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To cite this article: David Benson (2019): A litany of practices, Practical Theology

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1756073X.2019.1565080>



Published online: 07 Jan 2019.



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AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL REFLECTION



A litany of practices

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ABSTRACT

Emerging from the experience of a Brisbane-based intentional Christian community, this reflection explores how right belief, right desire and right action may fuse when discipleship centres on embodied spiritual practices. Spiritual formation, like physical training, takes repetitive exercise against resistance under supervision; and yet, lackadaisical disciples readily dismiss classic disciplines and cast off traditional liturgies as hackneyed litanies. Through enriching everyday actions and secular practices with cognitively deep and affectively engaging rituals, we can powerfully appeal to the imagination through the body in this age of apatheism. In so doing, we participate in shaping committed spiritual athletes who together work out the way of Jesus for the life of the world.

KEYWORDS

Practices; body; imagination; discipline; liturgy; exercise

When my wife, Nikki, and I founded Christ's Pieces (christspieces.org) – an intentional Christian community in the back-blocks of Brisbane, Australia – we built upon a core conviction: embodied spiritual practices matter. It's not enough to be informed and have all your beliefs in order. Plenty of people 'believe right' in the cognitive sense, but their lives are functionally unredeemed. Their desires are dis-oriented, and their actions betray the way of Christ in the everyday. Orthodoxy, then, calls for travel companions, orthopathy and orthopraxy, in the journey of faith to 'love right' (Smith 2009, 62–63; Roth 2016).

In our therapeutic and consumerist context, it's tempting to believe that holiness can happen by proxy as we procure Sunday services. The pastor preaches, we listen and nod – familiar with the drill – and walk out feeling spiritually fit. In reality, however, we are flabby and in no better shape than when we began. From my background in exercise science, I noticed a parallel: even the best personal trainer will fail to get results if her client only watches but never lifts weights. Instead, we need to train, to discipline, to form our bodies against resistance and under supervision (1 Corinthians 9:27). Only then will we be transformed. In the Garden of Gethsemane, the place of testing, Jesus wasn't joking: weary disciples drift from attentive faith even when the spirit is willing, for 'the body is weak' (Matthew 26:41). What better description is there of the western postmodern malaise and the proliferation of 'apatheism' (Brian and Sixsmith 2018; McCrindle 2017, 9–10, 16)?

Embodied practices matter in the process of spiritual formation. And yet, parallels with body building run even deeper. There is a reason why gym membership is often purchased, but rarely exercised. Frankly, weight training is hard work. And it's awfully repetitive. Unfortunately, the same goes with faith building and cheap church membership. In this age of authenticity, following our feelings from novelty to novelty, the disciplines essential to discipleship – solitude and simplicity, fasting, quiet times, confession and so forth – appear tedious and tiring (Q Ideas 2018). G. K. Chesterton's assessment is apt: 'The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult; and left untried' (Chesterton 1994, 37). The double meaning of 'litany', far from ironic, is expected. Our timeworn litanies of prayer and Scripture reading, the clerical call and congregational response, is perceived as an insincere, monotonous and boring recitation of tired words: a litany of woes. What, then, should we do? And how might attention to our bodies help?

At Christ's Pieces, we cherish the 'living faith of the dead' (Pelikan 1984, 65), and refuse to jettison traditional formation. We celebrate classic disciplines to shape the soul (Foster 2018) and are convinced of the power of the Word to renew our minds (Orr 2018). Aligned with the project of 'Deep Church' (Walker and Bretherton 2013), we seek a storehouse of treasures old and new (Matthew 13:52), asking: 'How can we both listen to the wisdom of ages past and be open to the ongoing creative work of God today?' (Benson 2018). This calls for a synergy of thinking and doing, knowing and being, willing and wanting, 'that honours the rich inter-relatedness of the cognitive and the affective' (Faroe 2013, 16).

Cognitively, it has meant wrestling at the intersection of the Scriptures and prophetic voices calling for new forms of being the church in a post-Christendom context (Murray 2018). As this 'religionless age' continues to unfold, we need space to seek wisdom in response to the twin questions of contemporary discipleship: 'Who is Jesus Christ, for us, today? ... [and] Who are we, for Jesus Christ, today?' (Bonhoeffer 2010, 362–364; Stackhouse 2018, 207). Affectively, however, it means taking seriously the bodily processes of habit formation (Smith 2016). To engage ill-disciplined, distracted and even jaded 'apprentices' of Jesus (Hauerwas 1991, 101–102), we must leverage our senses, thereby capturing the imagination with rich pictures and compelling stories that shape our loves toward the kingdom of God (Smith 2013, 124–125). Repetition is simply how we learn, however this 'litany of practices' need not bore. It becomes a gateway into a rule of life replete with meaning-full liturgies, traditional and contemporary, forming the image of Christ in his followers (Galatians 4:19; Scandrette 2011).

For our community, 'Open Book' (christspieces.org/open-book) epitomises this fusion and safe place to experiment.¹ It is our spiritual gymnasium where the heavy-lifting of faith formation takes place. We curate sessions to wonder and walk out what it means to follow Christ at our cultural cross road. Over five fortnightly sessions, we meditate on a timely tome, marrying the key cognitive themes of the book with imaginative and highly sensory practices; we trial these practices on the night as a model, but exercise daily until we next meet and debrief what difference it made in walking Jesus' way for the life of the world.

After toying with dozens of definitions, we characterised Christian practices as:

... rich and repetitive actions we do,

over time and often together,

which engage our senses and imagination,

reminding us of God's presence

and aiming us at His Kingdom. (Benson 2015)

Far from replacing traditional liturgies – such as reciting the Apostles' Creed and praying the Jesus prayer, aligning with the church calendar, or practicing foot washing, hospitality and the sign of the cross – we tend to improvise and elaborate. We seek creative cultural equivalents that 'thicken' current bodily habits and regular secular activities already in place; brushing your teeth, washing the dishes, pouring a drink, driving the car, playing with the dog, can each be enriched as a channel for worship, wonder, and virtue formation under the Spirit's supervision. The challenge is to build a litany of practices that you carry outside the Sunday church gathering to live during the week. Space permits only a sample of three such sensory experiments, with the growing repertoire available online (N. Benson 2018).

As part of our exploration of integrating faith and everyday work (Sherman 2011), we placed empty communion cups representing our lives onto dry sponges representing the needs of our colleagues, situating this visual metaphor at our workplace to enact first thing in the day. While slowly filling this cup with water, we asked the Spirit to supply us with power and wisdom to play our part on the job; then, as the water overflowed onto the sponge, we prayed for eyes to see aridity around us, and for this same provision to overflow our lives in renewing a thirsty world through the very nature of our occupation.

As we meditated on imaging God as sexual beings (Grant 2015), I was captured by the practice of 'Sacred Skin'. Having provided each member with fragrant soap and oil, we would take special care whilst showering daily to wash our feet, then drying them carefully before anointing with the sign of the cross. As we recited 1 Corinthians 6:19 – 'Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit' – this practice made tangible the call to honour our naked flesh as sacred amidst what could otherwise be considered mundane, profane or unimportant. It cultivated holiness as relates to our physical selves.

My favourite practice was from our series on stewarding the gift of creation in an ecologically aware age (Pope Francis 2015). After telling the story of St. Francis, we cut out hessian squares, representing his rough garb, trading down to find transformation. My hessian square sits in my wallet, on top of my visa card. Each time I open my wallet to spend, it reminds me to pray. 'God, this money is yours. Help me live simply. What would you have me leverage this money for?' (Thus far it's saved me a tidy sum, going for the standard latte over the drinking-bowl sized coffee with scones on the side!)

In all these ways and more, our community is thankful for this litany of embodied spiritual practices. Through appeal to the senses and affections, fused with deep thought, we become participants in the reformation of Christ's body, through the power of the Spirit, to the glory of God.

Note

1. In the educational context, I have constructed the Malyon Theological College Course, 'Theology for Everyday Life' around this same fusion of deep cognitive content and embodied

spiritual practices. See <http://traverse.org.au/base/everyday-theology/>, especially Module 9 where we construct an 'Everyday Theology of the Body: Discipline and Play in God's Kingdom'.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

David Benson is the Director of Traverse (traverse.org.au), the Malyon Centre for Bridging Church and Culture. He lectures in practical theology, worldviews and philosophy at Malyon Theological College, affiliated with the Australian College of Theology, based in Brisbane, Queensland. His work concerns pluralistic dialogue and the public expression of Christian faith in a post-Christendom context, toward the flourishing of all. With his wife, Nikki, Dave leads the intentional Christian community, Christ's Pieces (christspieces.org).

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