. This challenge is particularly acute for the theory-centered approach (Section 1.3), which relies on the authority of biblical texts and theological traditions as sources for reconstructing practice. If experience supersedes text, the dialectical movement from theory to practice that characterizes this approach loses its grounding. Conversely, the pastoral approach (Section 1.1) may find the experiential turn more compatible, as pastoral care emphasizes attending to believers’ lived experiences. However, even here, a tension emerges: pastoral care traditionally operates within a framework of theological guidance, where the pastor’s role includes directing experience toward normative ends.

The experiential turn potentially inverts this relationship, making the pastor a facilitator of experience rather than a guide toward theological truth.

The Hermeneutical Crisis and Epistemological Pluralism

Another meta-theoretical challenge is the influence of various epistemologies

on theology. The different scientific disciplines that became available offered new different insights for contemporary humans and challenged theological perspectives on numerous life issues. Due to a lack of constructive interaction with these sciences, theology's role in shaping contemporary human understanding diminished. This situation led theology to create an appropriate semantic horizon with biblical narratives for the present era (Constantineanu, 2017, p. 98). This challenge, known in theological literature as the "Hermeneutical Crisis," drove theology toward becoming more practical and engaging actively with the human sciences.

A concrete example of the hermeneutical crisis is the debate over interpreting the Genesis creation narratives in light of evolutionary biology. As evolutionary theory gained acceptance, the literal reading of Genesis came into tension with scientific consensus. This issue has practical consequences for preaching, Christian education, and how believers relate their faith to the natural world. Different interpretive frameworks _from young-earth creationism to theistic evolution_ show how hermeneutical assumptions lead to different practical outcomes.

The hermeneutical crisis is perhaps the most fundamental meta-theoretical challenge because it concerns the very possibility of meaningful interpretation across historical and cultural distances. If biblical texts were produced in radically different epistemological contexts, how can they speak authoritatively to contemporary situations? This challenge affects all four approaches but in different ways. The theory-centered approach (Section 1.3) requires a hermeneutical framework that can bridge ancient texts and contemporary contexts while maintaining theological normativity. The social studies-based approach (Section 1.2) may attempt to resolve this challenge by treating texts as cultural artifacts to be analyzed empirically, but this risks reducing theological meaning to mere sociological function. The reformist approach (Section 1.4) confronts the hermeneutical crisis when attempting to justify institutional reforms on biblical or traditional grounds: if interpretation is contested, so too is the authority of any particular reform agenda.

Theoretical Level

The theoretical realm of challenges in the formation of practical theology relates to the analysis of theological, philosophical, and methodological principles and foundations. In this area, theologians examine sacred texts, religious interpretations, theological theories, and conceptual frameworks, attempting to redefine fundamental concepts of faith through interaction with contemporary knowledge.

Theoretical challenges are conditioned by meta-theoretical assumptions. The hermeneutical crisis (meta-theoretical) generates the challenge of how to interpret sacred texts (theoretical). The secularization of epistemological foundations (meta-theoretical) shapes the challenge of how theology can interact with the human sciences without losing its distinctive identity (theoretical). Recognizing this conditioning relationship is essential for understanding why theoretical solutions alone may prove insufficient: if meta-theoretical challenges remain unaddressed, theoretical frameworks built upon contested foundations will remain unstable.

Interdisciplinary Integration Without Theological Dissolution

One of the fundamental challenges within this realm is how theology interacts with and utilizes the various human sciences. In this area, the theologian attempts to interpret the conditions and situations of Christian communities and the theological concepts formed in those communities with attention to theological principles and foundations, and to explain patterns of religious behavior in society. This requires utilizing disciplines such as social sciences, psychology, anthropology, and sociology to achieve a deeper understanding of social structures and bring it closer to theological theory appropriate to human behavior by presupposing theological foundations (Tracy, 1996, p. 43). In this regard, attention to the diversity of lifestyles and different cultures in Christian communities is essential for priests and theologians. Different understandings of various religious behaviors and social conditions can help in constructing appropriate theories in the field of theology and lead to more effective performance by priests.

A concrete example of this challenge is the integration of psychology into pastoral counseling. With the rise of Clinical Pastoral Education in American seminaries, clergy increasingly adopted psychological methods in their counseling practices. While this enriched pastoral care, it also created tension: some reduced the practice to clergy-led psychotherapy, marginalizing theological themes, while others wholly rejected psychology as incompatible with Christian anthropology. This example illustrates the challenge of using the human sciences without losing the distinctive theological identity of pastoral care (Tracy, 1996, p. 43).

This challenge is particularly acute for the social studies-based approach (Section 1.2), which explicitly incorporates empirical methodologies from sociology, psychology, and anthropology. The risk is twofold: on the one hand, the uncritical adoption of social scientific frameworks may import secular assumptions that conflict with theological commitments (e.g.,

methodological naturalism or reductionist accounts of religious experience); on the other hand, a superficial engagement with these disciplines may produce work that is neither theologically rigorous nor scientifically credible.

The theory-centered approach (Section 1.3) confronts this challenge differently: rather than beginning with empirical data, it begins with theological concepts and seeks to reconstruct practice accordingly. However, this approach must still engage with the human sciences when its theological reconstructions require implementation in concrete social contexts. The challenge here is ensuring that theoretical frameworks remain responsive to empirical realities rather than becoming abstract constructs disconnected from lived experience.

The Vulnerability of Autonomous Reason

Another theoretical challenge that provided the foundation for the formation of practical theology is the recognition of the detrimental effects that autonomous human reason can inflict upon religious communities. The theologian at this level of practical theology needs to take the vulnerabilities of reason seriously, as despite human intellectual progress and the achievements of modernity, reason's arbitrariness can have irreparable consequences for theological discussions and theories. The fundamental challenge posed by this vulnerability, particularly in light of modern technologies and the paradigms of industrial society, is determining the extent to which theological theories can constructively engage with modern social theories (Osmer, 2011, p. 6).

A clear example of this issue is the rise of the "death of God" theology in the 1960s and, subsequently, the New Atheism movement. Both used autonomous reason to question the credibility of belief in God and even the legitimacy of theological reasoning. For practical theology, this shows that while reason is valuable, it becomes highly precarious when detached from faith commitments. The challenge lies in preserving critical rationality without accepting the view that theology is inherently irrational or outdated (Osmer, 2011, p. 6).

This challenge reflects a core tension within modern practical theology: the discipline emerged partially in response to Enlightenment critiques of traditional authority, embracing rational reflection on practice. Yet, the same Enlightenment tradition that enabled critical reflection also produced forms of rationalism that marginalize or dissolve theological claims. The task is to maintain critical rationality without succumbing to rationalistic

reductionism. This tension is evident in the theory-centered approach (Section 1.3), which emphasizes critical reflection on practice but must avoid the trap of treating theological concepts as merely instrumental-useful for achieving practical ends but devoid of intrinsic truth value.

Hermeneutical Application in Contemporary Contexts

Additionally, the hermeneutics and interpretation of sacred texts in contemporary contexts constitute another vital theoretical challenge that practical theology faces. This challenge involves questions regarding how to interpret classical texts under modern conditions, the relationship between tradition and renewal, and how to maintain religious identity while responding to contemporary needs (Ricoeur, 1976, pp. 93-94).

While the hermeneutical crisis (Section 3.1.3) is a meta-theoretical challenge concerning the possibility of interpretation, hermeneutical application is a theoretical challenge: given that interpretation is possible, what principles and methods should guide the application of classical texts to contemporary situations? This challenge is central to all four approaches but manifests differently in each. The pastoral approach (Section 1.1) requires hermeneutical principles that can guide the application of biblical wisdom to individual pastoral situations—such as counseling, comfort, and moral guidance. The reformist approach (Section 1.4) requires hermeneutical principles that can justify institutional reforms on biblical or traditional grounds. The theory-centered approach (Section 1.3) requires hermeneutical principles that can bridge the gap between ancient textual meaning and contemporary theoretical reconstruction.

A clear example of this challenge is the debate over women's ordination. Biblical texts on church leadership can be interpreted to support divergent conclusions, and the issue has major practical effects on church structures, clergy training, and congregational life. Different traditions reach different positions because they employ distinct hermeneutical frameworks—such as contextual, traditional, or redemptive approaches. This demonstrates how interpretive choices directly shape institutional practice (Ricoeur, 1976, pp. 93-94).

Practical Level

The practical realm examines how theoretical principles are implemented in real-life contexts of religious practice. This level includes planning, designing interventions, and taking action to improve specific conditions in the church and society. In practical theology literature, this realm is

fundamentally associated with the concept of “praxis” (Freire, 1970, p. 84).

Practical challenges are the most visible manifestations of difficulties in practical theology, yet they are often symptoms of deeper theoretical and meta-theoretical problems. Failures in clergy education (practical) may reflect unresolved questions about interdisciplinary integration (theoretical), which, in turn, may stem from contested epistemological foundations (meta-theoretical). Effective solutions at the practical level therefore require attention to the conditioning relationships from higher levels. Conversely, practical challenges can serve as diagnostic indicators: persistent practical failures may signal a need to reevaluate underlying theoretical frameworks or meta-theoretical assumptions.

Clergy Formation and the Acquisition of Practical Wisdom

One of the fundamental challenges at this level pertains to the church and the education of priests in relation to the Christian community. This challenge can be divided into two main parts: the process by which priests acquire knowledge from people’s lives and issues related to the church institution (Cahalan, 2005, pp. 63-64):

Regarding the first part, it should be noted that practical theology, with respect to the common good, seeks to guide theologians in critical reflection upon daily human behavior. This leads theologians to gain deeper knowledge of social interactions and sociological dimensions of individuals. When a priest encounters social interactions of his community, he acquires practical knowledge that can be evaluated against theological discourse and used to operationalize religious teachings. Such a topic cannot be expressed in pure theoretical theology, but this matter can be raised in theology with a practical approach.

A specific illustration of this challenge is the experience of newly ordained clergy who enter congregational ministry after completing seminary education. Research on ministerial transitions consistently reveals a phenomenon described as “reality shock”: graduates who excelled in academic theological studies find themselves unprepared for the complex, ambiguous, and often emotionally demanding realities of congregational life. They may possess sophisticated knowledge of systematic theology, biblical languages, and church history, yet lack the practical wisdom to navigate a church board meeting, counsel a couple considering divorce, or respond to a community crisis.

A widely documented case is the Association of Theological Schools

(ATS) survey in North America, which found that while 85% of seminary graduates reported feeling well-prepared in biblical and theological knowledge, only 40% felt adequately prepared for the practical demands of ministry, including conflict resolution, organizational leadership, and cross-cultural communication (Cahalan, 2005, pp. 63-64). This gap between academic preparation and practical competence exemplifies the challenge of clergy formation.

This challenge is central to the pastoral approach (Section 1.1), which emphasizes the priest's role as shepherd, counselor, and companion. The acquisition of practical wisdom (*phronesis*) requires more than academic training; it demands immersion in the lived realities of congregational life. However, contemporary clergy education often emphasizes academic theological knowledge at the expense of practical formation. The result is clergy who possess theoretical sophistication but lack the practical wisdom to apply theological insights to concrete pastoral situations.

A specific manifestation of this challenge concerns the gap between seminary education and congregational reality. Seminaries typically operate within academic frameworks that privilege written texts, systematic analysis, and theoretical coherence. Congregational life, by contrast, involves oral communication, situational judgment, and practical responsiveness. Clergy trained primarily in academic modes may struggle to translate their knowledge into effective pastoral practice. This gap is particularly acute in rapidly changing social contexts, where traditional pastoral approaches may no longer resonate with contemporary congregations.

Institutional Reform and Structural Adaptation

The second part of practical challenges involves issues related to the church institution and the necessity of structural reforms. This challenge became increasingly prominent for the Catholic Church with the formation of the Protestant Church. The Catholic Church turned to practical theology to counter the threat of marginalization, as it used traditional methods in expressing its discussions, and this caused serious damage to the public's acceptance of its theological teachings. In fact, a primary motivation for developing and reviving practical theology in theological education programs was to counter the decrease in influence against Protestantism.

Practical theology set its goal as teaching effective communication skills for engaging with people in confronting the Protestant movement so that it could create closer relationships with people. This matter subsequently expanded the scope of its issues, rendering church leadership methods,

priest performance, change management in religious institutions, and communication strategies central topics of practical theology.

This challenge is central to the reformist approach (Section 1.4), which focuses on institutional transformation. However, institutional reform is constrained by both theoretical frameworks (e.g., determining which models of church organization are theologically legitimate) and meta-theoretical assumptions (e.g., defining the essential nature and purpose of the church). Reform efforts that proceed without addressing these higher-level questions may produce changes that are practically expedient but theologically problematic, or conversely, theologically justified but practically ineffective.

It should be noted that church leaders must always consider the good of the church and society, maintaining a rigorous scientific and scholarly spirit in their acquisition of theological education (Schleiermacher, 1850, pp. 190-192). Achieving this is a significant challenge that can provide a suitable foundation for the formation and development of practical theology.

Contextual Responsiveness and Religious Pluralism

In addition, practical challenges include issues related to religious pluralism, demographic changes in Christian societies, the impact of new technologies on worship and religious education, and the necessity of responding to the needs of new generations. These challenges drive practical theology to develop novel methods and strategies for effective interaction with the contemporary world.

This challenge affects all four approaches but is particularly acute for the pastoral approach (Section 1.1) and the social studies-based approach (Section 1.2). Pastoral care in pluralistic contexts requires sensitivity to diverse religious backgrounds, secular worldviews, and hybrid spiritual identities that do not conform to traditional Christian categories. The social studies-based approach must grapple with empirical findings that reveal the complexity of contemporary religious life: declining institutional affiliation coexisting with persistent spiritual seeking, religious “nones” who reject institutional religion while maintaining spiritual practices, and the rise of multiple religious belonging.

A specific example of this challenge is the increasing number of individuals who identify as “spiritual but not religious.” Many combine Christian practices with elements from Buddhism, indigenous spiritualities, or secular wellness culture. This phenomenon creates a challenge for practical theology because traditional pastoral models assume a clear

Christian identity and firm boundaries of belonging. In pluralistic contexts, pastors need more flexible approaches that engage hybrid identities without compromising theological commitments.

Practical Theology Strategies

The strategies proposed in this section correspond systematically to the challenges identified in Section 3. Given the dialectical relationship among the meta-theoretical, theoretical, and practical levels, effective solutions must address not only the immediate challenge but also its conditioning relationships with other levels. A solution at the practical level may prove ineffective if theoretical or meta-theoretical challenges remain unaddressed; conversely, meta-theoretical clarification may enable theoretical and practical solutions that were previously obstructed. The following analysis presents solutions at each level, indicating their connections to other levels and their relevance to the four approaches examined in Section 1.

Meta-theoretical Strategies

1. Critical Retrieval of Epistemological Foundations

In response to the challenge of secularized epistemological foundations (Section 3.1.1), practical theology requires a strategy of critical retrieval. This entails neither an uncritical acceptance of secular epistemological standards nor a defensive rejection of modern knowledge, but a critical engagement that retrieves and reconstructs theological epistemology in dialogue with contemporary thought. This strategy involves:

a) Explicit articulation of theological epistemological commitments :What sources of knowledge does practical theology recognize (Scripture, tradition, experience, reason)? What criteria distinguish valid from invalid theological claims? How do these commitments relate to, differ from, and potentially critique secular epistemological assumptions?

b) Critical engagement with secular epistemologies :Rather than simply adopting or rejecting secular standards, practical theology should engage them critically—identifying valid insights (e.g., the importance of empirical evidence, the critique of arbitrary authority) while simultaneously exposing limitations (e.g., reductionism, the exclusion of transcendent dimensions).

c) Development of integrative epistemological frameworks :Building on the work of scholars such as Alister McGrath (scientific theology) and Wentzel van Huyssteen (postfoundationalist rationality), practical theology

can develop epistemological frameworks that integrate theological and secular knowledge without collapsing either into the other.

In practice, this strategy requires three steps. First, seminaries should teach philosophy of science and epistemology so that students can critically assess both theological and secular knowledge claims. Second, practical theology journals should require authors to state their epistemological commitments clearly, thereby improving transparency and scholarly debate. Third, interdisciplinary teams of theologians, philosophers, and scientists should develop integrative frameworks for specific issues—for example, relating prayer, neural activity, and spiritual experience in ways that respect both empirical findings and theological interpretation.

2. Reconstructing the Relationship Between Experience and Authority

In response to the experiential turn and the crisis of textual authority (Section 3.1.2), practical theology requires a strategy that neither dismisses experience nor abandons textual/traditional authority. This strategy involves:

a) Developing a theology of experience :What is the theological status of experience? How does experience relate to revelation, Scripture, and tradition? A robust theology of experience can affirm the importance of lived experience while situating it within a broader framework of theological authority.

b) Hermeneutical frameworks for experience-text dialogue :Rather than treating experience and text as competing authorities, practical theology can develop hermeneutical frameworks in which experience and text mutually illuminate each other. Experience raises questions that drive theologians to Scripture, while Scripture provides categories and narratives that shape and interpret experience.

c) Community as a mediating context :Individual experience, unchecked by community, risks subjectivism; textual authority, imposed without attention to experience, risks irrelevance. The faith community serves as a mediating context where individual experiences are tested, shared, and interpreted in light of shared texts and traditions.

Concretely, this strategy can be implemented in three ways. First, congregations can form theological reflection groups where members interpret life experiences in light of Scripture and tradition. Second, seminaries can use supervised experience journals to help students connect field education with theological reflection. Third, denominations can

establish guidelines for assessing experiential claims _such as divine guidance or prophetic experiences _so that personal experience is neither ignored nor accepted uncritically.

3. Addressing the Hermeneutical Crisis Through Contextual Hermeneutics

In response to the hermeneutical crisis (Section 3.1.3), practical theology requires hermeneutical frameworks that can bridge ancient texts and contemporary contexts. This strategy involves:

a) Acknowledging the contextuality of all interpretation :All interpretation occurs from a particular historical, cultural, and social location. Acknowledging this contextuality does not lead to relativism but rather fosters hermeneutical humility and an openness to dialogue across contexts.

b) Developing criteria for faithful contextualization :How can practical theology distinguish between contextualization that faithfully applies biblical meaning in new contexts and distortion that imports alien meanings into biblical texts? Criteria might include consistency with the overall biblical narrative, coherence with the historic Christian tradition, and fruitfulness for Christian practice.

c) Engaging multiple interpretive communities :The hermeneutical crisis is partly a crisis of interpretive authority _namely, who possesses the right to interpret? Practical theology can address this by engaging multiple interpretive communities (academic, ecclesial, and grassroots), recognizing that each contributes distinctive insights while also requiring correction from the others.

Specific measures include three steps. First, practical theology programs can use cross-contextual hermeneutical exercises in which students read the same biblical text from different social and cultural perspectives. Second, denominational bodies can form contextual hermeneutics commissions to prepare guidelines for applying difficult texts to current issues. Third, digital platforms can support cross-cultural interpretive dialogue among theologians in different countries, enriching biblical understanding through shared contextual insights.

Theoretical Strategies

1. Principled Interdisciplinary Engagement

In response to the challenge of interdisciplinary integration without theological

dissolution (Section 3.2.1), practical theology requires a strategy of principled engagement with the human sciences. This strategy involves:

a) Clarifying the terms of engagement :What is the relationship between theological and social scientific knowledge? Options include correlation (theology and social science address the same questions from different perspectives), complementarity (they address different questions that together provide a fuller understanding), and critical dialogue (each discipline can critique and learn from the other). Practical theology should explicitly adopt and justify its model of interdisciplinary relationship.

b) Maintaining theological normativity :While learning from the human sciences, practical theology must maintain its distinctive theological perspective. This requires that sociological, psychological, or anthropological findings be received critically, evaluated in light of theological commitments, and integrated into theological frameworks rather than simply adopted wholesale.

c) Developing bilingual competence :Practical theologians require competence in both theological and social scientific discourses. They must be able to read, evaluate, and utilize research from relevant disciplines while also contributing distinctively theological insights to interdisciplinary conversations.

Concrete implementation requires three steps. First, seminaries should offer required interdisciplinary methods courses that teach students to critically assess social scientific research and examine its theological implications. Second, practical theology projects should employ an interdisciplinary audit process that makes epistemological assumptions explicit prior to integrating insights from other fields. Third, universities and seminaries should create interdisciplinary fellowships so that theology and social science students acquire meaningful formation in each other's disciplines.

Research programs typically follow four functions: description, explanation, design, and conceptualization. They begin with the empirical description of religious phenomena, move to explanatory models, design theology-based interventions, and ultimately formulate contemporary theological concepts adaptable to current life. This four-function model provides a structure for interdisciplinary engagement that progresses from empirical data through theoretical interpretation to practical application, while maintaining theological conceptualization as the ultimate goal. This process fosters theological frameworks that resonate with lived experience and counter the dominance of secular rationalism.

2. Critical Rationality Within Theological Bounds

In response to the challenge of autonomous reason's vulnerability (Section 3.2.2), practical theology requires a strategy that embraces critical rationality while recognizing its limits. This strategy involves:

a) Affirming the legitimacy of critical reflection :Practical theology rightly employs critical reason to examine practices, traditions, and institutions. This critical function is essential for identifying failures, exposing injustices, and enabling reform.

b) Recognizing the situatedness of reason :Reason does not operate in a vacuum; it is shaped by historical, cultural, and social contexts. Acknowledging this situatedness guards against rationalistic pretensions to universal, context-free knowledge.

c) Grounding reason in theological commitments :Critical reason in practical theology operates within a framework of theological commitments—to Scripture, the Christian tradition, and the faith community. These commitments provide both the motivation for critical reflection (seeking faithful practice) and its limits (remaining accountable to theological norms).

In practice, this strategy can be applied in three ways. First, practical theology curricula should include courses on critical thinking and theological reasoning. Second, publications should require authors to articulate the theological commitments that guide and limit their critical analysis. Third, congregational study programs should help laypeople practice theologically informed critical thinking so that they can engage culture thoughtfully without falling into either secular rationalism or anti-intellectualism.

3. Hermeneutical Frameworks for Contemporary Application

In response to the challenge of hermeneutical application (Section 3.2.3), practical theology requires frameworks that guide the translation of classical texts into contemporary contexts. This strategy involves:

a) Narrative hermeneutics: Reading biblical texts as part of a larger narrative—creation, fall, redemption, and consummation—that provides a framework for understanding contemporary situations and guiding Christian action.

b) Analogical reasoning: Identifying analogies between biblical situations and contemporary contexts that facilitate the transfer of biblical

wisdom without requiring identical circumstances.

c) Communal discernment: Recognizing that hermeneutical application is not merely an individual intellectual exercise but a communal practice of discernment, involving dialogue, debate, and prayerful reflection within the faith community.

Specific implementation steps include three measures. First, practical theology programs can offer narrative hermeneutics workshops that train students to relate pastoral situations to the wider biblical story. Second, congregations can use structured communal discernment processes that integrate Scripture, prayer, testimony, expert input, and dialogue. Third, denominational publishers can produce applied hermeneutics resources that guide pastors and laypeople in interpreting biblical texts for contemporary issues.

Practical Strategies

1. Integrated Clergy Formation

In response to the challenge of clergy formation and the acquisition of practical wisdom (Section 3.3.1), practical theology requires an integrated approach to ministerial education. This strategy involves:

a) Integration of academic and practical learning: Seminary curricula should integrate theoretical study with supervised practical experience, ensuring that theological concepts are learned in connection with pastoral application. Models include field education, clinical pastoral education, and action-reflection learning cycles.

b) Formation in practical wisdom: Beyond knowledge and skills, clergy formation should cultivate practical wisdom (phronesis)—the capacity for situational judgment that enables the appropriate application of general principles to particular circumstances. This formation occurs through mentorship, case study analysis, and reflective practice.

c) Ongoing formation: Clergy formation should not end with ordination but must continue throughout ministry. Continuing education, peer learning groups, and sabbatical study provide good opportunities for ongoing development in response to changing contexts and emerging challenges.

Concrete implementation requires three reforms. First, seminaries can adopt a teaching-hospital model that integrates supervised ministry practice with classroom learning from the beginning of training. Second, faculty

should include practicing theologians to ensure teaching remains connected to real ministry contexts. Third, denominations should provide structured post-ordination formation—such as peer groups, retreats, and sabbaticals—to support clergy during the early years of ministry and reduce burnout.

2. Theologically-Grounded Institutional Reform

In response to the challenge of institutional reform (Section 3.3.2), practical theology requires approaches that ground structural changes in theological reflection. This strategy involves:

a) Ecclesiological clarity: Institutional reform should proceed from a clear theological understanding of the nature and purpose of the church. What is the church for? Which structures are essential to its core identity, and which are culturally contingent and therefore adaptable?

b) Participatory discernment: Institutional reform should involve broad participation from the faith community, not merely top-down imposition by leadership. Participatory processes honor the priesthood of all believers and draw upon the diverse gifts and perspectives present within the community.

c) Adaptive leadership: Church leaders require competencies in adaptive leadership—the capacity to guide communities through necessary change while maintaining identity and cohesion. This includes skills in communication, conflict management, and visionary articulation.

Institutional Leadership Reform—Schleiermacher underscored the necessity of aligning church leadership with people’s lived realities. This alignment requires ongoing attention to changing social contexts and a willingness to adapt institutional structures accordingly, while maintaining theological foundations.

Specific implementation steps include three measures. First, denominations can create ecclesiological review commissions to regularly assess whether church structures effectively serve the church’s theological mission. Second, congregations undertaking major structural changes can conduct theological impact assessments to evaluate their effects on identity and mission. Third, leadership formation programs can train pastors and administrators in adaptive leadership for faith communities, helping them distinguish technical problems from adaptive challenges.

3. Contextual Responsiveness Through Listening and Learning

In response to the challenge of contextual responsiveness and religious

pluralism (Section 3.3.3), practical theology requires approaches that prioritize listening and learning. This strategy involves:

a) Ethnographic attentiveness: Practical theology should cultivate ethnographic sensibilities—the careful observation of and listening to the communities it serves. This attentiveness reveals the actual beliefs, practices, and concerns of contemporary people, which may differ significantly from theological assumptions.

b) Contextual theological reflection: Theological reflection should begin from concrete contexts rather than abstract principles. What are the specific challenges, opportunities, and resources present in a given community? How does the gospel address this particular situation?

c) Flexible pastoral approaches: Pastoral care in pluralistic contexts requires flexibility—the capacity to engage with diverse religious backgrounds, hybrid identities, and unconventional spiritual paths while maintaining Christian theological commitments. This flexibility constitutes contextual wisdom, not relativism.

Concrete implementation requires three steps. First, practical theology programs should require ethnographic immersion experiences in unfamiliar cultural or religious settings, paired with theological reflection. Second, congregations should carry out community listening projects so that ministry decisions are shaped by the actual concerns of their neighbors. Third, denominations should develop contextual ministry toolkits that combine theological rationale with practical guidance for addressing specific ministry challenges. The preceding analysis demonstrates that solutions at each level are interconnected. Meta-theoretical strategies (the critical retrieval of epistemological foundations, reconstructing experience-authority relationships, and contextual hermeneutics) create the conditions for theoretical strategies (principled interdisciplinary engagement, critical rationality, and hermeneutical frameworks). Theoretical strategies, in turn, enable practical strategies (integrated clergy formation, theologically-grounded institutional reform, and contextual responsiveness). This vertical integration indicates that practical theology cannot address its challenges through piecemeal solutions at a single level; a comprehensive response requires coordinated attention to all three levels.

Conclusion

The present research, by adopting a three-level approach—meta-theoretical,

theoretical, and practical—has undertaken a comprehensive analysis of the challenges and corresponding solutions within practical theology. This study demonstrates that this field of knowledge has experienced profound, structural transformations since its initial conceptualization by Schleiermacher.

A comparative analysis of definitions presented by various theologians reveals three fundamental axes of transformation: (1) the expansion of practical theology's scope of application from the domain of the church institution to the broader arena of social life; (2) the transformation from a purely applicative approach toward critical reflection based on religious praxis; and (3) an increased attention to socio-cultural contexts in the analysis of religious phenomena. These transformations reflect the creative response of practical theology to the complex challenges of modernity and the effort to maintain the connection between religious tradition and contemporary realities.

An examination of contemporary research literature and the four approaches to practical theology demonstrates considerable paradigmatic diversity and methodological richness at the international level. From the pastoral theology approach (emphasizing empathetic care and the active presence of clergy) to the social studies-based approach (utilizing empirical methods), the theory-centered approach (emphasizing the dialectical interaction between theory and practice), and the reformist approach (focusing on the reconstruction of church institutions) each represents a diverse effort to achieve the common ideal of connecting theological doctrines with the practical life of believers.

Osmer's (2008) four-dimensional framework—including descriptive-empirical, interpretive, normative, and strategic dimensions - provides a comprehensive model for understanding the complexities of practical theology and its application in various cultural contexts.

Challenges and Solutions at Three Levels

This research demonstrates that contemporary practical theology has been shaped largely in response to the transformations of modernity through a systematic examination within the three-level framework.

At the meta-theoretical level, challenges such as the expansion of secular thinking, revisionist movements, and hermeneutical crisis have directed theology toward becoming practical. Solutions include revision of epistemological presuppositions and establishing connections between

biblical narratives and contemporary issues.

At the theoretical level, challenges include theology's interaction with human sciences, vulnerabilities of autonomous reason, and interpreting sacred texts in contemporary contexts. Solutions here involve the development of interdisciplinary methodologies and new hermeneutical frameworks balancing tradition and contemporary needs.

At the practical level, challenges related to clergy education, church reforms, religious pluralism, and new technologies have forced practical theology to adopt new strategies. Solutions include revision of clergy education models and the creative utilization of new technologies in worship and religious education.

The dialectical interaction among these three levels has given practical theology special dynamism. Solutions that address only one level while ignoring other levels are likely inadequate. The three-level framework provides a diagnostic tool for identifying where challenges originate and where solutions must be directed.

The findings of this study carry several implications for practical theology practitioners:

For **theological educators**, the analysis suggests that clergy formation programs should attend not only to practical skills but also to theoretical frameworks and meta-theoretical assumptions. Curricula that focus exclusively on practical competencies may produce graduates who lack the conceptual resources to navigate complex challenges. Conversely, programs that overemphasize theoretical sophistication without practical integration may yield graduates unable to translate knowledge into effective ministry.

For **church leaders**, the analysis indicates that institutional reform efforts should be grounded in explicit theological reflection. Reforms that proceed without attention to ecclesiological foundations may produce changes that are practically expedient but theologically problematic. The framework of theologically-grounded institutional reform provides a structure for ensuring that structural changes remain connected to theological identity.

For **pastoral practitioners**, the analysis highlights the importance of contextual attentiveness and hermeneutical flexibility. Pastoral care in pluralistic, rapidly changing contexts demands the capacity to engage with diverse religious backgrounds and hybrid identities while maintaining theological commitments. The strategies of contextual responsiveness and the reconstruction of experience-authority relationships provide resources for navigating these challenges.

For **practical theology scholars**, the analysis provides a framework for situating particular research projects within a broader map of the discipline's challenges. Scholars can use the three-level framework to identify the specific level at which their research operates and to consider how their findings relate to challenges and solutions at other levels.

Practical theology stands at a critical juncture. The challenges identified in this study—the secularization of epistemological foundations, the experiential turn, hermeneutical crisis, interdisciplinary tensions, gaps in clergy formation, institutional rigidity, and contextual complexity—are not merely academic concerns but existential questions about the discipline's capacity to fulfill its fundamental mission: connecting theological wisdom with the lived realities of faith communities in a rapidly changing world. The strategies proposed here offer pathways for confronting these challenges, though their successful implementation will require sustained commitment from scholars, educators, church leaders, and practitioners working collaboratively across the boundaries that too often separate academic theology from ecclesial practice.

The future success of practical theology depends on developing a comprehensive and flexible approach that can utilize the capacities of all approaches. Combining elements of pastoral care, empirical-social insights, theoretical-critical reflection, and institutional reforms can empower practical theology to confront the complex challenges of the contemporary world and establish it as a bridge between faith and life, theory and practice, as well as tradition and innovation.

The three-level framework developed in this study provides a map for navigating this complex terrain—serving not as a fixed destination but as an orientation for the ongoing journey of practical theological reflection and action.

Practical Recommendations

Establishment of Integrated Practical Theology Laboratories in Theological Seminaries

Theological seminaries should establish “Practical Theology Laboratories” that integrate theoretical knowledge, empirical research, and practical application. These laboratories would include case study sessions, supervised fieldwork programs, interdisciplinary collaboration, and periodic review sessions where practitioners and academics evaluate implemented strategies together.

Development of Contextual Practical Theology Networks Across Diverse Cultural Settings

International networks of practical theologians should be established, focusing specifically on contextual exchange and collaborative learning across diverse cultural, economic, and religious settings. These networks would facilitate regular exchanges, develop shared research protocols for comparative studies, and create accessible repositories of case studies and best practices from diverse contexts.

▣ **Conflict of Interest**

- ▣ The authors declare no competing interests.

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