
Christian ministry (and perhaps Christian life in general) is often highlighted by times during the journey when particular clarity is gained or momentous decisions are made. These “turning points” have the power to become much more than simple acts: over time, these periods make the formative transformative, moving things from definition to action. This is the type of community we will be, we choose to carry out this specific ministry, etc. Ask any congregation to recount its past, and they will undoubtedly focus on particular times when decisions were needed and action was taken. The turning points of the congregation have become its history, remembered and retold as the defining moments that shaped both the identity and mission of the whole.

Victor Matthews has, in a sense, asked the congregation in the Hebrew Bible to recount its past for us in his book. His stated aim is to “emphasize those moments in time and space that are retold, recalled, and reckoned as essential to the identity of ancient Israel as a nation” (8). By examining these turning points in Israel’s history, Matthews hopes to demonstrate how these “echoes of tradition” (8) were remembered and retold to successive generations of Israelites to help shape their identity. His specific criterion for choosing these turning points is their contribution to the covenant identity of Israel: eight events are examined as the major defining moments for what it means to be the people of God.

Those eight events comprise the eight chapters of the book, listed as follows: Adam and Eve are expelled from the garden; Yahweh establishes a covenant with Abraham; Moses leads the Israelites out of Egypt; King David makes Jerusalem his capital; Jeroboam leads the secession of the northern tribes; Samaria falls to the Assyrians; Nebuchadnezzar destroys Jerusalem and deports the people of Judah; and Cyrus captures Babylon and the exiles return home. Each chapter includes a basic overview of the event according to a biblical passage, additional social/cultural information that contributes to the context of the passage, and a more detailed examination of various themes related to the event. The chapters also include numerous insets that provide additional information on a wide range of topics. In the introduction, Matthews states that these insets serve to point out “how particular themes and traditions are retold in light of later history” (9), but not every inset follows this prescribed pattern. I found these shaded boxes rather distracting. If the items in the insets were so important, perhaps this information should simply have been included as part of the normal text of the chapter, or collected into an excursus.

The chapters themselves cover the basics of Israel’s history, from the “big names” in its early history (Abraham, Moses, David) to its demise, exile, and return. The contextual information is similar to what one would find in a basic biblical commentary, while the chosen themes relating to the passage are rather selective. The author’s interpretive biases are implicit throughout: the Deuteronomic History is assumed; authorship and provenance are stated as fact with little or no reference to any scholarly debate about these issues. A quick check of the Scripture index demonstrates a strong emphasis on Samuel-Kings, which demonstrates Matthews’s fixation on Israel’s history from the monarchy through the exile. Chapters five through seven are rather repetitive, with many of the same prophetic texts being cited for each (separate?) turning point. While Matthews states in his introduction that “each section of the book represents a self-contained study” (9), the same themes continue to be repeated from chapter to chapter. The glossary contains many helpful definitions, but should perhaps have been placed at the beginning of the book rather than at the end.

Finally, I wonder if Matthews has actually accomplished his stated purpose. To be
sure, these events in Israel’s history are important: they would not have been recorded in the Hebrew Bible if they were not considered integral to the formation of Israel’s identity. On the other hand, though, if the biblical writers were only allowed to include eight items in their canon, I doubt that they would choose these same events to represent the totality of Israel’s identity as the covenant people of God. Did Matthews choose these turning points because of their repeated themes in the poets and prophets (as he claims), or were the events chosen first and the poetic/prophetic echoes found to back up his historical biases? If pastors or educated laypersons are looking for a sociohistorical examination of Israel’s history, a concise introduction to the Hebrew Bible would provide a more balanced perspective.

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Sponheim’s purpose in this work is to introduce readers to the content and relevance of a Christian understanding of God and God’s relationship with the world. He focuses on God’s creative relation with the world. Creation is God’s opus proprium, and the relation between God as Creator and creation (both as a multitude of specific realities and as cosmic whole) is richly depicted in an accessible manner. Drawing on his technical work with Kierkegaard, Whitehead, and such themes as apologetics, pluralism, and ethics, Sponheim herein writes for anyone interested in thinking and speaking relationally of God.

The work is divided into two parts, each of which contains three chapters. In keeping with the theme of relationality, the parts are mutually informing and informed, yet distinctively relevant. Part One focuses on the material content of Christian belief in God as Creator, and Part Two examines the relation between believing and living. The book opens with a pretext entitled “Becoming Vocal.” The purpose of these initial pages is to ground our speaking of God in both Christian and creaturely relations to God.

As Christians, we speak of God and not merely of Jesus, for we believe that it is the Creator who became incarnate in this person from Nazareth. The distinctiveness of Christian experience prompts Sponheim to speak of differing “intensities” in our experiences of God. The intensity of the relation between God and world in Jesus is decisive for Christian speaking of God. This, however, does not mean that Christians alone relate to God, or even that they alone relate to God in Jesus. In Sponheim’s “process-relational” conception of God, God’s relations with the world inform God. Thus, we can say that God’s relation to the world in Jesus shapes the God-world relation. Moreover, this historical relation is rooted in the Father’s eternal election of the Son, and this implies that God’s will for salvation grounds and shapes God’s creative relation to the world. It is no wonder then that Sponheim writes that we are not only compelled to speak of God as Christians, but as creatures.

Speaking of God is not without its challenges, however. Suffering and evil pose what Sponheim regards as the most formidable obstacles to speaking of God in faith. He acknowledges this problem early in his work, returns to it frequently, and grapples with it in a sustained manner in chapter five. In chapter one, Sponheim responds to the question “Where is God?” with a presentation of the classical doctrine of omnipresence. “God is present with all; God is present to each,” he writes in seeking to express the “unlimited range and unparalleled closeness of God’s presence” (16; 21). One of the important implications of this understanding is that God is present with us in our suffering. While some regard the notion that God suffers with us as an insufficient answer to the problem, Sponheim
views it as an effective source of comfort and hope.

In the second chapter, Sponheim makes a number of important points regarding God’s creative activity. Perhaps the most important one is this: creation is a free act of love; as God’s proper work, it expresses what Sponheim calls “the category proper” for speaking of God. The doctrine of God as Creator is thus intimately connected with the conviction that God is love. Everything we say about God, Sponheim maintains, must cohere with this teaching. In particular, it requires a refiguring of the idea that God is omnipotent. Because so much of our experience cannot be squared with the idea that God is both all-loving and all-powerful, at least one of these ideas must be reformed or given up. As Sponheim begins with the biblical teaching that God is love, he views power as the obvious candidate for change. In chapter three, therefore, he outlines a “process-relational proposal” for conceiving God’s activity. He depicts God’s providence (preservation, concurrence, and government) in terms of God’s providing every actuality with an “initial aim” (both information and direction), and subsequently “judging” (evaluating and transforming) its creative response. Sponheim recognizes that this portrait of divine activity provides no guarantee that God’s creative venture will be brought to fulfillment, but he believes that God’s commitment to the project, expressed in continuing creative activity that gives rise to our sense of belonging to God, provides sufficient grounds for hope (76–79).

In Part Two, Sponheim looks at what he calls the “so what” of our speaking—What difference does what we believe about God make in the way we view our lives? In chapter four he argues that the relational conception of God articulated in Part One provides the basis for a robust prayer life. Because God wills to be known, God engages us in conversation and we respond. We are, in Robert Jenson’s words, “the praying animals” (84). Moreover, prayer is not merely a pious exercise. In Sponheim’s metaphysics, prayer will be effective; it will
Chapter five addresses questions about God’s relation to the origin and overcoming of suffering and evil that is intrinsic to creation’s becoming. Sponheim acknowledges that no single response is adequate, but argues that one emphasizing the freedom characteristic of both human life and the process of becoming generally most adequately accounts for the “whence” of evil. He then articulates a vision of its resolution in which God works righteousness in us, enabling us to work out our salvation in and with the world with fear and trembling.

In the final chapter, Sponheim focuses on the dialogical character of the church that is generated by God’s missional relation to creation. As the content of our speaking is measured by the “category proper” (God is love), so the relevance of our speaking is judged by a “soteriological criterion” (134). Sponheim uses this criterion in offering suggestions for talking with persons from other faith traditions as well as with those who do not speak of God in faith. He recalls that suffering and evil raise difficult questions for such speech, and suggests the while our Christian faith provides resources that help us respond, we do not have a constraining answer. He then concludes his work with a postscript entitled “Falling Silent,” wherein he acknowledges that all our speaking falls short, and observes that there is wisdom in knowing the ungraspability of the God who wills to be known. He closes by expressing the hope that one day the relation within which our speaking (as well as our silence) takes place will be “face to face.”

This book serves well the purpose for which it was written. It presents a thoroughly relational conception of God as Creator and the world as God’s creation. Most important, it is sensitive and faithful to the Christian conviction that God is love, and works to reconcile this belief with the realities of suffering and evil. Those of us with Reformed intuitions will be nervous about whether his concept of a “self-limited” God is adequate to the task of bringing creation *ex nihilo* to the eschatological fulfillment disclosed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Sponheim will in turn be justified in pointing out the difficulties involved in reconciling a Reformed doctrine of God with the “category proper” in the face of suffering and evil. Our differences are part and parcel of the “ineradicable ambiguity” of our knowledge. It is vital, therefore, that we practice Sponheim’s humble commitment to speak of God together with our “others,” expecting to be changed (154).

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Schooled, if not by Cicero, then at least by the modern science of marketing, in the rhetorical implications of *pathos*, the Alban Institute knows its audience. Like good Aristotelian rhetoricians who have carefully categorized their target demographic group, their topics often appeal to pastors’ (or at least this pastor’s) gut-level sense of what to attend to in ministry. So it frequently happens that I pick up an Alban Institute publication, attracted by the title and inspired by the topic, and I am sometimes, though not frequently, edified.

In a way similar to the long-standing and justified criticism of some schools of rhetoric that overemphasize *pathos* and *ethos* at the expense of the *logos*, I find that the message of Alban publications, though attuned to its topics, does not always substantially contribute to extensive theological and reasoned discourse. Because they are always book-length publications, they are usually a good idea padded with lots of filler. So, although I may be assisted a bit in my reflections by paying attention, for a time, to the topic addressed in the volume, I do not find

change the one who prays, the God to whom one prays, and the world for which one intercedes.
myself substantially informed, changed, or challenged.

So, my question when approaching any Alban Institute publication is, Does the book live into or transcend these (admittedly sweeping) generalizations?

The answer, in the case of Gary E. Peluso-Verdend’s new book is: better than most. His book, Paying Attention, is addressed to leaders of (formerly) mainline Protestant denominations who are distracted by issues of size, technology, preservation of tradition, and worship wars, not to mention the ever-present next “big idea” for church growth and renewal. He observes that, usually, congregations try to solve their problems in these areas by means of “technical rationality,” trying to fix the problem using the conceptual framework that caused the problem/distraction in the first place.

Instead, Peluso-Verdend wants congregations to “pay attention to attention.” In so doing, he believes they will discover and develop practices consonant with his central thesis: “The church participates in the kingdom of God—which Jesus embodied and proclaimed—when we attend lovingly and truly to God and to neighbor” (35).

After an opening chapter on four attention challenges for the church—size, preservation, technology, and conflict—Peluso-Verdend goes on in chapter two to examine some of the brain science related to attention (including an insight summarized later in chapter five, that the brain is plastic, and continues to change shape throughout our life, especially when activity is combined with attention), and then considers the theological implications of attending to God and neighbor, concluding with Simone Weil that “attention is the substance of love” (25).

The central chapter of the book, “Practicing Theology,” is the most enjoyable, if also the least believable. Peluso-Verdend cleverly creates a fictional scenario in which four parishioners read four books in four months with their pastor, discussing the books one Saturday morning a month from nine to noon. The books discussed include Rick Warren’s The Purpose-Driven Church, Letty M. Russell’s Church in the Round, Carlye Fielding Stewart’s The Empowerment Church, and Douglas John Hall’s The Cross in Our Context. I call this section enjoyable because it represents (if it were an actual event) a dream come true for most of us clergy-types who love books and people about equally, and can imagine nothing better than working towards the attentive transformation of our congregations by reading through books of theology with astute readers in our congregation. I call it unbelievable because the dialogue as it is constructed is too much the imagined construct of the author, attempting to distill (quite successfully, I might add) the main themes of each book, and then play them off against each other, in one chapter. It is an unusual approach, but it pays off, because it illustrates how the practice of theology “frames attention,” to use Peluso-Verdend’s apt phrase (91).

The remainder of the book is more predictable. Peluso-Verdend proceeds to argue that practices (in the Dorothy Bass-ian sense of that term) are the primary locus for his call to renewal of attention, because it is specifically “attentive practices” that prepare Christians to receive the kingdom of God named in his thesis. He then chooses three focal practices to reflect on briefly—worship, conversation, and detachment—and then concludes with an implementation chapter, “Fostering a Culture of the Wise Virgins,” which encourages the building of key capacities: “the virtues of attentiveness—capacities to enter into suffering, to practice emotional intelligence, relinquishment, thankfulness in small things, slow cooking, persistence, and thinking theologically” (126). The final chapter is simply a collection of notes, preliminary questions and ideas suggested by Peluso-Verdend as ways to begin exercising these virtues in congregations.

A final observation: although Peluso-Verdend wants us to pay attention to attention, it may be that in doing so he is inadvertently distracting congregations from paying attention to the very “things that matter,” the intention of his book. Why is this the case? Because attention, as important as it may be as a concept, is not a primary Christian matter. Instead, attention in
Christian terms is, simply put, prayer. It would not be too strong to say that where attention is lacking, so is prayer, for attention is of the essence of prayer. By recontextualizing attention and presenting it as something distinct from prayer, so that a phrase like “attentive prayer” can function as something other than a redundancy, attention becomes something added. One might say the same of theology, for how could any theology call itself theology if it was “inattentive theology.”

This may be to put too fine a point on it. Certainly Peluso-Verdend’s book has drawn my attention to attention in such a way that I will attend to whether or not I am attentive in my Christian practices and theological reflections, whether or not I attend to God and neighbor. For this, he is to be commended and recommended.

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Diana Butler Bass, Virginia Theological Seminary, has presented an intriguing examination of the mainline church in America in her book The Practicing Congregation: Imagining a New Old Church. The text rests in a conversation that has surrounded the disciplines of ethics and practical theology for the last several years, that of practices as virtues producing actions. Following the work of Alasdair MacIntyre, many in the field of practical theology have turned their attention to the congregation and have claimed that its distinct practices can be identity-forming and faith-nurturing. The Practicing Congregation looks to test this hypothesis.

Drawing on an Ely Lilly Endowment-funded research venture called “The Project on Congregations of Intentional Practice,” Butler Bass presents this text as the first foray into analysis of this project’s data. Her thesis is that a significant number of mainline churches are not dying, but are actually reviving as they begin to reimagine themselves in the American religious landscape. She says pointedly, “This book does not argue that mainline churches should change. Rather, it argues that mainline churches are changing and have already changed” (3). Some mainline churches, she believes, have risen from the ashes of cultural irrelevance like a phoenix; those who have, she calls practicing congregations. “Practicing congregations weave together Christian practices—activities drawn from the long Christian tradition—into a pattern of being church that forms an intentional way of life in community” (3).

To unpack this thesis Butler Bass uses historical and sociological perspectives to understand the evolving ideas and practices of congregations in America, examining where the practicing congregation is unique from a number of other evolutions in ecclesial understanding and action. In chapter one, Butler Bass makes a case that there has been great energy across confessional and ideological perspectives for intentional congregational reform. These include house churches, seeker services, megachurches, café churches, and online communities. She files such intentional congregations under three types; conservative-evangelical, new paradigm, and diagnostic. It is here that Butler Bass adds a fourth type, the practicing congregation, which she asserts is made up of theologically moderate to liberal persons who have embraced “traditional Christian practices in worship, prayer, moral formation, and life together” (14).

But why this need for new intentionality? Butler Bass tackles this question in chapter two, entitled “Just the Way It Is.” Because of the changes in the currents of culture, she explains, we now live in a culture that has been detraditionalized. In our time tradition is no longer trusted, because we are bombarded with multiple voices claiming legitimate authoritative traditions. Yet, an
interesting thing is happening, she believes. While tradition is losing its monolithic authority, it is reappropriating itself in ways that can be digested by small groups (some of which become militant, others ascetic, and some innovative). “Thus...detraditionalization...is happening in tandem with...retraditioning...” (31–32).

Therefore, she makes the claim in chapter three that our congregational battles are not between those who hold to tradition and those who do not; rather, our conflicts are over which traditions will guide our practice and life together. The conflict exists between an established church (seeking to fortify itself: the formal perspective) and an intentional church (which seeks to use its ancient traditions to live in our contemporary world: the fluid retraditioning perspective).

This all leads to what this reviewer finds to be the most interesting presentation in The Practicing Congregation, a four-quadrant grid that maps the landscape of the church in America. Butler Bass believes that the grid helps us understand how distinct groups and congregations are dealing with tradition. She begins this diagram by presenting a horizontal line with liberal on the left and conservative on the right. Unhappy with this too-simplistic perspective on the church, she adds a vertical line with established at the top and intentional at the bottom. Butler Bass makes the case that it is not only the conflict of liberal versus conservative that confronts the church, but rather more importantly the confrontation between churches seeking to be intentional and those who are fighting to maintain their establishment. She contends that both mainline and evangelical congregations are stuck in the quicksand of establishment, though seeking to maintain their establishment in distinct ways. Yet, in the same fashion, both mainline and evangelical groups are seeking to re-envision the church in intentional ways (as they do so, she believes the bold divisions between liberal and conservative melt away). Those doing so in more evangelical circles are those in the Emergent church (Brian McLaren and others); their counterpart in the mainline church is what Butler Bass has called throughout this text “practicing congregations.”

The text ultimately argues that the way mainline churches can move from decay to new life (as she argues is already happening) is to become congregations that recover the ancient tradition of the church by reappropriating its practices and leading its congregants into such ways of practicing life.

The Practicing Congregation raises many interesting arguments through the lens of historical analysis and sociological theory, but this reviewer was left desiring some theological discussion. What exactly is the church in relation to God’s activity, and how are practices to be understood from divine action? While Butler Bass gives us many helpful perspectives on tradition and practice there are no theological images that might help the church find identity and purpose in our age. This reviewer finds this particularly needed in the presentation of her four-quadrant grid. Are our only options to be either practicing or Emergent? Following Douglas John Hall this reviewer is hopeful that we might begin to think of the church as the suffering weak community in the image of the cross of Christ, that we might see ourselves as the “few” who seek to be a blessing to the “many.” As Hall has argued (see The Reality of the Gospel and the Unreality of Churches), disestablishment will only come through suffering and death, not re traditioning ancient practices. It may be true that practices can help us live into being a suffering community in the image of the cross of Christ, but without discussion on the cross of Christ and its theological profundity practices can be of little help.

Yet, this theological deficiency should not keep theologians and pastors from picking up and reading carefully The Practicing Congregation. If they do they will find a text that pushes the reader to think deeply about what they believe about the church and its future.

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