

Poling, James Newton. *Rethinking Faith: a Constructive Practical Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011.

James Newton Poling has been an active scholar in practical and pastoral theology for over thirty years. He retired as professor of pastoral theology; care, and counseling at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, Evanston, Illinois. He lives in Black Mountain, North Carolina. Some of the books he has authored are: *Deliver Us From Evil: Resisting Racial and Gender Oppression* (1996) and *Formation and Rejection: The Promise of Practical Theology* (edited with Lewis Mudge: 1987/2009), *The Abuse of Power: A Theological Problem*, *Sexual Abuse by Clergy: A Crisis for the Church*, *The Care of Men*, and *Render Unto God: Economic Vulnerability, Family Violence, and Pastoral Theology*.

Poling gives further personal disclosure in his introduction. The author shares that he grew up in the liberal wing of the Reformed tradition as interpreted by the Anabaptist and Pietist communities. It is my understanding that Anabaptists are Christians who believe that baptism is valid only when the candidate confesses his or her faith in Christ and wants to be baptized. This believer's baptism is opposed to baptism of infants, who are not able to make a conscious decision to be baptized. Pietist leans towards living a vigorous Christian life.

The author also discloses that he was strongly influenced by feminist, liberation, and gay theologies. He resolves that salvation and healing from the effects of violence is possible through the grace of God.

The theological question that the author responds to in his book is: What is the nature of God as revealed in the communities that follow Jesus Christ and what practices best express faith in God? There are three levels Poling has chosen to respond: first, as a practical theologian; second, as a baptized member of the Christian church; and, third, as a follower of Jesus Christ in

solidarity with those who have suffered violence in their lives. He also 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. He responds to three questions in this theological reflection: first, What does practical theology contribute to the theological disciplines and the church about the nature of God in Jesus Christ? ; second, What is the nature of the Trinitarian God and the ecclesial witness to Jesus Christ in the world? ; and third, What can the church learn about the love and power of God in Jesus Christ from the community of survivors of violence?

Poling claims that the blend of faith and practices and scholarship in this book could be helpful for any thoughtful Christian as he or she develops a theology that is both personal and conversant with other voices. He encourages leaders of faithful communities everywhere to engage in the discipline of uncovering the implicit theologies at work in communities and articulating them for a wider public conversation. He concludes that in doing so, we give voice to the hidden things that God consistently communicates to humans but are often blocked by finitude and sin. (p.1)

I agree with the author in that we need ways of thinking and practices of faith that can help us keep our balance in the midst of uncertainty and violence. I can relate to resilience and ambiguity being important in a person's faith journey. If resilience refers to the indomitable will of human beings to find creative solutions in the midst of the deep contradictions of life and if ambiguity refers to the contradictions that confront human beings every day of our lives then I can agree with the author that resilience and ambiguity are built in creation, however, due to mental processing mainly because I yet find it difficult to identify God with negativity, I am slowly convinced that God operates in ambiguity. I fall short claiming that resilience and

ambiguity is a part of God's character. I do agree that we can find our way in this world with God's help.

Poling submits that God is relational, ambiguous, and resilient. He further comments that God created the world out of love and lives in covenant with human beings no matter what happens based upon scripture, process theology and testimonials of survivors of violence. I agree with Poling in that God influences every moment of our human experience, that God embraces human courageous acts and God is larger than any valuations of good and evil that we may understand. Also, He is with us in the midst of life's contradictions and confusion. The God who never gives up, whose healing power is everlasting is revealed in Scripture and the life of Jesus Christ. He continues to intervene in our lives today. I can attest to the same as a survivor of violence.

The writer has caused me to take a different look at the parents of Emotional Behavior Disordered Children. As I revisit Rom. 7:19-25, ... So I find it to be a law that when I want to do good, evil lies close at hand. ... As a therapeutic support for EBD children, it is hard to move past a parent that sexually abuses his or her own child, especially when I witness the affects of this violent act day after day in the lives of innocent children. The author was successful at causing me to look through the filter of Scripture. I am convinced that God's healing power is everlasting as I have witnessed success stories of EBD children. I am enlightened as I remember when we try to do good, evil is at hand. Working as therapeutic support allows me to add new value in the lives of parents and children affected by sexual violence.

Poling points out that a theology exists that teaches those who are raped are convicted of guilt while the perpetrator is relieved by his perfunctory participation. The researcher has a

Lutheran background that incorporates this belief. While the perpetrator may be half hearted about the act, I see rape as a violent act against a person's will. It is a displaced use of power. The author poses - Are Christians required to forgive those who abuse them? As I look through the filter of scripture, the victim benefits in forgiving the perpetrator. The act of forgiving frees the victim while releasing the perpetrator to be dealt with by God in only a way that He can. The author includes from a feminist theological reflection that when we show stories of biblical resistance to violence that can be used for their healing journey the survivor can be helped.

Poling introduces the view of the cross shared by Deanna Thompson whereby she reconstructs the theology of Martin Luther. The cross can be understood as a symbol of friendship in the sense used in the Gospel of John: "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13). In Jesus on the cross, we see a depth of friendship that is necessary to overcome the differences between God and humans. (p. 54) My DMin project addresses healing from rejection of women in ministry due to gender bias. Looking through the lense of the cross I can see friendship that overcomes our differences.

The author poses that Christology is what God has done in Jesus Christ that saves humans from evil and transforms humans to fulfill their creative purpose, and that human responses move toward communion with God's purposes. (p. 56)

According to the author, God is revealed through Jesus as relational, ambiguous and resilient through his life, teachings, ministry, death, and resurrection. He parallels with Agosto, the author of *Servant Leadership* who introduces Jesus as a servant leader when he claims Jesus showed receptive power to persons of every level of society. While the teachings of Jesus may appear ambiguous symbols for human life, one must study God's word to understand His

original intent and denounce numerous interpretations. I agree that the ability of Jesus to recover quickly from difficult situations is clearly expressed in His life and Ministry.

The author substantiates that new forms of the church regularly recover the original vision of Jesus and make it available for human transformation.

Poling shares five norms of measurement to prove the faithfulness of the church, they are rituals of liturgy and sacraments, education and care, evangelism and social justice. These five marks can re-present to the community of believers and the larger community the vision of a resilient, ambiguous God whose radical love and power redeems the world from its own destruction and offers the promise of transformation and life. I offer that when the word of God is accurately presented and the life of Jesus remembered through the meal that heals, the Eucharist, then the resilient God is represented and honored.

God's love and power aims toward a new earth in which all people and the earth live together in peace and harmony and 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.

(p.93)

Poling addresses how a Christian “keep hope alive” in the face of the accumulation of human evil in the twenty-first century. Some of the dangers mentioned are, epidemic rate of

violence against women, endangerment of local cultures, languages and religions by systems of domination as well as Christian churches competing with each other and non-Christian groups to gain first place. He then gives some strategies of hope, such as, accommodate the current authorities and try to survive until a better day; survive the present situation whatever it takes or rebel and overthrow authorities. He discloses some of the social movements that inspire his hope and his faith in Jesus Christ. First, he is inspired by the women's movement of the last two centuries, which has identified the systemic problem of gender justice, particularly discrimination against women in leadership and violence against women such as sexual and domestic violence. (p. 105) Second, the movement for liberation of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, intersexual and queer persons. (GLBTIQ) (p. 106) Third, the global movements for economic justice. (p. 107) Fourth, social movements for a different perspective on the natural environment and human interdependence with animals, plants, and the nonbiological ecosystem of our planet. (p. 108) And, fifth, the resistance groups in numerous ethnic and international communities as they assert their cultural identities and global significance as well as their claims for a fair share of economic resources. The author has inspired me as one who raises hope by joining the ranks of those who find, protect and preserve the female voice in ministry by addressing the treatment of women in ministry due to gender bias. The author expresses concerns in relation to the second coming or issues surrounding death, judgment and final destination of the soul. He resolves that looking for hope requires deep honesty and that he chooses to trust his experiences in life as a guide. I submit that we merely put our trust and hope in God no matter what the present looks like.

In spite of the many challenges in the world that arise from evil systems of gender, race, culture, environmental degradation, congregations have organized themselves with energetic and

creative responses. Disciplines of Christian education, arts and worship, pastoral care, and prophetic social action have encouraged activism on behalf of persons that experience oppression and suffering in the world. Congregations have developed many forms of faithful practice in order to express the relational, ambiguous, and resilient love and power of God in Jesus Christ. (p.125) All four of the disciplines need to be present in the response under the umbrella of Senior Ministry in the church. Listening carefully to individuals regarding their social context is a part of inclusive love. The author has shared practical examples of what has been done to address social issues in church settings. Injustices can be appropriately addressed in a worship environment.

According to Poling, God is relational – that is, God is embedded within the relationality of everything that exists. God is ambiguous – that is, God cannot know the full reality of the future and accepts accountability for the consequences of multiple free decisions.(p. 128) I disagree because I believe that an all knowing God knows the future. I do agree with the author’s definition of resilient as it pertains to God. He offers that God survives forever, and through God’s resilience, we have hope for love and power in a future we cannot control. The author points to the multiplicity of God revealed in the many different types of birds as well as human beings having diverse cultures, languages, religions, and desires. He further discloses that he can worship a God who loves multiplicity because he loves multiplicity and the challenge of finding harmony and unity in the midst of diversity. Harmony and unity can be found in the midst of diversity as we cling to the healing power of God.

A concrete God who is ambiguous is beautiful per Poling. God accepts ambiguity as the reality of the actual world, both in the past and the future, but never gives up striving for good and neither should we. 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. (p.133) Jesus achieved great beauty in the midst of great evil and thus serves as a model for what is possible in human life. The stories saved by the church inspire new generations to understand the resilience of God the regardless of the circumstances. (p. 133)

To make these writings true to its description of practical – serving a useful purpose and tending to build up – Poling adds methods of Practical Theology for congregations and church leaders, plus methods of Practical Theology for teachers and scholars. He has included three levels of methods, first, method for local congregations, second, method for church leaders in local churches and judicatories, and third, method for teachers and scholars in practical theology.

Practical Theology as defined by Poling is the attempt of believers to practice their faith according to their understanding of the Bible and its interpretations. He offers four essential steps to an adequate practical theological method for the local congregation: (1) reflection on practices of Christian communities; (2) reflection on the social and cultural context of practices; (3) reflection on the biblical and theological roots of practices; and (4) planning and implementing new, transforming practices for particular communities of faith. Reflection on practices is what happens when a congregation gathers for worship, study, and action in its life together. (p.142)The second step happens when members begin a study of the contextual issues involved in any issue or program. (p.144)

When crisis develop such as 9/11 a method of practical theology needs to be developed so that the church will know how to proceed. The real test of practical theology according to Poling is whether it leads to new practices for particular communities. (p. 147) Only in a context where people pledge to be open-minded and honest can changes occur that make a real

difference in their lives and present models for children and other adults about the meaning of Christian life. (p. 148)

Finally, Poling describes Practical Theology as the academic theological discipline that studies the practices of the churches in conversation with other branches of theology and the modern social sciences and designs programs and strategies for salvation/transformation of the church and the world. Other branches of theology include biblical studies, historical studies, systematic theology, and ethical theology. The most common social sciences used in practical theology are psychology, sociology, anthropology, economics, and ecological studies. Physical sciences sometimes are influential, including biology, brain science, and environmental studies. (p.149)

There are six components of practical theology: (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, (5) Critique of interpretations, and (6) Guidelines and specific plans for a particular community. (p.154) These six steps constantly repeat themselves and interact with one another because the practical theology method is like a wheel rolling along the road.

Poling wanted to bring his life work as a practical theologian into dialogue with the disciplines of biblical, historical, and systematic theology. And he wanted to present a confessional statement of faith as well as an extended reflection on theological meaning and value that he discovered through his ministries.

Poling has been successful in rethinking faith in a constructive manner. Initially, I found his writing to be wordy, however he addressed some hard sensitive issues such as violence. The author looked at practical theology from many different angles. It is clear that he has over thirty years of diverse experience.

I was able to make a personal connection when he introduced post traumatic stress disorder. It is very real. It is a situation that would make you wonder, where is God? Has he left me? The author addressed surviving violence and the nature of God in such a way that answers these questions especially for a follower of Christ.

I recommend the book to be read to get another viewpoint on faith in relation to relating to God through faith. I look forward to reviewing another book he has authored as research for my DMin project. *Resisting Racial and Gender Oppression* , may be helpful.

Because of some of the negative tones associated about God, such as the implication that God may not know future occurrences; makes me slow to recommend this book as the only thought on Practical Theology. This book would serve as a good secondary comparison for the Practical Theology student. His reflections and different meanings may serve beneficial too.

The author did a good job expressing the levels of reflection. He did rethink faith.