

Poling, James Newton. *Rethinking Faith: A Constructive Practical Theology*.

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James Newton Poling and his wife Nancy lives in Black Mountain, North Carolina. Poling obtained a Ph.D. from the School of Theology, Claremont, CA, 1980. James Newton Poling is an honorably retired minister of Word and Sacrament with the Presbyterian Church (USA) and member of the Presbytery of Western North Carolina. And is the recipient of several outstanding awards: a distinguished Contribution Award, American Association of Pastoral Counselors, April 17, 2010. Distinguished Alumni Award, Claremont School of Theology, Claremont, CA. November 12, 1996. Scholar with the "Basic Issues in Theological Education," Association of Theological Schools, 1984-89. Grant recipient and co-leader of Seminar in Practical Theology for two years, Chicago, IL. And award for Academic Achievement, Claremont School of Theology, Claremont, CA, 1980. Recently retired as professor of pastoral care, counseling, and theology, and director of the Ph.D.; program at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, Evanston, Illinois. James Poling holds numerous memberships in the field of practical theology: such as founding member of the Society for Pastoral Theology and a member of the American Academy of Religion and others. As a theologian, James Newton Poling's thirst for practical and pastoral theology and counseling has taken him to the United States, Europe, Central America, and Asia in search of a greater intercultural understanding of the gospel. James Poling is an advocate of process theology, influenced as a young adult by feminist, liberation, and gay theologies. He has authored numerous books, including the Fortress Press books *Deliver Us from Evil*:

¹ Dykes Lillie B. Review of *Rethinking Faith: A Constructive Practical Theology*, by James Newton Poling, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011.

Resisting Racial and Gender Oppression (1996) and *Formation and Reflection: The Promise of Practical Theology* (edited with Lewis Mudge; 1987/2009). Among his many works, Poling has published both academic and professional articles and book reviews. In addition, his work has been extensively reviewed in a paper by David Polk, Texas Christian University, *Mapping the Terrain of American Practical Theology* presented at the Association of Practical Theology, Dallas, TX, September 8-10, 1989. James Poling was conceived into a culture drenched in social justice and nonviolence. Poling's mother worked for the progressive national office of the Church of the Brethren during the time of organized relief efforts in Spain during its civil war and lobbied for status for members of their denomination in anticipation of World War II. His father was a pastor in the Church of the Brethren in Virginia and Maryland and his mother was the daughter of a pastor. James Newton Poling, states in his introduction that after more than sixty years of discipleship to Jesus Christ, *Rethinking Faith* is a synopsis of his personal eyewitness of his understanding of a trinitarian God of love and power (5).

As a result of his cultural background, James Newton Poling cultivated a personal creed of faith. In this book, Poling wanted to bring his life work as practical theologian into dialogue with the disciplines of biblical, historical, and systematic theology. A confessional statement of faith, offered in a spirit of humility and courage, evolved from these efforts (169). The author gallantly states his beliefs in God, that the love and power of God, as revealed by Scripture, tradition, and religious experience, are best described as relational, ambiguous, and resilient (9). James Poling deems that human beings are made in the image of God as loving and powerful. Poling processes an embedded trust in Jesus Christ, a divine and human being, who fully embodies the reality of God and

humanity and discloses for humans both the character of human life in the world. James Poling notes, the Scriptures, reveals Jesus as a human being with extraordinary love and sensitivity for the full web of human and natural life. The author firmly believes in the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, who provides everyday empowerment for the world. Poling envision the Spirit strengthens the resilience of humans beings in the midst of the complex relationship and the moral uncertainty of daily life (10). Poling's personal testimony is his life has been transformed as he witness the resilient hope of those whose lives have been more controlled by evil than good. He found glimpses of faith in a God of love and power (168). He believes in the eschaton, the telos of God's love and power, as an image of harmonious community of peace and prosperity for all human and nonhuman beings, including the material world. Poling declares that Jesus will appear through the Spirit each time the love of and power of God is fully revealed in reality. The author's conviction is the hope for Jesus' coming in the future is a lure toward the harmony and beauty given by God for all creation (10). In a world tormented by violence James Newton Poling admit and confesses that he struggles with eschatology the presence of hope in the future. His process theology requires him to look for hope in the empirical world in which he lives, not just in fantasies about how God will rescue him from history. So he must examine the historical moments in which he lives and find signs that God's love and power are bringing about a new future of which he can be a part (111). Although, Poling's research is guided by practical theology, he states that in process theology, power is a central concept. Our experiences are created by the power when we pass our life on to others in the future. James Newton Poling explains process theology, it is God's ontological function of providing an initial aim for every occasion and

unfailingly receiving the free decisions of all occasions is a sign of resilience (26). In process theology, what happens on earth among human beings, animals, plants, and the nonbiological world is critical to God telos. The author's assumption is that God exists and is an active part of the spiritual and material reality that human beings know as everyday life. God not only cares about what happens to human beings and all creation, but God also is involved in mutual relationships with the same realities we know. This means that the everyday suffering and hope we have in our lives interacts with God's suffering and hope (94).

The author accepts as true the resilience of God because of the witness of communities of resistance. Poling speaks of survivors who should not have survived, but they did survive. He states that the survivors show systematic abuse of a whole class of people (including women, African Americans, Indigenous peoples) does not destroys the love and power of God. For those who live and seek life, God responds with creative possibilities for healing (133). Poling believe that the resilience of the human spirit reveals the resilience of the Spirit of God. It is obvious that God does not prevent all human evil and its consequences (72). Poling asserts the Christian mythos about the resilience of God is death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. God did not prevent Jesus' death at the hands of violent religious and political leaders (27). The author states one of the main things he has learned from ministry with survivors of sexual and domestic violence is the resilience of God and humans. Jesus reveals that God's love and power is resilient. This is the best concept he found to understand the will to live and heal with survivors whose lives have been traumatized and damaged by abuse (71). James Newton Poling spent much of his ministry working with abusers and survivors of violence.

Through the resilient love of survivors and the courageous spiritual quest of some abusers, James Newton Poling now understands that salvation and healing from the belongings of violence is made possible only through the grace of God (6). God is resilient-that is, God survives forever, and through God's resilience, we have hope for love and power in a future we cannot control (128).

In a time of devastation and bewilderment human beings need to see God in the midst of their calamity. In an unusual, but unique way James Newton Poling addresses three levels of theological reflection about the nature of God: (1) Practical theology and the nature of God; (2) Christian life and the nature of God; and (3) Surviving violence and the nature of God (1). First, practical theology is a discipline of theological reflection that gives sustained attention to the movement of God's Spirit in the everyday lives of contemporary Christian communities for the sake of more faithful practices. As a practical theologian, Poling deems that everyday practices of following Jesus Christ lead to revelation about the nature of God. That is, persons and communities who believe in Jesus Christ and dedicate themselves to following "the Jesus way" in their lives will be touched by God's love and power so that new witness emerges. The author assumes that while God's character is consistent with past self-revelations, God's interaction with the world continues today and tomorrow. Given the limits of human faith and understanding, the scope of God's revelation is far beyond what we know, and narratives are always unfolding if we are paying attention (2). Second, James Poling asserts that for Christians, human life depends on the constant presence of God's love and power. Discerning the nature of God's presence and will is critical to human survival and flourishing (3). As a Christian and a scholar, Poling courageously acknowledges his personal faith in the

trinitarian God and also engages in conversation with other believers and scholars (4).

Third, Poling's transparency becomes clearer in his narrative of how his faith was, for the most part shaped by those who have been victims and abusers of domestic violence and other forms of violence such as racism, genocide, and colonial oppression. Through self-exposure Poling acknowledges that his faith was shaped and deepened by the pain and agony of those persons who have sexually abused others and sought healing, accountability and restoration for their sin (4).

Practical theology is the academic theological discipline that studies the practices of the churches in conversation with other branches of theology and the modern social science and designs programs and strategies for salvation/transformation of the church and the world (149). It is primarily a development of twentieth-century dialogue between theology and the new social sciences (150). God is part of this world because God has influenced each moment of the past, and God has initiated the moments of our brief existence. Our life is the result of the exercise of power by God and others. The author presents six helpful steps that provide the basic guidelines for students through numerous research projects: (1) Description of lived experience. (2) Critical awareness of perspectives and interests. (3) Correlation of perspectives from culture and the Christian tradition. (4) Interpretation of meaning and value. (5) Critique of interpretations. (6) Guidelines and specific plans for a particular community (154). James Newton Poling declares that the question of practical theology is: What is the nature of God as revealed in the communities that follow Jesus Christ and what practices best express faith in God? He responds to this question on three levels: first, as a practical theologian; second,

as a baptized member of the Christian church; and third, as follower of Christ solidarity with those who have suffered violence in their lives (1).

Poling deems that the Scriptures are the necessary revelation of God in Christ, and that the history of reflection of Christian communities in creeds and doctrines are authoritative for Christian life. He deems that the reformation of the church continues because God has more to say about the nature of love and power as humans are ready to hear it (2-3). In order to explore the constructive contribution of practical theology to Christian doctrine, Poling organized *Rethinking Faith A Constructive Practical Theology* into several traditional categories of systematic theology-God, sin and evil, Christology, Holy Spirit and church, eschatology, and practices in faith. In each of these sections He shares his witness to God in Jesus Christ based on his study of Scriptures, and the tradition, as well as his study of practices of faithfulness within communities of faith (3-4).

James Newton Poling attributes that his personal reasons for his concern with human violence was his birth in the United States during World War II, raised in a pacifist tradition, nurtured in the nonviolence resistance of the civil rights movement and shaped by his work as a pastoral counselor in the prevention of domestic violence movement. The author confesses that the contradiction between the love and power of God on the one hand and the consequences of human violence on the other hand has been a thorn that has greatly troubled him (6). The author asserts in a world where we all influence one another for good or evil, it is a beautiful thing when a diverse community of individuals creates harmony between the many contrasts and contradictions. In a world where human spirit shapes the real world, those who survive evil and live to create another day can help

to harmonize the contradictions (133). James Poling recognizes God loves multiplicity. By similarity, human beings with their diverse cultures, languages, religions, and desires show God's love of multiplicity. The author assumes this is true because God has real relationships and loves multiplicity, the actual world is ambiguous. That is, multiple centers of freedom create conflicting centers of value, and individual decisions actually influence the future, creating consequences that have conflicting values that potentially violate the creativity of future moments. He sees God sharing moral responsibility for the consequences of history (129-130).

The author reminds the reader that God's moral ambiguity is based in the fact that there is no goodness, even in God, that can exhaust the novelty that is possible in the world. According to James Poling, ambiguity is the very way that novel morality occurs within the processes of time and history (66). James Newton Poling personal testimony is that facing ambiguity was one of the hardest things he has ever done. He states accepting the ambiguity he received and the ambiguity he has passed on requires courage (131). The author, in his unique way, explains how God calls all of us to a greater awareness and courage because God suffers with us but without despair. God is not defeated by ambiguity in the same way that threatens us. James Poling wants the reader to know that God knows that the spirit of life endures and will endure to struggle another day, even when there is genuine tragedy. Therefore, God accepts ambiguity as the reality of the actual world, both in the past and the future, but never gives up striving for good (132). The author also understands that God faces a similar ambiguity. Because God is real, God inherits ambiguity from many free decisions made by individuals (131). Poling confession is I obtained knowledge regarding the beauty of the ambiguous God from

survivors of violence (130). The author states Jesus was and is an ambiguous figure and reveals that God's love and power are ambiguous (61). Poling submit that nonviolence and the crucifixion are examples of God's ambiguity (66).

This book houses a poems by Lutheran chaplain Lorraine Frampton, written in the 1980's and published in 1992 (48), and a revised copy of the Lord's Prayer (115). The author has created two appendixes in this book so that others may benefit from his insights and experiences. Appendix one entails steps involved in practical theological thinking at congregational and professional levels. Poling discusses two levels of method: level-one method for local congregations, and level-two method for church leaders in local churches and judicatories. Appendix two entails a brief history of practical theology for those who may have a desire to learn more about the different types of theology. In this Appendix, Poling discusses level-three method for teachers and scholars in practical theology. Some types of practical theology see the church and the world working in close collaboration with one another, while other types see tension or a dichotomy between church and world. The author wants to make sure the reader has a clear understanding of practical theology. He has distinguished several types of practical theology, some that are scientific and academic and some that are theological and transformative. This appendix also includes: six types of practical theology, definitions of practical theology, scientific definitions of practical theology, ecclesial definitions of practical theology, and social transformation definitions of practical theology (150-163). Contained in these appendixes are insightful nuggets for Christian education Leaders, pastoral care, and prophetic signs and social action. This book is formatted for easy reading and comprehensive.

This book is for anyone that is seeking a deep change in their lives and especially those persons who have sexually abused others who craving redemption for their sin. And for those who are effectives from domestic violence or any violence and is struggling to find comfort and healing. Theologians can greatly benefit from this book. This book is beneficial for any thoughtful Christian as he or she develops a theology that is both personal and conversant with other voices, states Poling. The author encourages leaders of faithful communities everywhere to engage in the discipline of uncovering the implicit theologies at work in their communities and articulating them for a wider public conversation. By dialoging, we give voice to the hidden things that God consistently communicates to humans but are often blocked by finitude and sin. James Newton Poling future declares that this book is an attempt to summarize the way he found his way in this world with God's help. He hopes his work will also empower scholars, leaders to summarize the way they have found (7). The author makes his declarations by saying his hope lies in the resilience love and power of the Trinitarian God and the history of courageous witnesses over centuries (97). Poling sees God's love and power aims toward a new earth in which all people and the earth live together in peace and harmony, a community of togetherness that preserves our multiplicity and ambiguity and overcomes our contradictions for the sake of beauty. Christians follow Christ because, as humans, we hope for the peaceful and harmonious world that God intends. Our hope is beyond our imagination, so we trust in God to lead us into a future that we cannot yet see (93).

