

# Teaching Preaching: As Practical Theology

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<https://doi.org/10.25782/jebs.v21i1.697>

## **Abstract:**

This article explores the teaching of preaching as practical theology through a number of discussions concerning practical theology and theological education. According to Miller-McLemore's definition, both preaching, and the teaching of preaching are expressions of practical theology. One is located in the life of the church. The other in the curriculum of theological education. The purpose of Christian practical theology is to serve the life of the church. The teaching of preaching as practical theology should support the practice of preaching in the church. This means that theological educators need to pay attention to the types of knowledge students actually need for congregational practice. This requires knowledge that goes beyond cognitive understanding (episteme) to include practical wisdom (phronesis) and skill (techne). Since preaching teaching involves both wisdom and skill, there are limitations to what can be taught and learned in the classroom. Be this as it may, conceptualising the teaching of preaching as practical theology has implications for the classroom.

## **Keywords:**

Preaching; practical theology; skill; wisdom; teaching preaching

## **Introduction**

This article explores what it means to teach preaching in programmes designed for ministry preparation through the lens of a number of discussions regarding practical theology and its relationship to theological education. First, it positions practical theology as a discipline whose primary purpose is to serve the life and ministry of the church. Second, it conceptualises the teaching of preaching as an endeavour of practical theology that supports the practice of preaching in the church. Third, it advances the validity and value of seeking to teach knowledge that goes beyond 'cognitive understanding'. Fourth, it identifies the limitations of the classroom for teaching the sort of skills and wisdom

that the practice of preaching requires. Finally, it highlights some strategic implications for teaching preaching in the classroom.<sup>1</sup>

## Practical Theology: Serving the Life of the Church

In her 2011 Presidential Address to the International Academy of Practical Theology, leading USA practical theologian, Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore addressed several issues concerning the nature of practical theology.<sup>2</sup> As part of this, she offered ‘a concise yet expansive definition’ of practical theology.<sup>3</sup> Her description is important in the field. It was based upon a fuller explanation in the *Encyclopedia of Religion in America*.<sup>4</sup> It was also used to shape the format of *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, which Miller-McLemore edited.<sup>5</sup> Significantly for this article, it is a definition she credits as emerging from discussions about practical theology and theological education. These discussions included a ‘consultation on Practical Theology and Christian Ministry that began in 2003’, resulting in the 2008 book *For Life Abundant: Practical Theology, Theological Education, and Christian Ministry*.<sup>6</sup>

In her definition, Miller-McLemore describes practical theology as a ‘multivalent’ discipline that contains four ‘distinctive’ and yet ‘connected and interdependent’ ‘enterprises with different audiences and objectives’.<sup>7</sup> She described these different enterprises as follows:

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<sup>1</sup> I wrote this article after completing and publishing an article, ‘DMin as Practical Theology’, *Religions*, 12, no.1 (2021), <<https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12010031>>. This present article shares some common source material and some general arguments with that earlier article. However, it significantly deepens and develops the material and the arguments in a distinct way with reference to the teaching of preaching.

<sup>2</sup> This was published in 2012. Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, ‘Five Misunderstandings About Practical Theology’, *International Journal of Practical Theology*, 16, no.1 (2012): 5–26.

<sup>3</sup> Miller-McLemore, ‘Five’, p. 19.

<sup>4</sup> Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, ‘Practical Theology’, in *Encyclopedia of Religion in America*, ed. by Charles H. Lippy and Peter W. Williams (Washington: CQ Press, 2010), pp. 1740–1743.

<sup>5</sup> Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, ‘The Contributions of Practical Theology’, in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, ed. by Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore (Chichester: Blackwell Publishing, 2012), pp. 1–20. Miller-McLemore refers to these other uses of the definition, ‘Five’, p. 19, footnote, 45.

<sup>6</sup> Miller-McLemore, ‘Contributions’, p. 4; Dorothy C. Bass and Craig Dykstra, eds, *For Life Abundant: Practical Theology, Theological Education, and Christian Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008).

<sup>7</sup> Miller-McLemore, ‘Five’, pp. 18–23.

[A]n *activity* of believers seeking to sustain a life of reflective faith in the everyday, a *method* or way of analyzing theology in practice used by religious leaders and by teachers and students across the theological curriculum, a *curricular area* in theological education focused on ministerial practice and subspecialties, and, finally, an *academic discipline* pursued by a smaller subset of scholars to support and sustain these first three enterprises.<sup>8</sup>

For Miller-McLemore, these different enterprises are unified by a ‘shared understanding of practical theology as a general way of doing theology concerned with the embodiment of religious belief in the day-to-day lives of individuals and communities’.<sup>9</sup> As she would argue, practical theology’s concern for embodied Christian living is not merely ‘descriptive’ but ‘constructive’.<sup>10</sup> She states, ‘Practical theology’s objective is both to understand and to influence religious wisdom in congregations and public life more generally.’<sup>11</sup> For Miller-McLemore, therefore, it appears that it is not merely that the academic endeavour of practical theology supports and sustains the other three endeavours but that all the expressions of practical theology serve the embodied and daily lives of believers. Elsewhere she writes, ‘Practical theology either has relevance for everyday faith and life or it has little meaning at all.’<sup>12</sup>

That practical theology has to have relevance for the faith and lives of believing people is picked up and highlighted by the British practical theologian Pete Ward. In his response to Miller-McLemore’s 2011 address, he welcomed her emphasis at the conference not merely on the theological but on the ‘ecclesial’.<sup>13</sup> He contrasted this with what he saw as a move in practical theology away from ecclesial concerns to the broader area of ‘the place of religion in society’.<sup>14</sup> In response to this move, he argued that practical theology finds its orientation in the church.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, in terms of Miller-McLemore’s four types he suggested,

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<sup>8</sup> Miller-McLemore, ‘Five’, p. 20 (emphasis original).

<sup>9</sup> Miller-McLemore, ‘Five’, p. 20.

<sup>10</sup> Miller-McLemore, ‘Five’, p. 23.

<sup>11</sup> Miller-McLemore, ‘Five’, p. 25.

<sup>12</sup> Miller-McLemore, ‘Contributions’, p. 7.

<sup>13</sup> Pete Ward, ‘The Hermeneutical and Epistemological Significance of Our Students’, *International Journal of Practical Theology*, 16, no. 1 (2012): 55–65 (p. 63).

<sup>14</sup> Ward, ‘Hermeneutical’, p. 63.

<sup>15</sup> Ward, ‘Hermeneutical’, pp. 63–64.

that there needs to be an epistemological order of priority between the types. Practical Theology may exist as a method, a theological discipline, and as a curriculum area, but these three find their *raison d'être* in the life, expression, and reasoning of the Christian community.<sup>16</sup>

This emphasis defines Ward's later book *Introducing Practical Theology*, in which he engages positively with Miller-McLemore's typology and stresses the ecclesial location of his own approach to practical theology.<sup>17</sup> As Ward acknowledges, practical theology can be done in many ways and by people of other faiths and none.<sup>18</sup> However, his concern is to offer a 'way of doing practical theology that is fundamentally ecclesial and theological in nature'.<sup>19</sup> It is concerned with transformation in and through people's lives through the ministry and mission of the church. He writes,

So the purpose and eventual product of practical theology should be the transformation of individuals and communities. The transformation of individuals, society, and the church is a work of God that comes about through the work of the Holy Spirit. Practical theology, however, is a participation in this transforming work through the faithful pursuit of understanding that takes both theology and practice seriously.<sup>20</sup>

Christian practical theology, therefore, is deeply rooted in and exists to serve the church. This article takes this approach to the nature of practical theology.

## Teaching Preaching: A Supportive Practice

Christian practical theology exists in the service of the Christian Church. Following on from this, the teaching of preaching is an expression of practical theology that supports the practice of preaching as an expression of practical theology in the life of the church. This requires discussion on the distinction and connection between the 'ministerial

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<sup>16</sup> Ward, 'Hermeneutical', p. 64.

<sup>17</sup> Pete Ward, *Introducing Practical Theology: Mission, Ministry, and the Life of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017).

<sup>18</sup> Ward, *Introducing*, p. 3.

<sup>19</sup> Ward, *Introducing*, p. 3.

<sup>20</sup> Ward, *Introducing*, p. 167.

practice at hand’, preaching, and ‘the practice of the discipline that studies and teaches that practice’.<sup>21</sup>

Preaching as a ‘process of reading the Scriptures and trying to make connections to life is a vital form of practical theology that has been church practice since New Testament times’.<sup>22</sup> In terms of Miller-McLemore’s typology, it is a practice that operates as practical theology within the first use of the term. It is ‘an *activity* of believers seeking to sustain a life of reflective faith in the everyday’.<sup>23</sup>

As an activity in believers’ lives, preaching can be described as a form of ‘strategic practical theology’. Don Browning, one of the pioneers of practical theology in the USA, argued that all theology should be practical.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, he found the need to describe the Christian Church’s traditional disciplines such as liturgy, pastoral care, and preaching as ‘strategic practical theology’ or ‘fully practical theology’.<sup>25</sup> He used these terms because it is through such practices that critical reflection in a church’s life ‘becomes fully or concretely practical’.<sup>26</sup> Browning writes of these disciplines, which include preaching,

This is where ministers and lay persons who think about the practical life of the church really function. Here they make incredibly complex judgments of the most remarkable kind. If they are good practical thinkers, the richness and virtuosity of their work can contribute greatly to both the life of the church and the common good beyond it.<sup>27</sup>

For Browning, such strategic practical theology in a congregation’s life, such as preaching, is only one sub-movement in his ‘fundamental practical theology’. The other sub-movements are ‘descriptive theology, historical theology’, and ‘systematic theology’.<sup>28</sup> Together they enable, ‘the church’s dialogue with Christian sources and

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<sup>21</sup> Miller-McLemore, ‘Contributions’, p. 13.

<sup>22</sup> Ward, *Introducing*, p. 173.

<sup>23</sup> Miller-McLemore, ‘Five’, p. 20.

<sup>24</sup> Don Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology: Descriptive and Strategic Proposals* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), pp. 4–8.

<sup>25</sup> Browning, *Fundamental*, p. 8.

<sup>26</sup> Browning, *Fundamental*, p. 8.

<sup>27</sup> Browning, *Fundamental*, p. 55.

<sup>28</sup> Browning, *Fundamental*, p. 8.

other communities of experience and interpretation with the aim of guiding its action toward social and individual transformation'.<sup>29</sup> All of these movements for Browning are practical in the sense that they involve reflection on practice.<sup>30</sup> In this reflection, however, the movement is not from theory to practice but is instead from 'practice to theory and back to practice'.<sup>31</sup> The acts of strategic practical theology, such as preaching, seek to implement and communicate to the congregation insights derived from the critical reflection through the various other sub-movements.<sup>32</sup> However, while such disciplines as preaching mark a 'culmination' to this reflection in a congregation's life, this is not an endpoint. Instead, the issues which strategic practical theology raise, feed back into the 'hermeneutical cycle' of the critical reflection that makes up the life of a congregation.<sup>33</sup>

Such preaching as practical theology in the life of the church has a number of dynamics. Preaching can be 'a performative form of practical theological expression'.<sup>34</sup> This takes place through the activity of the preacher as they bring together doctrine, scripture, and experience, seeking to make connections with the lives of believers.<sup>35</sup> In turn, however, such preaching with its mixture of scripture, doctrine and life, becomes part of the listeners' experience as they then reflect upon the preaching in the light of their own broader knowledge and experience.<sup>36</sup> As such, it becomes part of their practical theological reflection as individuals and as a congregation. How preachers approach their task and congregants respond to the sermon, will be influenced by their ecclesial traditions and theological convictions. Be this as it may, implicitly and explicitly preaching contributes to the 'remembering', 'absorbing', 'noticing', 'selecting', and 'expressing', that constitute practical theology in the 'ordinary' life of the church as congregations seek to live out their faith.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Browning, *Fundamental*, p. 36.

<sup>30</sup> Browning, *Fundamental*, p. 57.

<sup>31</sup> Browning, *Fundamental*, p. 7.

<sup>32</sup> Browning, *Fundamental*, p. 55–57.

<sup>33</sup> Browning, *Fundamental*, p. 58.

<sup>34</sup> Ward, *Introducing*, p. 173.

<sup>35</sup> Ward, *Introducing*, pp. 172–173.

<sup>36</sup> Ward, *Introducing*, p. 173.

<sup>37</sup> Ward, *Introducing*, pp. 13–21.

In contrast to preaching, however, which according to McLemore's typology is located in the life of believing communities, the teaching of preaching is located in the classroom as 'a *curricular area* in theological education focused on ministerial practice and subspecialties'.<sup>38</sup> In the classroom, preaching is an academic sub-discipline of practical theology as are pastoral care and liturgics and leadership.<sup>39</sup> To teach preaching in higher education is to teach according to institutional and national standards. Teachers write syllabi and design courses. Students have fees to pay, grades to earn, classes to attend, and learning outcomes to be achieved. In this sense preaching and the teaching of preaching are 'distinct enterprises with different audiences and objectives'.<sup>40</sup>

Although these two enterprises of practical theology are distinct, they are yet 'connected and interdependent'.<sup>41</sup> Both are concerned with preaching as an activity in the life of the congregation and the world. Preachers can teach, and teachers can preach. Students bring the history, traditions, and practices of the congregations to which they belong into the classrooms. Ward expressed this very clearly in his response to Miller-McLemore's address.

One of the places that I meet the enacted and the performed is in the classroom. My students embody theology. When they travel in to London to our University they do not leave their calling or their communities behind. They do not cease to be ministers when they enter the classroom. They carry their ministerial experience and theological commitment with them when they come to study.<sup>42</sup>

This is of consequence. It relates to Ward's broader argument discussed above. The teaching of practical theology should be shaped by the concerns and practices of the Christian Church. Consequently, the teaching of preaching as an endeavour of practical theology has an objective beyond itself. This objective is the preaching of the church as a transformative activity that enables the faithful, embodied living of Christian people. As such, the teaching of preaching as practical

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<sup>38</sup> Miller-McLemore, 'Five', p. 20.

<sup>39</sup> Miller-McLemore, 'Five', p. 17.

<sup>40</sup> Miller-McLemore, 'Five', p. 20.

<sup>41</sup> Miller-McLemore, 'Five', p. 20.

<sup>42</sup> Ward, 'Hermeneutical', p. 57.

theology is a supportive endeavour of preaching in the life of a congregation. This claim is more significant than it may sound. For it requires focused attention in the teaching of preaching to what students actually need to learn if their theological education is to be enable them to do what they need to do as preachers.

## Teaching Preaching: Beyond Episteme

To teach preaching is to teach a sub-discipline of practical theology within the framework of theological education. The question raised above, however, is what it is that students need to learn for preaching in the church. On this issue, Miller-McLemore has critiqued theological education for its captivity to ‘cognitive intelligence’ or what she dubbed the ‘academic paradigm’.<sup>43</sup> She critiqued an overemphasis on theoretical knowledge, which is associated with Aristotle’s category of ‘episteme’. Her point is not that that such knowledge is unimportant but rather that on its own it is not adequate for theological education.<sup>44</sup>

Miller-McLemore argues for the necessity of a broader approach to the nature of knowledge in theological education because those who study to prepare for ministry need to learn ‘how to do’ certain things. In a chapter on ‘Practical Theology and Pedagogy’ she states, “Those who come into the classroom must leave better prepared *to do something*, whether that be to listen, worship, preach, lead, form, teach, oversee, convert, transform, or pursue justice.”<sup>45</sup> This is the case because, as she continues later, “There are, after all, better and worse ways to stand when speaking from the front of a church or raising the bread and wine for praise and blessing.”<sup>46</sup>

As indicated above, the necessity for a broader understanding of the knowledge desired through theological education has direct relevance for teaching preaching. John S McClure in a chapter on

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<sup>43</sup> Miller-McLemore, ‘Five’, p. 14. See also, Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, ‘The “Clerical Paradigm”: A Fallacy of Misplaced Concreteness?’, *International Journal of Practical Theology*, 11 (2007): 19–38.

<sup>44</sup> Miller-McLemore, ‘Five’, pp. 14–15.

<sup>45</sup> Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, ‘Practical Theology and Pedagogy: Embodying Theological Know-How’, in *For Ljfe*, ed. by Bass and Dykstra, pp. 170–190 (p. 173) (emphasis mine).

<sup>46</sup> Miller-McLemore, ‘Practical’, p. 180.

preaching in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology* puts it as follows: “The goal of homiletical education is to graduate not students who know “about” preaching, but students who are on their way to becoming wise and skilled practitioners of the theological communication in general, and of preaching in particular.”<sup>47</sup> For McClure, therefore, students of preaching need to learn both ‘wisdom’ and ‘skill’. To put that differently and anticipate the following discussion, people need to learn both ‘how to preach’ wisely and ‘to preach’ well. These are distinct forms of knowledge from ‘knowing about’. While connected, they are also distinct from one another, because there is a ‘fundamental difference between knowing how to do something and being able to do it’.<sup>48</sup>

Helpfully, Miller-McLemore and others not only make the case for the necessity of knowledge beyond cognitive understanding but also argue for the nature and validity of that type of knowledge in theological education.<sup>49</sup> To do this, they draw upon and dialogue with a variety of authors and movements which unsettle ‘mind-centred epistemology’.<sup>50</sup> They also critically appropriate the Aristotelian categories of, ‘*episteme/theoria*, (theoretical knowing as an end in itself), *praxis/phronesis* (practical knowing of how to live), and *techne/poesis* (productive knowing of how to make things)’.<sup>51</sup> They do this to highlight the existence of different forms of knowledge beyond episteme. It also allows them to stress both the neglect and yet the importance of phronesis, practical wisdom, in Christian living and theological education.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> John S. McClure, ‘Homiletics’, in *Wiley-Blackwell*, ed. by Miller-McLemore, pp. 279–288 (p. 279).

<sup>48</sup> Richard Carr, ‘A Taxonomy of Objectives for Professional Education’, *Studies in Higher Education*, 10, no.2 (1985): 135–149 (p. 137).

<sup>49</sup> I am concentrating particularly though not exclusively on Miller-McLemore’s contribution. Some of her constructive work on this is in the collaborative enterprise Dorothy C. Bass, et al., *Christian Practical Wisdom: What It Is, Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016). She also offers a far-reaching critique of the ‘Theory-Practice Binary’ in ‘The Theory-Practice Binary and the Politics of Practical Knowledge’, in *Conundrums in Practical Theology*, ed. by Joyce Ann Mercer and Bonnie Miller-McLemore (Leiden: Brill, 2016), pp. 190–218.

<sup>50</sup> Miller-McLemore, ‘Academic Theology and Practical Knowledge’, in *Christian*, ed. by Bass et al., pp. 175–223 (p. 175).

<sup>51</sup> Miller-McLemore, ‘Academic’, p. 200.

<sup>52</sup> Bass, *Christian*, pp. 4–16.

Practical wisdom, they argue, ‘is the good judgment someone shows in the face of everyday dilemmas. It is the ability to render a proper assessment of a situation and to act rightly as a result.’<sup>53</sup> It is the sort of ‘knowledge’ seen in ‘the competent nurse, a good parent, a seasoned mechanic, a thoughtful congregant, a trusted daycare worker, a sage administrator’.<sup>54</sup> Or as one early advocate claims, it is the sort of ‘intricate’ and ‘profound’ knowledge, obtained through experience that allows a person ‘to preach convincingly’.<sup>55</sup> Specifically ‘Christian’ practical wisdom is such embodied wisdom ‘*nourished by Scripture and reliant on the grace of God*’ with the concern to enable people to live ‘abundant lives’.<sup>56</sup>

The preceding discussion indicates something of the epistemological arguments for the validity and value of knowledge beyond episteme. Such arguments support the claims that the teaching of practical theology needs to give attention to cultivating such phronesis, “‘pastoral wisdom’ or ‘theological know-how’”.<sup>57</sup> However, this focus on practical wisdom only takes us so far in moving beyond episteme or cognitive understanding in the teaching of preaching. It focuses primarily on the practical wisdom of the ‘how to’ in context, rather than on the actual skill of doing. This is important. For as McClure suggested, preachers need not only ‘wisdom’ but ‘skill’.<sup>58</sup> Skill is ‘the ability to do something well’ or the ‘actual doing’ of something ‘with accomplishment’.<sup>59</sup> While connected to the ‘how to’, it is yet a distinct form of knowledge. Alternatively, to return to the Aristotelian language, skill is concerned with the *techne/poiesis* (productive knowing of how to make things) rather than *phronesis*.

Miller-McLemore is aware of the limitations of merely highlighting the value in practical theology of practical wisdom in

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<sup>53</sup> Bass, *Christian*, p. 4.

<sup>54</sup> Bass, *Christian*, p. 1.

<sup>55</sup> Rodney J. Hunter, ‘The Future of Pastoral Theology’, *Pastoral Psychology*, 29, no. 1 (1980): 58–69 (pp. 66–67).

<sup>56</sup> ‘In Anticipation’, in *For Life*, ed. by Bass and Dykstra, pp. 355–360 (p. 359, emphasis original), and Bass, *Christian*, pp. 4–10.

<sup>57</sup> Miller-McLemore, ‘Practical’, p. 171.

<sup>58</sup> McClure, ‘Homiletics’, p. 279.

<sup>59</sup> Merle Patchett and Joanna Mann, ‘Five Advantages of Skill’, *Cultural Geographies*, 25 (2018): 23–29 (pp. 24–25).

addition to theoretical understanding. Consequently, she points to the work of practical theologians who have begun to explore the nature and value of knowledge involved with and generated through *techne* and *poesis*. Accordingly, in terms of *techne*, she states that when it comes to practical subjects, ‘one needs knowledge that puts theology into action through movement, exercise, accumulated trial-and-error experience, and so forth’.<sup>60</sup> She highlights connections with the skills required and developed in sport, music, and nursing.<sup>61</sup> Thus John Witvliet in his chapter on teaching worship argues for the ongoing significance of ‘key skills’ not only in sport and music but for what he calls ‘improvisatory ministry’.<sup>62</sup> Concerning *poesis* Miller-McLemore points to British scholar Heather Walton’s work and her emphasis on the value of creative and imaginative perceptions which are part of the making of things.<sup>63</sup> This emphasis on the necessity, value, creativity, and complexity of the knowledge involved in skill finds support and development in other current research areas.<sup>64</sup> Tim Ingold in the concluding article on skill in a recent edition of *Cultural Geographies* writes,

We recognise that skill is the ground from which all knowledge grows, that ‘imitation’ is shorthand for processes of attunement and response of great subtlety and complexity and that skilled practice entails the working of a mind that, as it overflows into body and environment, is endlessly creative.<sup>65</sup>

For Ingold, skill is the starting point. Therefore, it may be just as accurate to talk about skill and wisdom as wisdom and skill. Moreover, as he goes on to argue, skill is not merely a mechanistic activity but involves a form of embodied practical knowledge that is capable of articulation.<sup>66</sup> So just as with *phronesis*, *techne* and *poesis* point to other necessary and valid forms of knowledge to which the teaching of

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<sup>60</sup> Miller-McLemore, ‘Academic’, p. 214.

<sup>61</sup> Miller-McLemore, ‘Academic’, p. 214.

<sup>62</sup> John D. Witvliet, ‘Teaching Worship as a Christian Practice’ in *For Life*, ed. by Bass and Dykstra, pp. 117–148 (pp. 140–143). Although this is a chapter on worship, I will draw on some material when relevant for preaching.

<sup>63</sup> Miller-McLemore, ‘Academic’, pp. 215–216.

<sup>64</sup> This is not to say that the other literature necessarily agrees with Miller-McLemore in all areas of definition or interpretation of what constitutes skill or how it operates.

<sup>65</sup> Tim Ingold ‘Five Questions of Skill’, *Cultural Geographies*, 25 (2018): 159–163 (p. 159).

<sup>66</sup> Ingold, ‘Five Questions’, pp. 160–161.

practical theology subjects, such as preaching, needs to give attention beyond episteme.

To teach preaching as practical theology is to teach a practice which requires knowledge which extends beyond episteme. This knowledge includes skill and the wisdom that exists in relation to its contextual operation. This claim is not to abandon the importance of theoretical understanding nor to abandon theological education for training in ‘mere know-how’.<sup>67</sup> Instead, it is to recognise the necessity and validity of other forms of knowledge, their sometimes priority, and their interconnectedness, which can provide the sort of learning that enables people to do things well and wisely in context.

### **Teaching Preaching: The Limitations of the Classroom**

Since the teaching of preaching is concerned with the teaching of skill and wisdom and not simply ‘knowledge about’, the classroom has its limitations. This learning is a long-term process. Practical theologian Craig Dykstra states, ‘It is a beautiful thing to see a good pastor at work.’<sup>68</sup> By a good pastor, he means one who can respond well with words and actions in a wide variety of contexts and situations. According to Dykstra, this ability comes from a way of ‘seeing’ that he calls ‘the pastoral imagination’. However,

The pastoral imagination emerges over time and though the influence of many forces. It is always forged, however, in the midst of ministry itself, as pastors are shaped by time spent on the anvil of deep and sustained engagement in pastoral work.<sup>69</sup>

Christian Scharen makes a similar argument in a chapter he writes about ministry learning and the embodying of skill and wisdom.<sup>70</sup> Scharen recounts his first experience of preaching at a church while in his second year of training at a theological seminary. At seminary, he had been

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<sup>67</sup> Miller-McLemore, ‘Five’, p. 15 (emphasis original).

<sup>68</sup> Craig Dykstra, ‘Pastoral and Ecclesia Imagination’, in *For Life*, ed. by Bass and Dykstra, pp. 41–61 (p. 41).

<sup>69</sup> Dykstra, ‘Pastoral’, pp. 41–42.

<sup>70</sup> Christian Scharen, ‘Learning Ministry Over Time: Embodying Practical Wisdom’, in *For Life*, ed. by Bass and Dykstra, pp. 265–288.

learning to preach using the Eugene Lowry *Homiletical Plot*.<sup>71</sup> In the classroom, he had received good feedback and a good grade. Nevertheless, when he delivered his sermon before a congregation, it was ‘labored and awkward’.<sup>72</sup> He contrasted this with the church minister’s ‘seemingly effortless’ preaching and his own later preaching.<sup>73</sup> As he argues in this chapter, the difference is learning gained through experience, supported by mentors, in the actual practice of ministry.

Scharen draws upon the work of Hubert and Stuart Dreyfus and their stages of skill acquisition to contrast and explain the difference between his earlier and later abilities.<sup>74</sup> According to this scheme, people acquire skills through the stages of ‘novice’, ‘advanced beginner’, ‘competence’, ‘proficiency’, and ‘expertise’.<sup>75</sup> Scharen equates his initial preaching while in his second year of theological education with the ‘novice’ stage.<sup>76</sup> The novice stage is one in which a person follows and applies the rules with little situational awareness. Progression through the stages requires experience *in situ* beyond experience in the classroom. Scharen suggests students can achieve only the first two stages and the beginning of the third during their theological seminary education.<sup>77</sup> The remaining stages require the experience of learning in and through the practice of ministry.

Such schemes of stage development are, of course, problematic. People are individuals and bring a different range of experiences to their theological education. Nevertheless, such schemes highlight that practices such as preaching cannot be taught in a single course. The skills and wisdom required to do them well take time, experience, feedback, and reflection. This perspective concurs with McClure’s chapter on homiletical theological education.<sup>78</sup> To be sure, in theological education, individual courses in preaching are supplemented with other courses

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<sup>71</sup> Scharen, ‘Learning’, p. 272.

<sup>72</sup> Scharen, ‘Learning’, p. 273.

<sup>73</sup> Scharen, ‘Learning’, p. 273.

<sup>74</sup> Scharen, ‘Learning’, pp. 267–269.

<sup>75</sup> See, for example, Stuart E. Dreyfus, ‘The Five Stage Model of Adult Skill Acquisition’, *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society*, 24, no. 3 (2004): 177–181.

<sup>76</sup> Scharen, ‘Learning’, pp. 271–273.

<sup>77</sup> Scharen, ‘Learning’, 279, footnote 29.

<sup>78</sup> McClure, ‘Homiletic’.

which provide associated knowledge and skills such as biblical exegesis. In turn, programmes can also offer fieldwork, placement, and practical experience. As Cahalan notes,

Increasingly seminaries are providing more and varied experiences for performance in communities of faith, including full-year internships and programs aimed to support them beyond graduation in the transition into ministry.<sup>79</sup>

However, if this is to be cumulatively successful, it will require not merely several places in the programme where preaching is taught or happens. Instead, it will require intentional ‘horizontal’ and ‘vertical’ integration in curriculum design.<sup>80</sup>

Even with curriculum integration, it is the case that ‘when ordination follows the master of divinity degree, we cannot suppose that the minister is fully competent, but he or she is recognized as possessing the gifts and education to become a competent practitioner’.<sup>81</sup> When McClure discusses the teaching of homiletics as practical theology, he focuses on a case study involving a pastor who has been a solo pastor for three years and has begun to worry that ‘her preaching is not as effective as it could be’.<sup>82</sup> Cahalan indicates how significant these early years can be: ‘The ministry setting is now the classroom and without sustained attention to learning in practice in the first years of ministry, many people will face burn-out, unnecessary conflict, ill health, and emotional upset.’<sup>83</sup> For seminaries and accrediting institutions, this raises questions of the role they expect and are expected to play in the ongoing development of their leaders and indeed preachers. For the teachers of preaching, it raises the question of what they can do in the classroom to facilitate the sort of learning that enables an appropriate stage of skill and wisdom to be achieved and also future learning to take place.

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<sup>79</sup> Kathleen A. Cahalan, ‘Integration in Theological Education’ in *Wiley-Blackwell*, ed. by Miller-McLemore, pp. 386–395 (p. 390).

<sup>80</sup> Cahalan, ‘Integration’, pp. 389–390.

<sup>81</sup> Cahalan, ‘Integration’, pp. 392–393. The MDiv is the main programme of theological education for ministerial preparation in North America. The point applies to other similar programmes elsewhere in the world.

<sup>82</sup> McClure, ‘Homiletics’, p. 281.

<sup>83</sup> Cahalan, ‘Homiletics’, p. 393. She also refers to the skill acquisition scheme of Dreyfus and Dreyfus.

## Teaching Preaching: Classroom Implications

A classroom course in preaching cannot make skilled and wise preachers. Yet, the classroom education in practical theology has an important role to play in the overall development of people.<sup>84</sup> Given the arguments above, courses in preaching can seek to develop level appropriate skills and wisdom and lay the groundwork for potential future development. This goal has several significant implications for classroom teaching. These include the teacher as a preacher, the epistemological emphasis, and the adopted learning and teaching methods.

The teacher of preaching needs to be a preacher among preachers. Miller-McLemore highlights this point. In a creative play on a well-known adage, she claims, ‘those who teach *can* do’.<sup>85</sup> The teacher’s demonstrable skill is essential because from the perspective of the students, ‘The *teaching* of a teacher of teachers, the *preaching* of a teacher of preachers or the *caring* of a teacher of care is seen as witness and proof of the professor’s embodied theology and real knowledge of the subject.’<sup>86</sup>

The fact that the teacher of preaching is a preacher is crucial not merely for student confidence, but also for classroom pedagogy. It is the preaching of the teachers of preaching that keeps their teaching ‘honest’.<sup>87</sup> It roots their own knowledge of the subject matter in practice. While research-led teaching is essential, so is practice-led preaching. Miller-McLemore writes, ‘A pedagogy that is developed and continually nourished in relation to clinical, congregational, or other non-academic practice engenders shifts in epistemological commitments.’<sup>88</sup> This shift in epistemological commitments is towards the sort of knowledge that students actually need to preach well and wisely in context.

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<sup>84</sup> Scharen, ‘Learning’, p. 265.

<sup>85</sup> Miller-McLemore, ‘Practical’, p. 175 (emphasis original).

<sup>86</sup> Miller-McLemore, ‘Practical’, p. 175 (emphasis original).

<sup>87</sup> Miller-McLemore, ‘Practical’, p. 176.

<sup>88</sup> Miller-McLemore, ‘Practical’, p. 176.

The above emphasis on the knowledge required for skill and wisdom does not mean that cognitive understanding is unimportant in the preaching classroom. Instead, the issue is how that knowledge is generated and evaluated in relation to practice and what students need to know to do what is required of them in churches. Through the lens of practical theology, this means paying attention to actual practice as the source and goal of theological knowledge. Browning stated that all church practices are ‘meaningful or theory-laden’.<sup>89</sup> This perspective means that the actual practice, the doing of it, becomes the source for biblical, theological, historical, and theoretical reflection. Here we have the crucial ‘practice to theory and back to practice’ move of practical theology.<sup>90</sup> Thus, it is the concern of practical theology pedagogy to make practice an ‘avenue into fuller engagement with history and theory and to bring history and theory to bear in practice’.<sup>91</sup> McClure, argues for such a reflective approach in homiletical education as practical theology in his case study of the minister who wished to improve her preaching. He claims that it enables people to ‘learn to relate the historical, theological, and theoretical perspectives on preaching to the task of developing a strategic contextual theology of communication’.<sup>92</sup> In the teaching of preaching as practical theology, therefore, cognitive understanding is important. However, it is important as it emerges from and relates to practice. The epistemological emphasis, however, is on practice.

This epistemological emphasis in practical theology requires appropriate teaching strategies to facilitate such learning. Just as the knowledge sought in the teaching of preaching goes beyond episteme, so too, the learning and teaching strategies need to go beyond the lecture.<sup>93</sup> Teaching preaching involves confronting the pedagogical ‘questions of what it takes to shape theologically wise practitioners’.<sup>94</sup> The answer to these questions will be level specific and contextual. Nevertheless, two pedagogical strategies are offered below for the

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<sup>89</sup> Browning, *Fundamental*, p. 6.

<sup>90</sup> Browning, *Fundamental*, p. 7.

<sup>91</sup> Miller-McLemore, ‘Practical’, p. 179.

<sup>92</sup> McClure, ‘Homiletics’, p. 287.

<sup>93</sup> Miller-McLemore, ‘Practical’, p. 173.

<sup>94</sup> Miller-McLemore, ‘Practical’, p. 174.

teaching of preaching as practical theology. The first is a strategic emphasis on the skill. The second involves the use of case studies to stimulate reflective practice.

In teaching preaching as practical theology, one pedagogical implication is the need to give greater attention to skill. This idea may seem obvious. Nevertheless, teachers may identify with Witvliet when he writes, ‘In the teaching of future ministers, I find the teaching of basic skills the most difficult part of my work [...] I want to use my 27 hours of teaching time to engage in discussions of content, not to practice skills.’<sup>95</sup> However, he also acknowledges that a coach’s goal is generally not to teach more coaches but to enable people to become players.<sup>96</sup> To teach practical theology is to teach towards ‘participation’.<sup>97</sup>

To pay attention to skill means paying attention to the skills which people bring. Some people may have preached a lot, and some people may have preached little. However, those who have spent any time in church life have heard sermons and implicitly or explicitly learned the practice and attendant theologies. Just as with the teaching of worship ‘this set of attendant experiences is likely to be far more influential than any [...] class in shaping their attitudes and habits of leadership’.<sup>98</sup> Thus if teachers simply apply a theory to practice model without dealing with inherited learning, students might implicitly or explicitly translate it through their prior learning. This filter can create resistance to new and transformative information. Effective golf coaches or singing instructors begin ‘by making students aware of their acquired habits, and then work to reshape those habits by carefully chosen drills’ and that to do otherwise is to court failure.<sup>99</sup> However, it is more straightforward to give such attention in one-to-one teaching situations than with a class of students. Possible responses include requiring students to provide recordings of their present preaching styles at the start of class or structuring a course where students preach earlier rather than later in the term. Another option, less direct but less

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<sup>95</sup> Witvliet, ‘Teaching’, pp. 140–141.

<sup>96</sup> Witvliet, ‘Teaching’, p. 119.

<sup>97</sup> Witvliet, ‘Teaching’, pp. 118–121.

<sup>98</sup> Witvliet, ‘Teaching’, p. 127.

<sup>99</sup> Witvliet, ‘Teaching’, p. 127.

time-consuming, is to invite students to provide a personal learning outcome for the course in terms of what they hope to learn. Whatever approach teachers take, they need to recognise the prior skills and attendant experience of their students. It represents prior embodied learning. Witvliet makes the critical point that teachers may ‘secretly’ tend to see students’ prior experience as ‘irredeemably deficient’ and an ‘unfortunate liability in the classroom’.<sup>100</sup> Instead, he rightly argues that enabling students to reflect upon these experiences can be a ‘key instructional resource’, rather than a liability.<sup>101</sup> Furthermore, it emphasises that students are co-creators of the learning that will take place in the classroom. Both their own and that of others.

Paying attention to skill also means paying attention and enabling practice in the skills that students actually need. Cahalan writes,

Some theological educators view teaching basic skills, or know-how, as merely technique and functions, but fail to see that novices need the “hints, tips and rules of thumb” of a practice, not because they constitute full ministerial practice, but because that is where practice begins.<sup>102</sup>

Preaching requires basic skills in at least three areas, interpreting the scriptures for preaching, designing sermons in terms of content and structure, and delivering sermons with attention to vocalics, non-verbal communication, and the medium of delivery. Since basic skill is where practice begins, teachers need to identify what level of specific skills need to be taught in that particular course and create opportunities for them to be practised for preaching. ‘Learning a practice means practicing it over and over again.’<sup>103</sup> To be sure, however, it is not possible to have students preach full sermons every week. Be this as it may, it is possible to develop short exercises.<sup>104</sup> In preaching, these would be exercises where students regularly speak publicly, demonstrating some management of voice, body language, eye contact, tone, biblical interpretation. Students can give an illustration, tell a story, offer an introduction, look at the camera while introducing themselves, speak a short part of a recent sermon without notes. In all these

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<sup>100</sup> Witvliet, ‘Teaching’, p. 127–128.

<sup>101</sup> Witvliet, ‘Teaching’, p. 128.

<sup>102</sup> Cahalan, ‘Integration’, p. 392.

<sup>103</sup> Cahalan, ‘Integration’, p. 392.

<sup>104</sup> Witvliet, ‘Teaching’, p. 141.

exercises, they can receive brief teacher and peer feedback. Instead of being asked to do additional reading, they can be asked to prepare and rehearse the skills involved in what they will be required to do as preachers in churches, speaking and speaking well. The point here is that if preaching is a skill and involves techniques, and if such skill relates to valid forms of knowledge, then the teaching of preaching has to give attention to these skills and techniques.

In addition to an emphasis on skill, another potential pedagogical strategy for teaching preaching as practical theology is the use of case studies. A case study is a focused and potentially in-depth study of a particular person or situation which invites understanding, analysis, and evaluation of practice. Daniel S. Schipani writes that ‘the case study method is one of the most widely used and valued ways of doing practical theology even though, strictly speaking, it was not originally devised and developed by practical theologians and is not unique to practical theology’.<sup>105</sup> Witvliet identifies many of the strengths of the case study when he writes,

Case studies expand our awareness of the diversity of ministry practices, ground theoretical discussions in every-day life, help us to perceive the complex interrelated dynamics involved in real life, and train new skills for perceiving what is at stake in any given situation.<sup>106</sup>

While case studies in practical theology may be associated primarily with pastoral theology, they can be used with preaching. McClure uses a case study to explore the teaching of preaching because case studies are a useful ‘pedagogical tool in practical theology’.<sup>107</sup> Through his ‘fictional’ case study he demonstrates the relationship between preaching and ‘self-reflection’, ‘congregational theology’, ‘public theology’, ‘theology of communication’, and the implementation ‘of new theologically grounded skills and practices’.<sup>108</sup>

Case studies allow focus on the breadth and depth of preaching from the perspective of practice. Breadth is necessary to give historical

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<sup>105</sup> Daniel L. Schipani, ‘Case Study Method’ in *Wiley-Blackwell*, ed. by Miller-McLemore, pp. 91–101 (p. 91).

<sup>106</sup> Witvliet, ‘Teaching’, p. 134.

<sup>107</sup> McClure, ‘Homiletics’, p. 279.

<sup>108</sup> McClure, ‘Homiletics’, p. 287.

and geographical ‘perception’.<sup>109</sup> In a class designed to teach preaching, case studies are ‘much more manageable for class discussion than larger surveys of the disciplinary landscape’.<sup>110</sup> Students can offer short presentations on a variety of selected case studies based upon delivered sermons. They can focus on the who, when, where, how, why, and style of these sermons. This approach can ensure that a variety of historical and cross-cultural, and marginalised voices are introduced and discussed. In this way, as successfully as any lecture, students are introduced to the long and diverse Christian preaching tradition but critically through engaging with actual sermons in context. In turn, any single case study, developed in-depth, can stimulate a range of theoretical and theological discussions about the practice of preaching. So, for example, a study of a sermon by Aimee Semple McPherson (1890–1944) invites relevant exploration of Pentecostal theology and preaching, women and preaching, the Bible and preaching, preaching and communication, preaching and performance, preaching and healing, preaching and crusade evangelism, the personality of the preacher, and media representations of preachers.<sup>111</sup>

As indicated above, the purpose of case studies is not merely descriptive. They invite research, analysis, and evaluation. In this way, as people ask questions and discuss the situation, they enable ‘theory building’ concerning how the people involved demonstrated good practice in context.<sup>112</sup> Frank A. Thomas uses Martin Luther King Jr’s last speech ‘I’ve Been to the Mountaintop’ as a case study of what it means to preach in context with a ‘moral imagination’.<sup>113</sup>

The pedagogical value of case studies, however, go beyond the content of what students discuss. It also relates to the reflective process in which the students engage. This value is also present when it is the students’ own preaching that they discuss as the case study. The reflective process of case studies stimulates and teaches students the sort

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<sup>109</sup> Witvliet, ‘Teaching’, p. 126.

<sup>110</sup> Witvliet, ‘Teaching’, p. 134.

<sup>111</sup> ‘A Chart Sermon’ by Aimee Semple McPherson can be found in O. C. Edwards, *A History of Preaching Volume 2*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2016), pp. 354–365.

<sup>112</sup> Schipani, ‘Case’, pp. 96–97.

<sup>113</sup> Frank A. Thomas, *How to Preach a Dangerous Sermon* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2018), pp. 49–67.

of discernment on the practice that they will need in ministry. Thus, the goal of case studies

is to train *perception*, to equip students with significant and instructive questions with which to habitually interrogate their own contemporary practice. In other words, we need to inform in ourselves and our students a kind of pastoral *intuition*, not unlike the kind of intuition needed by effective counselors.<sup>114</sup>

This questioning is precisely the sort of reflection McClure thinks should be built into the teaching of preaching as practical theology.<sup>115</sup> It is also an approach that resonates with the process of developing what Dykstra calls the ‘pastoral imagination’, and Miller-McLemore ‘practical wisdom’, albeit at a novice or beginning stage.

Students cannot become wise and skilled practitioners of preaching in the classroom. Nevertheless, with attention to the sort of knowledge that students need and drawing on practical theology’s methodological approach, specific learning and teaching strategies can facilitate present learning and prepare for future post-classroom development.

## Conclusion

The teaching of preaching, as with the practice of preaching, can be conceptualised as an expression of practical theology. As such, it is one that serves the preaching of the church. Teaching preaching in the church’s service involves giving value and validity to knowledge beyond cognitive understanding. This is the embodied knowledge of skill and wisdom. There are limits to what skill and wisdom can be taught in the classroom because experience and context generate this learning. Nevertheless, in the classroom students can learn stage appropriate skills, and wisdom, and processes for future development. This is the case when teachers as preachers pay attention to epistemological considerations and the attendant pedagogical strategies for teaching preaching as practical theology.

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<sup>114</sup> Witvliet, ‘Teaching’, p. 135 (emphasis original).

<sup>115</sup> McClure, ‘Homiletics’, p. 287.