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The Practice of Church

LEE C. CAMP

In this issue of *Leaven*, Professor Joe Jones asserts that “any community, but especially the church, lives and has its practical identity in and through its characteristic and distinctive *discourses and practices*.” This is not a *normative* statement, but a *descriptive* one. That is, we do not here have a prescription that we should get about the business of developing “characteristic and distinctive discourses and practices.” Instead, it simply describes a reality: our identity is grounded in, flows out of, and is made possible by whatever particular discourses and practices we do have. That is, we get a good idea of who we really are not by examining the things we simply assert about who we are, but by examining the things we do together, and examining the account we give for those things.

This way of describing the nature of church is increasingly common in theological circles, especially among those who take seriously the revival of the logic of “virtue,” and those who approach theology from the stance of “narrative.” That is, these approaches display a keen awareness of the particularity of our knowledge (the particularity flowing from the particularity of our own story or stories, our narrative, as opposed to the supposedly objective knowing asserted by heirs of the Enlightenment). Such an approach opens up space to take ecclesiology with profound seriousness, because these approaches assume that apart from some sort of communal embodiment, our purported claims and convictions mean nothing. This fits with talk of “virtue,” for “virtue” talk asserts that the “goodness” or “badness,” the “right” or “wrong” of an action, habit, or skill is dependent upon the degree to which it helps a community attain its *telos*, its goal or function or purpose. To use more explicit New Testament language, our “faithfulness” is exhibited in the degree to which our common life lives out of and bears witness to the gospel.

Out of such an approach, I want to develop several considerations in this essay: first, using Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s book *Life Together*, I will further develop this description of the church as a community with distinctive discourses and practices. Second, I will address some of the hindrances to the church being such a faithful community. And third, I will point toward a few examples, providing some signs of hope.

COMMUNITY, DISCOURSES, AND PRACTICES

What might be some ways in which our “distinctive discourses and practices” faithfully embody the gospel? In my “Theology of the Church” class for undergraduate ministry majors at Lipscomb, we begin and end the course with Bonhoeffer’s *Life Together*. Bonhoeffer’s treatise was written while he was in the midst of shepherding a community of seminarians at *Finkenwalde*, an illegal seminary of the “Confessing Church” during the years following Hitler’s election, prior to the full outbreak of World War II. Bonhoeffer’s book is instructive for our concerns on at least two points: first, for his understanding of the purpose of the church or gathered Christian community. “Christianity means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ.”¹ As expected of his evangelical German Lutheran roots, the language of justification and the language of salvation by grace through faith alone figure prominently in his discussion: the Christian community exists as a people freely forgiven, freely saved, and graciously called together by the work of God. He insists that

1. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, trans. John W. Doberstein (NY: Harper & Row, 1954), 21.

we be a community that lives out of “God’s reality” rather than any of the varied “human ideals” that could sidetrack, pervert, or demolish the work of God in our midst. “The existence of any Christian life together depends on whether it succeeds at the right time in bringing out the ability to distinguish between a human ideal and God’s reality, between spiritual and human community.” Indeed, he continues, “the life or death of a Christian community is determined by whether it achieves sober wisdom on this point as soon as possible.”² With this starting point, the remainder of the book describes in significant detail what it might look like to be such a community.

This is important for a restoration movement such as our own, for our practice of church can be more about our own ideals than the reality God has set forth in Christ. So Bonhoeffer more pointedly states: “... life together under the Word will remain sound and healthy only where it does not form itself into a movement, an order, a society, a *collegium pietatis*, but rather where it understands itself as being a part of the one, holy, catholic, Christian Church, where it shares actively and passively in the sufferings and struggles and promise of the whole Church.”³ Bonhoeffer’s language of “healthy” and “sound” point us back toward the notion that “doing church” in a faithful manner is not and cannot be the simple repetition of certain acts or doctrines.

To assert this, however, is *not* the same thing as saying “it’s all a matter of the heart,” as if what we *do* makes no difference. The dichotomy between “heart” and external forms is a holdover from a variety of Enlightenment dichotomies; instead, we discover that form and function, medium and message, are inseparable. The question is whether our use or practice of certain forms and mediums properly, faithfully, and healthily embodies the appropriate function and message.⁴ That is, “spiritual love proves itself in that everything it says and does commends Christ.”⁵

Thus when Bonhoeffer discusses practices such as reading scripture, singing, solitude, or confession, he is constantly attentive to the rightful practice of such: *rightful* in the sense that the practice of these disciplines bears witness to the “divine reality” as opposed to “human ideals.” He refuses to reduce Christian community to a group of people who merely say they feel a certain thing in their heart. That is, he can talk—out of his starting point assuming salvation by grace through faith alone—about *doing* certain practices *rightly*. Indeed, he employs even the language of rightful “performance” of Christian disciplines. And, yet again, on the other hand, he knows that merely focusing upon simple external performance is likewise deadly. Rightful practice requires proper attention to both. So consider how Bonhoeffer discusses the church’s singing of the “new song” given to us in the gospel; and note that he does so employing one of our tradition’s important proof-texts:

“Sing and make melody in your heart to the Lord” (Eph 5.19). The new song is sung first in the heart. Otherwise it cannot be sung at all. The heart sings because it is overflowing with Christ. That is why all singing in the church is a spiritual performance. Surrender to the Word, incorporation in the community, great humility, and much discipline—these are the prerequisites of singing together. Where the heart is not singing there is no melody, there is only the dreadful melody of human self-praise. Where the singing is not to the Lord, it is singing to the honor of the self or the music, and the new song becomes a song to idols.⁶

Life Together provides numerous other examples of the manner in which a particular discipline depends upon the rightful practice of other disciplines: solitude depends upon the rightful practice of Christian com-

2. *Ibid.*, 37.

3. *Ibid.*

4. To point to one of the classic arguments in the Churches of Christ: it is a very legitimate, indeed necessary, question of whether we understand and practice baptism rightly. Then again, that very argument—the form it takes, the content it presupposes and carries—can be a healthy or unhealthy argument.

5. Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 36.

6. *Ibid.*, 58-59.

munity; and, the rightful practice of Christian community depends upon the rightful practice of solitude.⁷ Or, significantly, the chapter on Confession and Communion *follows* a chapter on ministry, in which Bonhoeffer describes the “the ministry of holding one’s tongue,” “the ministry of meekness,” “the ministry of listening,” “the ministry of helpfulness,” and “the ministry of bearing,” among other ministries. Only in that context does Bonhoeffer discuss confessing, and receiving confession: and anyone who has ever confessed their sins knows quite well that they would want those who receive their confession to be able to rightly practice such virtues.

HURDLES AND HINDRANCES

There are all sorts of ways in which we can pervert a practice. We can likely never exhaust the list of possibilities. But consider three: first, a practice of the faith that reduces the gospel to what we might call ritualism or moralism. Second, and in reaction to the first, an alternative error which reduces everything to the “spiritual” reduces the practice of the faith to one’s “heart.” This is what we might call pietism. These first two potential hurdles I shall discuss by means of two parables. And then third, I will briefly note the hindrance posed by the practice of fear.

1. A Reduction to “Ritualism” or “Moralism”

Of late, my two younger sons have begun playing baseball. Imagine a situation in which their love for baseball grows; let’s say they become baseball purists, wanting to take baseball seriously. They listen attentively to the coach, taking all his cues with utmost seriousness; they show up at every practice; they recruit neighborhood friends to join them, and when not involved in league play, they cobble together games on their own initiative in the neighborhood school yard.

But in time, there creeps in a loss of vision: rather than reading about the baseball greats because of their love of the game, they simply do so because they’ve developed an obsessive-compulsive disorder. Rather than showing up at practice because they love the sport, they show up because they are fearful of what might happen if they are not present. Rather than constantly holding before themselves models who play the game well, their fear gives rise to an obsession with particular rules: once, they lost a game because the pitcher happened to balk in the bottom of the last inning, and so it becomes part of the team’s culture to always talk about the time they lost on the balk. So distraught by this particular historical accident, the team dares not forget; the team keeps alive the story of “the game lost on the balk.”

Each season, the story of the balk grows a bit more intense, and when the occasional balk occurs—whether any serious consequence results or not—the team expresses its dismay with the offender. In fact, they mine the larger history of baseball, finding examples of those umpires who are themselves particularly obsessed to catch and call the balk, and these stories get repeated with ardent glee, especially those stories in which the call of a balk meant disastrous consequences for the offending team. But meanwhile, so obsessed with not balking, they forget to spend as much time attending to their batting, their throwing, or their fielding; but, mind you, there is little incident rate of balking, given that all the players—whether they are ever going to be pitchers or not—spend the now requisite hours in the seminar on the psychological hesitancy that gives rise to balking. They never miss practice; and they always show up at practice with the rulebook (the paragraph on balking highlighted, and the corner of that page turned down) accompanying their bat and glove in their canvas baseball bags. But their team never wins, never plays well, and never enjoys it. But they refuse to give up, and indeed shame those who do. “Baseball is just not what it used to be; it is a shame so many have left our team.”

7. I first noted this after reading Stanley Hauerwas make this observation. He apparently engages this issue to some degree (though evidently not a sustained engagement with Bonhoeffer) in *Performing the Faith*, (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2004), a book I’ve not yet read.

2. A Reduction to "Spiritualism" or "Pietism"

Imagine, on the other hand, a second way to pervert the practice of baseball: imagine a team of romantic baseball lovers. The smell of the franks and popcorn at the concession stand; the sound of a well-pitched ball solidly hit by a wooden bat; the sensation of glistening, dew-covered outfield grass just after sun-down. Imagine that a team, comprised of just such folks, encounters the team-that-never-balks, or, at least the team-that-is-desperate-never-to-balk. The romantics look down their nose at the non-balkers, they realize the emptiness and the poor performance of the non-balkers, they realize, indeed, that the non-balkers have corrupted the very practice of baseball. Concerned not to corrupt the sport themselves, they insist upon ever relishing the excitement, the passion, the romance, and the thrill of baseball. It is not non-balking that constitutes baseball, they insist. It is the love of the sport, the love of the game that really matters. They mock the lectureships on non-balking. Instead, their coach—intending never to become an obsessed non-balker—never broaches the subject of balking. Discussing balking may lead the team to confuse the game with the rules, he reasons. Moreover, not only should balking not be discussed; any kind of discussion of the rules should not take place. And since technique and discipline come potentially close to rule-obsession, they should likewise be eschewed.

Practice times begin to take new forms for them: there are times in which they, too, sit in the dugout, but rather than obsessing about the rules, they talk about how much they love those who invented baseball; they sit quietly and go to happy places in their mind, calling to mind the first time they chewed tobacco on the baseball diamond; they sing songs about how much they love the smell of frankfurters, and are quite sure that they have reached the epitome of baseball greatness when they get a new Jumbotron to project moving pictures of the great baseball stadiums and diamonds, with the lyrics of "Take Me Out to the Ball Game" super-imposed.

Indeed, they begin to tell one another that baseball is *not a corporate endeavor at all*; instead, baseball is about one's personal relationship with the Creator of baseball, and one can actually be a proficient baseball player apart from membership on any team. In fact, the primary marks of growth in being a baseball player are the times of solitude one spends meditating upon baseball. When they do, on occasion, get on the diamond, they're careful never to throw the ball too hard, as it may accidentally hit someone, or cause someone to feel that they are not good enough players themselves; they always lob the ball; they never swing too hard; and they always do so with a smile on their face, making sure that they close out the practice with a time of happy reflection. Above all, they're friendly, because you never can tell when the friendliness of a lover of baseball could convert someone else to the love of baseball.

3. The Practice of Fear

The biblical canon repeatedly enjoins the people of God not to be afraid. Fear, and its corollary practices of anxiety, aggressiveness, shame, and resentment, poses such a threat to the practice of faith that the Hebrews epistle calls it a slavery, precisely from which we are delivered by the resurrecting God in the work of Christ. Christ came to "free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death" (Heb 2.15).

I mention fear here simply because it seems to be the elephant in the room so seldom discussed; and yet it is an elephant with which young and old alike are often controlled, manipulated, and mastered. We fear what others think of us; we fear being shamed by the brethren; we fear change; we fear things staying the same; we fear for our reputations; we fear one another; we fear not getting our needs met; we fear not getting our wants; we fear terrorists; we fear the government; we fear unhappiness; we fear what will happen to our children; we fear (these days, again) immigrant workers; we fear death. As is the case with numerous sins (all sins?), unacknowledged fear becomes a slave-master; we may be ever so quiet with one another about our true motives, give pious sounding rationalizations, and yet quietly make decisions based upon our fears, rather than our trust; and the church thus becomes enslaved, because it is holding not to the "divine reality," but "human ideals."

Years ago, while serving on the staff of a church, we had had a particularly beautiful men's retreat, in which a significant level of openness and honesty occurred, in a context of trust and trustworthiness. Reflecting upon that event later in a staff meeting, we discussed whether we could not have such an ongoing expectation of a place in our church gatherings—say a classroom set aside on Wednesday nights—where one could go, talk openly and honestly, and expect that others would honor that openness and honesty by refusing to gossip or mention what they had heard there. “No, it won't work,” said one of our elders. “Why not?” I objected somewhat defensively, “It works all the time in twelve-step meetings.” “Because,” he replied, “our people are not desperate; addicts are desperate.”

Not too long ago, a friend who is a recovering alcoholic reported to me that an acquaintance of his, new to recovery herself, was in a meeting with him at their church. She, in her new-found excitement about recovery, asked why the church couldn't be more like AA, in this practice of openness about our failings and fears and feelings. “Because,” my friend replied, “you can't save your ass and your face at the same time. Church is about saving face, and recovery about saving your ass.”

Whether these are fair judgments or not, such perceptions indicate a very real hurdle to be faced.

SIGNS OF HOPE

One of the reasons I have my “Theology of the Church” class finish the course with a second reading of *Life Together* is to point them to a terribly important contention Bonhoeffer makes near the beginning of the book. After a semester of giving them new tools with which to do social critique of both the larger culture of “world” and the more local culture of “church,” they could easily fall prey to a thorough-going cynicism. But Bonhoeffer insists that our task is not to judge the Church, but serve the Church. Thus he insists:

God hates visionary dreaming; it makes the dreamer proud and pretentious. The man who fashions a visionary ideal of community demands that it be realized by God, by others and by himself. He enters the community of Christians with his demands, sets up his own law, and judges the brethren and God Himself accordingly When things do not go his way, he calls the effort a failure. When his ideal picture is destroyed, he sees the community going to smash. So he becomes, first an accuser of his brethren, then an accuser of God, and finally the despairing accuser of himself.⁸

Thus our task is dangerous if we simply harp upon the hurdles, sit in cynicism and gripe that God has put us in the midst of a particularly difficult community of self-righteous, or hopelessly romantic, or shaming and fear-based brothers and sisters. Instead, part of the practice of Christian faith should include looking, as William Stringfellow put it, for “tokens of the resurrection.” What glimpses of faithful practice do we see? To pose some answers to such a question is not to prescribe what every Christian community should look like; but by catching glimpses of others' faithful performance, we might catch glimpses of ways we might faithfully improvise ourselves.

As I write this, I am returning to Nashville from a weekend with the Church of the Servant King (CoSK) in Eugene, Oregon. Theirs is a story apparently little known among Stone-Campbell folks, though the roots of some of the earliest members were grounded in Christian Churches and Churches of Christ. Desiring Christian community, they have developed distinctive discourses and practices of life together. Some of these are:

First, they covenant themselves to live in community with one another. This takes the shape, typically, of having more than one nuclear family living in the same residence. Consequently, one might find, say, two single people, and one or two married couples, of which one or both of those couples may have children, living together. In the household, the members share the mundane responsibilities of life together; parents

8. Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 28.

remain parents, but other members of the household assist in the duties and joys of raising children; and the week is marked by two or more regularly shared meals. A number of such households constitute the larger church community of forty-fifty covenanted members. When I asked members what they found most joyful about their way of life, a consistent answer was simply the joy of living their lives together, sharing their lives on a consistent basis with brothers and sisters in Christ.

Second, they do not baptize babies—and they do not baptize, typically, their adolescents. Following the lead of sixteenth century Anabaptists, as well as the lead of earlier leaders in the Stone-Campbell movement, baptism is not practiced as an adolescent rite-of-passage, an expected response once a young person reaches that ever fluid “age of accountability.” Instead, one member told me that they teach their young “about God and morality,” but do not even teach them much about Jesus when they are young, so as not to trivialize the profound call to discipleship. While this might sound shocking, their practice reflects how most of our church communities practice wedding vows: that is, we would sharply question whether a twelve-year-old child could actually be ready to take a vow of marriage; and yet we grow concerned when our twelve-year-olds have not taken the vow of baptism. Thus the CoSK folks do not expect their teens to be baptized, and do not pressure them to do so.

Third, they call one another “brother” and “sister”—they called me, their visitor, “brother.” This habit of speech is one which I regularly experienced as a youth in our small congregation in Alabama: members fifty or sixty years older than me were “Brother and Sister Fields” or “Brother and Sister Tumlin.” Such a practice illustrates the grave importance of the most simple behaviors. Such habits create, often in deep subconscious ways, a reality of community and shared common goals. Such habits create a disposition that simultaneously bears witness to the reality of a life together, and also provides ground for extending that kind of life together. That is, it is not “just talk,” but an expression of their common life. So, once having covenanted to live their lives together, should one member go out from them due to an unresolved conflict, they do not see such a departure as a member simply “leaving the church,” shopping for another church down the street or across town. Instead, such a departure is more like having an alienated family member, or going through a divorce.

Fourth, they practice hospitality. Their daily life is the hard practice of hospitality: that is, they have welcomed one another into their common life, and then they regularly welcome others into their home. The simple fact that there is a towel hook labeled “guest” on the back of the bathroom door speaks significantly to their skillfulness in welcoming guests. This is but one exercise in their manner of sharing communion, for their practice of gathered worship begins by breaking bread together, followed by a common meal, closed with the cup, and followed by a time of praise and thanksgiving.

Fifth, is their practice of “priesting.” Taking seriously the Anabaptist conception of the “priesthood of all believers,” they meet regularly in groups of three or four to confess their sins, inquire into one another’s well-being, and intercede in prayer on behalf of one another. This practice of humility and submission is likewise practiced in their sustained oral wisdom: that is, rather than seeing their life together as a model which all other believers should emulate, the members readily discuss the difficulties, hurts, pains, and disappointments that have arisen in their common life together. No self-righteous conceit, no romantic indulgence, but realistic, gritty awareness that life together is often very difficult, but joyous nonetheless.

Plenty of other signs of hope point us toward a well-practiced faith: Some are re-discovering that the traditional church calendar engenders a more faithful shaping of our communities than does the secular calendar (with its Valentine’s, President’s, Veteran’s, and Independence Days). Some are indeed discovering that the practices employed in recovery communities are very old Christian disciplines; and thus a church in Texas, in response to lives devastated by addictions, has seen one of its primary tasks as shepherding and encouraging brothers and sisters in the early stages of recovery. I continue to be humbled by students who meet on their own initiative to confess their sins to one another; and moreover, I’m humbled by witnessing

a new generation which appears to know, instinctively, that faith is not something apart from culture, but a particular culture itself, grounded in practices such as sharing, loving enemies, practicing reconciliation, and welcoming strangers.

In these and manifold other ways, we continue to discover that both form and function, both heart and external realities, may and must inseparably bear witness to the good news that Jesus is Lord, in our own life together.

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