

One New Book for the Preacher

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PRACTICING OUR FAITH: A WAY OF LIFE FOR A SEARCHING PEOPLE,
Edited by Dorothy C. Bass, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997.

Dorothy Bass introduces this collection of essays about the practice of Christian faith by saying, "We yearn once again for a way of life that is whole, and touched by the presence of God....We yearn for a richer and deeper understanding of what it means to live as Christians in a time when basic patterns of human relationship are changing all around us. We want to know what Christian faith has to do with our work, with friendship and marriage, with the way we raise our children, with public and political life, with how we spend our money. Some Christians cut the search short, perhaps after finding that when they ask, they get stock answers that are no real help at all. But most of us continue to look for greater insight into how our faith can help us discern what we might do and who we might become."

In an attempt to facilitate such discernment, vice president for religion at Lilly Endowment, Inc., Presbyterian minister and educator, Craig Dykstra, invited Dorothy Bass to join him in gathering a group of scholars and theologians to discuss the practice of Christian faith in daily life. Bass is a minister in the United Church of Christ and director of the Valparaiso Project on the Education and Formation of People in Faith. They recruited eleven others, men and women, representing diverse religious, geographical, ethnic backgrounds from Catholic and Protestant traditions, to form a community of dialogue about spiritual formation. They met and discussed the challenges of Christian life on the eve of a new millennium, prayed together, and shared ideas about essential practices of Christian faith.

The result of their dialogue and work together is this collection of essays in fourteen chapters. Co-authored by Bass and Dykstra, the first and final chapters serve to introduce the book by describing its formation, and to conclude it by challenging readers to integrate their faith in practical ways every day. Their collection seeks not only to provide help for the sake of individual sanctification but also for the purpose of building up the church as the body of Christ in the world. The twelve Christian practices included, each separately authored and given a chapter are: 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. As editor of the collection, Bass is clear to say that these practices are not a complete guide to faithfulness, but explains that these practiced together and over time will deepen our relationship with God, one another, and indeed the whole creation.

At first glance, these chapter headings raise some questions about how these particular practices were chosen and others were not. Where is prayer, for example? The delight of the book is that some familiar disciplines of faith are found in surprising places. M. Shawn Copeland, a Catholic laywoman and professor of theology at Marquette University, considers prayer in her contribution, Saying Yes and Saying No. "If we are to grow in faithful living, we need to renounce the things that choke

off the fullness of life that God intended for us, and we must follow through on our commitments to pray, to be conscientious, and be in mutually supportive relations with other faithful persons. We must learn the practice of saying no to that which crowds God out and yes to a way of life that makes space for God.” She discusses prayer in a larger consideration of Christian asceticism from a historical and biblical perspective, and includes very practical suggestions on how to move toward a more whole and holy life.

Other thought-provoking chapters include *Testimony*, written by Thomas Hoyt, Jr., a New Testament scholar and bishop in the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church. With concrete examples and stories from congregational life he reflects on the importance of truth telling in family, community, preaching, and worship. Acknowledging our life in a world where falsehood is strong and truth too often relative he invites the community of faith to a deepened understanding of what it means to bear witness and to practice telling the truth. In her chapter, *Dying Well*, Amy Plantinga Pauw, professor of theology at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, does an excellent job considering the Christian experience of death, from loss and lament to the source of our hope and ultimately as an affirmation of faith. The strength of these and other essays is the way they bring fresh insight to old familiar Christian disciplines and articulate everyday life as theological enterprise.

As with any edited collection, some contributions are better than others. Some are more biblically grounded; some are more creatively presented and interesting. And while the book makes no pretence to be exhaustive, each of the practices treated is worthy of deeper consideration. A minister friend of mine taught this book for an adult Sunday school class for fourteen weeks, taking a chapter each week. The class became overwhelmed by the process of trying to integrate these practices too quickly and exhausted by trying to the point of giving up. Reflecting on that class’s experience, he says now it would have been better to spend as much as a month on each chapter and to probe a little deeper.

Beyond its insight into Christian living and its use in adult education, this is a good book for preaching about the practice of faith. The essays embody the practices described with biblical reflection, consideration of the topics in church history, and narrative illustration. Most preachers of mainline denominations may shy away telling people how to live, but this book offers practical helps preachers and congregations might welcome. The season of Pentecost is a very appropriate time to consider how the church lives and carries out its mission in community. This book would be a good guide to a summer series on practicing the faith.