

James Nieman
Consultation on *Accompany Them with Singing*
Friday 10:40am panel of scholars and researchers

When an irritatingly long church council or faculty meeting stretches on and on, there comes that moment when everything that *should* have been said likely *has* been said, but not everyone has yet had the chance to say it. That's now my job. So, in the spirit of redundant confirmation, I'd like to offer a few comments on our focus for this panel. Specifically, what is needed for the kind of practical theological scholarship that Tom's book represents, scholarship that is a resource for Christian faith, communities of disciples, and those called to lead them? Let me pause, though, to indicate why all of us today have a stake in this topic, not just the professors. At first glance, the topic sounds like a third order concern far off from many of our callings. What is *central* is faithful life in community, for which (first) ministry gives leadership, for which (second) theological education gives formation, and for which (third) scholarship gives resources...which leaves it pretty remote from what some of us do. But the pastors here are also implicated in this focus about scholarship. After all, you are ultimately the beneficiaries and consumers of what results from such work. Without it, you, your colleagues, and those yet to come will have fewer useful resources for your ministry. And long before that, you are the very people who actually wield the power to insure that such scholarship happens, in your service as seminary trustees, board members for publishing houses or denominations, or knowing and influencing those who serve in these ways. All told, we all have a stake in the seemingly arcane concern for more scholarship like Tom's.

To return to the main topic, then, what is needed to support and produce such scholarship? Let me clarify that by "scholarship" I mean two inseparable things. On the one side are familiar academic products like books, articles, lectures, and the thinking that goes into them. On the other side, no less important, are the people who produce this research, complete the writing, make their work public in various ways, and thus embody a wise and thoughtful life. Scholarship is both about insights and those who have them, and so supporting such scholarship requires that we attend not only to intellectual content but also to human character. We should therefore ask both, "What does it take for a fine book like this to be produced?" and, "What does it take for a person like Tom to do such excellent work?" Of course, I don't mean that this book is the ideal for practical theology or that Tom is the perfect practical theologian to which all should aspire. There are other forms of scholarship and ways to be a scholar in theological education. Yet this intriguing, persuasive, visionary book left me wondering why there isn't little more of *this* and a few more of *him* sprinkled around. It surely couldn't hurt.

So how could this happen more often, and just why doesn't it? It's at this point that we in practical theology tell a "Woe is me" story. It's a tale of barriers and missed opportunities that prevent practical

theology coming to full voice and value in theological education. We tell versions of this narrative from our own situations or experiences, and they often focus on power and politics in academic institutions. The machinery of faculty hiring and promotion doesn't respect what practical theologians offer. Publications about Christian faith or the church are seen as second rate. Turf wars in seminaries are dominated by disciplines whose scholars regard practical theology only as a finishing school. These complaints may have some truth, but their accuracy hasn't changed anything. And while there are major efforts to address these concerns in graduate schools like Emory, Vanderbilt, and elsewhere, it will take time to see how a new group of practical theologians can reshape scholarship toward Christian faith and life. In the mean time, what can we do *besides* describe a structural defect we are unlikely to dismantle or rearrange? What is needed *now* to generate research and researchers like this?

For me, the nature of this very book implies three suggestions. Actually, there have been many more surfaced in our conversation. Like this book, the scholarship we need calls for nothing less than a biblically centered, historically informed, theologically rich, and culturally astute examination of clusters of practices central to the Christian faith and, literally in this case, of life or death significance. That's all. But I want to explore the *background* needed for *that* kind of scholarship to occur, matters that practical theology has recognized but must now try to address more directly. To put it plainly, Tom's book doesn't spend time trying to argue for its own respectability. It simply plunges into the fray to make a potentially compelling case on its own terms. This is also what practical theology needs to do in order to generate comparable scholarship: worry less about structural defects and focus more what we distinctively have to offer. As the book convincingly shows, this involves three features of scholarship that will be crucial not only in institutions of theological education in the years to come, but especially for the sake of more effective Christian witness and ministry.

The first thing needed for such scholarship is a sense of humble *dependency*. Nearly three decades ago, Donald Schön wrote of the unfortunate distinction between so-called major and minor professions. Major professions were disciplined and unambiguous, creating systematic, fundamental knowledge on the model of scientific rationality. Minor professions were, by contrast, mired in messy life contexts that rendered them nonrigorous and hopelessly dependent on other fields for sure knowledge. Schön's point was that the distinction itself was faulty, since all professions faced the shifting and slippery reality of life outside the laboratory. Instead, he claimed that one of the strengths of the minor professions was their very recognition of a dependency on other fields of inquiry. This is the character of Tom's scholarship in this book, a modesty that relies on the insights of other scholars in patiently building a case, rather than asserting some sort of heroic self-construction built on an isolated foundation. The question is how to create environments in which this sort of dependency is affirmed and modeled rather than swept under the

rug as an embarrassment. Moreover, this disposition takes a long time to learn. Chris Scharen has argued that the deep insight characteristic of practical fields may be a late-blooming process. For both pastors and academics, the wisdom in scholarship like Tom's is rarely available upon conferral of a degree. It is not a credential to earn but a pathway to seek that needs mentoring by partners who can acknowledge their own dependency on the work of others.

Closely related to this, such scholarship requires shrewd *integration*. Drawing from the insights of other fields is a start, but good scholars then must discern their relative value and relationship, which insights to include or ignore, and the grounds for these decisions. This is the work of integration, without which we become paralyzed by the agendas of adjacent disciplines. Perhaps more than others, practical theologians acutely realize that integration is essential, not because they are indiscriminate sponges but because religious practices themselves involve embodied insights in complex ways. You can't really get close to the heart of such practices without an integrative approach. But practical theologians also know that when this is done crudely, it is just a sloppy eclecticism that makes our work suspect. We therefore need to explain better how integration is essential for everyone in theological education. There have been fledgling efforts to explore this, but more is needed especially to overcome the resistance to the way integration is time consuming and can throw a wrench into our set ideas. A favorite remark in Tom's book was his candid admission that, "I have written this book in many ways against the book I started out to write." It reflects the awareness that integration can lead to reconsidering the relative merit of what you once thought. The result, however, will be scholarship that is both truly useful and has the integrity to make a contribution over the long run.

Finally, Tom's book shows that such scholarship needs an ample *action theory*. That surely sounds fabulously dull, but it's the crucial, distinctive, useful contribution that practical theological scholarship can bring to ministry and education. By "action theory," I mean simply what we are really, fully doing in any practice. So, in a funeral rite, action theory would explore what is being done, how the components and patterns mean as they do, toward what ends they are aimed, what values offer guidance, and what forces are constraints. That is merely a Parsonian social theory, though, unless we go further toward a *theologically-informed* action theory, which I see within Tom's book. That is, good practical theological scholarship would want to know how any religious practice relates or refers to God, contributes to faith formation, upbuilds the assembly, leads to greater love of neighbor, and so forth.

This still sounds pretty abstract, so let me show its importance by using funerals as the example. Such rites are sometimes misunderstood through an action theory I'll call "script performance," in which key leaders enact a given text in a social setting to generate intense response. So what's the problem?

First off, it leaves much unanswered, like why this script and not another, why these leaders and this setting, or why response would matter. Worse yet is its flat view of human practices, the unconvincing claim that if we try really hard then right ideas will lead to good actions, which anyone who wants to eat better or exercise more can tell you doesn't always work out so well. But most disappointing about this action theory is its silence about how religious rites participate in anything divine. Is a funeral just about generating sufficiently strong feelings so we can get closer to God? Or are we following the script in the tepid hope that we might be mimicking some holy work happening on another plane of reality? Script performance has little to offer about how a funeral is a primary theological enactment here and now, an occasion of God truly with us in the life and death journey we all make together. As an action theory, it cannot bear the weight of such a mystery, and so any scholarly depiction that relies on that approach will be less able to help us sense what we are really doing in funerals, let alone other practices.

Tom's book avoids these pitfalls precisely because he has a thorough, theological action theory in the sinews of his analysis, even if it isn't necessarily articulated on the surface. In larger frame, effective practical theological scholarship like this should not bypass this matter of an ample action theory, one that has (from my Lutheran perspective) a sufficient sense of the sacramentality of holy practices, the ecclesiality of our gatherings, and the eschatology of divine engagement. Inattentive to such matters, we end up with books full of advice, persuading us to another program of human improvement. We've had enough of those. By contrast, theological action theory, combined with the humble dependency and shrewd integration mentioned earlier, could generate a stronger kind of scholarship for church and academy, one that need not fight for its place because its contribution would then be as welcome and distinctive as this book and the one who wrote it.

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