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Chapter 5

Education in Christian Practice

In chapter 4, I described the practices of the Christian faith as habitations of the Spirit. They are not, finally, activities we do to make something spiritual happen in our lives. Nor are they duties we undertake to be obedient to God. Rather, they are patterns of communal action that create openings in our lives where the grace, mercy, and presence of God may be made known to us. They are places where the power of God is experienced. In the end, these are not ultimately our practices but forms of participation in the practice of God.

In chapter 3, I attempted to make the central point that people come to faith and grow in the life of faith by participating in the practices of the Christian life, practices such as those listed on pages 42–43. Whether children, youth, or adults, when people participate in these practices, they and the whole community discover a way of life that meets the world's deepest hungers.

With these ideas in place, we can now turn to the theme of education in Christian practice. This is not the first time we have talked about education; references to it have been scattered through every chapter so far, and the theme will appear again in later chapters. But here I discuss explicitly how the practices way of thinking about Christian faith and the life of faith may be helpful to all of us who have explicit responsibilities for the church's educational ministries.¹

THE PROBLEM OF THE TOO BIG AND THE TOO SMALL

A major problem that educators face is what I call the problem of the too big and the too small. The problem of the too big is that our purposes as Christian educators are rightly and necessarily large: They have to do,

ultimately, with learning a whole way of life and of coming to knowledge of and trust in God. Those purposes are true, but they are too large, too grand, too big to guide us in direct and concrete ways. Purposes that large are impossible to get your mind around. They are too big to do.

The problem of the too small is the opposite one. In our actual work of educating, we do a little of this and a little of that and a little of something else. But too often these pieces do not seem to add up to much. We can't tell what larger wholes these smaller pieces are parts of. The connections get lost, and we lose any sense of the significance and import of particular educational activities and projects and events. That is the problem of the too small.

Part of the educational significance of the idea and social reality of Christian practices is that this concept provides a good answer to the problem of the too big and the too small. It breaks down a way of life into a set of constructive practices. At the same time, it draws together the shards and pieces of particular events, behaviors, actions, relationships, inquiries, and skills into large enough wholes to show how they might add up to a way of life.

In the present cultural context, Christian educators need to think about how to lead people beyond a reliance on "random acts of kindness" into shared patterns of life that are informed by the deepest insights of our traditions, and about how to lead people beyond privatized spiritualities into more thoughtful participation in God's activity in the world. In the Christian churches today, large numbers of members—and even many leaders—seem to be unaware of the rich insights and strong help the Christian tradition can bring to contemporary concerns. Thinking about our way of life as standing in dynamic continuity with our Christian heritage and with the worldwide church today opens fresh sources of insight into how the practices that pattern our days can shape our lives in ways that respond to the active presence of God for the life of the world.

The life of Christian faith is the practice of many practices. As individuals, we learn to participate in the whole large practice of Christian faith—this way of being in the world—through steadily and patiently learning and participating in each of the particular constituent practices. Thus it is on the particular practices that we as educators can most fruitfully focus if education in faith is our aim.

WHAT IS A PRACTICE?

In this book, I have consistently been using the word *practices*. Why? What am I trying to convey by that term? I suspect readers have noticed

that this very familiar word is being used in a special way. What is at stake here?

As a matter of fact, my special use of that familiar word has a lot packed into it. A practice, according to the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre, is

any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conception of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended.²

This is obviously a very complicated definition, and it is impossible to absorb what he is saying on first reading. But if we unpack it a bit, we can see what the important things being said here are.

It helps to use an example. Baseball is a practice, by MacIntyre's definition.³ It is a specific example of a "coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity." Let's look closely at each important concept in this first long phrase of the definition.

Baseball is a *human* activity. Animals don't engage in practices. Only people do. This is because the kind of activity MacIntyre has in mind is not just random action and reaction but rather intelligible and purposeful action. Action of that kind is possible only because it draws from and makes use of language, concepts, images, and symbols in ways that only human beings can.

Baseball is a *human activity*. It is something human beings *do*.

While the activity is full of thought and purpose, it is still activity. There is no baseball if there aren't real people out on the field actually pitching and hitting, running bases, and catching fly balls.

Baseball is something people do together; it is a *cooperative* human activity. Baseball cannot be played alone. It necessarily involves a group of people doing something in relation and response to one another.

Baseball is *socially established*. People are able to do it together only because the practice has established rules and roles

that make the practice what it is. It has a character and consistency to it that makes it recognizable across time and place. Also, because it is socially established, it is possible for people to teach it to and learn it from each other.

Finally, baseball is *coherent and complex*. It makes sense, but it is complicated enough that you have to work to learn the rules, the skills, the moves, and the nuances. For those who haven't learned at least some of the complexities, the game makes no sense; for them it has no form or meaning.

In the rest of his long, one-sentence definition, MacIntyre elaborates two dimensions of practices that make them deeply significant for human life. The first of these is that *moral goods* and *standards of excellence* are intrinsic to the practices themselves. Even baseball is morally significant, according to MacIntyre. It has standards of excellence built into it. There are real differences between poor pitching, good pitching, and brilliant pitching, and being able to recognize and to strive to live up to standards of this kind is part of what it means to be human. Also, profound human joys and deep satisfactions come simply from playing the game really well. These are the "goods" that are intrinsic to the practice of baseball. Great pitching and great hitting, and when all the pieces are put together at a high level of excellence, great baseball itself, are "goods" that make human life human.⁴

The second dimension of practices that makes them deeply significant for human life is that through participation in them, our *powers to achieve what is good are enhanced*. We become more capable of achieving excellence. Furthermore, our very *conceptions of what the good is are extended*. Our ideas about what human life is really all about, what its best purposes are, what we should strive for in life are all made larger and greater. And this is true not only for us as individuals but for us as communities and cultures as well. Human moral progress is made through participation in practices.

In sum, then, practices are those cooperative human activities through which we, as individuals and as communities, grow and develop in moral character and substance. They have built up over time and, through experience and testing, have developed patterns of reciprocal expectations among participants. They are ways of doing things together in which and through which human life is given direction, meaning, and significance,

and through which our very capacities to do good things well are increased. And because they are shared, patterned, and ongoing, they can be taught. We can teach one another how to participate in them. We can pass them on from one generation to the next.

TEACHING AND LEARNING CHRISTIAN PRACTICES

Baseball, of course, is just a game. It is a great game, perhaps. It may even be the kind of game through which people can learn some of the “great lessons of life,” as they say. But games are probably not the most significant of human practices. Others are much more important—and more spiritually and morally powerful.

Is the interpretation of Scripture a practice of that kind? Is prayer? Is confession of sin? How about forgiveness, or hospitality? I answer yes to each of these questions. Each of these is—in the context of Christian faith—a coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which powerful internal goods are realized and through the pursuit of which our capacities as human beings to do and to be and to conceive of what God is calling us to become are systematically extended. Through participation in these specific practices—and others like them—the large, broad practice of Christian faith is made perpetually alive; at the same time, it is corrected and enlarged. Through the exercise of such practices, the “goods” that inhere in the life of Christian faith are realized in actual human existence. By learning them—and through long, slow, steady, patient participation in them—individuals and communities learn Christian faith, become Christian.

I do not know what a complete list of all the practices that constitute Christian faith would include. This, I think, is a matter for historical and theological investigation and for conversation and deliberation among Christians within and between their various smaller communities.⁵ I am convinced, however, that the church needs to deliberate and be specific about which practices we think are essential to the life of faith, if the church’s practice of faith and its educational ministries are to have any real vitality. We should become clear in each of our institutions and communities about which practices are crucial to us and why. We need also to get clear what moves, skills, understandings, and convictions are essential for engaging in these particular practices in the ways—and with the seriousness—that faith requires. We must examine (both historically and among our contemporaries) how people have learned and do learn the practices

we find crucial and then shape our own educational efforts by what we discover.

In my view, an essential task of education in faith is to teach all the basic practices of the Christian faith. The fundamental aim of Christian education in all its forms, varieties, and settings should be that individuals—and indeed whole communities—learn these practices, be drawn into participation in them, learn to do them with increasingly deepened understanding and skill, learn to extend them more broadly and fully in their own lives and into their world, and learn to correct them, strengthen them, and improve them.

But how does one learn a practice? Let's go back to baseball for a moment. One learns baseball by playing baseball. You have to get in on particular games when they are being played. You also have to practice over and over again the particular skills and moves involved in doing it well. And besides that, you need to watch baseball being played. You have to watch attentively—and analytically—as the play of the game takes place. (If you ever doubt the analytical capacities of some ten-year-olds, just engage a young fan in a discussion about a particularly exciting game.) Learning baseball can be greatly aided by good coaching, by apprenticeship to those who have achieved some degree of excellence in the practice, and by reading, conversation, and argumentation about the practice of baseball in all its parts, complexity, and coherence. Indeed, to learn well the practice of baseball, it is essential to be involved in all these different kinds of activity, and in ways that steadily and carefully reinforce, correct, and supplement one another.

Learning baseball requires playing the game, making the moves, developing the skills, thinking it through, and practicing over and over again in order to do it well. Dance is similar. So is surgery. We have a lot to learn from all this for purposes of education in faith. The practice of Christian faith is a lot more physical than we usually recognize or let on. It is a body faith—an embodied faith—that involves gestures, moves, going certain places (where people are hungry and thirsty, for example; where suffering occurs), and doing certain things. As with every other practice, learning the practices of the life of Christian faith involves practice, repeated participation in the bodily actions that make up those practices.

At the same time that we need a renewal of emphasis on physical action in educating for faith, we must not lose sight of the fact that what is always at stake is *intelligible* action, action imbued with discernment and

imagination, with understanding, purpose, and meaning. How is it that this intelligibility arises in the midst of learning a practice? The philosopher Iris Murdoch once wrote:

Learning takes place when words are used, either aloud or privately, in the context of particular acts of attention. . . . Words said to particular individuals at particular times may occasion wisdom.⁶

This is precisely what coaches and mentors do—and work hard at doing well—when they are intentionally striving to help others learn to do something better. Often a coach will teach by demonstrating something, by making one of the essential moves and asking the learner to watch. Then words begin. Questions: What did you see happen at the start of my swing? Descriptions: What I’m doing here is planting my right foot and bringing my right arm close to my side to start the action of the swing properly. Explanations and reasons: What this does is begin to shift your weight and the momentum of the swing toward the target without letting your hands get ahead of the bat. Soon thereafter the coach will say, “Now you try it.” And words flow some more. More questions, descriptions, explanations, and reasons, this time about the learner’s own experience in action. Often similes and metaphors will be employed: “Imagine that you’re swinging a chain with a heavy weight at the end of it. Try to hit the ball with that weight, not with the chain.”

I won’t go on, but you get the point. Intelligible action is full of imagery, concept, even theory—all made available and accessible through timely spoken and carefully chosen words that are shared back and forth among human beings. If the life of Christian faith is truly a practice of practices, shouldn’t Christian education and theological teaching be more like good coaching? Isn’t this how people learn actually to interpret Scripture themselves? Isn’t this how people learn to pray and to confess and to forgive and to practice hospitality to strangers and enemies?

I would say so. And I would say so for the full range of Christian teaching. To learn these practices and learn in the context of them, we need others who are competent in these practices to help us: to be our models, mentors, teachers, and partners in practice. We need people who will include us in these practices as they themselves are engaged in them, and who will show us how to do what the practices require. We also need them to explain to us what these practices mean, what the reasons, understandings, insights, and values embedded in them are. And we need them to

lure us and press us beyond our current understandings of and competence in these practices, to the point where we together may extend and deepen the practices themselves.

Children, youth, and adults best learn practices such as these when conditions such as the following pertain:

- { when we ourselves are active in them, actually doing what these practices involve, engaging in them personally in particular physical and material settings and in face-to-face interaction with other people;
- { when we participate in them jointly with others, especially with others who are skilled in them and are able to teach them to us;
- | when the people involved in them with us are, or are becoming, personally significant to us—and we to them;
- | when we are involved in increasingly broader, more varied, and more complex dimensions of the practice, and when the activities we engage in become increasingly wide-ranging in their context and impact;
- | when we come more and more to connect articulations of the significance and meaning of these practices (as well as the ways in which the various practices are connected and related to one another) with our own activities in them and with the reasons we ourselves have for engaging in them; and
- | when we come to take increasing personal responsibility for initiating, pursuing, and sustaining these practices and for including and guiding others in them.⁷

Participation in some of the practices of Christian life can and should occur naturally in the context of everyday life in a community constituted by them. But communities, especially in such culturally and socially fragmented situations as our own, cannot depend entirely on the natural activities of everyday life for initiating people into these practices and guiding them in them. Our situation requires planned and systematic education in these practices. Such education must never be detached from participation in the practices; it is not satisfactory simply to describe and analyze them from afar. Nonetheless, education must order this participation in such a

way that all the practices are engaged in meaningfully and with understanding at increasingly broader and more complex levels. And that presupposes systematic and comprehensive education in the history and wider reaches of the practices, as well as in the interpretation and criticism of the reasons and values embedded in the practices.

The need for planned and systematic education in Christian practices is complicated by the fact that we don't live in communities constituted only by Christian practices. Christian practices never exist in a vacuum. We both live and learn in multiple social contexts and institutions, each of which is constituted by a broader plurality of practices than those on which we have focused. Our wider intellectual, political, social, and occupational lives involve us all in a great variety of practices. And because these other contexts naturally infiltrate faith communities, this broad spectrum of practices is internal to every part of Christian institutional and cultural life. We all live our lives at an intersection of many practices.

Education in Christian faith must concern itself with the mutual influences that various practices have on one another, as well as with whatever complementarity or conflict may exist between the goods internal to Christian practices and goods internal to others. Because we are all citizens, for example, we must inquire into the nature, effects, and implications of our simultaneous engagement in practices constitutive of Christian life and those central to public life in the broader culture. We need to inquire, for example, into the continuities and discontinuities between medical practice in our society and practices of care for the ill and the dying that are now and have been in the past characteristic of the church. This applies also to a wide variety of other social practices.

THE PECULIARITY OF CHRISTIAN PRACTICE

These reflections on education in Christian practices lay out an agenda for those of us who bear responsibility for the church's educational ministry. They suggest that the idea of "practices" provides a helpful way in which to organize the work of education, both conceptually and practically. A focus on practices provides an educational aim and task that is at once concrete enough for us to accomplish and yet far-reaching enough to connect with faith's ultimate ends. This focus also encourages us to understand that a good deal of the best teaching consists of a kind of coaching that helps those learning practices of faith how to be intelligent, purposeful, and active participants in them.

Having said all this, one issue remains for us to consider. *Christian* practices have a peculiarity about them, and this peculiarity must necessarily mark the character of Christian teaching and learning. For all the usefulness of the baseball analogy, the practice of faith is in one crucial respect *not* like the practice of baseball—or the practice of medicine or politics, for that matter. For all its similarities, the practice of Christian faith is fundamentally different from other practices. This is because the practice of faith is part of a distinctive story and is built on different assumptions from most other practices. A clue to the difference can be found in how odd it seems to talk of “excellence” or “outstanding achievement” with regard to the practice of faith.

The idea of excellence in the practice of faith seems at least a little inappropriate. It might not seem too strange to call a writer of a fine book on Matthew “one of the most accomplished interpreters of the New Testament in our time.” But it would seem odd to say of Mother Teresa that she brought the practice of hospitality to strangers to a new level of excellence. Mother Teresa herself would have found such a comment off-putting. It seems to miss the point, in a seriously flawed way.

The very idea of achieving excellence or of attaining the highest standards possible in the practice of prayer or of forgiveness or of service seems, on the face of it, internally contradictory. Why? The reason is that excellence has to do with human achievement. But faith is not a human achievement; it is a gift.

The idea of excellence in a practice makes most sense when the point of a practice is the achievement of mastery. And the point of most human practices is just that—mastery over some set of forces that contend with one another, control over what threatens to run out of control, the creation of order in the face of chaos.⁸ Have you ever wondered why major political figures and war heroes are the most celebrated figures in almost every society? It is usually because they have attained mastery in situations of great danger to the community. Almost by definition, a hero is a person who has mastered forces of chaos that threaten a community’s peace and well-being. Excellence in the practice of politics means assuring, insofar as is humanly possible, that the powerful human forces that constantly threaten every human community, such as violence and greed, will not overwhelm or destroy it. The political task is to make sure that forces such as these are kept firmly under control and that the rights of the unprotected are justly defended. Mastery of political power is essential if the body politic is to endure in reasonable domestic and international tranquility.

Among those who make a society a good society are those who achieve excellence in the practice of politics in this sense.

Artists achieve a different sort of mastery, the ordering of words or colors or movements of the body to create new images out of the chaos of the materials at hand and to give rise to new understandings in the face of the threat of meaninglessness. Physicians seek mastery over illness and disease. Engineers must master powerful natural forces to fabricate machines that actually work or buildings that hold up. Athletes contend with the limitations of their own bodies and the competition of their opponents. They seek mastery, control in the context of the game. A home run to the upper deck against a ninety-eight-mile-an-hour fastball is the result of the mastery of forces of daunting proportions. Such mastery is a condition of excellence in baseball.

Our most important practices make sense only in the context of some overarching story that reveals to us fundamental convictions about what is ultimately real in and true of the universe in which we live. And most of the stories by which human beings live are *heroic* in character. They are stories about mastery over the forces of human evil and the threatening powers of nature. They are stories about how human beings (exemplified in their heroes) protect themselves against the undependability of the elements and the hostility or indifference of the gods. In such narratives, human mastery becomes ultimate virtue and the mark of excellence.

Christian practice is different. And that is because its story is different. While human achievement is valued in the Christian story, it has a different place and meaning. The human task is not fundamentally mastery. It is rather the right use of gifts graciously bestowed by a loving God for the sake of the good that God intends—and *ultimately assures*. In the Christian story, the fundamental fact is neither a violence that threatens to overwhelm us nor a chaos that threatens to undo us. No. This story's fundamental fact is that the everlasting arms of a gracious and loving God sustain the universe. So our basic task is not mastery and control. It is instead trust and grateful receptivity. Our exemplars are not heroes; they are saints. Our epitome is not excellence; our honor is in faithfulness.

Why does prayer show up high on a list of essential Christian practices? Because prayer *is* receptivity and responsiveness to the creative and redemptive grace of a triune God-for-us. Why would it seem odd to strive for the achievement of excellence in the practice of prayer? Because "achievement" connotes a kind of forceful striving that is inappropriate to the movement of body and spirit that prayer actually is. In the context of

prayer, the abundance of God's grace relativizes all our excellences. Before God, our achievement is not the point; and it may be a hindrance.

The case is similar for hospitality to the stranger and to the enemy. Hospitality, like prayer, is receptivity and responsiveness. In the context of faith, there is always the hope—even the presumption—that grace is what one will meet in the encounter with the stranger. This can never be a naive assumption, for as a practice of Christian faith, hospitality is persistent in the face of threat and evil. It recognizes threat and evil for what they are and will manifest itself in behaviors that take fully into account the realities at hand. But it persists on the conviction that the peace of grace is more fundamental and primordial than violence or chaos. This modifies the character and ultimacy of whatever strategic elements of resistance and self-protection any particular moment or relation may require. This, I think, is precisely what the people of Le Chambon were up to in their protection of the Jews and their treatment of the Nazis.

The peculiar character of Christian practice operates also in the interpretation of Scripture. Excellence in interpretation, however much discipline and broad knowledge it requires, is never so much an achievement as it is a gift. This is not so much because interpretive insight does not often require great skill, training, and talent but because it comes in the midst of existence before God—which is formed, shaped, and given in the form of the whole broad practice of faith we have been trying to describe.

The relativization of achievement and mastery inserts itself into every Christian practice as a mode of behavior and attitude that always seems slightly puzzling in our society. The ethical compulsion to achieve excellence is paradoxically relaxed, because the ontological/religious compulsion to mastery and control is relativized by a peaceable Grace that is at the heart and ground of everything. And that makes an odd sort of difference.

The theologian Edward Farley wrote about this some years ago:

We cannot avoid it, it seems. A certain "strangeness," a certain "peculiarity" marks everything which concerns in any way the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This means that everything in the church, including the church itself, is touched with this strangeness. Talking about the Gospel is strange. . . . Worshipping and praying have their peculiarities, and they are not exactly identical with these phenomena in all religions. Everything introduced into the church and its concerns is bathed in this strangeness.⁹

What is this strangeness? It is the strange freedom that comes when our deepest fear is relieved: our deep, deep fear that chaos and violence will overcome us unless we control it. That fear is relieved—that freedom comes—only in the strange gift of grace.

So what is the implication for Christian teaching and learning? The implication is that teaching and learning are not finally about mastery. Our task in learning is not to master the practices or the subject matter or ourselves. And our task in teaching is not to master our students. If, in striving for excellence, we find ourselves in pursuit of control over our own destinies as human beings, seeking to use education in faith as a means to secure ourselves before God, we will have missed the mark entirely. The practices of faith are not ultimately our own practices but rather habitations of the Spirit, in the midst of which we are invited to participate in the practices of God. So, too, education in faith is not ultimately an ethical or spiritual striving but rather participation in the educating work of God's Spirit among us and within us. In this way, education in faith is itself a means of grace.

Notes

1. I include here pastors and teachers in congregations, but I also have in mind those who have responsibilities for the programs and overall life of a congregation, including its governing board. In addition, I want to stress the role parents have in the education in faith of their children. Christians who are teachers in other institutions—primary and secondary schools, colleges and universities, theological seminaries—also have roles to play in the educational ministry of the church, though the ways in which they exercise their responsibilities may vary quite significantly, depending on the purposes and self-understandings of the institutions in which they teach. Finally, I believe leaders in a wide variety of institutions (from social service agencies to businesses) have educational roles to play, and I hope these reflections are useful to Christians in those contexts as well.
2. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 175.
3. Jeffrey Stout was the first to use this example; see his *Ethics after Babel* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988), esp. 276 and 303. See also my other discussion of MacIntyre's definition of "practice" in Craig Dykstra, "Reconceiving Practice," in Barbara G. Wheeler and Edward Farley, eds.,

Shifting Boundaries: Contextual Approaches to the Structure of Theological Education (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), esp. 42–46.

4. *Intrinsic* goods are the goods inherent in the practice itself and that in large measure give it its character and value. There are other kinds of “goods” that may come as a result of a practice, however. Great pitching, for example, may lead to fame, fortune, and ownership of your own restaurant. These are what MacIntyre calls *extrinsic* goods. When too much attention is paid to extrinsic goods, they have a tendency to distort, diminish, and eventually corrupt the practice that generated them.
5. See Dorothy Bass, ed., *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997). This book is the result of a sustained ecumenical dialogue about the nature of Christian practices. The group that engaged in this endeavor arrived at a complementary but somewhat different list of practices from the one found in this book. I recommend Bass’s book highly to anyone who wishes to pursue this way of thinking more deeply.
6. Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (New York: Schocken Books, 1970), 32.
7. This list of conditions is influenced by Urie Bronfenbrenner, *The Ecology of Human Development* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981); see esp. chaps. 3, 4, and 9.
8. See John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Publisher, 1990), particularly chaps. 11 and 12, where Milbank explores the “heroic” nature of MacIntyre’s understanding of practice and then describes how the content of Christian faith gives rise to a substantively different meaning to virtue as well as to practice.
9. Edward Farley, “Does Christian Education Need the Holy Spirit? Part II,” *Religious Education* 60 (November–December 1965): 432.