
CHRISTIAN PRACTICES, CONGREGATIONAL LEADERSHIP, AND THE PRIESTHOOD OF ALL BELIEVERS

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Introduction

“Mind the gap!” This is the recorded message one hears when stepping from the platform onto the tube in London. It is an apt challenge for anyone doing theology and reflecting on congregations. Often there is a gap between our theology and our ways of living. We struggle to hold together our beliefs and our practices. In our local congregations, we claim certain faith commitments but then we often live in ways that are inconsistent with these claims. At these points, our beliefs, our practices, or both need to be modified.

In this paper I will attempt to “mind the gap” between a theology of the priesthood of all believers and the on-going life of the local church. My thesis is that the priesthood of all believers can be re-embodied and re-conceptualized by attending to the practices resident within congregations. By engaging in Christian practices, limp and pallid congregations can be reinvigorated to live as the priesthood of all believers.

The understanding of practices that I will set forth holds together beliefs and actions in a mutually informing relationship. In the first section, I will set forth an understanding of practices which builds on the work of Alasdair MacIntyre. In the second section I will look at three specific congregational practices: witness, discernment, and confession. I will sketch their contours in MacIntyrian terms, I will lift up some of the meanings embedded in these practices, and I will make connections between these practices and the priesthood of all believers. In the third section I will suggest that these practices are best nurtured by congregational leaders who focus on interpretation and meaning-making.

My conception of the priesthood of all believers derives from a social understanding of the Trinity. I contend that the inter-Trinitarian existence is marked by relationality, presence, equality, non-domination, unity, and differentiation. Our

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understanding of the priesthood of all believers should correspond to these aspects of the Trinitarian relations.¹ Church structures and relationships within the church should bear these marks.

While I approach practices with a conception of the priesthood of all believers already in hand, my methodological assumption is that not only should our theology shape practices, but practices should shape our theology. As congregations engage in Christian practices, we will 1) be reshaped to better reflect our stated theology of the priesthood of all believers in our lives (corporately and individually), and 2) our understandings of the priesthood of all believers will be re-imagined.

1 The Nature of Social Practices

She is a practicing Catholic. He'll be home after baseball practice. After medical school she wants to start a private practice. The word "practice" has a range of meanings in popular usage. In addition to popular usages, "practice" has come to be used across a wide swath of academia as a way of understanding social life, and the technical meanings given this idea are as varied as in popular usage. As philosopher and social theorist Theodore Schatzki notes, practices have become an important concept in a range of disciplines including philosophy, cultural theory, history, sociology, anthropology, science, and technological studies.² The assortment of usages have some general features in common—minimally, practices are conceived of as arrays of activities—but no unified understanding or theory of practices exists.³

1.1 Alasdair MacIntyre's Conception of Social Practices

My discussion will build on the specific conception of

¹ While Trinitarian correspondence is highly suggestive for our ecclesiology, we must acknowledge that this correspondence is always incomplete due to our creaturely nature. For a discussion of the limits of correspondence see Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), 198–200.

² Theodore R. Schatzki, "Introduction: Practice Theory," in *The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory*, ed. Theodore R. Schatzki, K. Knorr-Cetina, and Eike von Savigny (London: New York, 2001), 1.

³ *Ibid.*, 2. In this introductory chapter Schatzki provides a helpful overview of various practice theories. Also helpful is Barnes' discussion of practices in the same volume. See Barry Barnes, "Practice as Collective Action," in *The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory*, ed. Theodore R. Schatzki, K. Knorr-Cetina, and Eike von Savigny (London: New York, 2001).

practices as set forth by Alasdair MacIntyre and extended by others. MacIntyre, in seeking to identify a common background for varied understandings of virtues, identifies practices as providing the necessary context. He provides a definition of practices that includes several key components. By a practice MacIntyre means 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 conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended.⁴

The first thing we must note about practices thus defined is that they are socially established. To be a practice means that an activity has a history. Craig Dykstra elaborates on MacIntyre's idea of social establishment: "practice is participation in a cooperatively formed pattern of activity that emerges out of a complex tradition of interactions among many people sustained over a long period of time."⁵ This means that we cannot invent an activity today and have it count as a practice because it will not contain within it a history, a tradition. Time is required for a practice to become socially established.

The fact that practices are socially established, that is, that they are grounded in tradition, does not mean that they are static. Practices evolve and are reshaped by the practitioners. And yet, although a practice may not currently be carried out in the exact way as was done historically, it is still shaped by that history and thus carries that history within itself. Fly fishing can serve as an example here. This is an activity that is steeped in traditions, but the graphite rods and the high-tech fly lines used today are significantly different than the rods and lines used in this practice decades ago. Casting techniques have been handed on from generation to

⁴ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 187.

⁵ Craig Dykstra, "Reconceiving Practice in Theological Inquiry and Education," in *Virtues & Practices in the Christian Tradition: Christian Ethics after MacIntyre*, ed. Nancey C. Murphy, Brad J. Kallenberg, and Mark Nation (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997), 170.

generation, but today, through books and videos, a budding young fly fisherman can explore approaches that go beyond those that his father or grandfather taught him. Fly fishing is grounded in history, but it is not frozen in history.

This possibility for adaptation over time must not obscure the basic characteristic of practices as grounded in a tradition. As Dykstra notes, an action that is *not* grounded in a tradition is a group activity, not a practice.⁶ If an action lacks a history, it is not—at least, not *yet*—a practice.

This historical dimension ties into the next part of MacIntyre's definition: a practice is also a cooperative human activity.⁷ Practices are inherently communal. They are carried out by groups of people and by communities, and because of this, practices shape both individual and communal identity. Only communal activities can be extended over generations—an activity carried out only by an individual will die with that individual. An activity must be carried out by whole communities of people if it is to have a history, a tradition. As a socially established activity, a practice is also by definition a cooperative human activity.

An individual can do something by him- or herself and still be participating in a practice. How can this be? Doesn't this contradict what was just said about a practice being a cooperative activity? Not necessarily. A person carrying out an activity alone can be doing so within the stream of a tradition and in a way that is connected to other practitioners, even if these practitioners are not physically present. Dykstra offers the example of prayer. He points out that prayer "is cooperative because we pray, even when praying alone, as participants in the praying of the church."⁸ In the same way, my example of fly-fishing can be understood as cooperative. Even if I go fly-fishing alone, I am guided by a set of fishing regulations, conventions of courtesy regarding how closely I

⁶ Ibid., 171.

⁷ In the context of our discussion, "human" can be assumed, but this assumption cannot be made in the broader range of literature on practices because as Schatzki notes, "a significant 'posthumanist' minority centered in science and technology studies avers...that the activities bound into practices also include those of non-humans such as machines and the objects of scientific investigation." Theodore Schatzki, "Practice Theory," in *The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory*, ed. Theodore Schatzki, Karin Knorr Cetina, and Eike Von Savigny (London: Routledge, 2001), 2.

⁸ Dykstra, 170.

can fish to others I might encounter on the same stream, and a fly-fishing code that expects me to release most of the fish I catch so that future fishers will also have fish to catch. In MacIntyre's conception, cooperative activities include activities done by individuals alone when these activities are grounded in a tradition and are part of a larger cooperative effort.

Let me pause to give an example of something that is *not* a practice: getting the newspaper in the morning. A person may go through the same routine each morning: preparing a cup of coffee, putting on slippers, walking down the driveway with coffee in hand, picking up the newspaper, and returning to the front porch to read it. This may be a firmly established routine, but it is not a practice. There is nothing complex about this activity (the first part of MacIntyre's definition), it is not grounded in a tradition, and it would be a stretch to construe this as a cooperative human activity. Furthermore, getting the newspaper in the morning does not qualify as a practice because it does not have goods internal to it.

What are internal goods? These are goods or rewards that can only be had by participating in the practice. MacIntyre uses the example of a child playing chess.⁹ Imagine that a child is offered candy for playing and winning a game of chess. The candy is a good external to playing chess. There are ways other than by playing and winning a game of chess to acquire candy. Hopefully the child will come to love the game of chess because of the analytical skills involved and the satisfaction of carrying out a creative strategy. These reasons for playing are *internal* goods. These goods can be had only by playing chess or some other similar game.¹⁰ Another way to put this is that the goal of a practice is found-at least in part-within the practice itself.

Our understanding of internal goods is expanded by two more points. First, only those who are engaged in a practice can adequately identify and evaluate the goods internal to it. MacIntyre asserts "those who lack the relevant experience are

⁹ MacIntyre, 188.

¹⁰ Jeffrey Stout, a sometime critic of MacIntyre, has great appreciation for MacIntyre's conception of practices. This idea of internal goods is the most important aspect of practices in Stout's view. See Jeffrey Stout, *Ethics after Babel: The Languages of Morals and Their Discontents* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988), 267.

incompetent thereby as judges of internal goods.”¹¹ I turn to my fly-fishing example for illustration. I have a friend who repeatedly expresses her bewilderment at the fact that I catch fish and then *let them go!* I have tried to explain to her why this is such an enjoyable activity for me, but she remains bewildered. This illustrates MacIntyre’s point that the goods internal to a practice are not readily understandable to those who are not engaged in the practice. Because of this, it is those within-rather than those outside of-the practice who are qualified to critique it. Second, as MacIntyre’s definition of practices indicates, internal goods 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.”¹² As one improves in a practice, the internal goods are realized to a fuller extent.

The internal goods are tied to the standards of excellence within a practice. When a person enters into a practice, she must willingly accept these standards. The novice must subject his actions to the judgment of these standards. Those who engage in a practice must accept their own shortcomings in relation to the standards. MacIntyre offers two examples of this:

If, on starting to listen to music, I do not accept my own incapacity to judge correctly, I will never learn to hear, let alone to appreciate, Bartok’s last quartets. If, on starting to play baseball, I do not accept that others know better than I when to throw a fast ball and when not, I will never learn to appreciate good pitching let alone to pitch.¹³

While these standards have an evaluative nature, the standards themselves are subject to evaluation. They are subject to criticism and revision. But when we engage in a practice we must-at least initially-accept the authority of the standards as they are currently understood.¹⁴ A person outside of the practice is not in a position to judge what constitutes excellence in the practice.

¹¹ MacIntyre, 189.

¹² Ibid., 187.

¹³ Ibid., 190.

¹⁴ Here MacIntyre makes a connection back into his main interest: the virtues. The virtues of justice, courage, and honesty are required to subject oneself to the standards of a practice. See Ibid., 191.

One final difference between internal and external goods needs to be elucidated. Both are achieved through striving, but the nature of this striving differs. External goods are characteristically finite-the more I have, the less there is for others-so the competition for external goods results in winners and losers. Internal goods are achieved through striving to excel, but the goods are not limited. My enjoyment of fly fishing is not diminished if you seek to excel in this activity as well.

1.2 MACINTYRE'S PRACTICES AND THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION

How might MacIntyre's work on practices fit into the Christian tradition? While the practices as set forth by MacIntyre are not specifically Christian, the overall thrust of his idea proves valuable in understanding the life of the church. I will now look at how this is so and I will point to ways in which his idea might be altered to be more adequate for use within the Christian tradition.

Craig Dykstra and Dorothy Bass are two of the writers who have taken up MacIntyre's idea of practices and modified it to refer to practices that are specifically Christian. By Christian practices they mean "things Christian people do together over time to address fundamental human needs in response to and in the light of God's active presence for the life of the world."¹⁵ This definition has both its strengths and its weaknesses.

A strength is that Dykstra and Bass, building on MacIntyre, conceive of practices as traditioned and cooperative. They point out that this is significant theologically because it acknowledges God's decision to work in and through history in particular places and with particular people.¹⁶

That they see practices as addressing fundamental human needs is an improvement over MacIntyre's definition. By their definition, an activity is a practice only if "it is a sustained, cooperative pattern of human activity that is big enough, rich enough, and complex enough to address some fundamental

¹⁵ Craig Dykstra and Dorothy Bass, "A Theological Understanding of Christian Practices," in *Practicing Theology : Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life*, ed. Miroslav Volf and Dorothy Bass (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2002), 18, their italics.

¹⁶ Ibid., 26.

feature of human existence.”¹⁷ This characteristic significantly narrows down what may be considered a practice in the life of the church. These fundamental human needs or conditions include “embodiment, temporality, relationships, the use of language, and mortality.”¹⁸ Accordingly, chess, which MacIntyre describes as a practice, does not qualify as a Christian practice.

Dykstra and Bass extend MacIntyre’s definition by tying Christian practices to the active presence of God. Christian practices are done in response to and in the light of God’s active presence. It is God’s presence that gives purpose and meaning to the practices and it is the Holy Spirit who shapes us into the image of Christ through our engagement with the practices. An awareness of God’s presence and leading extends a practice by reshaping it and clarifying its standards of excellence.

Alas, my example of fly-fishing, while a practice in MacIntyrian terms, does not qualify as a *Christian* practice! Fly-fishing does not address fundamental human needs and it is not carried out in response to and in the light of God’s active presence for the life of the world. One could argue that fly-fishing meets the need of relaxation or the need for a challenge, and one could argue that this practice is carried out in the light of God’s presence which is so wondrously seen and felt in nature, but here we would be stretching the concept so far as to make it rather useless. Such demarcation between what is and what isn’t a practice is helpful in a general way, but is not the critical point of our discussion. The important thing is to both understand the general contours of the communal activities of the Christian faith that form us into the people of God and to *engage* in these practices, to *practice* them!

The definition set forth by Dykstra and Bass would be stronger if it lifted up the standards of excellence within practices.¹⁹ These standards must be explicitly addressed

¹⁷ Ibid., 22.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ This omission from their definition is somewhat perplexing given the fact that in an earlier essay Dykstra and Bass specifically discuss the standards of excellence possessed by a practice. See Craig Dykstra and Dorothy Bass, “Times of Yearning, Practices of Faith,” in *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*, ed. Dorothy Bass (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997), 7-8.

because without them the practices have no positive formational norms. It is not enough for us to have a set of practices that shape us; we must have a set of Christian practices that shape us *in a particular way* and this particularity is tied to the standards of excellence. The practice of discernment can be done well or poorly - it has within it standards of excellence for evaluating how well it has been carried out. Likewise, the practice of witness can be done well or poorly. When witness is done well, the marks of excellence are extended. Future practitioners can build on and go beyond what has been done. The standards of excellence within these two practices will be addressed in their sections below.

The definition of Christian practices set forth by Dykstra and Bass would also be strengthened by specific reference to internal goods. These goods are a key element of MacIntyre's conception and are necessary for understanding how Christian practices work in congregations. We can turn to Nancey Murphy to fill in what has been left out here regarding internal goods. Murphy, drawing on the work of James McClendon, discusses the internal goods of the practice of worship.²⁰ She points specifically to the pattern of God's initiative and human response that comprises worship. That God reaches out to us in worship is a good internal to the practice as is the joy and identity formation that comes from responding communally to God in worship. We engage in worship because of the goods that are internal to the practice—we do not engage in worship for the sake of external goods. In fact, Murphy points out, Jesus specifically warned against seeking external goods from worship when he said “do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward” (Matt. 6:5). Status is a good external to worship.

Dykstra and Bass are right to point to the “responsive relationship of Christian practices to God.”²¹ This hints at the importance of internal goods. It is within the practices

²⁰ Nancey C. Murphy, “Using MacIntyre’s Method in Christian Ethics,” in *Virtues & Practices in the Christian Tradition: Christian Ethics after MacIntyre*, ed. Nancey C. Murphy, Brad J. Kallenberg, and Mark Nation (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997), 34-35.

²¹ Dykstra and Bass, “A Theological Understanding,” 21.

themselves that this relationship with God is shaped, experienced, and extended; the practices are not simply a means by which we prepare for a relationship with God that is then carried out somewhere else.²² For example, eschatology at first glance might be seen as connected to goods that are external to Christian practices, but as John Howard Yoder points out, practices themselves are eschatological because “the will of God for human socialness as a whole is prefigured by the shape to which the Body of Christ is called,”²³ or to put it another way, “the people of God is called to be today what the world is called to be ultimately.”²⁴ Christian practices are not just a way to prepare for the fullness of God’s kingdom and they are not just filler activities in which we engage while we await this kingdom. The kingdom of God is internal to the practices themselves. It is experienced and extended through Christian practices.

The idea of practices set forth here is based on a particular conception of how theory and action are related. Practices are theory-laden. They carry within them meanings and moral values. I do not hold to the theory-to-practice model which sees theory as the place where values and beliefs are developed and practice as the place where these are then implemented. Rather, practices should be seen as theory-laden. We may or may not be aware of the values embedded in a practice, but they are there nonetheless. The beliefs conveyed by a practice shape the practitioners even if the practitioners cannot articulate these beliefs.²⁵ Practices foster

²² I am quite certain that Dykstra and Bass would agree with this idea that we encounter God in the practices, and so their suggestion that Christian practices are “normed not only internally but also through the responsive relationship of Christian practices to God,” where this responsive relationship is apparently conceived of as an external good, seems inconsistent with their overall approach. See *Ibid.*

²³ John Howard Yoder, *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community before the Watching World* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1992), ix.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ This is consistent with the approach to practical theology represented by Don Browning, among others. Browning argues that theology should arise from the life of the church and, after critical reflection, theology must return into the life of the church. See Don S. Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology: Descriptive and Strategic Proposals* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991). Craig Dykstra makes a similar argument in relation to theological education. He points out the inadequacy of viewing practice as “the application of theory to contemporary procedure.” See Dykstra, “Reconceiving Practices,” 163, *passim*. Miroslav Volf is a third writer who rejects the theory-to-practice model. He sees a recip-

beliefs and beliefs shape practices. A mutually informing relationship exists. And so Christian practices must not be viewed as simply a means of living out certain doctrines. Christian doctrines are indeed lived out through practices, but they are not external to the practices and normally emerge from practices.

1.3 Summary

MacIntyre's idea of social practices is valuable for understanding what goes on in the life of the church. Practices are grounded in tradition and are carried out by groups or communities, not by individuals isolated from other people and from the tradition. Practices are characterized by internal goods and these goods are subject to standards of excellence which reside in the practices themselves.

In addition to these characteristics, *Christian* practices are further defined by the fact that they address fundamental human needs and are tied to the active presence of God. To account for these refinements, I will be working with a slightly modified version of MacIntyre's definition of practices, viewing them as any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity, *carried out with a sensitivity to the Spirit's presence and ongoing work*, 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 conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended.²⁶

The fact that Christian practices address fundamental human needs is implicit in my understanding of the Spirit's work, and so I carry over Dykstra and Bass's meaning even though I don't carry forward their wording. Also, I shift from Dykstra and Bass's more general reference to God to a more specific reference to the Spirit. It is the third person of the Trinity, the

rocal relationship in which beliefs shape practices and practices shape beliefs. Of note is his view that normally practices precede beliefs rather than the inverse. See Miroslav Volf, "Theology for a Way of Life," in *Practicing Theology : Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life*, ed. Miroslav Volf and Dorothy Bass (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 250-256.

²⁶ My additions are in italics.

Holy Spirit, who is the divine presence and force in the world.

With this understanding of practices in place, I will now look at several Christian practices, noting particularly their intersection with a theology of the priesthood of all believers.

2 SELECTED PRACTICES OF THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

Reflection and evaluation of a practice are part of the practice itself. MacIntyre has pointed out that the standards of excellence within a practice are open to evaluation and modification. He states:

when a tradition is in good order it is always partially constituted by an argument about the goods the pursuit of which gives to that tradition its particular point and purpose. So when an organization—a university, say, or a farm, or a hospital—is the bearer of a tradition of practice or practices, its common life will be partly, but in a centrally important way, constituted by a continuous argument as to what a university is and ought to be or what good farming is or what good medicine is.²⁷

Or what a good priesthood of all believers is or ought to be. Here I intend to engage in just this sort of evaluative reflection by seeking to identify and extend the standards of excellence of several practices that relate to the royal priesthood, the priesthood of all believers. I will discuss how the values of the priesthood of all believers are bound up within each practice and I will point to the standards of excellence found within these practices. My goal, in MacIntyrean terms, is to systematically extend the conceptions of the ends and goods involved and to further the ability of congregations to achieve these standards of excellence.

I have chosen three practices to explore in relation to the priesthood of all believers: witness, discernment, and confession.²⁸ Each practice has been selected because of its

²⁷ MacIntyre, 222. He makes the point also on p. 190. Nancey Murphy concurs: "such reflection is itself a part of the practice, the progressive refinement of Christians' concept of those standards of excellence that are partially definitive of this form of activity" (Murphy, 35).

²⁸ It is interesting to consider other lists of practices that have been set forth. Nancey Murphy lists five which she suggests are essential: works of mercy, witness, worship, discipling, and discernment (Murphy, 37). John Howard Yoder also lists five: binding and loosing (discernment), the breaking of bread together, baptism, the fullness of Christ (every-member giftedness), and the rule of Paul (participa-

role-or potential role-in the embodiment of the priesthood of all believers in local congregations. Practices are multi-layered and so I do not intend to imply that the meanings I lift up are the only or even the most important meanings found in these practices, and these are not the only practices that carry such meanings. With these qualifications in mind, I believe that these practices are crucial in the life of the church and I believe that the priesthood of all believers will be more fully embodied as the church pursues the standards of excellence within these practices.

2.1 WITNESS

All Christian traditions agree that witness is a practice that is open to the whole people of God. When it comes to practices such as the Lord's supper or preaching, such consensus does not exist, but with witness we have a practice in which Catholics, Baptists, Lutherans, Pentecostals, and others can engage regardless of whether or not they hold office.

The practice of witness, which can also be described as proclaiming the gospel, is carried out in a variety of ways such as evangelism, mission work, testimony, service, and godly living. In MacIntyre's terms, the practice of witness is coherent and complex. A group of Christian businessmen who are concerned about justice for their employees, high schoolers who go on an a short-term mission trip, and moms and dads who teach vacation Bible school all are practitioners of witness. The range of activities included shows the complexity of the practice, and yet within this range commonalities exist that hold them together. One of these commonalities is that each activity is tied to proclaiming Christ crucified, risen, and reigning. Here we see how the goal of the practice is intrinsic to the practice. Treating employees justly is not simply a means to gain credibility in order to tell

tive decision-making). See Yoder. Twelve are set forth by Dorothy Bass, et. al.: honoring the body, hospitality, household economics, saying yes and saying no, keeping Sabbath, testimony, discernment, shaping communities, forgiveness, healing, dying well, and singing our lives (Dorothy Bass, ed., *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997). None of these writers claim that their lists are exhaustive. Keep in mind that these authors are looking at practices in relation to the overall life of the church whereas here I am focusing on meanings related to the priesthood of all believers as they run through the practices.

them about Jesus. Christ is proclaimed *in the act* of treating others justly. This activity proclaims that Jesus has ushered in a social order in which profit and power do not define human relationships.

Notice that each of these activities is cast in the context of the community. Yes, an individual parent must decide to teach vacation Bible school and an individual teenager must decide to go on a mission trip, but the practice is a cooperative effort. The gospel is proclaimed to the VBS children through a group of parents working together, and the high schooler is sent by a community and goes with others on the mission trip. This cooperative aspect is a point of connection for this practice with the priesthood of all believers. As people become more aware of how the practice of witness is a communal one, the practice becomes more participatory, thus reflecting the nature of the royal priesthood.

In general we do not pay people to witness. This would be attaching an external good to the practice. There are exceptions such as people who are full-time evangelists, but even here we insist that money should not be the motivating good. Rather, we expect people to witness for the sake of goods internal to the practice. One such good is the exercise of faith. Witness is a way in which faith is expressed and faith is a good in itself. It is not tied to effectiveness or results. The missionary couple who labors in a hostile culture for decades without seeing anybody come to Christ can still be carrying out witness well. Regardless of the results, they can be said to be exercising their faith and such an exercise is a positive reward in itself. The internal good is not contingent upon positive outcomes.

The practice of witness has standards of excellence, one of which is presence. James McClendon, who sees presence as a virtue essential to the practice of witness, describes presence as being one's self for someone else; it is refusing the temptation to withdraw mentally or emotionally; but it is also on occasion putting our own body's weight and warmth alongside the neighbor, the friend, the lover in need.²⁹

²⁹ James William McClendon, *Ethics: Systematic Theology*, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 116.

“Being one’s self” is being authentic to who God has called a person or a congregation to be. But as part of the presence that McClendon refers to, being one’s self is not done for the sake of personal growth or fulfillment but for the sake of someone else. When a person carries out witness in a way that keeps him or herself sealed off emotionally and mentally from the other, when witness is conceived of as a duty that does not need to involve relationship, then witness is done poorly. A man who speaks of Christ to his next door neighbor in order to check it off of the list of things that a good Christian should do is not being present with that neighbor. In contrast, consider a man who barbeques with his neighbor and knows the names of his neighbor’s kids and knows the things his neighbor’s family likes to do. When his neighbor suffers a tragic loss, this man can be present with his neighbor and can speak of Christ to this neighbor in word and deed in a personally engaged way. Witness is done well when the practitioner opens herself up to the other, when the practice of witness is interactive and when the practitioner willingly moves into the sufferings and joys of the other. Presence is a mark of witness done well.

Witness is done well when it provides a good picture of who God is and how God works. When we look back on the imperialism that often accompanied the missionary surge of the nineteenth century, we judge the practice as deficient. We cringe at the fact that God was presented as an aging white male who wanted Africans to dress like Europeans.³⁰ Of course we argue today about what constitutes a good picture of God and we argue about how God works, but even so we have standards of excellence that are operative. For example, the scriptures teach us that God is love, and so witness done well provides a picture of a loving God.³¹

Witness done well invites people into the life of the Christian community. What is better: a Christian who lives out her faith in isolation, or a Christian who actively participates in her community? Would not the overwhelming majority of

³⁰ These missionaries may have been living up to the standards of the practice in place at the time, but as we have said, practices and their standards are open to critique, and we should indeed critique imperialistic missionary efforts.

³¹ The picture of God must be much more detailed than this, but my point is that common areas of agreement can and must be found among diverse groups of Christians.

Christians agree that the latter is better? So, then, witness that invites people to a personal faith grounded in a community, rather than to an individualistic faith unconcerned with community, can be said to meet this standard of excellence.

The practice of witness builds up the priesthood of all believers in at least two ways. First, I have pointed out that witness is a cooperative activity, and therefore groups of people, communities are called to witness. As Christians consider the standards of excellence in the practice, they will be moved to pursue witness as a group, and the practice of witnessing corporately will solidify their identity as the priesthood of all believers. Second, when done well, witness expands the priesthood of all believers. Others are invited through the forms of witness themselves to join the royal priesthood. When an individual attempts to witness in a way that is devoid of communal content (e.g., a person who is not grounded in a congregation or a person who presents the gospel solely in terms of individual benefit), those to whom this individual witnesses are invited to join something that is not communal. Witness that is grounded in community invites others to join a communal entity.

Preaching is a form of the practice of witness. In some traditions, this form of witness is reserved for ordained clergy. But like other forms of witness, preaching too should be an activity in which the whole people of God participates. What might this look like? Certainly preaching is participative when those who are listening are led into the narratives of the sermon and are moved to respond in some way. Preaching in the African American tradition can readily be seen as participative. But perhaps preaching should be participative in another way as well: a variety of people in a church, not just the office holder(s), should be allowed to preach. R. Paul Stevens describes how this works in his own congregation. The church staff is limited to preaching fifty percent of the time. The other fifty percent of the time non-staff people from the congregation preach. Stevens points out that this arrangement allows for both continuity and room for non-office holders to preach.³² Allowing non-office holders to preach is a powerful symbolic act. Visually, auditorially, and

³² R. Paul Stevens, "Liberating the Leadership : Equipping the Saints for Full Partnership" (D.Min. diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 1987), 61.

experientially a theology of the priesthood of all believers is enacted before the congregation.

In sum, the practice of witness is shaped by the theology of the priesthood of all believers and embodies this same priesthood. Witness is a communal activity and has a set of goods internal to it. The practice of witness also has within it standards of excellence by which the practice can be judged and extended. This practice, when done well, draws the whole range of Christians to participate in it.

While witness can justifiably be called a practice in its own right, witness can also be understood as the summing up of all the other Christian practices.³³ Every Christian practice, when carried out well, witnesses to the nature, presence and activity of God. We turn now to some of these other practices.

2.2 DISCERNMENT

So what should we do? This is perhaps the central congregational question for people formed by the cultural forces of efficiency and effectiveness. The rationalist mindset, which is perhaps as dominant in our churches as in our larger cultural context, will want to focus on efficient actions, and to be efficient, according to this way of thinking, we must delineate a streamlined process for making decisions so that we can get on with the actions. The decision making process is put under a microscope for analysis and evaluation in order to help congregations (or more likely, under this model, to help *individuals*) make good and timely decisions. This approach is what Yoder calls “punctualism.”³⁴ The focus is on the specific time, place, and circumstances related to a specific decision.

The Christian practice of discernment gathers decision making into the broader effort to develop a sensitivity to the presence and work of the Holy Spirit. The practice of discernment includes the operational and strategic decisions that a community makes, but it also includes an evaluation of

³³ For further discussion of witness as the canopy over the other Christian practices, see Lois Barrett, “Embodying and Proclaiming the Gospel,” in *Treasure in Clay Jars: Patterns in Missional Faithfulness*, ed. Lois Barrett (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 149-153.

³⁴ John Howard Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 35.

authoritative claims set forth by individuals and institutions. Discernment is the practice which identifies false prophets as well as the practice used to decide whether or not to build a new church building.

When a small group or a congregation gathers to prayerfully talk through a situation, they are practicing discernment. It is a practice that encourages us to focus on the Spirit, not just on the decision. In discernment, as the community seeks clarity regarding a choice to be made, the community does so in a way that makes room for the Holy Spirit to lead and move within the process if the Spirit so chooses (and I suggest that the Spirit usually does so choose!). Discernment in a congregation is thus not very similar to decision making in a business.

The difference between the practice of discernment and decision making as understood in the business world can also be seen in the nature of the goods associated with the activity. In a business, decisions are made for the sake of external goods—primarily profit. But, as with all practices, discernment is characterized primarily by internal goods. I have already mentioned that discernment can be viewed as a form of witness. Here witness is an internal good. It is not the goal of discernment; it is internal to the process. Community formation is another good internal to the practice of discernment. The formation of community is not the goal of discernment nor incidental to discernment. It is internal to it. The give and take of discussion, the listening required, the differences that must be worked through, the emotions that boil up at times—all these contribute to a sense of loyalty, trust, and cohesion among the participants; community is fostered.

I do not intend to gloss over the destructiveness and fragmentation that sometimes mark congregational discernment.³⁵ This sad reality does not take away from what has been said regarding the goods internal to the practice of discernment. By definition a practice contains within it different approximations of the ideal (if this were not the case, standards of excellence would be irrelevant). The standards of excellence within a practice serve as a means of

³⁵ Luke Timothy Johnson, an advocate of discernment, nonetheless devotes several pages to a helpful discussion of the problems with discernment. See Luke Timothy Johnson, *Scripture & Discernment : Decision-Making in the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 110-113.

critiquing these approximations. Not all instances of the practice of discernment will be carried out well, and in fact, sometimes the practice will be carried out quite poorly. But because practices have a historical dimension, a failure by an individual or community does not mean that the whole practice everywhere and always is corrupt.³⁶ Overall, discernment *does* witness to a watching world. In general, the practice of discernment *does* develop communal bonds.

As we continue this discussion, we must remain aware of how discernment and decision making are interrelated, but not identical. Because discernment is a practice, a punctualist view of decision making is inadequate because punctualism snatches a decision out of the narrative of the community, and discernment, as a practice, must be understood as an activity that takes place *within the flow of a tradition*. Discernment must be understood primarily in longitudinal rather than punctiliar terms.

This longitudinal dimension is important in at least two ways. First, the tradition teaches us about the processes of decision-making that have been used in the church over the centuries. As MacIntyre says, “to enter into a practice is to enter into a relationship not only with its contemporary practitioners, but also with those who have preceded us in the practice, particularly those whose achievements extended the reach of the practice to its present point.”³⁷ We learn from the tradition which processes have been affirmed over time and which ones have been set aside.³⁸ Second, our Christian tradition contains *other* practices that form us both prior to and during the decision making process. Our decisions are not made in a vacuum, but come forth from our identities and values which have been formed over time prior to the

³⁶ Amy Plantinga Pauw, “Attending to the Gaps between Beliefs and Practices,” in *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life*, ed. Miroslav Volf and Dorothy Bass (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 41.

³⁷ MacIntyre, 194.

³⁸ Nancey Murphy, in talking about communal discernment as a specific approach to decision making, affirms this practice in part because the results of this practice have been validated historically. She states, “it is significant that communities that exercise communal judgment do not readily abandon the practice. This suggests that the results tend to be consistent over time since a practice that yielded erratic results would soon lose its appeal.” Nancey C. Murphy, *Anglo-American Postmodernity: Philosophical Perspectives on Science, Religion, and Ethics* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997), 166.

moment when a decision is made.³⁹ Decision making must be viewed as an ongoing activity that takes place within a larger narrative.⁴⁰ This confirms MacIntyre's definition of a practice as having a history, being socially established.

What standards of excellence might be used to evaluate the practice of discernment? One standard is that of unity: discernment done well contributes to the Trinitarian-shaped unity of the body. Unity does not mean that differences are ignored and unity does not mean unanimity of perspective. The type of unity that marks the priesthood of all believers and that marks good discernment allows for differences and distinctions-in fact, this type of unity assumes that differences will exist. As within the Trinity, unity amongst the people of God requires difference. If there is no difference, there is nothing to unite. This type of unity transcends differences without ignoring them. The Spirit indwells and unites believers even when they hold different views on a given issue.

Openness to the Spirit is another standard by which this practice is to be evaluated. Has the community been open to the guidance and work of the Holy Spirit in their practice of discernment? This criterion cannot be used as an exact tool, but it is still a helpful means of evaluation. If a group must admit that their awareness of and sensitivity to the Spirit's involvement in their process has been minimal, then their practice can be judged as deficient. Discernment done well is marked by honest openness to the Spirit.

A third standard for judging the excellence of the practice is one identified by Luke Timothy Johnson. He says that Paul repeatedly subordinates individuals' behavior to the building up of community identity, and this, Johnson argues, provides a criterion for discernment: "the criterion is whether the interests of others as well as of the self are served."⁴¹

³⁹ Stanley Hauerwas makes this same argument in asserting that moral notions (he later substitutes virtues language here) precede decision making. He argues that good decisions will naturally emerge from well-formed character. Although his argument has certain weaknesses (e.g., he relies too heavily on virtues as a means of achieving justice), I agree with his general thrust and find it helpful in thinking about Christian practices. See Stanley Hauerwas, *Vision and Virtue: Essays in Christian Ethical Reflection* (Notre Dame, IN: Fides Publishers, 1974), find page numbers here.

⁴⁰ This is why I have placed decision making in the midst of my discussion of other practices. It is one of many, not the starting point nor the climax of the practices.

⁴¹ Johnson, 119.

Discernment done well is concerned for both the individual and the community, not just the former.⁴²

What might the actual practice of discernment look like? Yoder, drawing specifically on 1 Cor. 14 and Acts 15, identifies a scriptural pattern of discernment that includes allowing all to speak, listening, and holding up the decision to be confirmed by the Holy Spirit.⁴³ By allowing everyone the opportunity to voice their thoughts and feelings on an issue, and by listening to each one who would speak, the community acknowledges that the Spirit moves in and through all the members of the community, not just certain ones.⁴⁴

When done well, the practice of discernment is a concrete expression of a theology of the priesthood of all believers. The nature of the priesthood of all believers elicits the practice of discernment in which the members together seek to speak and act in light of the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit.

2.3 CONFESSION

Though it has taken various forms down through the centuries, confession has always been an important practice

⁴² We can extend our list of standards by drawing on Nancey Murphy who sets forth consistency and fruit as two standards for evaluating discernment. See Murphy, *Anglo-American Postmodernity*, 164.

⁴³ Yoder, *Body Politics*, 61ff. For another discussion of specific ways discernment is practiced, see Danny E. Morris and Charles M. Olsen, *Discerning God's Will Together : A Spiritual Practice for the Church* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1997), 65-93. Drawing on the history of the practice, Morris and Olsen identify ten movements in the discernment process and give significant discussion to each of them. A third move toward the concrete is that made by Nancy Bedford who, based on her experience in the church in Argentina, sets forth ten "moments" in the discernment process. See Nancy E. Bedford, "Little Moves against Destructiveness: Theology and the Practice of Discernment," in *Practicing Theology : Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life*, ed. Miroslav Volf and Dorothy Bass (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 170-171.

⁴⁴ I am making primary reference to communal discernment but also acknowledge the validity of individual discernment. Frank Rogers is one who discusses both individual discernment and communal discernment. I suggest that what he describes as individual discernment remains a cooperative activity because the person practicing discernment does so having been shaped by the community, both historical and present, and, when "individual" discernment is done well, the practitioner will move back into community where this person and the community will live in light of the choices that have been made. See Frank Rogers, "Discernment," in *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*, ed. Dorothy Bass (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997), 105-118. Morris and Olsen concur with my position, stating that "personal discernment is also vital, but it is always pursued in the context of community. See Morris and Olsen, 64.

of the church.⁴⁵ I have chosen to look at the practice of confession because of its centrality to the priesthood of all believers as understood by Luther. Luther posited two main functions for the priesthood of all believers. One was to proclaim the Word of God; the other was to hear each other's confessions and offer forgiveness, something he claimed every Christian has the authority to do.⁴⁶

The practice of confession must be distinguished from the practice of forgiveness. The two are closely related but are distinct.⁴⁷ Both forgiveness and confession can take place between a person and God, and both have a cooperative element to them. These practices are to take place not exclusively between God and a person, but are to involve other people as well. A difference between confession and forgiveness can be seen in their focus. With forgiveness, the focus is on releasing the wrongs of the other. With confession, the focus is on admitting the wrongs of the self. Forgiveness pushes for reconciliation. Confession pushes for humility and reform.

In the practice of confession we acknowledge to God and to each other that we have fallen short of who we are called to be. We see here how the practice of confession relates to, and is necessary to, all the other practices. MacIntyre says, "to enter into a practice is to accept the authority of [its] standards and the inadequacy of my own performance as judged by them."⁴⁸ The practices assume the inadequacy of the

⁴⁵ Thomas Oden shows this by weaving the writings of the Church Fathers and the Reformers into his discussion of confession (which is interspersed in his larger subject of communion discipline). See Thomas C. Oden, *Corrective Love: The Power of Communion Discipline* (St. Louis: CPH Concordia Publishing House, 1995). Max Thurian gives a focused discussion of the Reformers' ideas on confession in the first chapter of his book on confession. See Max Thurian, *Confession* (London: Mowbray, 1985).

⁴⁶ Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 316-317.

⁴⁷ Forgiveness has received much attention as a Christian practice, but to my knowledge no works yet have focused on confession in relation to a MacIntyrian conception of practices. My intention here is not to set forth a fully developed discussion of confession as a Christian practice, but to offer some of ideas that will be important in such a discussion. For the most focused discussion of forgiveness as a practice, see L. Gregory Jones, "Forgiveness," in *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*, ed. Dorothy Bass (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997). James McClendon shows how the practice of forgiveness is crucial for community formation in James William McClendon, "The Politics of Forgiveness," in *Ethics: Systematic Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002).

⁴⁸ MacIntyre, 190.

practitioners and call for their ongoing growth and development. This comes about by the acknowledgement on the part of the practitioners that they have not lived up to the standards of excellence. To grow in competence in a Christian practice requires one to admit the ways in which one falls short of the standards of excellence—to confess one's sins. The practice of confession is thus intertwined with all the other practices.

While confession needs to take place between an individual and God, it also needs to take place between people, and this latter interaction is my focus here. We can speak of two general categories of interpersonal confession: corporate and individual.⁴⁹

Corporate confession is the most common form of confession in Protestant Christianity. It takes place in the congregational prayer of confession found in (some!) worship services. In this prayer, we make our confessions to God, but we simultaneously confess to one another. We admit to each other our sins of commission and omission. In this action we are bound together. Our prayers of confession establish our shared state of fallenness. We do not celebrate the fact that we have this fallenness in common, and yet the understanding that we do have this in common can be a source of encouragement in our journey to move towards the standards of excellence in our Christian practices.

I suggest that to be consistent with a theology of the priesthood of all believers, corporate prayers of confession should be spoken by all those in the worship service, not just by those who are non-office holders. This cuts across the practice of some traditions, but it is necessary for the practice of confession and the priesthood of all believers to cohere. It is as we confess together, without special exceptions, that we most fully embody our shared identity as a royal priesthood. In the same way, the words of absolution should be offered in a way that does not stratify the whole people of God. A priest can do this by changing the tone and wording from I grant you absolution to may God grant us absolution. It can also be done by the whole people joining in pronouncing words of absolution to each other. The point is that the

⁴⁹ As I have argued earlier, some individual activities are still cooperative in a sense because they are carried out within a tradition and are part of a larger cooperative effort. Such is the case here with individual confession.

particular ways in which the practice is carried out must not subtly establish a special priesthood within the priesthood of all believers; the particular ways in which we carry out the practices are symbolically loaded, and we must work for the coincidence of our symbols-and the meanings embedded in them-with our stated theology.

The practice of individual confession has a strong tradition in Catholicism where formalized structures and patterns have facilitated it. While these formalized structures and patterns have not been problem-free, Protestants have here a form worth emulating. What might it look like for Protestant congregations to set up regular times of confession? What if a congregation had people available during the hour before the worship service to hear confessions? What if regular participation in the practice of confession became an expectation of members, in the same way some churches expect members to be involved in small groups?

Who is the person with the authority to hear another's confession? James implores, "confess your sins to one another" (James 5:16). We are to confess to each other and we are to hear each other's confessions. Luther was right when he designated the hearing of confessions as a function for the whole people of God. It is not only office holders who are authorized to hear confessions. The *whole community* is authorized to do so. Certain people, by virtue of their spiritual maturity and integrity, will be more equipped to handle the impact of confessions. On the other hand, for a person young in the faith, the full force of honest confession may prove to be a stumbling block. So practical moral wisdom will lead us to confess to some and not to others. But this discernment is not based on status or office. In principle, *any* believer can listen in this role.

As a practice, confession has internal goods. One such good is the lifting of guilt. We are promised that those who confess their sins will be forgiven and cleansed (1 Jn. 1:9). We have here an internal good. Such forgiveness and cleansing cannot be purchased nor can it be obtained through means such as righteous living. It is a good internal to the practice of confession.⁵⁰ Reconciliation is another good internal to

⁵⁰ Forgiveness can certainly be granted even when confession is not forthcoming, but it is still proper to speak of forgiveness as a good internal to confession because, though confession is not the only way to obtain forgiveness (it can be freely granted), we do not have a multiplicity of ways to attain it.

confession. True reconciliation emerges from the practice of confession; it cannot be attained without confession in some form. Not every confession results in reconciliation, but confession done well also expresses a desire for reconciliation.

As with all practices, the practice of confession has standards of excellence appropriate to, and partially definitive of, this form of activity. Freedom is one such standard. Confession done well must be done in freedom. Calvin stated "confession ... ought to be free so as not to be required of all, but to be commended only to those who know that they have need of it."⁵¹ It is a practice that builds up the whole people of God, but only if people freely choose to engage in it. This freedom makes it more likely that true contrition accompanies the confession.

Honesty and true contrition are other standards of excellence for this practice. The more honest a person is in confession, the better this person carries out the practice. The admission of guilt, if not accompanied by a contrite heart, is a poor instance of the practice. While the practice of confession contains standards of excellence, these standards are used primarily by the confessor. Others often cannot tell whether or not I am speaking with contrition and forthrightness. The standards can be developed by others, and at times others can use the standards to encourage me to carry out the practice better, but because of the nature of this practice I am often required to evaluate for myself the degree to which I am approximating the standards of excellence associated with the practice of confession.

The practice of confession forms the people of God. It unites us in our sin and in our forgiveness. It confirms our identity as broken yet accepted. In corporate confession we become aware of, and ask forgiveness for, the ways in which we as a community have fallen short. Our commonality in the priesthood of all believers is brought to the fore. In individual confession I become transparent and vulnerable before another, *any* other from the community, and through this practice I am moved back into the life of the community, re-affirmed as a member of the royal priesthood.

⁵¹ John Calvin, Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion, ed. John McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols., vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), Bk. III, Chpt. IV, Para. 12 (p. 637).

3 LEADERSHIP, PRACTICES, AND THE PRIESTHOOD OF ALL BELIEVERS

Christian practices are to be carried out by the whole community, but within the community, different people have different gifts and functions. For practices to be carried out well, one gift that must be exercised is the gift of leadership. Good leadership contributes significantly to the formation of healthy congregations. Good congregational leadership requires sustained attention to and involvement in Christian practices.

Our churches would be in trouble without pastoral leadership, but not just any form of leadership will do. In this section I will describe a type of pastoral leadership that I see as being consistent with the nature of the Trinity and complementary to congregational engagement in Christian practices. My use of the phrase 'pastoral leadership' should not be taken as referring only to the leadership provided by office holders in a congregation. It is used to describe the activity of any leader in the congregation, whether paid staff or not.

Implemental, relational, and interpretive leadership are three spheres that Mark Lau Branson uses to talk about the roles of a pastor.⁵² In describing these three spheres, Branson notes that these are not three models of leadership; rather, these are three overlapping spheres of leadership that work together in congregational life.⁵³ A congregational leader will need to attend to all three layers at different times and in

⁵² His most focused treatment is found in Mark Lau Branson, "Forming Church, Forming Mission," *International Mission Review* 42, no. 365 (2003), Accessed 10/20/2004 at http://www.fuller.edu/sot/faculty/branson/cp_content/FormingChurchIRMfin.htm. (For references that include a web address, page numbers refer to the print-out of the on-line document.)

⁵³ Ibid.: 3. Scott Cormode offers a similar-though slightly different-paradigm in which he sets forth three models or styles of leadership: Builder, Shepherd, and Gardener. See Scott Cormode, "Multi-Layered Leadership: The Christian Leader as Builder, Shepherd, and Gardener," *Journal of Religious Leadership* 2004, no. 6/2 (2002), Accessed 10/20/2004 at <http://christianleaders.org/JRL/Fall2002/cormode.htm>. He develops his approach from the work of Bolman and Deal who describe four frames for understanding organizations: the structural frame (similar to Branson's implemental leadership and Cormode's Builder model), the human relations frame (similar to Branson's relational leadership and Cormode's Shepherd model), the symbolic frame (similar to Branson's interpretive leadership and Cormode's Gardener model, and the political frame. For an overview, see Lee G. Bolman and Terrence E. Deal, *Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice, and Leadership*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997), 12-17. The rest of the book provides a detailed treatment of these frames.

different settings. I will briefly describe the first two and then I will give longer consideration to the third sphere.

Implemental leadership includes administrative and managerial tasks. The focus of this sphere is on doing, accomplishing. Implemental leadership is required for budgets to be submitted, for programs to be given structure, for evaluation to take place, and for facilities to be kept up. Implemental leadership is concerned with organizational structure and execution. Without implemental leadership, the church would not do anything! When people think of leadership, they most commonly think of implemental leadership. Our culture places a premium on efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control,⁵⁴ and implemental leadership is seen as the best means to attain these. Implemental leadership is an important part of congregational leadership, but it must be kept in relation with the other two spheres of leadership and certainly must not be given priority over the other two spheres. In fact, given the nature of our current context, this sphere should perhaps be listed third on the priority list.

Branson's second sphere is relational leadership. This sphere seeks to foster healthy connections between people and to build community. In this sphere, congregational leaders act as shepherds who encourage, empower, and build trust in the community. The relational nature of the Trinity calls us to develop relational connections within our congregations, and relational leadership is focused on this.⁵⁵ Leaders who do not attend to the relational sphere are wooden, dictatorial, or both! Whereas implemental leadership focuses on the goal, relational leadership focuses on the process, and more specifically, the personal and interpersonal dimensions of the process. For our

⁵⁴ These are the four characteristics of McDonaldization as set forth by George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press, 2000).

⁵⁵ In an interesting parallel from the business world, Charlotte Roberts also asserts that developing relational connectedness, or 'intimacy' to use her term, is a key function of leadership. The motivation for Roberts' assertion differs, however, from the motivating factor in the church. Whereas the motivation in the church should be Trinitarian correspondence, Roberts takes a functional position: intimate relationships result in greater efficiency. See Charlotte Roberts, "Reinventing Relationships: Leverage for Dissolving Barriers to Collaboration," in *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook: Strategies and Tools for Building a Learning Organization*, ed. Peter M. Senge (New York: Currency Doubleday, 1994), 71.

relationships to have Trinitarian correspondence, they need to be intentionally cared for. The relational sphere must be present because “within congregations, families and friendship need leadership so that gospel meanings can be embedded and healthy relationships can be nurtured.”⁵⁶

This raises the questions of ‘what are gospel meanings?’ and ‘how do we know whether or not they are embedded in our relationships?’ The third sphere of leadership, interpretive leadership, is required for a community to address these questions. This is perhaps the most important yet least considered sphere of leadership. Interpretive leadership helps a community to see connections between God, texts, context, congregations, and personal lives.⁵⁷ Interpretive leadership is about drawing out meanings from these connections.

This interpretive sphere can be further understood by looking at Scott Cormode’s Gardener model of pastoral leadership. The role of the Gardener is to till the soil and cultivate the plants. The Gardener creates the conditions for growth, but is keenly aware that she does not *cause* the growth. It is “the vocabulary that a minister plants in the congregation, the stories that she sows, and the theological categories that she cultivates [which] bear fruit when the congregation uses those words, stories, and categories to interpret their world.”⁵⁸ The focus of the Gardner is not on action, but on creating and pointing out meanings (which in turn inspire action). This can create discomfort for both leaders and followers who have traditionally viewed the role of a leader as being a ‘take-charge’ kind of person. The Gardener is not intent on boldly rushing forward. The Gardener is intent on nurturing deep understandings that are not just intellectual or theoretical, but are also emotive and visceral in the way that good poetry captures the whole of our beings.

The leader as poet is another apt metaphor for this interpretive role.⁵⁹ The poet listens to the voices around her.

⁵⁶ Branson: 4.

⁵⁷ See Ibid.: 4-6. By texts Branson means both Scripture and the traditions handed down to us.

⁵⁸ Cormode: 11.

⁵⁹ This image of leader as poet is one of four set forth by Alan Roxburgh. See Alan J. Roxburgh, *Crossing the Bridge : Church Leadership in a Time of Change* (Costa

The poet articulates what the people have been unable to say and the poet imagines what people have been unable to imagine. The poet's role is not that of strategist or manager; the poet is not concerned with functionality.⁶⁰ The poet asks challenging questions and invites a new way of seeing. The tools of the poet are metaphors and symbols. Roxburgh captures the poet's role well:

Functionality has become one of the mantras of our current ideology. Poets do not operate in this kind of world. Metaphors are not intended for functional purposes. They are meant to be lived in, savored, allowed to root down deep and take a form of their own. Metaphors are not to be controlled nor put to some practical use. They are like a virus in the body that surreptitiously enters the blood stream, lies deep in the body and begins a work of transformation. Poets use metaphor to create the imagination of an alternative world.⁶¹

It is the role of the poet to create new plausibility structures.⁶² When people in the congregation are overwhelmed by the demands of their work, the poet imagines for them an alternative world where people work less hours and make less money but have more life. When an adult Sunday school class is engaged in heated discussions about politics, it is the poet's role to help them to see the structural powers and economic forces that are involved and to imagine how the texts of our faith might speak to this context. We need more than poets to lead our congregations, but we must have poets to lead us in the essential work of interpretation.

The work of the poet or Gardener is not just to see for us, but to help us to see. As Cormode points out, the Gardener's role is not just to interpret for the congregation, but to help the congregation to do interpretive work, to create a

Mesa, CA: Percept Group Inc., 2000). He also describes these four images in his earlier work, Alan J. Roxburgh, *The Missionary Congregation, Leadership and Liminality* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997).

⁶⁰ Roxburgh, *Crossing the Bridge*, 126, 131.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 132.

⁶² I draw the term 'plausibility structure' from Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality : A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Co., 1966), 142-145.

congregation of interpreters.⁶³ Interpretive leadership, then, is a shared activity. It may be the pastor who gives it the most sustained attention and effort, but the interpretive work must be carried out by the whole congregation. When a woman in the congregation who is considering a particular purchase considers the effects of sweatshop labor and how that connects with her faith commitments and purchasing choices, she has been formed into an interpreter. When a group from the congregation wrestles with how to connect their evangelistic impulses with the social needs of their neighborhood, we see a group of people who have become interpreters. Nurturing a community of interpreters is a long process. It requires the patience and faith of a Gardener.

Empowerment of the whole people of God arises out of this interpretive sphere. Empowerment is often used to speak of something that is little more than delegation, and much of the literature on the empowerment of the laity falls into this category. But the type of empowerment I am referring to is transformative empowerment that emerges from the work of interpretation. A congregation needs to wrestle with meanings and needs to see meanings for itself rather than having these imposed upon it. Peter Senge has argued that structural explanations (in our case, lifting up meanings) are generative, that is, they produce change.⁶⁴ While delegation produces a change in actions, interpretive leadership generates a change in constitution (which is accompanied by a change in actions). Interpretive leadership changes the way a congregation understands its identity, its place, and its role. It leads to internal commitment rather than external commitment.

Chris Argyris describes external commitment as contractual compliance.⁶⁵ People functioning with external commitment carry out only what is expected of them or what they have been 'contracted' to do. They do not define the situation and so they feel little ownership of it. In contrast, internal commitment is developed when people define their

⁶³ Cormode: 11. Branson discusses this same point, drawing on the language of the philosopher Charles Peirce who spoke of a "community of interpreters." See Branson: 5.

⁶⁴ Peter M. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline : The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* (New York: Doubleday/Currency, 1990), 53.

⁶⁵ Chris Argyris, "Empowerment: The Emperor's New Clothes," *Harvard Business Review* (May-June, 1998): 99.

own tasks and when they decide for themselves the importance of a given task.⁶⁶ They develop a deeper sense of ownership in a project or organization and they are more willing to move beyond the initial tasks they have been given. Argyris argues that only internal commitment reinforces empowerment.⁶⁷ The internal commitment that emerges as a shared vision is not just an idea in people's heads but also a force in people's hearts.⁶⁸ Empowering the people of God is not primarily about allowing or encouraging them to do certain things. It is about forming a people with eyes to see and ears to hear-faith attributes that, if real, will then emerge in good works (James 2:14-26).

Interpretive leadership is needed for Christian practices to function at their best in our congregations. In the practices we have considered, I have suggested how meanings connected to the priesthood of all believers are present. These meanings must repeatedly be identified, lifted up, and wrestled with. Such interpretive work happens through vehicles such as Bible studies, discernment groups, informal conversations, Sunday school classes, and preaching. Interpretive leadership involves the on-going process of articulating the meanings carried by our practices and challenging our practices when they communicate deficient meanings. Our practices need interpreters.

Interpretive leadership is exercised when a leader offers up the idea that one's daily work can be a form of witness. It is exercised when a leader invites the congregation to reflect on the connections between the discernment process in Acts 15 and the congregation's current crisis. Interpretive leadership is exercised when a pastor points out connections and discontinuities between the priesthood of all believers, the role of the Holy Spirit, and the ways decisions are currently made in a congregation. It is exercised when a pastor chooses to confess his sins to another in the congregation, thereby setting forth a new plausibility structure for how masters and servants, leaders and followers, pastors and parishioners might relate. Interpretive leadership is exercised any time a poet lifts up the rich and formative metaphors and symbols of our practices.

⁶⁶ Ibid.: 100.

⁶⁷ Ibid.: 99.

⁶⁸ Senge, 206.

Cormode provides a helpful example of interpretive leadership. He constructs a scenario in which a local printing plant that is the primary employer in town announces it is closing down. How might the pastor and the congregation respond?

...the pastor cannot change whether or not the Elizabeth plant closes. But she can highlight which portions of the plant closing story are most salient for her congregation. And she can select which stories from Scripture and from the congregation's history to place alongside the plant closure. This is how a leader working within the Gardener model makes meaning.⁶⁹

This interpretive work sets the tone and focus for the congregation as it enters into the practice of discernment regarding how to respond to the news of the plant closure.

A congregation needs implemental, relational, *and* interpretive leadership. I have focused here on interpretive leadership because it is arguably the most important sphere in connection with Christian practices. Our Christian practices communicate significant meanings and are formative; interpretive leadership helps to lift up and shape these meanings and seeks to facilitate formation that is consistent with our faith commitments. By interpreting the practices and by creating *communities* of interpreters, such leadership promotes the priesthood of all believers.

4 CONCLUSION

"Mind the gap!" That has been the goal of this chapter: to mind the gap between a theology of the priesthood of all believers and the life of the local congregation. Building on MacIntyre's conception of practices, I have suggested that the Christian practices provide a way to close this gap. I have looked here at the practices of witness, discernment, and confession. Our understanding of the priesthood of all believers can help us to carry out these practices well, and when these practices are carried out well, they have within them meanings that form and nurture our congregations into the priesthood of all believers.

⁶⁹ Cormode: 13.

I have described three spheres of pastoral leadership: implemental, relational, and interpretive. Interpretive leadership is the sphere most central to Christian practices. We need people to do the interpretive work of lifting up meanings from within our practices and to help us make connections between those meanings and who we are as a people. We also need leaders who will foster whole communities of interpreters.

The priesthood of all believers finds its form and function as local congregations engage in Christian practices.

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