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Book Review: Christian Practical Wisdom: What It Is, Why It Matters

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Theology and the Practice of Ministry

Book Review

Christian Practical Wisdom: What It Is, Why It Matters, by Dorothy C. Bass, Kathleen A. Cahalan, Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, James R. Nieman, and Christian B. Scharen. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2016. 368 pages, \$25.10.

Reviewer: Beth Ann Fisher

Writing as a collective, those crafting *Christian Practical Wisdom* exemplify as much a real-time tutorial on the development of Christian practical wisdom as they do a demonstration of the same. Sharing from their strengths and combining their experiences, these authors travel in partnership with the reader on the path toward phronesis, or embodied wisdom. In an increasingly secular age in which practical belief in God is often called into question, the authors-as-learners in this community of inquiry incorporate concrete knowledge in their exploration of abstract awareness.

Utilizing science and theoretical knowledge as a springboard, this book remains engaged in larger realities, namely human limitation relative to divine knowing. The reader is encouraged to lay certainty aside. Leaning toward imagination based upon text and tradition, these authors demonstrate the practical, embodied, “knowing-in-action” to be found when taking an open-minded look at life with God (2). The reader is invited along in the journey from “showing Christian wisdom to telling how it operates” in the first two divisions of the book. A culminating chapter facilitates a description of the collaborative exercise in which the authors partook (16). Along the way each author invites the reader into concrete situations revealing fresh perspective in which the fruits of discipleship are evident, and ways of divine awareness reveal themselves in the common experiences of daily life. The chapters in Part 1 evidence the ways in which daily activities offer an opportunity for wisdom to develop. As an added benefit to the reader, each of these 5 chapters closes with not only the references the author consulted in developing the chapter, but also

precisely how they were utilized, and the connections discovered by the author. The 4 chapters in Part 2 each take a more scholarly view of the topic of phronesis offering historical and theological connections.

Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore opens Part 1 with “Spoonings,” exploring the connection between body and spirit and how postures elicit cognitive assent. The fact that the remembrance of our Lord consists of an embodied activity, the Eucharist in which we touch and taste, is no coincidence. Christian theology moves through our senses in the sacrament as it does in the human touch, marital intimacy being the most poignant example. The ways in which we mold our bodies around one another demonstrates compassion and the freedom to be known. Miller-McLemore suggests our ability to behold another and communicate acceptance through touch reflects that which we experience because of Christ’s sacrifice. By contrast, tethering our physicality limits the movement of our spiritual imaginations as well.

Kathleen A. Cahalan carries the practical conversation further in chapter 2 comparing *lectio divina* to “Swimming.” Immersed in Scripture, Cahalan shares from a place of personal transformation opening others to the power available in the healing waters of the biblical text. Through immersion in the words, she vulnerably shares the power she has found to drown selfish motivation. A life buoyed with Scripture offers this freedom to individuals and communities in a way Cahalan compares to the aquatic therapy in which she participated following back surgery.

Dorothy C. Bass joins in sharing from the perspective of that which has become personally meaningful in chapter 3 with the active metaphor, “Camping.” Bass associates camping with hospitality describing the practice of making homes for and with others as a way of nurturing daily life. She suggests the movement of God comes into view in these shared spaces where relational fires fan the flames of resurrection in people’s lives. Free of comforts and trappings, “campers” find themselves grounded in the provision of God, the reality of the present moment while reflective on God’s care and fidelity.

James R. Nieman carries embodied spiritual practice into chapter 4, “Dancing.” He recounts a story of a rural Lutheran church building whose youth fellowship hall had a sloped floor that prevented the dancing the kids might have enjoyed. Through the lens of this “eccentric construction decision,” Nieman explores congregational identity. What do these eccentricities communicate about our congregational identities? These questions can point toward truths that might be held lightly in terms of tradition while serving as a resource to “help navigate times of change and

stress" (96). This chapter serves as a hinge piece in the work, moving from reflection on individual practices to asking that we examine closely that which we foreground in our congregations and the priorities they exemplify. Nieman reminds congregations that the practices they embody must be examined with care, giving those practices the honor they are due while asking how well they communicate the intent behind their establishment.

In chapter 5, "Rocking," Christian B. Scharen articulates the spirit of popular culture with clarity. This book explores unique intersections of theology and life. Aspects often overlooked are examined; familiar experiences are interpreted with an eye for theological detail. For Scharen and those who relate, a rock 'n' roll show offers a religious experience like that which another might only find in church (120). Different types of music elicit different cognitive and emotional experiences for different people, drawing them, heart-and-soul, to holy ground. Therein they find a sense of community and leave feeling they've had a spiritual experience. Creative space is God's territory. In the sharing, each work comes to life and the artist invites participants to commune (133). Acknowledging pop culture as new ground for scholars, Scharen's contribution sings a harmonious reminder to the reader; there is space for God's movement in and through all things and people.

Turning toward the inner workings of wisdom in Part 2 with "Eclipsing," Scharen begins chapter 6 unpacking the ways in which theoretical ways of knowing fall short. In the modern Western world, reasoning and certainty trump experiential sources of knowledge; the mind is esteemed over the less honorable body. Here, Scharen directly addresses the central claim of the book: Christian wisdom infuses the theoretical with the practical. "One would need 'infinite science' to know how to act rightly in every case" (168). More nuance and greater sensitivity are required to thoroughly explore the multiple situational aspects with which life presents all of us. "Right judgment always includes more than the situation in its materiality" (169).

Miller-McLemore explores practical theology as an academic endeavor through "Disciplining" in chapter 7, delving headlong into debunking the "mind over matter" posture many academicians pose. In many ways matter leads the mind. Concrete experiences fuel thought, providing a handle to which learning may attach. Those with specialized theological training must still explore how to go about actually living their Christian commitments (183). Phronesis results when a variety of things ranging from how to be a friend to how to function responsibly within the

environment become lived “problem-solving activities.” Miller-McLemore provides a broad exposure to the views of philosophers and theologians regarding their perspectives on knowledge and its practical implications for faith and that which is unknowable outside of active participation in life with God. At every turn, theory directs the reader back to practice. Remaining alive to our academic disciplines means attention to the active work of God in and through them within our day-to-day lives (231).

Bass demonstrates the necessity of biblical “Imagination” in chapter 8, pressing the reader away from the fundamental certainty that the critical postmodern spirit craves. Practical wisdom developed within lives under submission to biblical authority and instructed by experienced faith must leave room for God to be God. The God whom Scripture narrates writes our life stories and perpetuates ongoing renewal through our encounters with the same (246).

The meat of the book culminates in chapter 9, a collaborative crown jewel on which Cahalan takes the lead, “Unknowing.” Initially displaying the different levels through which knowing is experienced, the telos remains purity of heart and the practical ability to see God in the dailiness of life. Cahalan examines discernment, humility, and unknowing through the working lenses of John Cassian and Gregory of Nyssa. Cassian employs the mantra of scripture in the unlocking of humility and discernment, replacing stray thoughts with ancient truths. Gregory of Nyssa exemplifies, through his narrative of the life of Moses, availability, and encounters that spring from the pathways of a habitual life with God. Through these mystical exchanges, development in understanding of the loving nature of God takes place, a heart-knowledge that supersedes head-knowledge, a passive, immeasurable, participatory practice through which God has a history of working.

Finally in Part 3, the authors confess the formative nature the discipline of drawing together the resources of the book had upon them as beneficial. The scholarly leader and practitioner is admonished to go and do likewise: to plumb the depths of humanity looking for the reflection God declares present, to experiment and engage with holy abandon, to explore and wonder at God’s creativity reflected in creation.

Scholars and those in religious communities interested in fine-tuning their spiritual sensitivities based upon information provided by the world around them will benefit from this book, as well as those keen on fruitful collaborative engagement. The divisions, Part 1 and Part 2, are helpful for those who might wish to increase their engagement with daily life by employing a new perspective on mundane activities. Part 1 offers an astute

study of simple pleasures. Part 2 is useful for scholarly readers who wish to explore different ways of knowing than the theoretical disciplines provide as well as step-by-step descriptions of mystical practices offering accessibility for those to whom they are new. The artful construction of the book assists both the reader's understanding of the ways of knowing explored within its pages and the divine creation-in-community it exemplifies.

Beth Ann Fisher serves the Siburt Institute for Church Ministry as a doctoral fellow while pursuing her Doctor of Ministry at Abilene Christian University. She is a local hospital chaplain, loves intertestamental connections, and finds life in liturgy. She is driven to help all people sense the nearness of God and the wellness the Lord's presence brings. Together with husband of 27 years, Craig, she delights in adventure along with "man-children" Riley and Owen, and they're crossing national parks off their list. University ministry at Highland Church captivates her heart, as do a growing number of dogs. This season of life brings new appreciation for the present moment and the ones she's with.