

Toward a Slow-Enough Church

BY SARAH KLASSEN

The books reviewed here are about patience, but they also describe the kind of relational presence that patience can facilitate with God and with one another.

In these connections are echoes of intimacy with creation, neighborhoods, and the Body of Christ through the ages.

As an athletic child growing up in the rural Midwest, winter nights were filled with basketball. My dad drove me all over central and south central Kansas to watch the most talented high school girls basketball players in the state, and then I would go home and climb a ladder into the emptied out hayloft of our white, wooden barn, and I would reenact what I had seen. For hours and hours I would practice under that tin roof. Over the years, nets frayed and once-dimpled basketballs were worn smooth, and ever so slowly my basketball abilities grew. It seemed like there was never a difference in my skill from one day to the next, but when I compared sixth grade and seventh grade to eighth and ninth, it was apparent that the practice was doing its magical work.

Decades later in our now incessantly connected world, the desire for instant gratification looms larger than it used to. In the world of basketball, children compete at younger ages and have access to nonstop, year-round competitive leagues and personal trainers. Still, regardless of how many personal lessons you take and no matter the number of games you play, to make free throws, you still have to *practice* free throws.

To practice something is to take the long view, to extend one's horizon of time well beyond today or tomorrow and perhaps even beyond one lifetime or two. Despite many tempting shortcuts toward the good life, virtues are the same as free throws. They require practice.

The three books in this review offer us theological reflections and historical musings on the necessary patience at the heart of Christian life. Even more, they provide concrete contemporary practices that draw us deeply into a more intentional and communal life of faith.



There's an appealing, old-school style to the way Philip D. Kenneson talks about patience in his short essay, *Practicing Ecclesial Patience: Patient Practice Makes Perfect* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2013, 26 pp., available for free download at www.ekklesiaproject.org/publications/pamphlets/). He begins with an imagined comment from his mother after he explains to her the slow food movement: "I think I hear what you're saying, dear, but that just sounds like *plain old food* to me" (p. 1).

"Plain old church" is the same. As multifaceted as it may be today, the church's role in the world is always tied to the "patient work of God" (p. 2), and Kenneson reminds us that when it comes to cultivating Christian patience, we are headed toward something old, rather than something new.

Kenneson's theology here is thoroughly relational in orientation. He firmly believes that God's greatest gift is the gift of presence, but he reminds us again and again that relationships (divine and human) take time. This is why patience is fundamental to the Christian life. Slow down, he says. Distrust urgency. Take the long view. Let mystery do its work. He explains,

Receiving God into our lives, as well as offering ourselves to God; receiving another person into our lives and offering our lives to them; making room in our lives to take in the beauty and wonders of the created order and offer ourselves in turn to its care—all of these unfold slowly, over time. None of them can happen at the break-neck speed at which all of us are encouraged to live. (p. 3)

After introducing these theological parameters, Kenneson offers three habits (or dimensions) that develop more faithful presence within us. *Abiding* "involves being with and remaining in another" (p. 5); *devotion* is "giving ourselves to another" (p. 7); and *attention* "involves an intense and focused openness to another" (p. 9). The quality of presence we cultivate through these three virtues emulates the depth of God's presence with the world.

Next, Kenneson provides us with practices that allow us to mature into these virtues—such as praying, weeping with those who weep, stopping, and eating together. These practical suggestions are not profound except in their accessibility and simplicity. In the section on stopping, for instance, Kenneson mentions the theological worth of sleep, and asks poignant, personal questions including my favorite: "What does it say about my life...if I can't make it through the day without a rather sizeable influx of stimulants?" (p. 18).

The virtues and practices described in this pamphlet are understood to be countercultural, imminently feasible, and wholly rooted in a theocentric

vision: "The patient work of God goes on every day, all around us, but because it so often is quiet and unassuming, it's easy to miss" (p. 24). Our proper response is to notice and join that work.

While we are right to be skeptical of movements that uncritically yearn for the good old days, Kenneson uses the lenses of patience and presence to recover aspects of a pre-digital, pre-globally connected world. He invites us to join with the patient work of God through our own attentive presence. For anyone beginning to think about Christian patience, this pamphlet, originally a plenary address of The Ekklesia Project, is an excellent starting point.



Jeffrey L. Bullock's well-organized, succinct survey of Christian patience, *Practicing Christian Patience: Encouraging Community, Establishing Peace* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2014, 95 pp., \$14.00), takes us several steps deeper into Scripture, tradition, and history. He begins the short volume by describing patience as a virtue defined and supported by nothing less than Scripture. The text moves readers through biblical samples and early church perspectives, including brief summaries of four church fathers: Tertullian, Cyprian, Augustine, and Gregory the Great. The book concludes with descriptions of Christian patience today for both theory and practice.

Bullock initially brings patience into view through a narrative lens, contrasting the story of capitalism with the story of Christianity. The free market story operates in crisis mode and encourages self-interest, urgency, and personal success. In direct contradiction, the Christian story's lengthened horizon of time provides those within it the ability to turn outward, consider others first, and trust that God's sovereignty transcends time itself. Virtues embedded in each of these stories function (often subconsciously) to shape those who occupy the narratives.

In chapter one, Bullock unmask the subliminal virtues of this "age of impatience" (p. 12), and he invites the Church to practice Christian patience instead. Patience "gives us the time to unravel tangled relationships" and restore "all creation to be right with God" (p. 17). As Augustine reminds us, our Christian aim and end are measured by the eschaton and nothing more temporal will do (p. 59).

In a brief biblical survey, Bullock's strongest work is with Pauline texts that speak directly to early Christians about how to be community. He also invokes Isaiah's suffering servant theme and the patient suffering of Jesus on the cross. However, feminist, womanist, and liberation thinkers offer an appropriate critique of patient suffering from the perspective of the oppressed, which Bullock is remiss in his failure to mention.

Several themes weave through the book. First, patience is fundamentally relational (as Kenneson noted). It is a necessarily communal practice and a virtue that, for Bullock, is intrinsically tied not only to God's reconciling work but to the revelation of God in Trinitarian form. Second, patience originates

from God, which shows in the way God relates to creation. Patience is bound together with God's generous grace and is "the cornerstone of God's justice" (p. 69). Finally, patience is only patience when it is lived, enacted in the narratives of our own lives and the lives of our congregations. This happens both interpersonally and liturgically as "worship dramatically illustrates patience at work in our lives through the cycle of the liturgical seasons" (p. 79).

Bullock concludes the book with three stories of Christian patience at work. The true stories resonate beyond their particular contexts as they articulate common human experiences: a family's struggles with mental illness; the long, slow work of community change; and a church navigating conflict around deeply held beliefs about homosexuality. In the end, Christian patience is not only a virtue to be admired and believed, but a virtue to be practiced and lived within the messiness of this world.



C. Christopher Smith and John Pattison's title – *Slow Church: Cultivating Community in the Patient Way of Jesus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2014, 247 pp., \$16.00) – clearly presents their thesis: a slower, more patient church is precisely the kind of authentic, holistic church needed today.

The authors are laypeople, self-proclaimed amateurs pursuing their great passion for the Church and the practicing of their faith "separate from any compensation (money, fame, career) that could come from it" (p. 20). Indeed, their passion and the depth of their commitment are present throughout this accessible and enjoyable read.

Like both Kenneson and Bullock, Smith and Pattison depend upon a countercultural frame to set the long, slow work of faith apart from the hurried tenor of today's world. Unlike Kenneson and Bullock, they directly and continuously engage the culture that they also critique. Today's world (and too often the American church) is plagued by "McDonaldization," a phrase sociologist George Ritzer describes in four dimensions: efficiency, predictability, calculability, and control (pp. 13-14). Their favorite ecclesial examples of "McDonaldization" are megachurches and the underlying philosophies of the church growth movement, which are a direct contrast to the slow church calling. The Slow Church is rooted in individual neighborhoods, works against uniformity, and emphasizes spiritual formation over numbers. By contrast, the church growth model relies on homogeneity, presents a static vision of church life, and focuses on quantifiable results.

Throughout the book, the authors introduce readers to pithy phrases that capture a constellation of concepts in a fresh way: "crisis of hypermobility," "culture of impatience," "stingy vision," "mythology of scarcity." Furthermore, the categories they use to describe a relevant and faithful church are both fresh and easy to grasp. Their final chapter on "Dinner Table Conversation as a Way of Being Church" reframes an ordinary daily event and imbues it with theological meaning: "We challenge you to imagine

what our common life would look like if it were centered around (a) eating together at the table and (b) the slow, Eucharistic conversation that convivial feasting encourages" (p. 209).

I am unsure of the link Smith and Pattison make between patience and Jesus. Jesus was often rather impatient and insistent, at times even breaking longstanding relationships by insisting that one make an immediate decision to follow him. When offering images of patience, there are other, more biblically resonant models in the Christian tradition and Scripture (see the examples cited by Bullock). This small blip does not detract from the immense practical resources the authors offer clergy and laity alike. Each chapter is centered on a theme (for example, stability, wholeness, Sabbath, and gratitude), and each chapter includes basic history and Scripture that round out a holistic sense of the authors' perspectives on those topics.

This book is the most engaging of the three works. Its authors employ a range of conversation partners, quoting Shakespeare and G. K. Chesterton, the Rule of Benedict and Parker Palmer, Tertullian and fictional Ron Swanson of the sitcom *Parks and Recreation*. At the end of each chapter, several reflection questions ask readers to apply the concepts to their own lives and communities. Not only is this book accessible and practical, it is entertaining. I recommend it for book clubs and study groups as well as personal reading.



At one level, these three texts are about patience. At a deeper level, they describe the kind of relational presence that patience can facilitate. Each emphasizes connection with God and with one another, and within these two primary connections are echoes of intimacy with creation, neighborhoods, and the Body of Christ through the ages.

This trio of works has more similarities than differences. They are unapologetically theocentric: all begin with the slow, enduring, and reconciling work of God as a primary theological starting point. They all present their story of patience as a foil to powerful contemporary cultural forces. In complementary ways the three remind us that the work of the Church is old, ancient work and should be built upon uncomplicated virtues. And finally, the calling to patience for today's church takes cultivating and tending. In other words, our patient work as people of faith takes practice, just like free throws.



SARAH KLAASSEN

is a freelance writer in Columbia, Missouri.