
Learning Life-Giving Ways of Life

BY TODD EDMONDSON

As true catechism challenges us to wrap our minds around the mysteries of the faith, it guides us to more faithful ways of living. The two approaches reviewed here open space in daily life to practice the presence of God, not just in the words we say, but in the ways we use our hands and feet.

Unfortunately, to many Christians catechism seems like a set of abstract questions and important-sounding answers, a sort of divinely sanctioned Scholastic Aptitude Test to guarantee entrance into the Kingdom of God. “Since the Enlightenment, intellectual knowledge, theology, and doctrine have been the primary means by which people come to the religious life,” Tony Jones notes in a pair of recent books. If he is right, and if his adverse reaction to this phenomenon is not unique, this might go a long way toward explaining the general ambivalence about the practice of catechism among churchgoing Christians today.

The most committed and faithful practitioners of catechetical instruction think this characterization misses the mark. They know that the value of such instruction is in how it can form Christian character rather than just manipulate ideas. For we are not disembodied souls or fleshless reason, as the ancient heresy of Gnosticism and its modern counterpart of Enlightenment Rationalism would have us believe. We are skin and bone, arms and legs, physical matter on two feet walking through this physical world, wondering not just what we should think, but what we should do. The question, then, for those committed to exploring the benefits of traditional catechetical instruction, is how we might unite the living qualities of Christian prac-

tice without forsaking substantive doctrinal matters. In training disciples, how might we challenge one another to wrap our minds around the mysteries of the faith, while at the same time spurring one another on to more faithful ways of life? Better yet, how might we grow to see the two activities as inextricably connected, or of one piece entirely?

Recently there has been no shortage of books on Christian practice, all of which profess the common goal of helping a Church largely disconnected from its past rediscover some of the regular activities our predecessors in the faith embraced as they sought to grow closer to God. The weakest of these works treat disciplines as mystical formulas, as though simply assuming a certain posture and uttering certain words might serve as a two-step process to spiritual enlightenment. The strongest, however, seek to open up space within the patterns of daily life so that believers might practice the presence of God, not just in the words they say or doctrines they believe, but in the ways they use their hands and feet. Our work and rest, our sharing of meals and stories and embraces and tears with families and friends and church communities, are opportunities for us to learn together what it means to live faithfully under the care of a God who is made known not just to our minds, but to our whole selves.

RECOVERING THE TRADITION

For those seeking to understand how doctrines and practices firmly rooted in the past might come alive in the Church today, and specifically how this might take place across generations of Christians, the work of Tony Jones is a good place to start. Jones, a former Minnesota youth minister and a current doctoral candidate in theology at Princeton Theological Seminary, has something of a vested interest in communicating the significance of Christian practice in language that is easily grasped by younger members of the Church. To this end, in 2003, he published *Soul Shaper: Exploring Spirituality and Contemplative Practices in Youth Ministry* (El Cajon, CA: Youth Specialties, 2003, 253 pp., \$19.99). This book, geared primarily towards men and women committed to the formation of young Christians into mature followers of Christ, endeavors admirably to bring modern disciples, young and old alike, into conversation with practices from the past that many believers dismiss out of hand as “weird,” “outdated,” or “superstitious.” Eschewing the stereotypes so often heard in Protestant circles especially, Jones manages to ground these practices—which range from the use of icons and labyrinths to fasting and spiritual direction—in theological, historical, and personal contexts that make them seem less alien to us. In short, he gives us eyes to see these things as immensely practicable, even in the midst of a culture that kicks against the goads of the past with all its might.

Consider just one example of how Jones approaches this task. He opens the chapter on pilgrimage by relating a fellow youth minister’s reflections

on a recent trip to Ground Zero in New York City. This serves to illustrate that we needn't be mired in medieval images of journeys to Canterbury or Santiago in order for the practice of pilgrimage to make sense. After sharing these insights from someone actively and daily engaging in the process of forming Christians in the twenty-first century, Jones turns to the history behind pilgrimage, and in the process he helps a past full of spiritual wanderers come alive. He describes what a journey to Santiago de Compostela during the twelfth century would have been like, and helps us understand the purpose such a journey would serve. In the third section of the chapter, he explores some of pilgrimage's theological moorings, such as the conviction that we are resident aliens on this earth, "trying to find our way back to that perfect place where our relationship with God is perfectly intimate." Indeed, Jones classifies all of life this side of Eden as a wandering, and he views the practice of pilgrimage as a powerful symbolic reminder of that reality. What Jones accomplishes, then, over the course of five short pages, is to connect what we believe with what we do in a way that seems not foreign, but rather a part of who we are.

Every chapter in Jones' book includes notes on how we might best engage these practices, such as tips on how best to prepare for a pilgrimage (leave the Discman and *Sports Illustrated* at home) or what to expect during a fast (weakness and muscle soreness will give way to clarity).

Another Jones publication, *The Sacred Way: Spiritual Practices for Everyday Life* (El Cajon, CA: Youth Specialties, 2005, 222 pp., \$12.99), is an updated version of the earlier book, but it is directed more toward the formation of adults. The structure of the book is similar to that of *Soul Shaper*, without the abundant reflections on youth ministry. Otherwise, most of the chapters in the earlier work have simply been repro-

duced for a different audience. Both books are valuable introductions to ancient Christian practices and fruitful meditations on how these practices might enrich our understanding of who we are as disciples of Jesus Christ. Neither seeks to disengage from the intellectual or doctrinal aspects of our identity as Christians, but rather to map out new ways to live into the realities communicated in the catechisms and creeds of the faith.

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RELATING PRACTICES AND BELIEF

As the director of the Project on the Education and Formation of People in Faith at Valparaiso University, Dorothy C. Bass is committed to exploring ways in which the Church might participate in the shaping of Christians. Her role as editor of two recent books shows that, like Jones, she believes this business of formation should not be limited to one generation within the Church. It is never too early or too late to begin the process of growing in faith and practice.

Way to Live: Christian Practices for Teens (Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 2002, 310 pp., \$16.00), like Jones' *Soul Shaper*, is a book that helps youth and those who minister to them to connect their faith with the struggles, challenges, and opportunities they face every day. Bass co-edited the book with Don C. Richter, and the chapters were composed by teams of an adult and a teenager putting their heads together to think faithfully about prayer, work, time, creativity, play, stuff, and fourteen other pieces of the puzzle called life. Emerging from these myriad parts is a beautiful whole of real-world Christian existence, as well as an encouraging picture of youth and adults developing a common vocabulary as they talk about things that matter. It is a vocabulary of practice rooted in belief that, if engaged, can result in a process of forming disciples that is living, active, and deeply valuable to the Church.

In the chapter on grieving, for example, teenager Tatiana Wilson, 14, joins with her aunt, Cheryl Kirk-Duggan, to reflect on the loss of loved ones, the depth of suffering in the world due to AIDS and other diseases, and the need for healing in the wake of death. The two frame the conversation in the context of Scripture, especially the biblical psalms of lament, so that teens are given an ancient language to express their emotions, a language deeper and more God-centered than so many of the platitudes that pass for wisdom in today's world. Wilson and Kirk-Duggan encourage their audience to find ways to remember, in word and action, through poetry and heartbreak and ritual and honesty, the past they might be mourning and the future they anticipate. Christian doctrines are not forsaken; Christian community is not denied; Christian practice is not ignored. Instead, we are given a picture of a fuller, richer sort of grief than is so often experienced, a grief that young people can embody practically and in the process find true healing, the kind of healing that can only be rooted in the truth and beauty of God.

Another collection of essays edited by Bass, *Practicing our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People* (San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1997, 232 pp. \$18.95), sets out, over the course of fourteen essays, a vision for connecting the shared beliefs of Christians with "life giving ways of life." This vision is all about practicing what we confess, through the exploration of such practices as honoring the body, keeping Sabbath, forgiveness, healing, and discernment.

An illustration from the book's essay on hospitality might best articulate how Christian practice and belief, vocalized through catechism, creed, and confession, are inextricably linked. The author, Ana Maria Pineda, tells of a yearly practice in the Mission District of San Francisco known as *Las Posadas*. The ritual unfolds over nine December nights and involves the entire community. For the first eight nights, various men, women, and children assume the role of Mary and Joseph and request lodging from innkeepers stationed at various sites. At each station, those playing the role of the weary father-to-be ask for a place to stay. At each station, those playing the role of the innkeeper answer back, "This is not an inn; move on—I cannot open lest you be a scoundrel." Finally, on the ninth night, something changes. A spirit of grace-filled hospitality enters the proceedings, so that Joseph and his pregnant wife are given lodging for the night, Jesus is born, and the community celebrates with piñatas, song and dance, and feasting. It is a celebration of the ancient innkeeper's hospitality, as well as a call to open our doors, our tables, and our hearts to the wandering strangers in our own midst.

This is what catechism and practice should be about; we enter into a harmonious exchange as belief and action both come alive among us. God's methods are many; throughout our lives, that same God who moved the innkeeper to hospitably welcome a wandering couple into his stable forms us into citizens of the Kingdom, so that through profession and practice we might become the people, and the disciples, we were intended to be.



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