

KULCSÁR Árpád¹: 

Ecclesiastics as the Physiology of the Reformed Church in the Perception of László Ravasz

Abstract.

László Ravasz (1882–1975), former professor of practical theology (1907–1921) at the Transylvanian Reformed Faculty, Cluj, as a young professor introduced a new subject in the preparation and education of prospective Reformed pastors. Ecclesiastics appears in his works in the early 20th century and persists over the decades in the scientific discussions of Reformed theologians. In this paper, I examine László Ravasz's perception of ecclesiastics and Reformed practical theology. In its early years, the subject struggles with the lack of proper terminology and needs to clarify several issues. László Ravasz proves and justifies that practical theology needs ecclesiastics as a prolegomenon. The most important questions, such as how? what? why? who? where?, can only be answered through a theoretical clarification by ecclesiastics. With the help of mostly Dutch practical theological literature, I also examine how relevant László Ravasz's thoughts are nowadays, and my conclusion is that by pioneering the issue of ecclesiastics László Ravasz formed generations of pastors in their profession.

Keywords: ecclesiastics, practical theology, Reformed Church, László Ravasz

¹ Assistant Professor, Partium Christian University, Oradea; e-mail: kulcsarpad@partium.ro.



In February 1934, at the National Reformed Theological Professors' Conference held in Debrecen, the attending professors discussed the state of Hungarian Reformed theological literature and the most pressing tasks ahead.² The speakers reviewed over three decades of theological literature since the turn of the century, categorizing and evaluating the works by subject-matter. In his presentation on general religious studies, Béla Vasady expressed his view that until the emergence of neo-Reformation theology (1925), religious studies had essentially absorbed Reformed theology.³ Distinguished theologians, who expounded on their respective fields in essays and books of varying lengths, were essentially engaging in religious studies rather than Christian theology in the classical sense. At this point, the author mentioned notable figures such as Károly Nagy, György Bartók Jr., Sándor Makkai, Lajos Imre, and László Ravasz. In his view, which was firmly rooted in neo-Reformation theology, the practice of treating theology as a branch of religious studies had not been beneficial for Reformed theology.⁴

We cannot but agree with him that Christian theology as a scientific discipline should be distinguished and separated from religious studies; that anthropocentric religiosity evident in the writings reviewed by Vasady, as well as in the theological thinking of their authors, constitutes only a part of Christian faith and spirituality – it does not represent their entirety. However, one significant advantage of the scholars who approached theology as a scientific discipline must be acknowledged: they pursued theology academically and remained scholars in the truest sense all along. Despite certain losses, they successfully integrated Reformed theology into the 19th-century academic framework and maintained its place there.

Within Reformed theology, practical theology particularly required this scientific recognition. One of the key strengths of László Ravasz's 1907 habilitation dissertation, *Introduction to Practical Theology*, was exactly that it elevated this field from the marginal status to which it had inadvertently been relegated compared to other areas of theology.

² [no author] (1933–1934): A magyar református theologiai irodalom helyzetképe és legközelebbi teendői. In: *Theologiai Szemle*. IX–X. 124–142.

³ VASADY, Béla (1934): Az általános vallástudomány. In: *Theologiai Szemle*. IX–X. 124.

⁴ TAVASZY, Sándor (1925): Tudomány és világnézet. A theologiai tudomány helye a tudományok mai rendszerében. In: *Az Út*. VIII, 1. 20–23.

Lajos Novák, in his appraisal of the dissertation, remarked, “With this work, he has rendered greater and better service to the practical theological literature of the Hungarian Reformed Church and to the scientific credibility of the discipline itself than any of his predecessors taken altogether.”⁵

Through his work, László Ravasz aimed to lay down the theoretical foundations, as someone fully aware of their significance. In doing so, he established the groundwork for practical theology as an independent discipline. It was no coincidence that at the 1934 professors’ conference, Sándor Csikesz asserted that this work had rendered all previous publications on the subject obsolete.⁶ Similarly, in 1938, Sándor Czeglédý noted the following: since László Ravasz’s dissertation, Hungarian Protestant practical theology had been pursued as a legitimate science. At the same time, he recognized the challenge inherent in this shift and rightly grasped the urgency of analysing, evaluating, and further developing Ravasz’s work.⁷

A portion of the nearly 100-page-long dissertation had already been published in serial form in *Erdélyi Protestáns Lap* [Transylvanian Protestant Journal] in 1906. Regular readers of the journal were already familiar with the first of its four major chapters, which provided a brief, outline history of practical theology. Upon its publication, Károly Nagy assessed its significance in a rather biased tone:

A gem of our meagre Hungarian theological literature, and “it is evident that this is not merely doctrine but a lived, vitalizing, and enriching truth, a reality” that the dissertation echoes, in connection with which “when we think of our Elisha who has been taken up to heaven, our dear departed Albert Molnár, whose spirit and mantle this young Elisha has inherited. Where will he wear this mantle: in congregational work or in the academic lecture hall? That remains a mystery of divine providence. One thing is certain: whether here or there, he will belong to the privileged company of the chosen.”⁸

⁵ NOVÁK, Lajos (1907): Vélemény Ravasz László magántanári dolgozatáról. In: *Ellenzék*. Független politikai napilap. XXVIII, 118. 3. [Unless otherwise stated, the translations of all, originally non-English quotations belong to the author of this article.]

⁶ CSIKESZ, Sándor (1934): A magyar református gyakorlati teológia. In: *Theológiai Szemle*. IX–X. 142.

⁷ CZEGLÉDY, Sándor (1938): *A prédikáció gyűlekezettszerűsége*. A Pápai Református Theológiai Akadémia Kiadványai, 25. Budapest. 7–8.

⁸ Op. cit. 167.

Lajos Novák, professor of practical theology in Sárospatak, saw in Ravasz's work a clear intent to establish a system. Contrary to previous approaches dominating practical theology, the author paid less attention to its everyday, applied aspects and instead focused rigorously on its theoretical foundations. His approach was deeply rooted in philosophy of religion and religious history, presenting what could be described as the metaphysics of practical theology.⁹

At the time, Ravasz had to complete the dissertation in great haste, managing to write it in just three weeks – a fact that inevitably affected the quality of the text. His critics did not fail noting: "It is heavily laden with foreign terminology, its dialectics is highly abstract, at times obscure, and even somewhat awkward."¹⁰ In a review published in *Protestáns Szemle* [Protestant Review], his critic compiled phrases and expressions that should have been used more cautiously or omitted altogether,¹¹ also pointing out a few minor factual errors.¹² Lajos Novák opines that the entire work was written in a philosophical and academic language that was not well received in ecclesiastical circles, nevertheless acknowledging, "...an author possessing such literary qualities is equally suited to serving theology both as a literary discipline and as a vocation on the academic lectern".¹³

Some ideas from the dissertation reappeared in Ravasz's inaugural lecture at the theological faculty and in a few minor studies, which extended beyond theoretical

⁹ NOVÁK 1907, 2.

¹⁰ RAVASZ, László (1907a): *Bevezetés a gyakorlati teológiába*. Kolozsvár, Ellenzék Nyomda. 94.

¹¹ "Examples of this include: stereotypical wisdom; hoary old chestnut; soul-crushing, barren orthodoxy; a magician from the top hat; a highly cultured causeur; the stock-market value of religious studies; the Pharisees of rigid dogmatism; materialism – this great harlot; tumult of witches; the blanket-weed of traditions; buffalo meat softened under the saddle; hoops around a barrel, etc." SZ. M. (1907): Ravasz László: *Bevezetés a gyakorlati teológiába*. Kolozsvár. 1907. 96. In: *Protestáns Szemle*. XIX, 8. 548.

¹² "The distinction between 'fact complex' and 'church community versus public' feels somewhat farfetched. Lastly, it is a factual error to state that Lipsius, the great Jena-based dogmatic theologian, was a disciple of Ritschl, and I can accept his claim regarding practical theology alone that 'the Reformed spirit was the muse of Germany's free theology'." Op. cit. 548.

¹³ NOVÁK 1907, 3.

questions of practical theology into the field of homiletics.¹⁴ Certain passages were eventually incorporated into his textbook on homiletics – these textual overlaps are indicated in the footnotes of my paper.

Since the early 19th century, Reformed theological professors teaching practical theology had consistently advocated for the greater recognition of their field within theological science. Albert Kovács dedicated a separate chapter to this issue in his *Homiletika 1904* [Homiletics 1904], arguing that it was not enough to be merely a practical person: those sent forth to minister also needed solid academic knowledge, ensuring that practical work was underpinned by theoretical foundations: “Some tend to overestimate the value of practical theology in contrast to theoretical theology, expecting nothing more from a theologian than to be a capable, hands-on minister. [...] without theological knowledge, no one can be a good pastor.”¹⁵

Accordingly, in the introduction to his habilitation dissertation, László Ravasz first addresses the question of whether practical theology is a science and whether it requires a separate prolegomenon. Should we be satisfied with the view held by some earlier scholars that it is merely “a collection of various practical rules”?¹⁶ Géza Boross, in his short but substantial study on the significance of László Ravasz’s practical theological work, once again highlighted how crucial this question was in Ravasz’s time – and we can say that it remains just as relevant today. Neo-Reformation theology regarded this entire issue as a systematic theological and ecclesiological topic, and thus deemed it as appropriate to clarify its theoretical foundations within this domain.¹⁷ However, from the second half of the 20th century onwards, practical theological thought began to re-evaluate its orientation. By the late 1960s, the question arose as to whether practical theology would continue under the

¹⁴ RAVASZ, László (1907b): Az igehirdetés megújódása. In: PÉTER, Károly Jr. (ed.): *Református Prédikátori Tár*. Székelyudvarhely, Becsek D. fia könyvnyomdája. V–XVI; RAVASZ, László (1910): Igihirdetésünk alapkérdése. In: RAVASZ, László: „Ez ama Jézus” – *Egyházi beszédek, elmélkedések*. Kolozsvár, Stein János Magyar Királyi Egyetemi Könyvkereskedése – Stief Jenő és Társa Könyvnyomdai Műintézete.

¹⁵ KOVÁCS, Albert (1904): *Homiletika vagy egyházi ékesszólástan*. Budapest, Hornyánszky Viktor Császári és Királyi Udvari Könyvnyomdája. 2.

¹⁶ RAVASZ 1907, 4.

¹⁷ BOROSS, Géza (1997): Ravasz László, a gyakorlati teológus. In: *Református Szemle*. XC, 2. 142–143.

authority of Karl Barth's doctrine of the Word of God, invariably subordinating church practice to it – on an exclusive basis – , or it would take a different direction.¹⁸

Those advocating change argued for the need of the scientific independence of practical theology, asserting that its scope of inquiry should encompass subjects that can be examined through empirical methods. This excludes God, as He does not need to be researched, as He has revealed Himself in His Word; therefore, through the Pronouncement, He is knowable to all who seek Him. If practical theology is to have a legitimate place among theological disciplines, then its primary field of study must be the human being. Its task should be to understand man as thoroughly as possible – for instance, by examining the context of human lives.¹⁹ In this sense, practical theology studies both the person of the listener and that of the preacher of the Word of God, exploring their individual characteristics, the influences they experience and that continuously change and transform them throughout their lives.

Thus, the aim of practical theology is to prepare future pastors for their ministry and to provide ongoing personal support to practising clergy, helping them to make their work more effective and fruitful. In fulfilling this role, practical theology intersects with various fields of the humanities (e.g. psychology, sociology, religious studies), correlates with them, places their methodologies under examination, and incorporates their research findings wherever deemed necessary and beneficial. This, however, is not merely about investigating the components of everyday life but also about searching for “traces” of God – meaning that, alongside addressing societal relevance, it also engages with the question of religious identity.²⁰ This does not entail turning away from the Word or ecclesiastical traditions; rather, it opens up space for the scientific human attitudes of inquiry, research, evaluation, deduction, and action.

¹⁸ LAAN, Jaap H. van der (2001): *Hoge woorden over de preek*. Uitgebreide tekst van het afscheidscollege, uitgesproken op vrijdag 2 november, 2001. Kampen Oraties 17. Kampen, Theologische Universiteit van de Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland. 14.

¹⁹ HEITINK, Gerben (2003): *Tussen 'oprit 57' en 'afslag 03' de weg, het landschap en de praktische theologie*. Rede in verkorte vorm uitgesproken bij zijn afscheid als hoogleraar Praktische Theologie aan de faculteit de Godgeleerdheid van de Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam op mei 2003. Amsterdam, VU Boekhandel/Uitgeverij. 5–6.

²⁰ Ibid.

In the latter half of the 20th century, Protestant churches in Western Europe and scholars of practical theology became acutely aware of the process known as secularization within society.²¹ The same was true in Eastern Europe, though with a crucial difference in the lives of individuals: while Western Europeans, on the basis of their religious and Christian identity, could freely choose to reject secularization without significant consequences, in the East, due to dictatorial regimes, such a decision carried much greater risks. Nevertheless, a strong resistance to secularization was evident in Eastern Europe – an attitude that not only earned the respect of Western Christians but also fuelled an optimism about the region's future following the fall of communist regimes. All the same, this optimism ultimately proved misguided. During the era of dictatorship, standing by the Christian faith and the church signified both loyalty to God and outright political dissent (or, in some cases, only the latter one). Yet, in the face of Western-style secularization, the earlier resistance failed to provide a sufficient barrier. The atomization of society, the rise of subjectivity, and the spread of individualism inevitably took hold in Eastern Europe as well.

Western European theologians and social scientists had already described the symptoms of secularization in great detail, and these became clearly observable: the rise of the “Self” led to an increasingly fragmented world. The promotion of the individual, subjective interests of the “Self” reinforced a rational approach to life, while human relationships became more loosely defined and their duration shortened. This rationality, on the one hand, pushed emotions into the background, but, on the other, it also fostered a deep spiritual thirst, reigniting and further stimulating interest in spirituality, religion, and faith. Recognizing this, those engaged in practical theology saw the necessity of reassessing their field's mission, re-examining earlier theories, and adapting their methodology and perspective.²² In some ways, this even led to a return to the liberal theological tendencies that predated Barth's influence, once again emphasizing the anthropocentric aspect of practical theology. With this in mind, I intend to look into

²¹ HEITINK, Gerben (1993): *Praktische Theologie. Geschiedenis-theorie-handelingsvelden*. Kok Kampen. 46.

²² DINGEMANS, G. D. J. (1996): *Manieren van doen. Inleiding tot de studie van de praktische theologie*. Uitgeverij Kok Kampen. 16–35.

László Ravasz's practical theological thought, highlighting his contributions and their significance in his time while also seeking their contemporary relevance – thus evaluating their present-day applicability.

Drawing on the works of renowned 19th-century German theologians, Ravasz sought to establish the theoretical foundations of Hungarian Reformed practical theology, clearly recognizing that in order for this field to claim its rightful place among theological disciplines, it could not avoid engaging in theoretical discourse. Following in the footsteps of Carl Immanuel Nitzsch²³ and Ernst Christian Achelis,²⁴ he viewed the Church as a “living organism that exists and is realized through its various functions”,²⁵ this way believing that practical theology described the physiology of the Church. However, he went beyond mere description when he saw practical theology not only as a descriptive but also a prescriptive discipline, one that must answer both the question *what is there?* and *what is needed?*

Similarly, Gerben Heitink, a Dutch practical theologian, structured his analysis of the self-defining processes within 20th-century practical theology around key questions. According to his assessment, practical theology has always needed to respond to specific inquiries, which, in the latter half of the 20th century, unfolded as follows:

- a) 1950s – *how?* (How should I conduct pastoral work?);
- b) 1960s – *what?* (What do I still have to say?);
- c) 1970s – *why?* (Why am I doing this, and who does it matter to?);
- d) 1980s – *who?* (Who am I?);
- e) 1990s–present days – *where?* (Where should I be looking for it?).²⁶

It appears so that these questions are applicable to the late 19th and early 20th centuries as well, and the above five points can be condensed into the two fundamental questions I quoted earlier in László Ravasz's case: *how*, *what*, and *why?* can be summarized as *what is?* while *who* and *where?* as *what is needed?* Examining László Ravasz's entire dissertation, we can also conclude that the optimism of the late 19th and early 20th centuries

²³ NITZSCH, Carl Immanuel (1847–1848): *Praktische Theologie* I–II. Bonn, Adolf Marcus.

²⁴ ACHELIS, Ernst Christian (1890): *Lehrbuch der Praktischen Theologie* I. Freiburg, Mohr.

²⁵ RAVASZ 1907, 4.

²⁶ HEITINK 2003, 18–19.

– also rooted in faith in the spectacular advancements of science – already carried within it the inclination to disregard answering *how?* and *what?* and instead to shift the focus towards *why?* Based on these, we can agree with Johannes van der Ven’s standpoint, who argues that practical theology has sought to define its field over the past two hundred years through three main themes: the practice of pastoral vocation, the fulfilment of the Church, and human action in the perspective of the Kingdom of God.²⁷ As we shall see, all three of these questions appear in László Ravasz’s prolegomena to practical theology, albeit with differing emphases.

Géza Boross later refined the definition of practical theology established by Ravasz, stating, “practical theology is the theology of the life and service of the Church”.²⁸ When using the word “life” in the context of the Church, it can be understood in the most general sense to mean that life = service. However, Géza Boross’s explicit formulation provides a more precise orientation regarding the Church’s essential nature, mission, purpose, and task beyond mere existence (self-preservation, self-activity).

Anthropocentric traits can be observed in both of these Hungarian Reformed definitions, though László Ravasz’s approach is far more pronounced in this regard (being ahead of Barthian theology) when he rejects external factors in answering the question what *is needed?* – be it Scripture, the ecclesiastical life of the early Christians, or any kind of idea or factual material, as these proclaim “the truth of authority”. Instead, he considers “the authority of truth” to be the sole standard, arguing, “Subjective perception bears the finest and richest fruit in the field of theology, for here it develops into personal life experience, and this science is thus endowed not only with truth but also with prophetic momentum.”²⁹

At first glance, László Ravasz’s claim on this matter may appear bold. However, he does not intend to speak against Scripture, church tradition, or dogma; rather, his perspective reflects a distinctive interpretation of the Reformed tradition and Calvinist

²⁷ VEN, Johannes A. van der (1985): Wat is pastoraaltheologie? Een analyse van het werk van F. Haarsma. In: VEN, J. A. van der (ed.): *Toekomst van de kerk. Studies voor F. Haarsma*. Kok Kampen. 13–14.

²⁸ BOROSS, Géza (1995): *Bevezetés a gyakorlati teológiába*. Budapest, A Károli Gáspár Református Egyetem Hittudományi Karának Gyakorlati Teológiai Tanszéke. 6.

²⁹ RAVASZ 1907, 7.

teachings when his emphasis on subjective perception is firmly rooted in liberal theological principles. The Reformers themselves stressed that faith must be personal, that turning to God, personal conversion must involve individual commitment, the subject's active participation, which implies that responsibility for one's faith shifts from the Church as institution to the individual believer.

Protestant Church history demonstrates that this personal responsibility did not develop uniformly or simultaneously everywhere, yet – where it did emerge – it virtually led to Church members becoming actively engaged in the life and work of the Church and congregation, increasing their sense of responsibility. By allowing for individualization, the Reformation sought to make Church members personally involved, essentially sharing responsibility by involving congregants in action, at the same time taking a risk: that processes could be successful, but there was also the possibility of failure or deviation.³⁰

For Church members, this form of engagement no longer meant passive participation but rather the conscious assumption of responsibility for what happens in the Church and the congregation. They had to make this engagement personal, recognizing that their involvement was voluntary and based on free will, that the Church needed their participation and allowed them a say in events. Consequently, subjective perception strengthened a critical attitude but also opened up the perspective that God is a personal God who interacts directly with His children, not solely through intermediaries. However, this also entails direct responsibility before God for the individual.³¹

³⁰ DEKKER, G. – HEITINK, G. (2002): *Samen op de goede weg? Een pleidooi voor een eigentijdse kerk*. Ten Have Baarn. 67–68.

³¹ In 1899, Abraham Kuyper, based on a similar principle and building on subjective decisions, provided space for believing church members in congregational life according to three aspects: they must be confessing church members based on a conscious, personal decision; their personal presence must be manifested in a sense of personal responsibility for themselves and for one another, as well as in voluntary financial contributions; a “mature” church member must be capable of expressing their faith in words and holding a personal opinion regarding church matters. KUYPER, Abraham (1899): *The L. P. Stone Lectures for 1898–1899 Calvinism. Six Lectures Delivered in the Theological Seminary at Princeton*. New York – Chicago – Toronto, Fleming H. Revell Company. Published in Hungarian language: KUYPER, Ábrahám (1914): *A kálvinizmus lényege*. Nagybánya, Nánásy István Könyvnyomdája; KUYPER, Ábrahám (2001): *Kálvinizmus és modernitás*. Cluj-Napoca, Koinonia. For a more detailed discussion of the matter, see: KULCSÁR, Árpád (2018): *Kálvin reneszánsz. Mit tanult Ravasz László Kálvintól?*

László Ravasz placed great emphasis on personal life experience as a key concept in his inaugural lecture titled *The Truth of Life*: "...to make Christianity personal, lest it soon become merely a historical memory or a pious tradition; to transform what has been mere expression into life, to exalt institutions and doctrines to the level of the subjective. *Personal life*: this is my ideal, the fundamental truth of my spiritual world and scientific conviction – would that my career bear witness to it."³²

In his perspective, personal life is directly proportional to subjectivism. However, he does not clarify how subjective truth finds its place within the Church and theology. Dingemans even describes practical theology as the praxis of the individual, suggesting that not only does practical theology seek new paths for itself, but the subject also searches for their own way with the help of practical theology.³³ Heitink, in one of his studies, traces the philosophical roots of the subject all the way back to René Descartes (1596–1650), exploring the issue in detail. According to Heitink, the well-known phrase "I think, therefore I am" marks the birth of the subject – the point at which the subject separates from the object by engaging in rational analysis and reflection, thereby positioning itself in opposition to the surrounding world. From that point onwards, the individual no longer automatically accepts everything that has been inherited from tradition.³⁴

We must agree with László Ravasz in that Christian faith must be personal; it is insufficient for the collective faith of a given community to be imposed upon the individual as a passive "recipient". When faith becomes personal, a spontaneous personal life experience emerges, containing undeniable subjective elements. This perspective opens the way for the idea that an external, objective, a priori fact cannot be truth in itself – only once filtered through subjectivism. In this sense, individuals accept from

In: Kulcsár, Árpád (ed.): *Reformáció 500. A Partiumi Keresztény Egyetem által 2017. október 5–6. között szervezett konferencia előadásainak gyűjteménye*. Oradea – Komárno, Partium Christian University – J. Selye University, J. Calvin Theological Institute, Partium Press. 260–270.

³² [no author] (1907): *Emléklapok Dr. Ravasz Lászlónak, a Kolozsvári Református Theológiai Fakultáson a Gyakorlati Theológia nyilvános, rendes tanárának 1907. évi szeptember 15-én tartott Székfoglalójáról*. Kolozsvár, „Ellenzék” nyomda. 23.

³³ DINGEMANS 1996, 31.

³⁴ HEITINK, Gerben (ed.) (1998): *Het gemeentelid als subject*. In: *Een gezamenlijke trektocht. Meedenken met Jan Hendricks over gemeenteopbouw*. Kampen, Kok. 19–20.

the teachings of the Holy Scriptures, from doctrinal statements formulated in creeds, and from general theological assertions only what aligns with their own subjective truth while rejecting what does not. This substantially extends beyond the general, theoretical concerns of practical theology, touching on hermeneutical, dogmatic, and ethical boundaries. Klaus Douglass expresses this concept as follows: "...truth does not belong to us. We only know the truth! [...] We do not possess the truth; rather, the truth possesses us."³⁵

Let us add that by "truth" we mean Jesus Christ.

From the above, it appears that while Ravasz strives to remain grounded in academic theology, his scope is narrowed by his rejection of external, objective factors and his exclusive focus on direct religious experiences. His reasoning leaves open certain questions when he suggests that if an individual belongs to the Church, they automatically become a subject of Church life, and from this, it follows that they inherently know what the Church should be.³⁶

The first part of the assertion does not necessarily lead to the second; actually, there is no guarantee that someone, merely by being a member of the Church, already knows what the Church should be – as if arriving at this understanding entirely on their own. In fact, the whole question is not entirely ecclesiastical but rather ecclesiological. As Ferenc Kádár observes, Ravasz has "not yet clarified the relationship between practical theology's ecclesiology and ecclesiology itself".³⁷ This is attributable to the fact that Ravasz's work essentially laid the foundation for ecclesiastics as an independent discipline of practical theology within Hungarian Reformed theology, whereas his work is more of a draft than a polished, definitive piece. Despite its sketchiness, we must agree with Géza Boross when he refers to László Ravasz as the creator of Hungarian Reformed practical theology.³⁸

³⁵ DOUGLASS, Klaus (2002): *Az új reformáció. 96 tétel az egyház jövőjéről*. Budapest, Kálvin Kiadó. 88.

³⁶ "...in fact, this entitles me to establish ideals and set a guiding star towards the universal development of church life." RAVASZ 1907, 6.

³⁷ KÁDÁR, Ferenc (2006): *Egyház itt és most. Az ekleziásztika művelésének alapjai, eredményei és mai lehetőségei* [doctoral thesis in the field of practical theological studies]. Sátoraljaújhely. 45.

³⁸ BOROSS 1997, 142.

Practical theology must always maintain a close connection with real life, as theological disciplines inherently risk becoming overly philosophical or philological in their abstraction. Practicality, a theology that lives within the reality of everyday life must counterbalance this tendency while ensuring that its objective foundational norms are not merely subjected to continuously shifting, transient subjective perspectives. Lajos Szabó approaches the definition of practical theology from a different angle, neither as descriptive nor prescriptive but rather stating, “The contemporary commitment of practical theology is the continuous study of the current way of life, piety practices, and the societal role of church communities.”³⁹

Rather than absolutizing practical theology, he assigns it a deliberative, advisory, and suggestive role, as opposed to a declarative, instructive, or critical approach. He perceives its essence in guiding life and deepening the understanding of existence. Considering this aspect, he views interdisciplinarity as one of the greatest allies of practical theology, whereas the refusal to engage in interdisciplinary dialogue, building walls instead of bridges is seen as a fundamentalist threat. His perspective even extends to endorsing experimental approaches in practical theology, which have emerged over recent decades; accordingly: “This shift also entails a structural transformation, whereby practical theology no longer rigidly adheres to old classifications or insists on traditional methodologies but predominantly operates in an *experimental* manner. Alongside experimentation, the processing of experiences, observations, and reflections has become an accepted practice.”⁴⁰

At this point, it becomes evident that this approach fundamentally aligns with the Schleiermacherian tradition, emphasizing experimentation, experiences, and observations, which, albeit in a different – essentially more open – wording, reinforce the same anthropocentric, subjective perspective that Ravasz spoke of a century earlier. It is no exaggeration to suggest that, following Barthian theology, we are witnessing a renaissance of practical theology in the new millennium. Zsolt Kozma reminds us that neo-Reformation theology lacked a separate practical theology because it maintained that theology as a whole must be practical: “Ultimately, both dogmatics and homiletics seek to answer the same question: *what* should we preach? The difference is merely that dogmatics also addresses the question of *from where* by referring back to biblical theology,

³⁹ SZABÓ, Lajos (2004): *Alapozó ismeretek a gyakorlati teológiában*. Budapest, Luther Kiadó. 9.

⁴⁰ Op. cit. 12.

while practical theology looks forward to the reality of the Church in answering the *how* question.”⁴¹

Although this statement does not equate homiletics with the entirety of practical theology, it remains a fundamental element thereof. This neo-Reformation insight – that theology as a whole must become practical – would be difficult to replace with anything else. In the 1960s, during the paradigm shift in Dutch practical theology, Jacob Firet argued that practical theology perceives and conveys God’s approach to man through His word within the human world. His widely published understanding of practical theology can be summarized succinctly as follows: *relationship* (what is God’s word, and what does He do?); *community* (through what structural form does God approach us?); *diaconia* (what results from stepping into the sphere of God’s word?). In his interpretation, God’s approach is realized not only through kerygma but also through *didaché* and *paraklêsis*.⁴²

From Firet’s approach, I wish to highlight the aspect that relates to the question of *from where?* formulated by Zsolt Kozma. As the previous quotation illustrates, interrogatives once again emerge in his interpretation; in addition to the previously mentioned *what?* and *how?*, the question of *from where?* also appears, serving as a valuable addition within the spirit of Barthian theology. He takes this to remind practical theological thought that the question of *from where?* should not be neglected, as it constitutes the very link between practical theology and other theological disciplines, bringing it closer to Firet’s already expounded viewpoint. In other words, it is important that practical theology can define itself not only in relation to the social sciences but also maintain organic connections within the realm of theological disciplines. Accordingly, by rearranging the aforementioned questions [(a) from where? (b) what? (c) how?], a “theological minimum” can be established, prompting further considerations.

I have previously alluded to the fact that, in the second half of the 20th century, the shift away from the position designated by neo-Reformation theology within practical theology emerged precisely along the argument for the free practice of science. As a recurring motif, this surfaces in the revival and execution of practical theology,

⁴¹ KOZMA, Zsolt (2000): *Ekléziasztika. Az egyház a mai helyzetben*. Egyetemi jegyzet 1980–2000. Cluj-Napoca, Protestáns Teológiai Intézet. 3.

⁴² FIRET, Jacob (1982): *Het agogisch moment in het pastoraal optreden*. Kampen, Kok. 54.

aligning with László Ravasz's liberal theological perspective: "...the truth and strength of practical theology are directly proportional to the intensity of religious life and the freedom of theological thought".⁴³

Lajos Szabó shares a similar view: "...[practical theology] best serves contemporary church practice when it also ensures the necessary freedom essential for scientific activity."⁴⁴

It might be worth briefly addressing the clear-cut distinction in practical theology between European and American thought. Gerben Heitink pointed out that European theologians tend to adopt an encyclopaedic approach even when it comes to practical theology, which entails precise and appropriate distinctions, the clear separation of things. In contrast, American theologians emphasize correlations, adopting a rather hermeneutic approach, seeking connecting points through which understanding the Word simultaneously facilitates its comprehension, acquisition, and lived experience. This perspective fosters reciprocity and incorporates the possibility of reflection. Heitink's work also demonstrates this latter approach to practical theology.⁴⁵

In the case of László Ravasz, it is clear that European theological thought serves as the inspiration for his practical theological views. This is understandable considering that his approach is characterized by a process of searching for direction.

In concluding this exploration, I refer to Firet's position, which finds the scientific nature of practical theology in a threefold task: developing and teaching a fundamental theory of practical theology; developing and teaching various practical theories; conducting practical training in different specialized areas of practical theology.⁴⁶ At the beginning of the 20th century, László Ravasz's principles of practical theology already met these general expectations. In his habilitation dissertation, he not only questioned the practical nature of theology as a whole but also provided relevant answers that have proven enduring. His perspective reveals his awareness of the tension between everyday faith practice and the Church's institutional practice.

⁴³ RAVASZ 1907, 7.

⁴⁴ SZABÓ 2004, 14 [insertion mine].

⁴⁵ HEITNIK 1993, 113.

⁴⁶ FIRET, Jacob (1987): De plaats van de Praktische Theologie binnen de theologische faculteit. In: *Spreken als leerling. Praktisch-theologische opstellen*. Artikelen van de emeritus-hoogleraar theologie, verschenen ter gelegenheid van zijn afscheid. Kampen, Kok.

Furthermore, he recognized that contemporary questions could no longer be answered solely by appealing to the authority of Scripture, to creeds or dogmas. Liberal theology, in the realm of practical theology, “must set itself in motion”, transcend its previous stance, and engage with both scientific discoveries and the rapidly evolving insights of the humanities. He did not perceive these developments as “threats” but as profound sources of assistance. His aim was not to detach practical theology from theological scholarship, nor to criticize ecclesiastical traditions outright, but rather to refine theoretical interpretations of tradition in a way that aligned with both the Reformation spirit and contemporary modern thought.

Thus, it can be established that practical theology must be interpreted within the framework of the Christian Church – or, if you will, within its boundaries – where norms withstanding subjective criticism must provide guidance in the development of its activities, as Géza Boross aptly formulates:

... the mystery of ecclesiastical ministry can only be grasped in a meaningful way from the Church itself, from the miracle of the Church, and from the biblical teaching concerning the Church’s service and mission. Practical theology is essentially the presentation, explication, interpretation, and application of this biblical teaching regarding the Church’s present-day activities. [...] within the Church, discussions about its tasks (its ministry) can only meaningfully take place theologically. That is, scientifically – systematically and methodologically –, in the manner in which theological science operates in all its branches.⁴⁷

Following the line of thought expressed by Géza Boross, by “norms” I understand Holy Scripture, as well as the confessions and dogmas that have crystallized and been refined over the centuries, and which must be regarded as authoritative in the Church’s self-understanding, its interpretation of the world – even its worldview –, and its theological and, within that, practical theological positions. This is the framework that can set the directions and limits of interdisciplinarity and place practical theology within the realm of “faith-based science open towards the transcendent”.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ BOROSS 1995, 6.

⁴⁸ The following formulation is cited from a lecture delivered by DSc Dr Botond Gaál, Professor Emeritus of Dogmatics, on the occasion of his being conferred the title of Honorary Professor at the Protestant Theological Institute in Cluj-Napoca, on 14 October 2015. A report of the

The interdisciplinary orientation of practical theology was also advocated by László Ravasz, following Heinrich Bassermann,⁴⁹ professor at Heidelberg, and he believed that a major turning point was necessary.⁵⁰ Looking back over the development of practical theology in the twentieth century, it is clear that this major turning point did not occur with the emergence of neo-Reformation theology but rather in the decades that followed – and it continues to this day. Taking into account even the insights of neo-Reformation theology, Lajos Imre⁵¹ and Zsolt Kozma reached similar conclusions: that we are in need of practical theology as a specialized field in order to clarify fundamental theoretical questions because “...if we have declared that biblical, systematic, and even church-historical theology must be practical, then we must now add that practical theology, too, must be theoretical”.⁵²

Thus, in answer to the three questions formulated earlier, I would now seek to give my own response: *from where?* – from the revelation of God, who discloses Himself (Holy Scripture); *what?* – the Word (Jesus Christ); *how?* – through the guidance of the Holy Spirit (as the doctrine of the Church’s physiology and ministry prescribes for the needs of the here and now).

event was published in BALOGH, Csaba (2015): *Felekezeti teológia, egyetemes tudomány. Ünnepi szimpózium a Kolozsvári Protestáns Teológiai Intézet épületének 120. évfordulóján*. In: *Református Szemle*. CVIII, 6. 712–716. Following the bestowal of the honour, Professor Gaál kindly provided the full text of his lecture, for which I also extend my gratitude herein. The complete version of the lecture has subsequently appeared in print: GAÁL, Botond (2018): *A teológia mint „fölfelé nyitott hittudomány”*. In: *Református Szemle*. CXI, 5. 509–522.

⁴⁹ BASSERMANN, Gustav Heinrich (1879): *Die Bedeutung der Praktischen Theologie in der Gegenwart*. In: *Zeitschrift für Praktische Theologie*. I. 11.

⁵⁰ “Without psychology, we cannot attain a true understanding of the religious person; without ethnology, we cannot approach our own people; without sociology, we are incapable of establishing charitable institutions or engaging in humanitarian work; and the great task of pastoral care cannot be fulfilled without competence in economics, jurisprudence, and public administration – in short, without a formation in legal and civic disciplines.” RAVASZ 1907, 34.

⁵¹ IMRE, Lajos (1941): *Ekleziasztika. Az egyház élete és szolgálata*. A Coetus Theologorum Reformátusok Theologusok Munkaközösségének kiadványsorozata 2. Budapest, Bethlen Gábor Irodalmi és Nyomdai Részvénytársaság. 14.

⁵² Kozma 2000, 4.

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