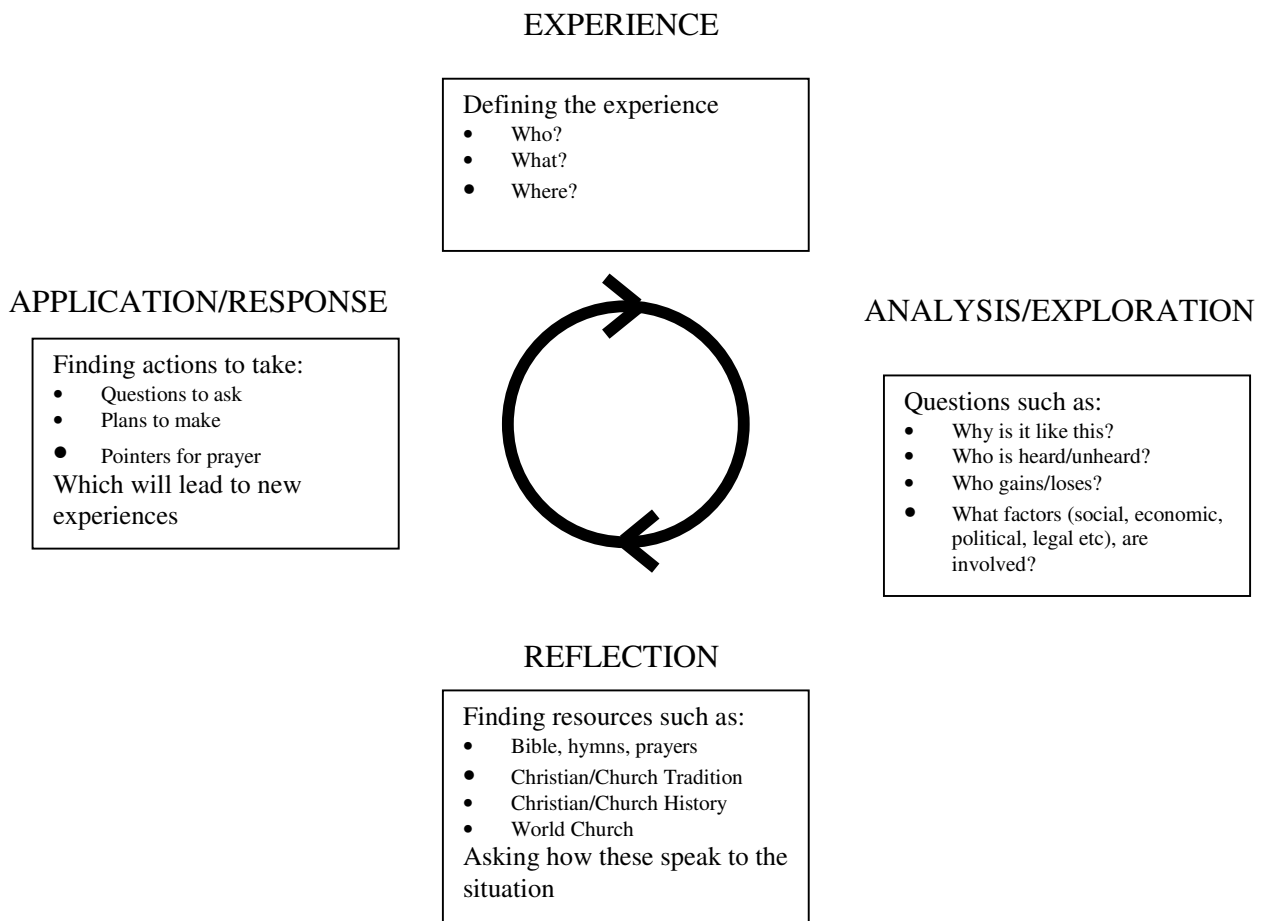


## Practical Theology

Practical Theology is a diverse academic field, emerging towards the end of the twentieth century, and closely related to Pastoral, Contextual and Liberation Theologies, which share some common features. Explicitly interdisciplinary in nature, practical theology draws on insights from other academic fields including, but not restricted to, the social sciences, as well as such diverse resources as media, literature, music and the arts. As its name suggests, Practical Theology is an approach to theological thinking rooted firmly in practice (praxis and habitus), finds its active starting point in the concrete experience of individuals, congregations or communities, and seeks to offer transformative insights and practical wisdom (phronesis). Expressed diagrammatically it may be seen as a movement<sup>1</sup>:



Central to Practical Theology approaches are variants of the pastoral or hermeneutical cycle, made popular by theologian Laurie Green,<sup>2</sup> an annotated version of which is shown below<sup>3</sup>:



The process begins with careful identification and description of a specific 'experience', which may be very localised (e.g. a discrete pastoral encounter, a local event) or more general (e.g. a 'big' issue

<sup>1</sup> This is essentially the same as Don Browning's 'practice to theory to practice' D. Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991). p. 7

<sup>2</sup> L. Green, *Let's Do Theology* (London: Mowbray, 1990).

<sup>3</sup> Diagram developed by CJM Gorton and used for undergraduate teaching within The Partnership for Theological Education, Manchester.

such as natural disaster, political situation, military action, etc) out of which arise questions to be explored theologically. These questions may be general (such ‘why does a good God allow suffering?’) or specific (such as ‘why does this community react in this way to suffering experienced by this person/people group?’). Having identified the questions, the Practical Theologian draws on the resources of theology (e.g. Biblical Studies, ethics, doctrine, etc.), more widely from the Christian tradition, and sometimes from other fields, to assist their reflection. The cycle of reflection concludes with the identification and implementation of practical outcomes (e.g. new liturgy for pastoral situations, involvement in social action campaigns, etc.) and a greater phronesis (‘practical wisdom’) on the part of those involved.

Practical Theology is never ‘completed’ as the ‘cycle’ model indicates: the outcome of theological reflection is new experience, which, in time, will prompt further reflection. Some variants of the cycle include a fifth stage ‘celebration’ – which itself finds good precedent in Christian tradition – whereby having completed the process of a full cycle, participants celebrate liturgically and socially! This (optional) fifth element re-focuses Practical Theology where it belongs, in the grass-roots experience of men and women living as Christians in communities of faith.

### **Further Reading**

Ballard, P., and Pritchard, J. *Practical Theology in Action: Christian Thinking in the Service of Church and Society*. Second ed. London: SPCK, 2006.

Browning, D. *A Fundamental Practical Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991.

Cartledge, M. J. *Practical Theology: Charismatic and Empirical Perspectives*. Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2003.

Green, L. *Let's Do Theology*. London: Mowbray, 1990.