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Reconsidering the Boundaries
Between Theological Disciplines

Zur Neubestimmung der Grenzen
zwischen den theologischen Disziplinen



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Inhaltsverzeichnis

Vorwort/Preface	I
I. ZUR NEUBESTIMMUNG DER GRENZEN ZWISCHEN SYSTEMATISCHER UND EXEGETISCHER THEOLOGIE RECONSIDERING THE BOUNDARIES BETWEEN SYSTEMATIC AND EXEGETICAL THEOLOGY	
PATRICK D. MILLER Theology from Below. The Theological Interpretation of Scripture	3
MICHAEL WELKER Sola Scriptura? Die Autorität der Bibel in pluralistischen Umgebungen und die interdisziplinäre Biblische Theologie	15
DON JUEL The Project of a ‚Biblical Theology‘ as a Reshaping of the Boundaries Between Systematic and Exegetical Theology. Response to Michael Welker	31
ELLEN F. DAVIES Salvific Surprise: The Shared and Complementary Tasks of Exegetical and Critical or Constructive Theologians	35
MARY ELIZABETH MULLINO MOORE Systematic Theology and Exegesis. Multifarious Conversations with God and Creation	45
ROBERT CUMMINGS NEVILLE Carrying Scripture Across Imagination	65
CHRISTOF HARDMEIER New Relations between Systematic Theology and Exegesis and the Perspectives on Practical Theology and Ethics	71
GERD THEIßEN Exegese und Wahrheit. Überlegungen zu einer Interpretationsethik für die Auslegung der Bibel	81

II. ZUR NEUBESTIMMUNG DER GRENZEN ZWISCHEN
 PRAKTISCHER THEOLOGIE UND THEOLOGISCHER ETHIK
 RECONSIDERING THE BOUNDARIES BETWEEN
 PRACTICAL THEOLOGY AND THEOLOGICAL ETHICS

MAX L. STACKHOUSE Christian Ethics, Practical Theology, and Public Theology in a Global Era	99
CHRISTOFER FREY Konvergenz und Divergenz der Interessen von Ethik und Praktischer Theologie	113
EILERT HERMS The Rationality of Theological Disciplines and their Interdisciplinarity	123
RICHARD OSMER The Rationality of Theological Disciplines. Response to Eilert Herms	133
WILLIAM SCHWEIKER Intellectual Fences and Cultural Values: The Shifting Boundaries Between Ethics, Practical Theology, and Biblical Studies	137
FRIEDRICH SCHWEITZER Practical Theology, Ethics, and the Challenge of Plurality: Changing Boundaries Between Practical Theology and Ethics	151
DON BROWNING The Relation of Practical Theology to Theological Ethics	161
HEINRICH BEDFORD-STROHM Theological Ethics and the Church. Reconsidering the Boundaries Between Practical Theology and Theological Ethics in Light of the Debate on Liberalism and Communitarianism	175
JAMES W. FOWLER God's Praxis and Our Callings. Reclaiming Providence And Vocation	187
NORBERT METTE Hermeneutik göttlicher Praxis und menschlicher Berufung als gemeinsame Aufgabe - Bemerkungen zu Fowlers theologischem Ansatz	197
FRANCIS SCHÜSSLER FIORENZA Changes in Culture and Society and the Interdisciplinarity of Theology	201
Verzeichnis der Autorinnen und Autoren	217

Friedrich Schweitzer / Michael Welker

Preface

The contributions of this volume reflect the shifting of boundaries between the theological disciplines of Systematic and Exegetical Theology on the one hand and between Practical Theology and Theological Ethics on the other. For the most part, they focus on two developments which can be observed both in German and North American contexts:

a. The intensification of the dialogue and the cooperation between Systematic and Exegetical Theology over the past 25 years. It is documented in many interdisciplinary projects and publications, often under the heading of a 'Biblical Theology'.

b. The convergence of Practical Theology and Theological Ethics. It is reflected in the growing implementation of the social and cultural sciences in the work of Practical Theology.

The texts collected in this volume explore these developments from different perspectives and investigate their connectivity.

Reconsidering the Boundaries between Systematic and Exegetical Theology

Patrick D. Miller (*Theology from Below. The Theological Interpretation of Scripture*) compares 'bottom up-' and 'top down - approaches' in theological discourses and proposes a biblical theology that takes seriously the inner complexity of the canonical texts and the complex reality of God to whom they witness. This is also the aim of the Systematic perspective developed by Michael Welker (*Sola Scriptura? Die Autorität der Bibel in pluralistischen Umgebungen und die interdisziplinäre Biblische Theologie*) who differentiates between four gravities of the biblical texts (historical, cultural, canonical, theological) and on this basis attempts to explicate what the authority of the Bible means for theological thinking in pluralistic environments. These lines of thought are taken up and probed in the response of Don Juel (*The Project of a 'Biblical Theology' as a Reshaping of the Boundaries Between Systematic and Exegetical Theology*) and by Ellen F. Davies (*Salvific Surprise: The Shared and Complementary Tasks of Exegetical and Critical or Constructive Theologians*).

Mary Elizabeth Mullino Moore (*Systematic Theology and Exegesis. Multifarious Conversations with God and Creation*) discusses the interplay of different 'conversations' which take place in the theological discourse and outlines their inner-theological

and societal implications. Robert Cummings Neville (*Carrying Scripture Across Imagination*) underlines the theological need for a theory of symbols which can serve to discover analogies between the world of the biblical texts and western late-modern societies in order to overcome the modern bifurcation of “the natural” and the “supernatural”. Christof Hardmeier (*New Relations between Systematic Theology and Exegesis and the Perspectives on Practical Theology and Ethics*) underlines this demand in reflecting on the task of Exegetical Theology under late-modern conditions. Finally, Gerd Theissen (*Exegese und Wahrheit. Überlegungen zu einer Interpretationsethik für die Auslegung der Bibel*) differentiates between ‘truth of fact’ and ‘truth of life’ and proposes a combination of attempts to access both in exegetical work.

Reconsidering the Boundaries Between Practical Theology and Theological Ethics

The contributions in the second part of this volume investigate the shifting boundaries between Practical Theology and Theological Ethics from North American and German perspectives (Stackhouse – Frey, Herms – Osmer, Schweitzer – Browning, Bedford-Stroh, Fowler – Mette), including reflections on Systematic Theology and the overall tasks of theological thinking (Schweiker, Schüssler Fiorenza).

Notwithstanding the impact of national and positional differences in both Practical Theology and Theological Ethics, all authors emphasize the practical implications of Theological Ethics which demand interpretative and reconstructive endeavors to accompany the traditional normative efforts of Theological Ethics. This is highlighted by the growing importance of approaches from the perspectives of the social sciences and the task of an analysis of culture within ethical thinking, e.g., in the discussion of the ethical implications of globalization. The different contributions underline that this development should not lead to a neglect of normative ethical questions and ethical critique, e.g., of ideologically loaded and one-sided interpretations of globalization.

From different perspectives, the collected texts point to the common interest Practical Theology and Theological Ethics take in the task of a ‘public theology’ which addresses societal and political issues on the basis of theological reflection and does not confine itself to the community of the church. They describe the growing importance of ethical questions and problems for Practical Theology in both North America and Germany and the ways in which they are incorporated into practical theological thinking. In approaching societal developments like individualization and pluralization, Practical Theology has to pay attention to normative ethical questions. Whether this should lead to a virtual merging of the disciplines of Practical Theology and Theological Ethics or whether they should preserve their disciplinary confinements is an issue much disputed among the authors.

We are most grateful to the Internationales Wissenschaftsforum Heidelberg and its staff for hosting the conference between the German and North American scholars three years ago which gave it the privileged status of an institutional and interdisciplinary “symposium”. Finally, our thanks go to Markus Höfner for his patience in assist-

ing with the editing of this volume. We are equally grateful to the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft which supported the meeting in Heidelberg.

We dedicate this book to Donald H. Juel, dear friend and colleague, who sadly is no longer among us.

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