

## What is a Christian Practice?

Dorothy Bass, September 2003

Christian practices are shared patterns of activity in and through which life together takes shape over time in response to and in the light of God as known in Jesus Christ. Woven together, they form a way of life.

Each practice is a complex set of acts, words, and images that addresses one area of fundamental human need. Hospitality. Sabbath-keeping. Forgiveness. Making music.

First of all, practices are things we *do*. A child or adult can participate in a practice such as hospitality through warm acts of welcome, even without comprehending the biblical stories and theological convictions that encourage and undergird this practice. Most of our practicing takes place at this unreflective level, as we go about our daily living.

At the same time, practices are not *only* behaviors. They are meaning-full. It is important to note that within a practice, thinking and doing are inextricably knit together. Those who offer hospitality come to know themselves, others, and God in a different way, and they develop virtues and dispositions that are consistent with this practice. When people participate in a practice, they are *embodying* a specific kind of wisdom about what it means to be a human being under God, even if they could not readily articulate this wisdom in words.

While affirming the unreflective character of most participation in practices, I believe that it is also helpful to reflect in the light of our faith on the shape and character of the practices that make up our way of life. Indeed, such reflection may be especially important at this point in history, when the shape of our lives are changing so rapidly. These are practices in which Christian communities have engaged over the years and across many cultures, practices which it is now our responsibility to receive and reshape in lively ways in our own time and place.

When we do reflect on practices such as those explored in *Practicing Our Faith*, we can see that central themes of Christian theology are integrally related to each Christian practice: our practices are shaped by our beliefs, and our beliefs arise from and take on meaning within our practices. For example, Stephanie Paulsell bases her chapter and book on “Honoring the Body” on the theological convictions that God created human bodies and declared that they are good; that God shared our physical condition in the incarnation of Jesus; and that God overcame death through Christ’s resurrection. Through everyday activities—for example, resting, bathing, and caring for those who suffer—we live out our deepest convictions about who we are as embodied children of God in specific, often stumbling, ways. We learn to do so from those with whom we share our lives, and likewise, it is with them that we need to reflect on practices as they take shape in the light of and in response to God’s grace.

A practice is small enough that it can be identified and discussed as one element within an entire way of life. But a practice is also big enough to appear in many different spheres of life. For example, the Christian practice of hospitality has dimensions that

emerge as (1) a matter of public policy; (2) something you do at home with friends, family, and guests; (3) a radical path of discipleship; (4) part of the liturgy; (5) a movement of the innermost self toward or away from others; (6) a theme in Christian theology; and probably much else. Thinking about this one practice can help us make connections across spheres of life—connections that often get disrupted in our fragmented society. For example, reflection on the Christian practice of hospitality would provide a way of exploring the relations between spirituality and social justice.

Note that our concept of practices describes a larger chunk of life than most uses of this term imply. For example, we would not call tithing a practice; rather, it would be one discipline within the larger practice of household economics.

Notice that each of the practices (keeping sabbath, honoring the body, hospitality, discernment) necessarily leads to the others; in fact, you can tell when you are doing one well when it necessarily involves you in the others. For example, if you are practicing hospitality so intensely that you neglect sabbath and don't honor your body, your practice of hospitality is misshapen.

Is worship a practice? Yes. However, it is important to note that worship is an overarching master practice rather than one practice among many.<sup>1</sup> The term “worship” has a double meaning: it is what we do together in church (as we speak, sing, listen, and gesture, *embodying* the wisdom of Christian faith in a specific form), and it is the purpose of the entire Christian life. Bringing these two meanings into right relation requires us to ask questions like these: How does the way we worship together form us to engage in Christian practices in other contexts? And how can our participation in practices beyond our worship services also be offered up as worship to God?

Some would call the sacraments “practices.” However, in Valparaiso Project literature we have seen the sacraments as more normative and all-encompassing than any given practice can be. Craig Dykstra and I put it this way in our essay in *Practicing Theology*:

At its heart, baptism is not so much a distinct practice as it is the liturgical summation of all the Christian practices. In this rite, the grace to which the Christian life is a response is fully and finally presented, visibly, tangibly, and in words. Here all the practices are present in crystalline form—forgiveness and healing, singing and testimony, sabbath keeping and community shaping, and all the others. Unlike each particular practice, baptism does not address a specific need; instead, it ritually sketches the contours of a whole new life, within which all human needs and ways of living can be perceived in a different way. Under water, we cannot secure our own lives, but we can know, in a knowing beyond words, that God's creativity overcame the darkness that covered the face of the deep at earth's beginning, and that water flowed from Jesus' side on the cross, and that the new creation to which we now belong anticipates a city where the river of the water of life nourishes the roots of the tree whose leaves are for the healing of the nations. When a new Christian rises from the baptismal water, human needs are not just met; they are transformed. Even the need not to die no longer overpowers all other needs, and the true freedom of a life formed in love, justice, mercy, and hope is no longer too frightening to embrace. “In baptism,” said St. Francis, “we have already died the only death that matters.”<sup>ii</sup>

**Why does all this matter? How does this idea of “practices” help us think about—and live—the Christian life?**

- **It points beyond the individualism of the dominant culture** to disclose the social (i.e., *shared*) quality of our lives, and especially the social quality of Christian life, theology, and spirituality. Our thinking and living take place in relation to God and also to one another, to others around the world and across the centuries, and to a vast communion of saints. I remember a line that got cut from *Practicing Our Faith*: “This is not a self-help book but a mutual-help book.”
- **It helps us to understand our continuity with the Christian tradition—an important matter during this time of change and in the midst of a culture infatuated with what is new.** The way of life we are describing is historically rooted. Practices endure over time (though their specific moves have changed in the past and will surely change again). This perspective can help contemporary people to treasure their continuity with the past. Continuity is not the same as captivity, however. Caring for a *living* tradition means encouraging adaptation and inventiveness within ever-changing circumstances. Moreover, the history from which Christian practices emerge is expansive, encompassing many cultures and denominational traditions.
- **It makes us think about who we truly are as the created and newly created children of God.** An important claim is that Christian practices address “fundamental human needs.” We live in a culture that is very confused about what people need—a culture where “needs” are constructed and marketed. In contrast, awareness of Christian practices helps us to reflect theologically on who people really are and what we really need. (Our vulnerability and our strength are disclosed in the practice of honoring the body, our finitude and gratitude in the practice of keeping sabbath, etc.)
- **All of this means that people need to craft the specific forms each practice can take within their own social and historical circumstances.** This approach thus requires attention to the concrete and down-to-earth quality of the Christian life. It invites attention to details such as gestures and the role of material things. This crafting is an important responsibility of ministers and educators.

All people engage in most or all of the practices in *Practicing Our Faith* in one way or another. After all, all human beings necessarily rest, encounter strangers, help one another to find healing, and so on. However, those who embrace Christian practices engage in these fundamentally human activities in the light of God’s presence and in response to God’s grace as it is known in Jesus Christ. Ultimately, Christian practices can be understood not as tasks but as gifts. Within these practices, we do not aim to achieve mastery (e.g., over time, strangers, death, nature) but rather to cultivate openness and responsiveness to others, to the created world, and to God.

## A one-page definition

*A Christian practice is a cluster of activities, ideas, and images, lived by Christian people over time, which addresses a fundamental human need in the light of and in response to God's active presence for the life of the world in Jesus Christ.*

A practice

- ◆ addresses fundamental human needs and conditions through practical human acts.
- ◆ involves us in God's activities in the world and reflect, in the way we participate in the practice, God's grace and love.
- ◆ is social in character
  - \* we learn practices with and from other people
  - \* though we sometimes do some of the activities that comprise a given practice alone.
- ◆ endures over time
  - \* each practice arises out of living traditions, having taken numerous forms in the past and in various cultures around the world, and
  - \* will carry those traditions into the future, in specific forms not yet imagined.
- ◆ involves a deep awareness, a profound knowing; a practice
  - \* is imbued with thought; it is embodied wisdom
  - \* carries particular convictions about what is good and true;
  - \* embodies these convictions in physical, down-to-earth ways;
  - \* becomes articulate in concepts, ideas, and images, expressed through rich vocabularies and carefully developed bodies of thought;
  - \* incorporates both words and gestures, some of them grand but others apparently small and mundane.
- ◆ is done within the church, in the public realm, in daily work, and at home.
- ◆ shapes the people who participate in it
  - \* as individuals and as communities,
  - \* in ways that conform to the particular content and patterns of the specific practice, thus
  - \* nurturing specific habits, virtues, and capacities of mind and spirit.
- ◆ possesses standards of excellence
  - \* having that which is good as its purpose and goal
  - \* relying on certain competencies and embodying certain norms
  - \* though practices often become distorted and corrupt
  - \* and so are open to criticism and reform, particularly with reference to the shape of God's practice.
- ◆ comes to a focus in worship
  - \* which makes manifest in words, gestures, images, and material things the normative meaning of the practice and its place in the mysterious life of God, and
  - \* discloses the practice as gift, not task.
- ◆ adds up to a way of life when interwoven with other practices
  - \* through their mutual interdependence, as each practice strengthens the others, and
  - \* in their reliance on the God of Life.

The Valparaiso Project on the Education and Formation of People in Faith has sponsored a still-growing body of literature about Christian practices. Several are accompanied by study guides written specifically to further conversation, learning, and growth. The books and guides are available for purchase, with free download for most of the guides, at [www.practicingourfaith.org](http://www.practicingourfaith.org). This website also contains other resources to assist communities interested in Christian practices. At this writing, these books are:

Dorothy C. Bass, ed., *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997).

Dorothy C. Bass, *Receiving the Day: Christian Practices for Opening the Gift of Time* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2000).

Dorothy C. Bass and Don C. Richter, eds., *Way to Live: Christian Practices for Teens* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2002), with related website and Leader's Guide at [www.waytolive.org](http://www.waytolive.org).

Craig Dykstra, *Growing in the Life of Faith: Education and Christian Practices* (Louisville: Geneva Press, 1999).

Christine Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999).

Stephanie Paulsell, *Honoring the Body: Meditations on a Christian Practice* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2002).

Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass, eds., *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

Thomas Long is working on a book on testimony. Don and Emily Saliers are working on a book on music. Both are due to appear in 2004.

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<sup>i</sup> *Practicing Our Faith*, 9.

<sup>ii</sup> *Practicing Theology*, 30-31; see also Miroslav Volf on this point, 248.