

The Practical Theology of Robert Banks:

FROM BIBLICAL STUDIES IN CAMBRIDGE
TO A BLIND SCHOOL IN CHINA

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A small and growing cohort of theologians known as *practical* theologians are the butt of various jokes in churches, theological colleges and academic conferences. This article charts the ideas, influence and impact of an Australian pioneer in this expanding field of theology. To identify Robert J. Banks as a practical theologian might appear controversial to some who are only partially familiar with his scholarship. But a practical theologian of everyday life is what he became. Specifically, this article maps four essential characteristics of this maligned and neglected sub-discipline of theology through the career and writings of one its exemplars: my supervisor, mentor and friend, Rob Banks.

1. Ethical concerns: the cradle of practical theology

Banks' first publications arose from ethical questions for Christian people: Jesus' teaching and its relationship

to the law, and Paul's attitude to community (see for example *Jesus and the Law in the Synoptic Tradition*, 1975; and *Paul's Idea of Community*, 1979). Here we find a serious New Testament scholar engaging with the issues and concerns of many ordinary Christians: what should I do and how should we relate? Too often these so-called practical and ethical concerns have been relegated to the end of theological enquiry as mere application. Not so for practical theologians. In his book, *Redeeming the Routines* (1993), Banks describes the 'need for a closer and reciprocal connection between study and activity, thinking and doing, writing and experimenting' (35) evident even in his earliest writings in New Testament.

Practical theology observes a mutually enriching relationship – as opposed to a conflicted relationship – between personal experience, cultural engagement and the biblical text. It creates the possibility that such gaps can be bridged through a theology of everyday life. In fact the title of the earlier, Australian edition of the same book, *All the Business of Life*, is preferable in this regard. Practical theology belongs to – and begins with – the ordinary believer, not the academic theologian. Banks, as a practical

theologian, embodies a humility rare in the academy:

I have outlined the range of issues which require attention and identified the obstacles which must be overcome. I will point you to ways in which you could begin to bridge the gap and to resources that will help you along the way. More than that I cannot do. Otherwise I take too much of the privilege and responsibility for what needs to be done out of your hands. (Redeeming the Routines, 37)

In the decades to follow, the range of issues requiring Banks' attention extended to leadership and public policy, time, work and film studies, culminating in a *Complete Book of Everyday Christianity* (with R. Paul Stevens, 1997). For practical theology, the thick description of these (and many other) issues is explored through a deep and sustained engagement with the wider culture, public issues and everyday life.

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2. Cultural engagement: the competence of practical theology

In his book, *The Tyranny of Time*, Banks explores the concept of time by drawing on historical, theological, cultural, philosophical, poetic and other literary sources to give a fully rounded description. I first heard Banks addressing these at a conference as a first-year theological student in the mid 1980s. Without knowing it then, I was embarking on a lifelong vocation as a practical theologian and an enduring friendship with one of its greater exponents. For too long, evangelical theology has remained suspicious of, or been content to glance off, cultural moments. Banks had already described 'Paul's experience within the theology' that is essential for practical theology, but the connection between mission and theology was still under development in the late nineties. Banks saw, however, that 'the apostolic theologian, of which Paul was the first great exponent, places mission first and largely allows theological reflection to follow that' (*Redeeming the Routines*, 148). More than a decade after my first encounter with the practical theology of Banks I would complete my first postgraduate qualification in theology – a research masters in Practical Theology – under his supervision in Los Angeles where he was directing the *City of Angels* annual film festival.

Does the cultural competence of practical theology mean it has abandoned rigorous, biblical theology? This is a common accusation made against practical theologians.

3. Biblical theology: the centre of practical theology

The best and standard description of biblical theology is provided by the current Principal of Ridley College in

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Melbourne, Brian Rosner, who defines it 'as theological interpretation of Scripture in and for the church ... maintaining sight of the Bible's overarching narrative and Christocentric focus' ('Biblical Theology', *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, 2000). Together the whole story of Scripture and Christology protect practical theology from the mere trendy and the more tangential. Practical theology emerges from stories of personal experience but must be understood and interpreted in the larger context of the Scriptural narrative of creation, redemption and new creation. Practical theology can be highly competent in cultural engagement only when its centre of gravity is the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

In his introduction to *God the Worker*, Banks notes three motivations for the writing of the book: his personal meditation on the Scriptures; his theological concern about the displacement of the first person of the Trinity; and a literary interest in the importance of imaginative language. These motivations find expression in the central idea of God as a worker and are addressed in the explicit approach of a practical theologian in three ways.

First, the critical correlation between four movements usually cited as the heart of the practical theology method is on display throughout the book. Each chapter: i) introduces a particular vocational interest and expression of work; ii) describes contemporary forms and expressions of that endeavour; iii) surveys the biblical narrative for the many and diverse ways God is depicted in terms of human occupations and endeavours; and iv) assesses and affirms the theological implications of this language.

Second, the third movement comprising a close and careful engagement with the entire arc of Scripture shows the proper place of biblical theology as the centre of practical theology. *God the Worker* provides an extensive survey of biblical references to God in vocational language.

Third, the faithful practice produced is best captured by Banks' intention stated in his introduction:

The journey takes us deeper into the territory of the divine significance of everyday life ... a journey into the imagination of God that takes place not for its own sake, but that we might become imitators of God in what we say and do, with reference to God as well as others and in particular to our work. (God the Worker, 23)

'Imitators of God in what we say and do' articulates perfectly the final movement of practical theology: faithful practice in Christian speaking and living. The architect of Moore College's biblical theology and early influence on Banks' own theology, Donald Robinson, also insisted that the gospel and the apostolic task (theology and practice) were inseparable because 'the content of the gospel which the basic documents point to as their precipitating word and the role of the apostle who was sent

out to preach and teach that gospel to the world' (*Faith's Framework*, 1985, 39).

But how does practical theology avoid reducing its crown – faithful practice – to mere application?

4. Faithful practice: the crown of practical theology

Banks suggests the gospel must be brought to bear upon practice in at least five ways for the Christian: i) their images of reality; ii) the motives they live by; iii) the values they live by; iv) the beliefs they entertain; and v) the goals they have. Colleagues in the USA, with their love for alliteration, say that God is known – and faithful practice embodied – not primarily in church or the college classroom or in everyday life but at the intersection of sanctuary, seminary, streets and soil. With Banks as a mentor, supervisor and friend I have discovered my own vocation at this intersection. In fact I cannot imagine Christian faith, loving God or following Jesus without the church I lead, the college I teach for, the inner city communities where I have dwelt for 25 years or time leading a group 'on country' in central Australian deserts each year with an East Arrernte elder.

Late in his career Banks has focused on the faithful practice of female Christian leaders like Amy Oxley Wilkinson and her blind school in China (with Linda Banks, *They Shall See His Face*, 2017). How do we make sense of a publishing career that began with biblical studies in Cambridge and arrives, fifty years later, in a blind school in China? As a practical theologian I see a journey beginning in the church sanctuary, rigorously pursued in the academic seminary and the streets alongside workers and filmmakers, now drawing to its conclusion: the crown of faithful practice of female missionaries. Banks' recent publications have witnessed to those lives receiving the commendation of the One: 'well done, good and faithful servant'.

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Conclusion

The pioneering Australian practical theologian Robert Banks has demonstrated the ethical concerns, the cultural engagement, the biblical theology and the faithful practice of practical theology at its best. This is not surprising as he once reflected that 'a theology of everyday life that has insight and power must have a decidedly autobiographical and contemplative character' (*Redeeming the Routines*, 146).

There are multiple challenges facing the church and theological education in Australia in 2019 coinciding with the celebration of Rob's 80th birthday. Some of these challenges are new, ones that Banks never really encountered: online education by colleges and obvious contempt for the church. Some challenges are more familiar to him but have grown more acute over time

(see *Reenvisioning Theological Education*, 1999). I will conclude by suggesting some ways the practical theology of Robert Banks equips church leaders and theological educators for their task.

Many practical theologians feel – and I speak autobiographically here – as if we are too practical for the theological college and University, too activist for the church and too evangelical for many practically-orientated and activist organisations. Furthermore, the demands of research outputs and accreditation of colleges and their courses means most colleges have drifted somewhat from their traditional accountability to the church or denomination and toward the standards of government audits. How does practical theology help?

How do we make sense of a publishing career that began with biblical studies in Cambridge and arrives, fifty years later, in a blind school in China?

1. Practical theology ensures that the gulf between what happens in the theological college and the life of the church (local congregations, the practical ministry of individuals and the public advocacy and witness of organisations like Anglicare) does not widen.
2. Practical theology guards against the tendency of theological and biblical scholars to ignore the demands of practice, and ensures their important work is appropriately interpreted for everyday Christians.
3. Practical theology equips practitioners and activists – engaged in works of mission, mercy and justice – in the essential disciplines of critical, biblical reflection (why and how they are trying to redeem the world!).
4. Practical theology calls church and denominational leaders to mission and witness because, in the busyness and demands of resourcing ministry, the insights of theological inquiry or the challenges of activists and practitioners are easily neglected under the pressure of what is happening next Sunday.
5. Finally, practical theology knows each of these are impoverished by their isolation from each other, and, in the language of Parker J. Palmer, calls us to stand in the tragic gap.

I – together with my friends and colleagues who appear in this volume – am grateful for the example and encouragement of Robert J. Banks who taught us how to stand in the tragic gap, with intelligence and integrity.



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