

James Newton Poling. *Rethinking Faith: A Constructive Practical Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011. 135 pages. \$25.

James Newton Poling is a recently retired professor of pastoral theology, care and counseling at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary in Evanston, Illinois. He holds a Ph.D. in Religion and Theology/Pastoral Counseling from Claremont School of Theology in Claremont, California, and is an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church (USA). In this book he utilizes his thirty plus years of active experience as a scholar of practical and pastoral theology to construct a personal statement of faith regarding the nature of God in Jesus Christ, the Trinitarian God, and the ecclesial witness of Jesus Christ in the world.

Poling constructs his personal statements of faith through an interactive dialogue between practical theology, his personal life as a baptized member of the Christian church, and his commitment to be a follower of Jesus Christ in solidarity with those who have suffered violence in their lives. (1) The stated goal of the author is to humbly and courageously develop and present these confessional statements of faith. Humbly, because he recognizes that every believer has his/her own witness to make and no one witness holds priority. Courageously, because of his own personal encounter with the reality of God in Jesus. His hope is that these offerings will contribute to and become a part of the ongoing conversation about the nature of God within the Christian churches. (169)

Poling's confessional statements make a unique contribution to the discussion of the nature of God. The unique nature comes from the fact that most of his ministry was spent working with those affected by violence. He gives the often-muted voices of this community a clear theological voice. Ultimately their experiences have led him to reexamine the nature of God through the implicit theology at work within their communities. Through his journey with those affected by violence, Poling has come to value in his own faith journey resilience and ambiguity. He defines resilience as the "indomitable will of human beings to find creative solutions in the midst of the deep contradictions of life" and ambiguity as "the contradictions that confront human beings every day of their lives." (7) He proposes that these two characteristics that make it possible for human beings to find their place in the world are built into creation and are the core essentials of God's character. He argues from the position of scripture, tradition, and religious experience that the three words that best describe the nature of God in Jesus Christ, the Trinitarian God, and the ecclesial witness of Jesus Christ in the world are relational, ambiguous, and resilient. (9)

However, it would be incorrect to believe that the primary purpose of Poling's work was to construct his own confessional faith arising from the voices in his community and pass it on as the voice in other communities. Instead his deeper desire is that individuals, Christian leaders, and faith communities will be encouraged to follow the process he lays out in this book in order to uncover the implicit theologies at work in their communities and develop a theology that is both personal and conversant with other voices. (7)

Poling's journey is guided by practical theology deeply rooted in process theology. He utilizes the primary sources of process theology: scripture, faith tradition, the social sciences, and personal/communal experience, in conversation with each other to arrive at the implicit theologies at work in his community. It is the task of the readers to apply this same process within their own communities of faith. In order to make sure that the process is clear enough for others to follow, Poling includes two appendixes that are essential to the overall purpose of the book. Appendix 1 lays out a clear step-by-step process of practical theology for congregations

and church leaders and in Appendix 2 a clear process of practical theology for teachers and scholars.

The primary objection some readers will have with this book rests in the equal weight given in process theology to scripture, tradition, the social sciences, and human experience. However, even those who have a “higher view” of scripture can still benefit from a clear understanding of the need to at least bring tradition, the social sciences, and experience to the table as conversation partners in the process of practical theology.

Poling has produced a reader-friendly book that is easily accessible to anyone interested in the process of practical theology. Pastors, religious leaders, teachers, scholars, seminarians, and members of various communities of faith will benefit from this exploration of how to work out a constructive practical theology that is both personal and conversant with other voices.

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