

Practical Theology In Action: Christian Thinking in the Service of Church and Society, Paul Ballard and John Pritchard (SPCK 1996), 186 pp, £11.99 pbk

This book is a first-rate introduction to practical theology and is offered for all those involved pastoral care and applying thinking to the service of Church and society. It is a starting-point or springboard; comprehensive in its scope and splendidly balanced between theory and experience. The book is in two parts: in the first, 'The Foundations', the authors seek to review the current scene and provide some rationale for what is a rapidly expanding area of theological activity. In the second part, 'The Art of Practical Theology', they set out to explore in some detail the methodology of the pastoral cycle. The essence of the subject is tackled with clarity by two experienced teachers and practitioners. It deserves to become basic reading for all who wish to dig deeper into the nature of Christian practice, and, I suspect, will be used by pressured teachers wanting a short-cut tool for lectures or presentations!

Whilst reading this book prior to a clergy meeting, one of my colleagues, looking over my shoulder, commented, 'Have you nothing better to do, James, than read all those words? Your parishes are waiting to be saved!' Clergy, like almost any other professional group, will contain within them a range of perspectives about the need to be informed and updated. In a busy life, reading may be an unaffordable luxury. But is there something deeper going on here? Perhaps it is the recognition that there is a failure of words in a post-modern age to carry any conviction and convey a sense of the presence and activity of God. Nevertheless, words are still one way by which something of the meaning of God is made present?

Where Ballard and Pritchard fail, and all others too in this area, is in not providing busy or cynical professionals with tools by which they may understand that their practices as well as their reading are significant tools to aid deeper exploration around meaningful discourse about God. There is a profound debate to be had here about the nature of a failure of nerve in relation to what we believe in and how we communicate it. This may have been part of my colleague's gentle challenge. How would you have replied?

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