

Faith Formation Through Guided Participation in Practice

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Abstract

In this study I want to explore faith formation through the framework of practice. First, I will describe discipleship as a lifelong process of identity formation, defining Christian religious education as a faith community's intentional work of equipping people to walk in the way of Jesus through apprenticeship in faith practices. I will argue that this process is more about the teaching of practices and engaging in theological reflection on practices than it is about dispensing correct information. This idea is not original with me, but has been expounded by many others particularly in the past decade in the U.S., as part of a larger movement within theological discourse emphasizing the centrality of practice. Second, I will describe some resources from educational theorists that can help us to understand what it means to educate through practices toward an identity as Christians. And finally, I will suggest that in our complex, broken and wounded world, as Christian religious educators we especially have a calling to equip disciples in two urgent faith practices: earth-care, and dealing with conflict.

Key Words

Faith formation, Framework of practice, Discipleship, Identity formation, Apprenticeship in faith practices, Broken and wounded world, Earth-care, Dealing with conflict.

신앙형성과 원칙에 따르는 실천의 참여

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논문 요약

이 연구는 첫째로 제자도를 정체성 형성의 평생 과정으로 설명한다. 그것은 기독교 종교교육을 신앙 공동체의 의도적인 사역으로 정의하는 것으로, 신앙 실천의 견습을 통해서 예수의 길을 따라가도록 도와주는 활동을 의미한다. 연구자는 이러한 과정이 실천의 교육이고 실천에 대한 신학적 성찰에 참여하는 것으로, 정확한 정보를 제공하는 것보다 위에 있는 것으로 접근한다. 둘째는 교육 이론가들의 자료를 간단하게 설명하는데, 그러한 이론은 기독교인으로서의 정체성을 지향하는 실천을 통해 교육하는 것이 무엇을 의미하는지에 대해서 가르쳐 준다. 그리고 마지막으로 본 연구는 깨지고 상처 난 세계의 관점에서, 기독교 종교교육가로서 두 가지 긴급한 신앙적 실천을 위해서 제자를 세우는 소명을 제시한다. 하나는 지구를 보호하는 것이고, 다른 하나는 갈등을 다루는 방법이다.

〈 주제어 〉

제자도, 정체성 형성, 신앙 실천의 견습, 정체성 지향의 실천, 깨지고 상처 난 세계, 지구의 보호, 갈등 관리

I. Introduction

In our short time together I want to explore faith formation through the framework of practice. First, I will describe discipleship as a lifelong process of identity formation, defining Christian religious education as a faith community's intentional work of equipping people to walk in the way of Jesus through apprenticeship in faith practices. I will argue that this process is more about the teaching of practices and engaging in theological reflection on practices than it is about dispensing correct information. This idea is not original with me, but has been expounded by many others particularly in the past decade in the U.S., as part of a larger movement within theological discourse emphasizing the centrality of practice (Bass & Dykstra, 2011; Bass & Dykstra, 2008; Dykstra & Bass, 2002; Paulsell, 2019; Volf & Bass, 2001; Winner, 2018). Second, I will describe (very briefly) some resources from educational theorists that can help us to understand what it means to educate through practices toward an identity as Christians.

And finally, I will suggest that in our complex, broken and wounded world, as Christian religious educators we especially have a calling to equip disciples in two urgent faith practices: earth-care, and dealing with conflict. Of course, these practices are not the exclusive "property" of Christians! We share them with people in other faith traditions who also hold commitments to human responsibility for the earth's well-being and for the work of peace-building. At the same time, these are crucial practices to which Christians give our particular theological imprint of meaning making: they are practices through which Christians embody faith in the God who created the earth and all that dwells within it, and the Christ whose very being is reconciliation. So let me get started.

II. Being Formed in Faith: Apprenticeship in Practices

How do people come to have faith? The classic Reformed Christian response to this, of course, is that we do not make faith happen at all: faith, when it takes root in a person's life, is a gift from God. So we read in the letter to the

Ephesians, (2:8-9) “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— not the result of works, so that no one may boast” (New Revised Standard Version Bible, 1989).

Thus the age old conundrum: if faith is a gift from God, why engage in religious education at all? My response, again drawing from my own Christian theological heritage in the Reformed tradition, is this: We educate because gifts need to be nurtured if they will thrive and grow into their fullness. Through Christian religious education, we join God, we participate with God in what God is already doing, in God’s mission to reconcile and redeem all of God’s creation. We help to create the conditions under which God’s gift of faith can take hold and be realized in a person’s, and a community’s, life.

In contrast to the theological affirmation that faith is a gift from God, however, many existing models of religious education treat faith like something that teachers, evangelists, and pastors can personally bring into being by their actions. Such notions of faith may be further accentuated when religious education takes its cues from “schooling.” Schooling models of religious education draw from patterns developed in (secular) education’s organization of schools, to create methods of religious teaching and learning. The commonly-followed structuring of religious education into age-graded classrooms (Sunday school) is not the only way to educate religiously. But it is extremely common, as a byproduct of the efforts of nineteenth- and twentieth- century church educators to combine Jesus’ call to “go and make disciples” with an emphasis found in the then-new science of developmental psychology and in the strong pull of consumer culture (Mercer, 2005).

Schooling models of religious education have their place as a means of acquainting students with what to believe. But problematically, sitting at a desk or around a table may not do much to acquaint learners with how to believe—that is, how one may actually be a believer. This is because educational methods drawn from schooling models treat learning as an individual’s process of accumulating information in their heads. Education gets reduced to a wholly cognitive, information-processing activity. And, accordingly, when used exclusively as the only form and structure for learning, these schooling models of religious educa-

tion are out of touch with some of the best contemporary understandings of lived theology and of education. Education for faith—Christian religious education—has to be more than the accumulation of information. It has to be more than a merely cognitive activity alone. Education for faith is about a people being formed and transformed in a new identity. Here we can take a clue from the Apostle Paul who wrote, “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” (2 Corinthians 5:17). All learning, all education, is about becoming something that one is not already; Christian religious education is about becoming a new creation as a disciple of Jesus. And so let me offer my working definition of Christian Religious Education in this vein:

Christian religious education is a companioned walk in the way of Jesus, through which the church apprentices persons into its transformative practices for the sake of the world that God loves.

- It is formation in a new identity within a community whose life is shaped by stories, symbols, and practices of God’s love, justice, and reconciliation. A “companioned walk” means we do it together.
- This education therefore centrally involves guided participation in practices of faith; the nurture of religious imagination (populating imaginations with stories and symbols of faith); and critically reflective engagement in the church’s ministry for the liberatory transformation of the world.

From this perspective, religious education is formation in an identity, in a set of practices, and into a way of life.

III. Christian Practices

What is a practice? What do you think of when you hear this term? Perhaps you think of a physician who practices medicine or a musician who practices playing their instrument. These are examples of practices. When I and other prac-

tical theologians use the term “practices” in relation to lived religious experience, this is what we mean:

- A practice is a social, shared activity, done over time (even across generations) in a community.
- A practice is a matrix of actions, language, symbols and thought held together. Practices, writes my Yale colleague Miroslav Volf (2010), are normatively shaped by what we believe (theology), but at the same time the very nature of Christian belief is such that lived practices of faith are always already internal to the expression of belief we call theology. That is, what we believe is already shaped by our actions, by what we do. This relationship between thinking and acting, between speech and performance is not a one-way relationship. It is mutual, going in both directions.
- Practices involve standards of excellence. That is, one way we know that a particular act is a practice is that one can get better at it by continuing to do it and by honing one’s skills.

A practice has “goods internal to it” as Alistair McIntyre writes (1984, 187). That is, one does not just achieve some kind of good at the end, as a result of engaging in a particular practice, but participation in the practice itself ‘contains’ goods that are part of it. For example, in Christian prayer practices, it is not only the “result” of our prayers that constitute their good, but also the fact that in the act of praying, we experience goods such as the deepening of conscious contact with the Holy, and the formation of a strong sense of shared community by those who pray together, among others. Here is an example: my student at Yale Divinity School, Mr. Ban Souk Kim (who, by the way, also is an alumnus of your school, Seoul Theological University), wrote his thesis last year about the Korean prayer practice of *tongsungkido* as it occurs in immigrant contexts of Korean American churches. There, he notes, this vibrant prayer form not only provides a way for the faithful to pour out their hearts to a listening God. It also functions as a process for embodying the collective sense of *han* encountered in the often-traumatic experience of migration. The latter is an aspect or a “good”

contained internally within the practice of tongsungkido in Korean-American congregations, such that the very act of participating in the practice produces something of value, aside from its primary aim as a form of communication with the Divine.

So, is practice alone sufficient to educate for faith? The American pragmatist philosopher and educator John Dewey argued that learning happens through the combination of experience, and critical reflection on experience (Dewey, 1916, 1944; Rodgers, 2002). But here's the problem: in church education today, there is a marked tendency to separate faith experiences from talking about faith—and to treat only the latter as “teaching.” Much of our teaching in faith communities involves reflection minus the key dimension of experience. Sometimes, though, we offer experience minus the learning opportunity of reflection, which is just as problematic! For example, when we invite people to participate in worship but fail to offer any opportunities to learn more about Christian theological understandings of worship beyond the bounds of our own experience alone, it is like giving them access to basic practices with no opportunities to move to a deeper and more complex level of meaning-making in relation to those practices.

Here is an example from my context of worship in my Presbyterian church in the US. in which adults and children worship together in the same service. We pass a basket around each Sunday to receive the offering, an action that is part of the larger practice of Christian stewardship. Even a very young child can participate in this practice, guided by adults or older children in the community. Initially the child “practices” Christian stewardship at the level of putting coins given to them by the parents for that purpose into the basket. Perhaps the internalized meanings of this practice for a child of 3 or 4 years is the feeling of competency that comes from sharing an action that the whole community participates in. Perhaps the meanings of this practice have to do with the enjoyment of belonging and the aesthetics of hearing the jingle of the coins as they drop into the basket. At some point, perhaps when the child is five or six years of age, they turn to the parent and say, “what happens to the money we put into the offering basket?” The moment creates an opportunity to expand the meanings held within the child's participation in the congregational practice of

financial stewardship, by telling the child about how the church uses these monetary resources for its mission to care for those who are hungry, suffering, and impoverished.

This conversation constitutes a form of theological reflection on practice, at the level of a child's experience and understanding. The next time the child puts coins into the basket, the practice of offering has expanded meanings and significance. Perhaps at some point the child learns the gospel story of the widow who gave all that she had as an offering to God. This simple practice of participating in the weekly offering then takes on increasingly complex meanings through the worldview of scripture. Think of how much less it would mean if practice, and reflection on practice, remained separate from one another: just an act of throwing coins into a basket; or just a nice religious story about a generous woman. Held together, each gives deeper significance to the other, and over time they become part of a larger pattern of practices that constitutes a way of life identifiable as Christian.

One might tend to see the above example as trivial, to ask whether a child's action of placing coins in the offering plate really has so much significance. I would argue that all people engage in practices appropriate to their development and context, and that seemingly simple or insignificant practices today become the basis for expanded and more complex practices of tomorrow. This child's action in worship obviously is not that of making a commitment to tithe ten percent of their income for the rest of their life! But it is the beginning of a socially and theologically defined practice of that giving one's financial resources is part of being a Christian. Many decades ago, Christian religious educators and theorists like David Ng, John Westerhoff, and James W. Fowler asserted that people of all ages can "have faith." Children, they each said in their own ways, have faith at a child's level experience and development. But it is not somehow less than the faith of an adult see (Blazer & Fowler, 1989; Ng & Thomas, 1981; Westerhoff, 2012; Fowler, 1981).

Both teaching and learning must be based in practice, but then must be deepened by shared reflection in the light of scripture and theology. Both practice and reflection—'doing' the practices and talking about them--are needed if

people are going to take on a new identity as Christ's disciples. If we as religious educators want our students, whether children or adults, to take on the identity of being Christian, we need to apprentice them into the central practices that mark our identity—hospitality to strangers, hymn singing; prayer and care; reading and interpreting stories of faith old and new, feeding hungry, support for weak, honoring all persons—and then help learners to make meaning out of the practices in which they engage by thinking biblically and theologically about those practices.

IV. Educational Theory

I draw the concept of “guided participation in practices” from the works of educators Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, cultural biologist Barbara Rogoff, and other social learning theorists who rely on the insights of Lev Vygotsky (Rogoff, 1990, 2003; Rogoff & Lave, 1984; Rogoff, Turkianis, & Bartlett, 2001; Vygotsky, Hanfmann, & Vakar, 1962; Wenger, 1998). Lave and Wenger asked in their research, “how do people take on identities in different cultural communities? How do people assume different professional identities?” Both are questions about formation into a new identity. Their findings suggest that identity formation happens not by telling people what an identity is, but by apprenticeship into identity—what Rogoff calls “guided participation in practice” (Rogoff, 2003; Rogoff & Lave, 1984). Lave and Wenger note that for identity formation to happen, learners must have access to participation in the core practices of the “identity community” to which they seek entrance. Of course, it has to start small, on the periphery, and then work into the central, core practices as a newcomer learns them over time and becomes better at performing them. This makes the learning of practices a lifelong, socially and culturally situated endeavor.

The theory of guided participation in practice underscores that learning is always social. It happens in and through relationships, and not merely in the individual heads of learners. The American educational philosopher Jerome Bruner speaks of this interdependent, relational nature of learning in terms of “scaffolding”

(Bruner, 1986, 1996). A scaffold is a temporary structure put up outside of a building, perhaps for purposes of construction on the building, washing windows, painting. The scaffold is not part of the building. But it is situated in a space between the building and the outside. Bruner writes that learning is a social phenomenon taking place “on the scaffold,” so to speak--in the space between a learner who wants to know, and teachers/mentors/a community that ‘already knows.’ Knowledge construction, or learning, happens in the engagement of teacher and learner with each other. Like the Russian educator Lev Vygotsky’s theory of the “zone of proximal development,” Bruner asserts that the construction of knowledge happens in the space between an apprentice or novice who seeks to know, and a more seasoned practitioner who can show how. In these social understandings of learning, learning is not so much about adding new information into the mind of the individual learner. It is, rather, about transformation of the learner’s very identity through taking on new practices that shape who they are.

Let me use a non-religious example to illustrate. Let’s say you want to become a plumber, one who fixes pipes and manages the technologies of water in houses and industries. To “become a plumber” means taking on the identity of one who does this work. So, a novice plumber learning the profession must first have access to plumbers’ practices and resources: the actions they do, the ways they talk (every identity has its specialized vocabulary and symbol system), the tools they use. To become a plumber, to take on this new identity, learners need access to the ways of thinking and acting common among those who already are skilled, seasoned plumbers. They can acquire these capacities by becoming apprentices of master-plumbers. It is not enough for the student to engage in the action or practice alone, nor is the student’s own reflection on practice sufficient. The role of the teacher who guides practice and reflection within a cultural and historical context that gives meaning to the activity is crucial, as it allows the learner to achieve a level of skill and knowledge that they could not accomplish on their own.

Of course, apprentices do not start at deepest level of responsibility and complexity. Instead, on the first day the skilled master-plumber hands them a

tool,—let’s say, a wrench—and tells them the name for it. The veteran plumber shows the novice learner how to use that wrench to repair a leaky pipe under the sink, and then stays alongside them while they practice doing that repair, hands-on. At first it is awkward. But the apprentice tries it again and again, day after day, helped by the seasoned plumber who already knows how, until finally this practice achieves a certain standard of excellence. Little by little, novices move from peripheral practices into those that are more ‘core’ in defining their identity as a plumber, until one day they act and think and talk like a plumber. At that point the apprentice has become a plumber.

Guess what Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger discovered in their research as the greatest source of failure among apprentices learning a new identity? Those who were not given access to any practices beyond the basics on the periphery, who were kept on the sidelines too long and were not assisted to deepen forms of knowing and acting—they were the ones to “drop out,” to stop trying to become a member of a particular group marked by formation into an identity (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Instead of being invited to take on a new identity by participating in practices, they only got to talk about that identity. It would be like giving swimming lessons by describing the mechanics of swimming, by talking about how to swim and why people swim, but never allowing the learner to get into the water and practice, much less become part of the “culture” of swimmers.

Similarly, taking on the identity of one who is, as Paul puts it, “in Christ,” happens through apprenticeship in the practices, language, and worldview of the faith. It is not enough to talk about what Christians believe, or to know about how Christians act. To become a Christian, one must learn to talk in the ways that Christians talk, and to do what Christians do, entering into a shared culture of practice. One becomes a Christian by acting and sounding like one! By learning to act and talk and see the world the way that Christians do, identity takes shape. For this transformation to happen, a person who would be a disciple must be apprenticed by those who are more experienced practitioners who can guide newcomers into a way of action and of making meaning out of the practices.

There is one other perspective from contemporary learning theory to which I wish to draw your attention today. It concerns the role of emotions in learning. For a long time, educators and philosophers have been suspicious of emotion as the enemy of rational thought and therefore of learning. Developments in neuroscience have opened up new ways of understanding the relationship between emotions and learning, with some important implications for Christian religious education. Emotions and cognition have deeply intertwined roles in how humans learn, writes former public school teacher and affective and social neuroscientist Mary Hunt Immordino-Yang. “Emotions are not add-ons, distinct from cognitive skills. Instead, emotions such as interest, anxiety, frustration, excitement, or a sense of awe in beholding beauty, become a dimension of the skill itself” (Immordino-Yang, 2016, 21). That is, through emotions, we come to attach meaning to our experiences. “We only think deeply about the things we care about,” Immordino-Yang goes on to write (2016, 18). Teachers therefore “need to find ways to leverage the emotional aspects of learning in education” (2016, 18).

Acknowledging the role of emotions in learning is not about emotional manipulation, or some way of attempting to manufacture certain feelings in those whom we teach! Rather, recognition of the importance of emotions in learning suggests to religious educators the need to pay attention to what can invite learners to care about the ideas and practices we teach. In other words, we need to find the emotional connections between the lives of learners and the teaching we offer, to facilitate deeper reflection and deeper knowing.

Taken together, these two educational theories (the first being about guided participation in practice and the second concerning the role of emotions in learning) suggest that Christian religious education has a key role in nurturing the faith identities of believers, when it brings together action and reflection, deepened by the role of emotions.

V. Earth-care and Dealing with Conflict

I want to conclude by suggesting two particular practices of faith that I would consider essential elements of Christian identity, or living the life of faith, in our time. These are practices of faith in a time when the survival of the planet is in question, and the wounds of all sorts of conflicts threaten the thriving of communities everywhere. I mentioned them earlier: the first is the practice of earth-care, a practice of lament, repentance, and action on behalf of “planetary solidarity,” as Grace Ji-Sun Kim and Hilda Koester name their book on Christian doctrine and the environment (Kim & Koster, 2017). The second is the practice of dealing with differences. Christian religious educators must find new ways to teach about these critical matters from the perspective of Christian faith, not only as ideas but as crucial elements of the way of life called Christian discipleship. I suggest that educational theories of “guided participation in practice,” and about the connection between emotions and learning, are key resources for religious educators who understand ecological destruction and destructive conflict as faith issues.

Let’s start with earth care as a faith practice. Christians are not the only ones to practice planetary solidarity, just as we are not the only ones to practice rituals using water as a sign of cleansing and new life. What makes practices of earth care specifically Christian practices and therefore part of the larger repertoire of faith practices that both form and express our identities as disciples? Actions on behalf of the healing of the planet become Christian faith practices when they are part of the matrix of action, narrative, and thinking through which Christians enact the love and justice of God the Creator.

Christian faith practices of planetary solidarity are an expression of Christian identity, even as the Christian identity of the practitioner gives particular substance to these practices by drawing on the narratives, symbols, and traditions of Christian theology for their meaning. Religious education in our time must apprentice believers in practices of earth care as a central element of Christian identity, tapping into the emotions and passions to motivate learning and activate participation in these practices, and then making connections to the biblical and theological understandings of God’s creative activity and human responsibility.

The second faith practice I named at the start of this lecture has to do with

how we as Christians deal with our differences. I am not specifically talking here about the Christian practice of peacemaking, although certainly its mention by Jesus in the Beatitudes ought to be a clue to us that moving from conflict to peace is close to the heart of God. Instead, I want to focus on what Christians do and say while they are still fighting, before they turn to the work of peace. What might it look like to fight like Christians? That is, can we imagine ways of engaging differences and disagreements in which practices of contending with one another might actually be recognizably Christian practices?

In the current global political landscape, and in the ecclesial landscape, practices for dealing with difference seem to boil down to engaging in destructive struggle until one party to the conflict leaves and everyone bears the scars of the fight. This leaves relationships and communities in peril. If we bear the identity of Christian we cannot say we only are Christians when we are in agreement. We must also be people who practice our faith when we disagree. Can we as religious educators imagine apprenticing people of faith in practices of faithfully disputing with one another, fighting in ways that continue to uphold the wellbeing and dignity of the one who is at least temporarily one's "enemy" in a dispute? Imagine what it would be like if people outside of the church could recognize people as Christians on the basis of our practices of fighting well!! This is another area where the emotional aspects of learning can be significant.

VI. Conclusion

In this lecture have explored faith formation as a process of taking on a new identity in Christ. I have described that process taking place through guided participation in practices of faith which, taken together, comprise a way of life and belief that is Christian. I have identified perspectives from educational theorists as resources for religious educators who seek a way of teaching that holds action and reflection together toward the shaping of Christian identity. And I have suggested two practices as essential for Christian life in our time. Thank

you for your attention and I am happy to respond to questions or hear your comments.

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