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PERSONALITY THEORY
AND EMPIRICAL THEOLOGY

SUMMARY

The intention of this paper is to make the case that personality theory is not only a legitimate, but also an essential component of empirical theology. The case is made in two parts, by drawing on theological tradition and by drawing on social scientific perspectives. The case is then illustrated by examples from one recent study in empirical theology, known as the 'pastoral care survey'. First, however, it is necessary to rehearse the nature of empirical theology, by drawing attention to the two roots of this activity in practical theology and in the pioneering work of Johannes van der Ven in the University of Nijmegen.

1. Practical Theology

Roots in practical theology help to shape the agenda addressed by empirical theology and help to define the subject matter with which empirical theology works. Practical theology is concerned at heart with the mission and ministry of the church. Ballard and Pritchard (1996) characterise the activity in the subtitle of their study Practical Theology in Action as 'Christian thinking in the service of church and society.' Such concerns bring practical theology face to face both with the rich variety of theological traditions (such as revelation, scripture, doctrine, and history) and with the practical realities of the contexts within which mission and ministry operate (such as social institutions, cultural heritages, and individual people). Broadly conceived practical theology finds itself concerned with issues like homiletics, preaching, communication, catechetics, religious education, liturgy, worship, pastoral care, prayer, and spiritual formation.

Practical theology shares with other branches of theology the fundamental problem of determining the methodological perspectives which provide appropriate and legitimate tools for theological enquiry. Theology as a discipline has become much more clearly defined in terms of the subject matter of study than in terms of methodologies brought to bear on that subject matter.

While etymologically speaking theology can be defined as the 'study of God', in practice God eludes direct academic scrutiny. Consequently theologians find themselves studying the human experience of God. The raw material of theolo-
gical enquiry is found in the examination of the revelation or experience of God in a variety of forms, including the sacred texts, the historic formularies of faith, the traditions of the church, the natural world, and the living and dynamic experiences of the contemporary faith community.

The academic study of theology comprises rational reflection on, systematisation and critical evaluation of such raw materials concerned with the human experience of God. Different perspectives will lead to different evaluations of the path that can be taken from reflection on the human experience to definition of the divine reality. As members of the faith community, theologians properly engage with the religious experience of their tradition (presiding at mass or speaking in tongues). As members of the academic community, theologians are required to stand back from the immediate experience of faith and to test that experience by means of what they regard as appropriate methodological perspectives. While tests of faith may be appropriate for the theologian operating in the arena of the faith community (presiding at mass or speaking in tongues), tests of faith may be absolutely inappropriate for the theologian operating in the academy (in the laboratory or in the lecture theatre).

Across the various branches of theology, theologians find themselves engaging with academic tools shared with other disciplines. Sometimes these academic tools have had their origins in other disciplines and then they have been shaped and refined within departments of theology. The discipline of biblical theology, for example, is defined much more closely by the subject matter (for example, the Book of Numbers or Mark’s Gospel) than by the methodological perspective brought to study that subject matter. Biblical theologians have clearly shared methodological perspectives with other disciplines concerned, over time, with such activities as archaeology, linguistics, textual analysis, form criticism, redaction criticism, and sociology.

2. The Nijmegen School

Roots in Nijmegen help to shape the methodological perspective of empirical theology as pioneered by Johannes van der Ven and as fostered by the Journal of Empirical Theology. Van der Ven’s perspective on practical theology seems to be characterised by two key principles (see, for example, Van der Ven 1993; 1998).

The first principle is that tools shaped by the social sciences provide legitimate methodology for addressing the agenda of practical theology. It seems to be the case that many questions raised by practical theologians are not radically different in the ways they require addressing from questions raised by social scientists. Practical theologians raise questions, for example, about the functioning of institutions, about the nature of cultural context, and about the effectiveness of models of ministry and mission which can be illuminated by proper empirical