PRACTICES OF CHRISTIAN LIFE - FORMING AND PERFORMING A CULTURE

Introduction

The Missional Network's convictions are formed out of an ongoing engagement with a question posited by Lesslie Newbigin over thirty years ago: What is the nature of a missionary encounter with the late modern culture that shapes the West?[1] These convictions are as follows:

1. Because the missionary God is at work in the shifting, turbulent contexts of western societies – the churches are called to enter a new imagination for being God's people.
2. This requires disciples of Jesus to be shaped by disciplines and practices.
3. Local contexts are where God's ordinary people discern the activity of God.
4. The Spirit is leading us on a journey of mutuality and respect toward our neighborhoods and communities.
5. There are no preferred solutions or formulas. Experimentation and innovation are important gifts for this journey.

Each of these five convictions invites fuller exploration in terms of what they mean as well as their indissoluble connectedness. The way they are framed presupposes a set of practices (ways of acting and, hence, thinking) that have become quite alien to the churches of the West. An underlying conviction resourcing them is that the local, everyday, and ordinary are the location where God's future is experienced and discerned. This, itself, is a massive turn from a long period wherein experts and professionals (that is the ordained and degreed) were empowered to work through abstract ideals that were then standardized, programatized, packaged and transferred down from some supposed center to the local.

The discussion of practices set out here is rooted in a fundamentally different imagination. It presumes the fitness of the ordinary as the primary location for discerning how God's agency shapes the life of the church. It claims that the everyday is the primary place where the God revealed in Jesus Christ is actively known and experienced. This is a basic shift in imagination. It can be noted in the ways various movements across the churches, such as the New Monasticism and, in North America, the Parish Collective, are refocusing on the ordinary and everyday as the locus of God's action. There is a recognition that Christian practices need to be formed around the social relationships of communities in local contexts.

Such a shift in imagination, by itself, calls for a transformation in our comprehension and engagement with what we are calling practices of Christian life. This essay focuses on the second of the five convictions – Christian practices. Its intention is not to adumbrate a series of practices but present a rationale for why social practices need to be at the center of missional formation at this time in the life of the West.

Practices as Social Formation

Just over a hundred years ago, in the euphoria of the fin de siecle, Europe and North America (the West) were aglow with hope. There were great expectations for the emerging century. Beneath panegyrics on progress and peace framed by World Fairs, Crystal Palaces and technological leaps (application of electricity to all of life was the equivalent of today's networked technology; the claims for the ushering in of a new world were about equivalent) were counter voices to this pervasive faith in the ascent of the West. Such voices struggled to name dark undercurrents they sensed but could not yet put into words or artistic expression. Some of these names are now obvious: Seurat and Picasso in painting,

Stravinsky in music, Nietzsche in philosophy. There were also theologians. Barth's assault on the liberal idea of progress still reverberates in our time a hundred years after *Romerbrief*.

Another theologian and social historian who shared this sense of disturbance was Ernst Troeltsch (1865-1923), famously identified with liberal theology and certainly an important member of that movement. Like his precursor, Schleiermacher (1768-1834), Troeltsch wrestled with how the church could engage the modern in all its powerful forms (economic, cultural, historical, philosophical, scientific and technological). The struggle to answer this question is with us still. It is a subterranean question running beneath all the tactics, strategies and flavors of the month thrown up as fixes to a profoundly intractable challenge to the gospel in our time.

The question of Christian identity and expression in late modernity remains the abiding struggle. Those who believe the answer lies in some new movements of church planting or leadership, some recovery of vision or some better strategies for evangelism have hardly begun to grasp the tectonic shifts that birthed modernity and continue to hold Christian imagination in its thralls. Proclamations that the modern is over, replaced by some new postmodern moment, betray an inability to grasp, or feel, the depth of what is at stake at this moment in time. As Fredric Jameson stated so well in the title of a book, declarations of postmodernism reflect more "the cultural logic of late capitalism" than any new moment that takes us beyond the modern.[2]

This enigma of how the Christian narrative might engage modern western culture occupied Newbigin's energies just as it did Schleiermacher's and Troeltsch's. Newbigin's writing was a continuation of this long wrestling with modernity in its varied forms. It was clear to him that modernity had radically changed the basis of the Western imagination. Life in Europe had been fundamentally transformed in terms of social relationships and attitudes to the Christian narrative. The question this has kept raising is: How to form Christian life in the midst of such massive transformations in social and cultural life? For Troeltsch, as Newbigin, it has to do with practices. The former stated it in terms of people being socialized into an alternative way of life; the latter in terms of the church as the hermeneutic of the gospel.[3]

Troeltsch was concerned with how to ensure the thriving of the church. His urgency was framed by an informed, intuitive sense that the West was racing, head long, toward a cataclysm. While his views were shaped by late Nineteenth century ideas of progress, he also grasped that theology was about the social – the ways people perceived and formed their interrelationships with one another, and that God acts in the midst of social relationships rather than inner, personal, private experiences. This instinct provides an important perspective into our engagement with the meaning and role of practices of Christian life at this moment.

For Troeltsch the modern fundamentally altered the social relationships that had shaped the West. These changed social realities were having massive, deleterious effects on church and society. This, in part, is what lay behind his greatest work, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches* (1912).[4] He sought to frame a basis for the church in modernity by analyzing, as a social historian, the ways it had engaged varieties of cultures throughout its history. He observed that in its early stages the church formed extensive networks of small communities experimenting in living the way of Jesus in their varied

contexts. They were social movements, mostly comprised of those from the lower echelons of society, embodying ways of tentatively working out what it might mean to live as Christians in their particular localities throughout the Roman and Greek worlds. Troeltsch asked how Christianity in this period took root and transformed its known world, and answered that these Christians *socialize people into an alternative way of life*. Put in another way, the reason the Church triumphed was because of its social practices.

These observations are critical for framing a discussion of the role of practices in a missionary engagement with Western culture(s). The continuing transformations of the West in the forms of capitalism, science, technology and philosophy have continued to disrupt and unravel the structural and narrative relationships the churches established in their engagements with modernity. A fragile detente between church and modernity (Newbigin's analysis of the flight to the private/public and faith/fact dichotomizations) is formally over. The missional question is not that of fixing this situation but re-imagining what it means to be God's people. Practices are an essential part of this response.

Such a re-imagining requires the church, first and foremost, to ask what it means to be re-socialized into a way of life that posits the gospel as an alternative narrative to that of late modernity. This is a prima facie requirement of a missionary encounter with our culture. The Spirit of God is calling us on this journey both as *pilgrims* (we are shaped by a narrative of where we are going and a sense of how to go on that journey) but also as *wayfarers* (we're leaving a place that has been familiar, where we mastered the practices of being church but now travel in terra incognito with a sense of loss and disorientation). The way for such pilgrims/wayfarers is a journey of mutuality and respect among strangers in our local communities without preset solutions or formulas; we will need to experiment and discern. How do we take this journey? What are the guides for this strange path on which God's Spirit is leading us?

Luke 10: 1-12 continues to provide guidance. The passage has become an iconic text in the missional conversation. The reasons for its usage have been discussed elsewhere. Three key elements of this text are important for our discussion:

1. It re-orients the **focus** of the church's activities from within and among themselves into the communities where they dwell.
2. It reframes the **location of the questions** – from an ecclesiocentric: *How do we fix the church*, to theocentric: *How do we discern what God is up to ahead of us in our communities? How do we join with what God is already doing ahead of us in our communities?*
3. It is **shaped around practices**. The seventy receive instructions, a set of *practices*that shape their journey and little more:
   - In pairs (social construction rather than individual heroes).
   - Dependent on the hospitality of the neighbor (no bag…).
   - Speaking the *shalom* of God (this was not a polite, formal greeting; they went where empire proposed Pax, if loyalty were given the Pax Romana then the good things in life would come to people. These disciples announced a counter-narrative.).

- Entering the socio-economic life of the people (“eat what is set before you”, “the laborer deserves to be paid”, “stay in the same place”).
- Healing the sick.
- Announce the kingdom of God.

At the base of their mission was a set of practices shaping their encounters. In the midst of huge social upheaval, when the narratives and roadmaps of a culture are changing and the church finds its accommodations within the culture unravelling, it will be the re-appropriation of such practices that shape a new missionary encounter. Troeltsch sensed this, the early church exemplified it and those of us faced with the end of the detente between Christianity and the modern form of the Western narrative are in a similar situation. What might such practices involve? There are no easy answers. We have to address the issues of missional practices from within the still dominant narratives of the modern Western imagination.

Migration of the Holy: Practices and Dominant Narrative of the Churches[5]

As mentioned above, Newbigin noted primary dichotomies shaping the modern, Western imagination: fact/truth were set over against faith/belief. The so-called ‘objective’ world, amenable to scientific method, was set over against the subjective world of inner experience amenable to religious sensibility. To a large extent the public, social work of the everyday was vacated by a form of Christianity that defected to the private, inner, spiritual world of the self. This meant Christian practices came to be referred, mostly, to the inner life of individuals. In this sense the language of *spiritual* became a descriptor for the ways in which the individual *self* practiced his/her personal, private religious expressions. Christian practices were functionally transformed into *spiritual* practices. For all practical purposes, Christian practices were relegated to the personal and individual.

Practices became an adjunct to the dominant narratives of modernity (for example: the self, the inner and the private) leaving the church captive to the canons of the modern imagination. This has changed little even though one can detect fresh movements of the Spirit in nudging Christian wayfarers in a different direction through such movements as the New Monasticism or growing numbers of house church-like movements that seek to form practices in terms of their rootedness in neighborhoods and communities. While there is always an important place for what we might call personal practices it is difficult to imagine how the churches of the West can form alternative communities of the kingdom so long as this deeply embedded narrative of *spiritual practices* prevails. It is a narrative of the inner, private self that fundamentally lacks the capacity to grasp that in the economy of the gospel, Christian practices form a people, they are *social practices* that establish and shape a culture offering an alternative way of life.

Practices and the Formation of a Culture

When practices come to be practiced in a culture as primarily that which individuals do in privacy, in their inner life, their integral Christian meaning and intent has been removed. Such practices become commodified, turned into harmless habits people do personally that have little impact on public life except for some form of moral worth to society. In this rendering of Christian practices the agency of God is relegated to inner, private experience. As in some contemporary vampire movie, the inner life of the Christian narrative has been sucked out of it, and turned into private experience with some attenuated moral extra for society.

But Christian practices are not about private, inner life in the ways private, personal, inner has come to be understood in the modern era. There is much more at stake here for Christian identity. The question of a missionary encounter with Western culture(s) must be addressed through a radically different engagement with practices.

Practices are about the formation of a society. They are about the making a world; the formation of a culture that assumes and lives as if God is the active agent in the midst of a people. All other framing of Christian practices are accommodations to other narratives. When the seventy in Luke 10 are told to practice speaking *shalom* in the households and towns they entered, it was the practical announcement of an alternative story that stood in contradistinction to the PAX of that other empire that promised economic, political and social peace to all who lived under the requirements (practices) of that PAX. The speaking of *shalom* was the announcement of practices cutting across the claims of PAX. Sitting at table, joining the social and economic life of the household with the open hands of the stranger were practices radically counter to the regnant Pax of that empire.

In the Christian narrative practices are about the socially constructed habits of a people that are continually shaping the world anew. Practices are the primary ways in which the Creator and Redeemer calls creation into existence and invites human beings to partner as co-creators of an unfolding and to-be-discovered creation/new creation. The language of 2 Corinthians 5:13 (“new creation”) is not about the individual and their inner personal experience, but a whole new society. It is, thus, practices that give us the capacity to practically and socially become participants in God’s re-creation. In this sense, practices are a form of productivity – they are the concrete, ordinary, everyday, local ways of *making* a world (this is why the social practice of worship is so critical – it forms us in ways that produce a world that is doxological and, therefore, moves our common actions toward an intended teleology shaped by God’s agency). Practices produce a culture – an embedded, observable way of being in the world. This is what Troeltsch was getting at his response to the question of how the young church came to reframe the life and imagination of the Roman world in its first three centuries. Those first Christians were socialized into an alternative way of life that formed a culture, a world, in the name of the One revealed in Jesus Christ and made manifest through the Spirit.

This is not a call to a primitivism that sees the early centuries as normative. That naiveté cannot address the crisis of the churches in the West. What then can this call to re-engage with the social

practices of the kingdom mean for our context and the fundamental question of a missionary engagement with the West?

If 'practices' are about cultural production we must reflect on the primary forms of "practices" operative in our everyday life. Here we confront the overriding role of the principalities and powers in the garb of essential practices for life in the West. These dominant social practices are instantiated in such forms as politics, education, and economic systems that, practically, predefine how we live. Think of just a few examples of existent social practices that are defaults of these dominant narratives. There are, for example, economic demands of our cultural production that require two parent families to both work to satisfy basic living needs; think of the practices of individualism linked with technology that automatically default people out of extended households into relatively isolated living. These are representative of dominant social practices the principalities and powers have embedded in everyday live, that continually form and re-form us in specific modes of cultural production around the dominant narratives within which we live.

The practices of these dominant forms of social life are the predetermining, operative narratives shaping Christian life within western societies. This missionary context has, on balance, produced 'spiritual' practices focused on the inner life of individuals that are little more than overlays to these dominant practices. What we have come to call spiritual practices are mostly religious prophylactics that anesthetize Christians from what is at stake – the production of a new creation in the midst of the existent powers. It has always been a great mistake to confine Christian life and identity to the inward and expressive. What is at stake in a missionary encounter with the West is the re-forming of Christian life in terms of social practices. Without this movement away from the expressive and inward to social praxis Christianity will remain stultified and impoverished. What might such social practices involve?

This journal address the churches in North America and the United Kingdom. Its conviction is that each has much to share and learn from the other in a spirit of mutuality and co-learning. In this spirit there is no space for either to sense itself as superior to the other, or even competent to appreciate the nature of the missionary challenges faced in the other's contexts. This would be arrogance of the first order. The question, therefore, about appropriate social practices, needs to be responded to by those living in their particular part of the West with the rest of us listening in, seeking to understand and putting ourselves in the role of co-learners.

I am a North American. A Canadian to be specific. An immigrant Canadian from the UK to be very specific. I want to address the question of 'what kind of social practices' from the perspective of my location, rather than in some generalized set of ideal proposals. Others in Europe and the UK are far better situated to engage this question in their contexts. The challenges to reframing Christian practices in Europe and the UK have different antecedents and dynamics from those in Canada and the US. It was noteworthy that Ratzinger, the current Pope, took the name Benedict to signal his understanding of the challenges confronting Christianity in Europe. It signaled this ongoing recognition for the resocialization of Christians around practices that were social rather than simply individualistic and personalistic. These are clues that are important for the whole church to follow. In the UK one is

struck by the way many have been influenced by the Northumbria Community. What enlivens this dispersed community is not primarily a list of practices (as important as they are and built around the Daily Office), but its Rule of Life: *Availability and Vulnerability*. This is a fundamentally *social* understanding of practices because, at the core, it involves the recognition that the most critical space where we encounter and know God is in our engagement with the other. This, of course, lies at the core of the Luke 10:1-12 text – the practices of becoming and welcoming the other in the name of Christ.

In terms of my own context and the meaning of social practices, only an illustrative approach can be offered. In Canada deep, mostly forgotten, undercurrents, shape the life of peoples here, especially that majority who come from a European heritage. It is these tribes, more than any others, who came to this land and plundered it from the peoples who were here. One of our most acute observers of the nature of Christian life on this continent and in this country was George Grant – now hardly known by the vast majority of people in this country. Grant understood that one could not properly grasp the nature of Canadian life without grasping what it means to be the descendants of European settlers. These people were (just as subsequent waves of immigrants from other places, despite all the efforts of governments to sir up some kind of core 'identity') rootless people because of who they were (detached from a European heritage that might have taught us something about place).

For Grant those of us from this narrative are not able to value what we need most, in fact, we cannot even name it, but it is fundamentally about place, about dwelling. Rather, we became those who subjugated and conquered, we 'took' the land and in so doing functionally eradicated any notion of lived, indwelt space.{rev}Another eminent Canadian, John Ralston Saul, has more recently, restated the implications of this reality in his enormously important book, *A Fair Country: Telling Truths About Canada* (Toronto: Penguin Books, 2008).{/rev} In Grant's estimation this homelessness has proven disastrous for both those from the European immigrant tribes and those from the tribes who dwelt here long before first contact. There is, therefore, in all of us who come from this narrative (still a majority), a restless homelessness, a loss of place and a diminution of our ability to be present in our own place.

I believe this is one of the most critical, underlying missional issues that continues to accelerate the irrelevance of Christian life in Canada. It is seen in many forms, from an assumed guilt about being of this tribe, to aggressive, u-topos plans and strategies by certain Canadian church leaders to 'retake' Canada for the gospel or, using demographic calculus, plant 'churches' all over the country in some global strategy of church growth. This homelessness is witnessed in the ways Canadian church leaders can, at times, claim with great vigor that Canada is not America and then use all the American pragmatisms to develop strategies that show, again and again, that place and the people of a place is, simply, a container to be used in the name of some abstract ideal, ministry goal or new project from the US or UK.

What is called for in this missionary context is a re-engagement with quite specific social practices. Luke 10, again, helps us to think through what might be involved. It is framed around Jesus sending the seventy 'home'. They return to the places where they had, mostly, been raised, namely, Galilee of the Gentiles. They are sent to dwell (stay in the same house; enter into the whole social and economic life of

the household) in the neighborhoods and communities in a very specific way – not in control, not with a new tactic called 'entering the neighborhood' – but as those who were in need of receiving hospitality from the other (the *household* in the community). The anxiety of Euro-tribal Christians (when not focused in inward, personal 'spiritual' practices), from what Grant describes as rootlessness, is usually expressed in the need for control in the form of plans, strategies, vision statements. What if, a missionary encounter with the gospel in Canada has little to do with the practices of control and management (mission assessment plans, 'natural' church development, fresh expressions or church planting) but re-socialization in practices rooted in a receptive, mutual entering and dwelling (availability and vulnerability) in the local as one's own neighbourhood? What if an essential practice for hearing what the Spirit is up to is in this kind of entering, dwelling, embracing of place in dramatically changing Canadian communities? For those in the UK and US there may well be other kinds of practices – we have much to learn from one another if we can see each other genuinely as 'other'.

This article has sought to frame proposals about the nature of Christian practices within the question of a missionary encounter with our own culture(s), namely, late modernity in the West. For a long time this tradition has been shaped by deeply embedded defaults of privatized, affective individuality as well as the consumer pragmatics around serving this self-actualizing self. Throughout the modern period, there have been Christians who sensed that these formations of Christian life were deeply flawed in terms of the kinds of engagements that would be required to re-engage Western culture(s). This is not to deny the role and place of individual, or even 'inward' practices but to locate them in something much more fundamental in terms of God's agency in the world. The language of 'social' seeks to frame practices that engage the peoples and places where we live and dwell. It has been proposed that these kinds of practices within current church systems of the West call for a re-orientation of imagination regarding Christian practices. It has also argued that such a re-orientation cannot be some generic, one-size-fits-all approach but needs to be worked out in the lived realities of differing national and regional narratives. There is no high place from which any of us can declare for the other what is wrong, what needs to be fixed and the formula for making all things well. These deeply modern defaults cannot help us in this moment. What we need are distributed, networked communities of God's people sharing with one another their learning as they experiment with the social practices of the kingdom.

1. As pointed out below, Newbigin wasn't the first to raise this question of Christian meaning in the modern West. The importance and richness of his response was the missiological frame he brought to the question. ↩
2. Fredrick Jameson, *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Duke University Press, 2003). ↩
3. Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989) see chapter 10. ↩
4. Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, transl. Olive Wyon (London: Allen and Unwin, 1931). First published in German in 1912. ↩
5. See William T. Cavenagh, *Migrations of the Holy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011). ↩

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