
PRACTICING THEOLOGY: BELIEFS AND PRACTICES IN CHRISTIAN LIFE

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Today's leaders of congregations are having to respond to the transitions being encountered within the emerging post-modern condition. They are finding it increasingly difficult to clarify and defend the practices and traditions that congregations carry out. Congregations as faith communities no longer hold a privileged position where certain practices hold meaning and have authority merely because they represent historical traditions. Christian leaders are now in the position where they are being called on to answer the question, "What does this practice mean"? To address this issue, critical theological reflection is required. *Practicing Theology* was written to deal with this issue. This book responds to the question, "What makes it worthwhile to do the hard work of studying theology"? (2). It takes a close look at the concepts and meanings behind *some* of the practices that are part of a Christian way of life.

A predecessor book edited by Dorothy Bass, *Practicing our Faith* (Jossey Bass, 1997), focused on defining Christian practices. This volume, *Practicing Theology*, co-edited by Bass and Miroslav Volf, takes the next step in the process. It reflects closely on the Christian beliefs that underlie such practices and engages in the theological reflection necessary to substantiate the integrity of these practices. The book's basic premise is that beliefs and practices cannot be separated. They are continually shaping and reshaping each other through the process of theological reflection. "Beliefs," according to Amy Plantinga Pauw, "are what make practices intentional" (40).

Practicing Theology consists of an introductory essay by Bass, followed by 12 essays divided into four sections. The essays provide unique perspectives on the relationship between practice and belief. Each essay is flavored by the background and experiences of the particular author, and taken together, their diversity in thought and traditions makes this a helpful volume for reflecting on the topic of Christian

practices. Vivid examples of what theological reflection looks like in congregations across a variety of denominational and multicultural boundaries are woven throughout the essays, and provide the reader with practical illustrations within diverse settings.

The first section, "Embracing a Way of Life," consists of two essays that lay the groundwork for the rest of the book by demonstrating the necessity of undertaking the discussion of practicing theology. Dykstra and Bass state that the purpose of practices and beliefs lies in the work of God (18, 22). Amy Plantinga Pauw takes their argument to the next level in her essay by noting that practices and beliefs are at the heart of understanding the church (35).

The second section, "Engaging in Ministry," consists of six essays which discuss the interrelationship of beliefs and practices as a crucial aspect of ministry. In one essay, Serene Jones shares her experience in serving on a committee in her congregation to design the structure for what the church was to become. Without going through a process of theological reflection, their plans would never have made it off the paper. In another essay, Christine Pohl gives us a glimpse at how congregations can utilize theological reflection through a variety of methods with regards to the practice of hospitality.

"Becoming Theologians," the third section of the book, makes a transition with three essays that examine more closely the role of theological reflection in education and the training of future leaders of the church. L. Gregory Jones argues that different communal settings are critical to theological formation and that leaders need to address the ongoing integrating of beliefs and practices within these settings (188-189). According to Kathlyn Tanner, theological reflections can actually serve as a critical tool to address problems that Christian practices generate (228).

In the final section, "Serving a Way of Life," Miraslav Volf revisits many of themes mentioned in the previous essays. But in summation, he states that the whole point of beliefs, practices and their interrelationship is not just to know about God, but to serve God (247). His essay references his experience at his parents' Sunday dinner table while growing up to make the point that this discussion is about real life. He notes that, "Theologians must be concerned with more than just how beliefs relate to everyday practices – and must be so con-

cemed precisely for the sake of everyday practices" (262).

There is a tendency in some Christian circles to associate practices with the calling and vocation of the individual, but this book makes it clear that critical analysis must take place on the communal level. This view comes through in the examples cited within specific congregations. It is reinforced by the continued use of the plural subject throughout the essays, such as is used in Volf's definition of beliefs and practices. "Core beliefs are convictions that a Christian community must hold true in order to maintain its own identity, (and are) . . . practices . . . that seek to satisfy fundamental human needs and conditions and that people do together and over time" (247-248).

This book would benefit anyone interested in "building up ways of life that are abundant not in things but in love, justice, and mercy" (16). It heightens a level of awareness on the topic for both the scholar and the practitioner. For those deeply embedded in academic scholarship, this book lends insight into the important role of practicing our beliefs. Dykstra and Bass note that Christian doctrine has no purpose unless it is lived out to serve God. In fact, theological reflection finds its meaning in the pursuit of "life abundant" (16). "It is precisely by participating in Christian practices that we truly come to know God and the world, including ourselves" (24).

For practitioners, this book stresses the importance of developing a process for theological reflection which can substantiate the meaning and purpose of practices that are carried out each and every day. Tanner argues in her essay that Christian practices won't even work without "critical theological engagement" (232). Beliefs, and the process of reflection concerning beliefs, help to keep God and the work of God in focus within our practices.

While this book does a good job of raising our awareness of the inter-relationship of beliefs and practices, I find myself wanting more concrete methodologies on how congregations can undergo this kind of transformation in their own unique settings. It is one thing to understand the need for reflection, but quite another to carry it out. Where do churches that are heavily steeped in traditions, whose meanings are no longer remembered, begin the process? What would it look like for a congregation to have a system of analysis and reflection in place that is ongoing, and is able to keep up as a

congregation and its community changes over the years? I recognize, however, that these issues lie beyond the primary focus of this present volume.

I would recommend this book to anyone interested in finding new or renewed meaning in the practices of shared Christian life, especially leaders who are called to shape, direct and give vision to such practices within a faith community. It will undoubtedly provoke further discussion and critical reflection concerning the interrelationship of beliefs and practices, a discussion that must take place on the communal level, with its leaders showing the way.

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