

Remarks for January 8, 2010 (*Accompany Them with Singing* Conference)
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I want to begin with a note of thanks to Tom for two accomplishments related to *Accompany Them with Singing*. First, this book teaches well. I had a chance to teach it this past semester in a course on pastoral care. The students enjoyed reading two of the assigned chapters and were especially attentive to the close attention Tom gives to making decisions within the context of practice. What I especially appreciate is that Tom, as a master teacher, is not teaching the discipline of liturgics here, but is teaching students how to engage the practice of leading and presiding at funerals. That is an important genre shift in practical theology: we are teaching a set of practices. The second thing I appreciate about the book is what has been said many times in our gathering: it is an excellent example of practical theology in its fullness. It takes an issue in the Christian life, explores the practice historically, does critical analysis of contemporary culture, engages interdisciplinary perspectives, and offers us a constructive, normative set of theological claims about what ministers should consider and do in presiding at funerals. This book speaks to intelligent practice by ministers in their setting.

I have two main points in response to our question for this session: What kinds of scholarship are needed to resource education, pastoral work, and the life of faith of the kind we've been discussing?

First, I think practical theology needs to engage in research that attends to and appreciates the lived experience of Christians and other people in society. As many participants in this meeting noted on their sheets of introduction, not all funerals are the same—there is a great difference between the funeral of a teenage boy who has committed suicide, and the 90-year old grandmother who has lived a full life. What Tom has shown us are the liturgical fundamentals that need to be in place in any funeral situation. In addition, what practical theology research could further contribute is a thicker portrait of how to preside in multiple situations and contexts. This means taking into consideration the context of the funeral and the situation of the people involved. In other words, practical theology needs to pay close attention to *how people experience funerals*. Often times, liturgists assume that everyone experiences the liturgy in the same way, or that the words and symbols are so powerful as to be self-evident, or that once we know what the fundamental theological claims are in the funeral, we can fully participate. However, not everyone experiences funerals in the same way, and my guess is that depending on the situation, some people involved, such as the family, may feel “carried” by the funeral, but not conscious of much that is going on at all. It may take months for them to be able to grapple with the loss and grief and its religious meaning. In fact, rituals after the funeral may hold more meaning for them.

The question for practical theology research, in this case, is how to best describe and illuminate *liturgical participation*. Obviously, ethnography is an important tool, but it cannot be the only one and it has its limits, as Ted Smith has demonstrated today. How can we get good descriptions of what people experience and know and how can that help pastors in the decisions they make both within the funeral as well as their ongoing ministry with the family and community.

I raise this issue about how people experience funerals because I found it largely missing from the book and I wondered if we knew more about it would we *appreciate* what people are doing in contemporary funeral practices. I felt Tom was appreciative of early Christians making up their funeral practices as they went along, connecting Christian meaning and symbols with cultural practices and artifacts, even from other religions. However, it seems that he was more critical than appreciative of meaning-making in contemporary practice, dismissing much of it as narcissistic or therapeutic. I wonder if many of these practices that he and others describe are not serious attempts to make religious meaning with what people have and if we should not try to appreciate the meaning within the actions (e.g., pop music, teddy bears in the casket, sports emblems on the casket). We may not like what people are doing, but can we appreciate it in any way? How does practical theology listen at this fundamental level of lived experience, appreciate what is happening, as well as critique it appropriately? Might we fail to miss the people's imagination as they express their beliefs through word, action, and song?

The second major point I want to raise is that practical theological research is essentially collaborative research. I want to make two points about this.

First, Tom noted that practical theology is a discipline that is dependent on nearly every other discipline and is often vulnerable because of that relationship (just like pastors do). We have to go to biblical scholars, historians, sociologists to gather insights and to craft our argument, and in that process we have to figure out what authorities we are going to use and why. As the reader, we do not see all the negotiations Tom makes to get down to this concise argument in 200 pages, but I bet there is 10 times as much material in his file cabinet or computer. An issue for practical theological research, especially at the doctoral level, is teaching and demonstrating how we make these moves and decisions as researchers across disciplines. We also need better collaborators from those disciplines to understand what we are doing when we use biblical, historical, theological, and social scientific material.

Second, practical theology is a collaboration of the disciplines that attend to the practice of ministry. In fact, practical theology might be better at collaborating with other disciplines than it is at showing how the sub-disciplines within practical theology collaborate. One of the significant problems in practical theology is the isolation of the different areas into silos

of specialization. How are the practices of ministry inter-related and connected in our research? In Tom's book and our discussion we have named five: liturgy, pastoral care, catechesis, preaching, and social justice. However, Tom definitely writes this book from the perspective of liturgy, and at times takes a swipe at pastoral care (I think a bit unfairly), which he sees as one of the problems contributing to the changes in funerals.

My concern is how do we engage in practical theological research and writing that demonstrates, not the distinction or competition between the sub-disciplines, but their inter-relation? In fact, practical theologians live within these sub-disciplines much more than ministers. It seems to me we need to do practical theology that shows the inter-woven and inter-related connections in the practice of ministry. What would a book on funerals look like when all the facets of the practices of minister are represented and in dialogue? To be fair to Tom, one book can't do everything, so I'm pointing at another book or another way for us to consider practical theological research. In addition, can we portray the funeral, one liturgical event, within the broader ministry of pastoral care, worship, social justice, and preaching?