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Practices, Core Practices, and the Work of the Holy Spirit

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Introduction

The recent interest in “practices” has created a multi-faceted discussion in theological circles, a discussion that has brought together insights from many other disciplines such as ethics, philosophy, and cultural anthropology.¹ However, there has been little extended theological analysis about how the many claims about how practices function in our lives are related to the quite similar claims traditionally made about the work of the Holy Spirit. This is not surprising, for many of the implicit and explicit understandings of the work of the Holy Spirit, at least in mainline and academic circles in the last century, have been formed around the notions of revelation, inspiration, and miracle, and so do not fit precisely with the kind of “action” practices have on us. Protestant conceptions of what it means to be a Christian have often centered on our beliefs or our response of faith to revelation; therefore, the work of the Holy Spirit has often been conceptualized in ways that make sense the process of coming to faith in those beliefs and propositions or the response of faith to revelation. However, the renewed emphasis that the Christian life is an ellipse centered on the twin-foci of beliefs *and* practices—this shift, which I think is a quite fruitful shift, may cause us to have to broaden our notions of the Spirit’s work in certain ways. I believe this broadening will create healthy winds of change and yet coming from the Reformed tradition, I want this broadening to be done carefully in order not to sacrifice certain key theological themes, such as the Reformation theme of *sola gratia*. This paper is an attempt to begin to do precisely that. To that end, I will highlight four distinctions found in the work of certain theologians that can help us better conceptualize the overlap between human “practices” and the work of the Holy Spirit.

Before I launch into these four distinctions, however, I will lay out more precisely the landscape of the “practices” discussion.

Practice makes perfect

“Practice makes perfect.” My father used that common saying to encourage me to try harder and stick to the task at hand when I was growing up. Whether I was doing my homework, throwing a

1. An earlier version of this paper was delivered as a public lecture sponsored by the Institute of Reformed Theology on November 4, 2002 in Holland, Mich.

baseball, playing the piano, or engaging in another of the activities that structured my life, I was encouraged to try hard and keep at it. This meaning of the word, “practice,” is familiar to us all.

But there has been another use of the word “practice” that is less familiar. This other use of the word refers not to our repetitive attempts to get something right—our practicing—but rather to the something that we are trying to get right. It refers to the structured activity itself, which is called a practice. We use this other meaning of the word “practice” when we talk about a lawyer’s “practice,” a doctor’s “practice,” or the “practice” of hospitality, prayer or baptism.

In this fast-paced and often fragmented world in which we live, a world in which community is much talked about because we have so little of it, one of the impetuses of the renewed interest in “Christian practices” is the hope that as we participate in them, our beliefs and lives may become a meaningful whole. In the preface to the book entitled, *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*, edited by Dorothy Bass, Bass speaks of the search of many people for “some context of larger belonging and some pattern of believing and valuing that is richer and deeper” than what our society offers.² She offers a broad definition of practices as “those shared activities that address fundamental human needs and that, woven together, form a way of life.”³ In that book, a variety of authors speak about Christian practices ranging from hospitality, to testimony, to forgiveness, to healing. When integrated into one’s life, they will provide searching people with a sense that their life is a meaningful whole.

These claims about Christian practices leading us into “a Christian way of life,” however, raise questions about what exactly is at the center of a Christian way of life. Is Christianity best understood as a culture made up of various practices, as a list of beliefs one must subscribe to, or as a spiritual experience? It is no surprise that there is an ongoing discussion about the relationship of Christian practices to our beliefs and to the experience of faith. The understanding that our “way of life” and identity are partly formed by the practices which constitute the cultures and sub-cultures we are part of are insights that have been brought to the fore by cultural anthropologists such as Clifford Geertz and Pierre Bourdieu and the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre.⁴ Theologians such as George Lindbeck have in turn sought to understand the way that culture and language are related to our Christian beliefs. Others such as Katherine Tanner, Miroslav Volf, and Reinhard Hütter have specifically addressed the role that Christian practices—

2. Dorothy Bass, ed., *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1997), x.

3. Bass, *Practicing Our Faith*, xi.

4. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1973). Geertz does not use the term “practices” as his preferred technical term, but often uses terms such as “symbol systems” or “rituals.” However, his analysis of how societal structures interplay with individual structures and belief share much in common with Bourdieu and MacIntyre. Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977). Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), esp. 187–198.

especially the Christian practices involved in our worship—play in the construction, meaning, and interpretation of our Christian theological beliefs.⁵

Not only has the discussion of practices been related to Christian beliefs; many have also sought to show how practices are complexly related to our ethics. Since at least 1979 there has been a growing interest in the way that Christian liturgical practices are related to Christian ethical life.⁶ In an article originally delivered to the Society of Christian Ethics in 1998, M. Therese Lysaught nicely laid out at least six different “mechanisms” highlighted in the work of various Christian ethicists and liturgical scholars for how the practices in which we are involved in Christian worship are claimed to shape the ethical life of those who participate. She writes, “specifically, liturgy is construed as: influencing cognitive faculties, affecting vision, shaping affections, forming community, relating the individual to the divine, or engaging participants in drama.”⁷

As mentioned above, this rather dizzying array of claims about how and in what way we are constituted, affected, and/or guided by the practices in which we participate raises this question: How is the Holy Spirit involved in these practices?

Complicating this question is the fact that many of these Christian practices seem quite close to cultural practices outside the church, so the boundary between Christian and non-Christian practices often seems to be quite fuzzy.

This question becomes especially pointed when one considers the claims that through certain Christian practices, our lives, beliefs, and dispositions are shaped and formed. For example, Susan Wood writes concerning the practices involved in corporate worship, “Liturgy becomes the microcosm of the work that God is doing in the world, that is, transforming it into his body.”⁸ Thus, using more traditional Christian language, she is claiming that in and through these practices, we as Christians are being sanctified. One could change that saying of my father, “practice makes perfect” into the claim that “practices make perfect.”

5. Kathryn Tanner, “Theological Reflection and Christian Practices,” *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life*, ed. Dorothy C. Bass and Miroslav Volf (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002). Reinhard Hütter, *Suffering Divine Things: Theology as Church Practice* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997). Miroslav Volf, “Theology for a Way of Life,” *Practicing Theology*. George Lindbeck in *The Nature of Doctrine* played a large role in the beginning of this discussion by seeing doctrine as part of a “cultural-linguistic” system. He was influenced by the cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz.

6. M. Therese Lysaught traces “serious efforts” made in this discussion back to a plenary session at the 1979 Annual Meeting of the Society of Christian Ethics which featured papers by Paul Ramsey and Donald Saliers and a response by Margaret Farley. These were later published in a 1979 issue of the *Journal of Religious Ethics*. M. Therese Lysaught, “Eucharist as Basic Training: The Liturgy as Nexus of Liturgy and Ethics,” in *Theology and Lived Christianity*, ed. David M. Hammond (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 2000), 257–286.

7. Lysaught, “Eucharist as Basic Training,” 258. She argued that in addition, participation in liturgical practices shapes a Christian’s body.

8. Susan Wood, “The Liturgy: Participatory Knowledge of God in the Liturgy,” in *Knowing the Triune God: The Work of the Spirit in the Practices of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 112.

So, to sharpen my initial question about how the Holy Spirit is involved in practices, let me restate the issue in this form: In light of claims that Christian practices are involved in our sanctification and growth as Christians, and given the observation that many of these practices seem quite similar to practices observed in other cultures and other parts of our culture, how are we best to understand the way that the Holy Spirit is involved in Christian practices?

One simple and I believe common answer to this question could go like this. I will label this answer the “grace, then gratitude” answer. One might answer that Christian practices, such as hospitality, prayer, or even the practice of catechesis, are a thankful human response to God’s gracious activity toward us. So, in essence, the Holy Spirit is not *directly* involved in these practices themselves. Given God’s saving action in our lives, the practices that form our Christian way of life are our human response to the prior action of God in our lives—much in the same way that Muslim practices are formed in response to their beliefs. Given this relationship, these practices and these liturgies will certainly provide rich resources for reflection on the beliefs of the people who create such practices. In short, God acts, then humans respond in the creation of ways of being that we deem fitting of the God we love and have faith in. As an example, we as Christians believe that God is hospitable to us in certain ways; we in turn go out and try to be hospitable to others in ways appropriate to us as forgiven creatures.

While there is a certain truth to such an answer, at least two problems arise. First of all, from a cultural anthropological perspective, this one-way movement from beliefs to practices is precisely the kind of understanding that recent work on practices has critiqued. For example, Pierre Bourdieu locates cultural practices within an ongoing dialectic between what he calls the *habitus* of a culture, which would include our beliefs but which he more broadly calls our “dispositions,” and the embodiment of that *habitus* in cultural practices.⁹ Thus at least Bourdieu would argue our *beliefs* and dispositions are formed in part by the *practices* we engage in, rather than simply the other way around.

But there is a theological problem as well in this “grace, then gratitude” answer, which becomes apparent when one tries to specify more clearly how God’s saving and sanctifying action reaches us in our lives. The typical Reformed answer is God works to save and sanctify us through Word and Sacrament. The problem is that the preaching of the Word and the celebration of Baptism and Eucharist would be on the “grace” side of the formula rather than the “gratitude” side, but they are in fact part of the list of Christian practices under discussion. One *could* try to draw a strict division between preaching, Eucharist and Baptism from other Christian practices, saying that in those three practices we encounter grace while other Christian practices are merely instances of gratitude. While this is a possible answer, it is not the answer one finds in most Reformed theology of the sacraments and certainly not within the larger discussion of Christian practices.

The other extreme answer to this question of how the Holy Spirit is involved one could

9. Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, esp. 87–96.

label the “all is grace” answer. In this view, God’s Spirit seems to be involved equally in all the motions of history; therefore, distinguishing the way the Holy Spirit is involved in some Christian practice from some other cultural practice is quite difficult. Even if one uses broad categories such as “love” and “justice” as a means of discrimination, it becomes difficult on that basis to make distinctions between the Spirit’s activity in the Eucharist from the Spirit’s activity in, say, a Buddhist peace demonstration. The problems that arise here are that this view tends to undermine both the sovereignty of God in conversion and the uniqueness of Christ. But as opposed to the “grace then gratitude” answer, which has a rather limited view of the Spirit’s work in the range of what are considered Christian practices, this other “type” of answer has a much broader understanding of the Spirit’s work of grace in and through all kinds of practices.

As might be expected, I will be shooting for some kind of golden mean in the middle of what I have just presented as the “extremes.” But as we all know, the middle ground is often difficult to maintain and usually requires careful distinctions. In the following I will highlight four such distinctions that have been made and that will lead us in fruitful directions as we consider how the Holy Spirit might be involved in the full range of Christian practices.

Distinction 1: General Cultural Practices vs. Core Practices of the Church

The first distinction is the distinction between practices in general and what have been called core practices. I get the term “core practices” specifically from the work of Reinhard Hütter, a contemporary Lutheran theologian; however, there are several other authors who work with a similar distinction.

In his book *Suffering Divine Things* and his several articles that deal specifically with Christian practices, Hütter makes this distinction between “practices” as understood from within the contexts of cultural anthropology and what he calls Christian “core practices.”¹⁰ In that book he offers an extended analysis and appreciative critique of George Lindbeck, whose groundbreaking book, *The Nature of Doctrine*, is in part the application of insights gained from cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz to the analysis of what Christian doctrine is. One way of spinning Hütter’s critique of Lindbeck is that he thinks Lindbeck’s model, while quite instructive, is finally insufficient because it does not have the resources to make such a distinction between cultural practices and Christian core practices; as a result, it is unable to discern the *unique* character of Christian theological discourse as opposed to other cultural discourses. In Hütter’s words, “the substantively and ecumenically shaped formal character of [Lindbeck’s] proposal prevents any explicit development of theological discourse as church practice, or of the substantive pathos

10. Hütter, *Suffering*, 128–134. “The Church: The Knowledge of the Triune God: Practices, Doctrine, Theology,” *Knowing the Triune God*, 33–35. “Hospitality and Truth: The Disclosure of Practices in Worship and Doctrine,” *Practicing Theology*, 206–206 n 1, 220–223.

characterizing the church itself.”¹¹ What Hütter is referring to by the phrase, “the substantive pathos characterizing the church itself,” is the way the church is formed and shaped by the work of Holy Spirit.

So what are core practices according to Hütter? He provides this list of seven core practices of the church: (1) Proclamation of God’s word and its reception in faith, confession, and deed; (2) Baptism; (3) the Lord’s Supper; (4) the Office of the Keys (which is the public or private reproof and forgiveness of sins); (5) Ordination and offices; (6) prayer/doxology/catechesis; and finally (7) discipleship or “the way of the cross.”¹² Hütter is drawing this list from the “marks” of the church that Martin Luther lists in his treatise, *On the Councils and the Church*. The reason why Hütter is describing these as core practices rather than simply calling them “marks” is that he thinks aspects of these activities can be illumined by the theory bound up with the term “practices.” However, he also says that core practices can only be considered practices “analogically”; while “core practices” share certain traits with other practices as defined by MacIntyre or Bourdieu, there are substantial differences. Specifically, Hütter understands core practices to be those specific church practices in which human activities “simultaneously participate in the being of the Spirit itself.”¹³ In these practices, the Holy Spirit practices on us, rather than, as in Bourdieu, these practices being the embodiment of the *habitus* or “habits” of a human society. As the title of his book suggests, we “suffer” or undergo the action of the divine in our midst; human communal life is sanctified and made to participate in the life of God. Thus, these core practices are distinguished *primarily* by the way the Holy Spirit is present in those practices, *not* by their outward form.

However, there is an outward dimension to the distinction as well. Hütter writes, “What we find in Luther’s account is a way to conceive the Holy Spirit’s sanctifying work as concretely embodied and thus mediated in distinct *communal* practices.”¹⁴ What he means by the phrase “communal practices” is that core practices are practices of the church, of the body as a whole, as opposed to individual practices or individual spiritual disciplines. Thus it is both their peculiar relationship to the Holy Spirit and their communal dimension that distinguishes them. It is this communal dimension of these core practices that, in Hütter’s phrase, makes the church a “public” or visible entity in the world. Hütter writes that the church is “the public of the Holy Spirit.” What marks the church is not some kind of “wall,” but rather the presence of these core practices in conjunction with what Hütter calls *doctrina definita*, distinct doctrine.¹⁵ These two elements, core practices and distinct doctrine, are both effects or embodiments of the work of the Holy Spirit, and they together constitute the Christian church.

11. Hütter, *Suffering*, 26.

12. Hütter, “The Church,” 34–35.

13. Hütter, *Suffering*, 27.

14. Hütter, “The Church,” 35.

15. Hütter, *Suffering*, 164–165.

Before working through more precisely how the Holy Spirit is thought to be involved in these practices, let me first point out similar lists of practices that come from two other sources, namely Glen Stassen's *Authentic Transformation*, and John Howard Yoder's *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community Before the Watching World*.¹⁶

In his book, Stassen examines H. Richard Niebuhr's work and discerns that a key aspect of his theological ethics is his questing after concrete Christological norms by which one could judge societal transformation. He puts Niebuhr's theological ethical structure in conversation with the work of the New Testament scholars Gerd Theissen, Walter Wink, and Richard Horsley to come up with what he calls "seven concrete, historically realistic processes of deliverance." He writes this about these practices:

We may see these as an extension of the logic of Niebuhr's historical realism, developed in dialogue with recent scholarship. In so doing, we surely conclude that at least the seven following bedrock practices are clearly emphasized by the concretely incarnate Jesus.¹⁷

These practices or processes are: (1) Not judging, but forgiving, healing, and breaking down the barriers that marginalize or exclude, (2) Delivering justice, (3) Evangelism, preaching the gospel and calling for repentance and discipleship, (4) Nonviolent transforming initiatives, (5) Love of enemy, (6) Mutual servanthood, and (7) Prayer. He highlights the many aspects of Jesus' concrete, historical ministry that fall into these categories.

Like Hütter, Stassen emphasizes the role of the Holy Spirit in, with and under these processes, as opposed to seeing them as human responses to God's grace. He also emphasizes their communal dimension, and calls them processes of the corporate body called church. He writes that "they are not recipes for perfection or self-righteousness; nor are they the virtues of individuals. They are processes of deliverance, shared in community, that participate in God's gracious dynamic rule. They are eschatological signs of God's delivering action, already beginning in present action and connected to future promise."

Lastly, let me point out a similar, and yet still different list in Yoder's book, *Body Politics*. As the full title suggests, his book is structured around five practices. These are: (1) Binding and loosing. For Yoder this means the process of mutual reproving and forgiveness, which in Luther's terminology is the practice of the keys. It is similar to Stassen's first and third processes. (2) Breaking bread together. This is Luther's Lord's Supper, and it is complexly related to all of

16. Glen Stassen, "Concrete Christological Norms for Transformation," Chapter 3 of *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture*, Glen H. Stassen, D. M. Yeager and John Howard Yoder (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996). John Howard Yoder, *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community Before the Watching World* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1994).

17. Stassen, "Concrete Christological Norms," 162.

Stassen's processes. (3) Baptism. This is another of Hütter's practices, and it is again complexly related to Stassen's processes. Number four on the list is a practice Yoder calls "the fullness of Christ," which is the practice of discerning and calling people to their various ministries in the body of Christ. This practice runs counter to the way leadership, power, and roles are typically doled out in at least our culture. This is similar to Hütter's practice of ordination and office and related to Stassen's processes of mutual servanthood and delivering justice. And lastly, (5) is the practice Yoder calls "the rule of Paul." This practice involves discerning the will of God through open conversation of the church body in which we yield the floor to anyone who has something to say. This practice is interestingly not on Hütter's list; however, it might be interpreted as an instance of "the way of the cross" and discipleship in which we lay down our opinions and power in order for the will of God to shine forth in the church. And again, this practice may be related to more than one of Stassen's categories.

The only practice of Hütter's that has no rough equivalent to Yoder is the practice of prayer/doxology/and catechesis.

Reflecting on these various lists of core practices, it should be apparent that this idea of core practices is one way of backing into a discussion of sacraments and enlarging our conception of them. I say "backing" into the discussion quite knowingly, for a frontal assault on the idea that there might be something limiting about the number "two" in at least a Presbyterian setting can be quite perilous (two of course referring to Baptism and Eucharist). When I was an inquirer seeking ordination, my supervisory committee was quite concerned when I suggested that *perhaps we might* need to rethink the number two. After an exchange of letters and several phone conversations, I nuanced an answer in which the number two figured prominently and they were satisfied.

Yoder clearly disagrees with the limit of two, and yet also gives himself some room. He writes: "I *suggest* that we should *perhaps* conclude that the odd selectivity whereby most of the churches lifted up two "sacraments" and forgot the rest is without theological warrant."¹⁸

But talk of core practices is not merely a way of talking about sacraments under another name. It is a way of specifying what sacraments are.¹⁹ It is also a fruitful way of highlighting the centrality of certain church practices without sealing them off from the rest of our lives. Instead, talking about Baptism and Eucharist as practices suggests ways for thinking about the relationship between these practices and the other practices in our lives.

18. Yoder, *Body Politics*, 71. Emphasis mine.

19. The stress of all three authors is that these core practices are the result of the action of God on us. But if this is the case, then our understanding of what it is that goes on in worship may need to be broadened. Much has been made of the roots of the word "liturgy." People, myself included, like to point out that the Greek roots of the word mean "the work of the people": the lesson being that we do not go to church to be entertained, but rather to work through our praise of God, for "praise" is our rightful service to God. This is correct, but something else in the word "liturgy" may lead us further. The original referent for the word was the gift of wealthy donors to construct public works in Greek cities; that was their "liturgy" or work for the people. Perhaps there may be an analogy to the way

But let me make another observation about these different lists put forward by Luther, Hütter, Stassen and Yoder. I have been struck first by their similarity and historical continuity, which I think lends them some credibility. Most, but not all, of these core practices are moments within the traditional shape of the Christian liturgy dating back at least to A.D. 150. In Justin Martyr's *Apology*, one can discern a shape to typical Christian worship services that includes most of these practices.²⁰ But what are we to make of the differences in their lists? Will such differences lead inevitably to further divisions and distortions in theology and practice? I do not think they need to; instead, I think the fact that we find common themes with some variations is exactly what we should expect given our understanding of church core practices. For, we are a church composed of finite and sinful humans who are encountered and worked on by a sovereign and yet loving God.

These last comments point us to the fact that something more than the dynamics internal to cultural practices does unite these lists and traditions of practice. It is not the practices themselves, understood from a sociological angle; nor is it the consistency of explicit Christian beliefs that these liturgical practices are thought by some to embody²¹; instead, on this view, what unites them is the thing they are living symbols of, namely, the form of the second person of the Trinity as it becomes embodied in human flesh through the power of the Holy Spirit.

This reference to the Word and Spirit as the unifying principle behind core church practices leads us to the second distinction.

Distinction 2: Work of the Word vs. the Work of the Spirit

The distinction I want to make between the work of the second person of the Trinity, the Son or Word, and the third person of the triune God, the Holy Spirit, is simply a way to make explicit the Trinitarian theology implicit in the defining characteristics of core church practices.

For a concise statement of this distinction between Word and Spirit, let me simply quote from Calvin's *Institutes*, I.xiii.18. Calvin writes, "Nevertheless, it is not fitting to suppress the

that God, in these practices, is constructing the infrastructure of the city of God. Similarly Hütter points out that the German word for the worship service, *Gottesdienst*, "service of God," reflects the fact that in both of the two main poles of the liturgy, the Word and the Eucharist, Christ is our host. Christ humbly and sacrificially stoops down and serves us so that we in turn might become servants of God, "living sacrifices" (Hütter, "Hospitality and Truth," 221).

20. Frank Senn discerns the following liturgical structure: "gathering, readings, preaching, intercessory prayers, kiss of peace, presentation of bread and wine, great thanksgiving, distribution and reception of eucharistic gifts, extended distribution to the absent." Frank Senn, *Christian Liturgy: Catholic and Evangelical* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 76. Quoted in Hütter, "Hospitality and Truth," 220–221 n 21.

21. Katherine Tanner convincingly shows the problems associated with the common view that Christian liturgical practices are simply the reflections of explicit theological doctrine in "Theological Reflection and Christian Practices," *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life*, ed. Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 228–234.

distinction that we observe to be expressed in Scripture. It is this: to the Father is attributed the beginning of activity, and the fountain and wellspring of all things; to the Son, wisdom, counsel, and the ordered disposition of all things; but to the Spirit is assigned the power and efficacy of that activity.” Thus Calvin understands that in every work of God, all three persons are united in action, but are distinct in that the Father is associated with the basis of that activity, the Son is associated with the “ordered disposition” or pattern of that activity, and the Spirit is associated with the “efficacy” or dynamic behind that activity.²²

This distinction helps clarify what is being claimed about core church practices, namely that through the dynamic and power of the Holy Spirit, certain patterns of activity emerge in human flesh that are reflective of and indeed participate in the form of Christ, to the glory of the Father. This “ordered disposition” of the Son became incarnate through the power of the Holy Spirit in Jesus Christ; this “ordered disposition” or pattern of the Son then becomes reflected and embodied in an analogous and yet different way in the activities or core practices of the Body of Christ, the Church.²³ This Trinitarian understanding thus makes sense of the impulse of both Yoder and Stassen to go to the *gospels* and analyze the *activities* of Christ incarnate. They do not simply look for specific “rituals” Christ instituted. These activities of Christ incarnate become models and checks for their lists of central redemptive processes and practices. The work of the Spirit is to bring forth the activity patterns of Christ in the world; in these core practices, we have an image of the image of God.

Calvin too thought that the central practices of the Church could be called a “mirror” of God in which we see God’s image. In his I Corinthians commentary, he writes, “We ... behold the image of God as it is presented before us in the Word, in the sacraments, and in fine, in the whole service of the Church.”²⁴

Two final comments about this Trinitarian distinction:

First, this way of entering into our understanding of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is in some tension with certain strands of “social trinitarianism,” where the mutuality and sociality of the triune persons are emphasized over their distinctions. While I do think this more economic model is the right place to start, and more fruitful in many ways, I would agree that both emphases must be upheld.

Second, this understanding of Word and Spirit—precisely that the Word and Spirit always

22. See Hütter’s concise statement of his Trinitarian theology that is the same as Calvin’s in its essentials in Hütter, *Suffering*, 124–125. These are the same trajectories we see in, for example, 1 Corinthians, Colossians, John, and Hebrews, in traditional liturgical prayers, and in early Fathers such as Basil, John Philoponos, Justin Martyr, and Irenaeus. For an extended analysis of Calvin’s Trinitarian theology, see Philip Butin, *Revelation, Redemption, and Response: Calvin’s Trinitarian Understanding of the Divine-Human Relationship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

23. Cf. Hütter, who writes that the mission of the Holy Spirit is “performed through” these activities. *Suffering*, 129.

24. Calvin, *In 1 Cor.* 13.12. C.R. XLIX, 514. C.T.S. I, 430. Quoted in T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin’s Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1969), 129.

are united, although distinct, in their action—can also help in avoiding the problem of viewing core practices as some form of “created grace” that is independent of “uncreated grace.” The term “created grace” is sometimes associated with the view that God has instituted some kind of creaturely medium that in and of itself can communicate God’s grace to us.²⁵ For example, one might think that God in his grace has instituted these practices or sacraments as “grace dispensing machines,” which in and of themselves are able to communicate God’s saving power to us. Such a view led to the kind of superstitions and practices that reformers such as Luther and Calvin reacted so strongly against in the Reformation.

By understanding that in core practices we are being shaped by the immediate presence of the Spirit into the “ordered dispositions” of the Word, we highlight that we are encountered by “uncreated grace,” by the Spirit, and preserve the sovereignty of God in the movement of grace.²⁶

To sum up our discussion so far, I have sought to provide clarity in the broad discussion of practices by using two distinctions, the first being that of core church practices as opposed to general cultural practices. The second distinction between Word and Spirit is simply a fleshing out of the Trinitarian theology embedded in the first distinction. Now I will attempt to move out more broadly by raising this question: Given the fact that God *creates* as well as *redeems* the world through the Word and Spirit, how then are we to distinguish between these core church practices and what we see as other positive practices in our culture? Is there in fact any clear division that can be made? My last two distinctions are an attempt to begin to answer that question.

Distinction 3: Economy of Redemption vs. Economy of Creation

In looking back to the lists of core practices and processes put forth by Hütter, Yoder, and Stassen, in all three cases, these lists were qualified in at least two ways. One, they were corporate practices related to the activity of the church, and second, they were said to be *redemptive* processes or practices. Stassen calls the seven concrete Christological norms that we listed above “processes of deliverance.”²⁷ And Yoder, while typically using the term “practices” to describe the five activities he highlights also uses the phrase “redemptive processes.” It seems then that there is an implicit distinction being made between God’s work in redeeming the world, which is commonly called

25. This is a common critique of Catholic theologies of grace by many Protestants; it certainly was an anxiety of Barth’s about Catholic theology. However, I would agree with the influential strand of Thomistic theology often linked with Henri de Lubac that claims this is a gross misunderstanding of Aquinas. See Fergus Kerr’s discussion of “quarrels about grace” in his *After Aquinas: Versions of Thomism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 134–148.

26. It also gives one the means to work out the careful distinctions needed between “what is offered” and “what is received,” by making the Word the objective principle and the Spirit the subjective principle in revelation and sanctification. It also helps one to name the problems often associated with practices: form lacking spirit, and spirit lacking form.

27. Stassen, “Concrete Christological Norms.”

the economy of redemption and God's work in creating and sustaining the world, which is called the economy of creation.

Hütter, in fact, in a lengthy footnote in one of his articles makes this distinction explicitly. Hütter writes:

Those fundamental practices that we encounter as central to the sustenance and enhancement of human life across a variety of cultures and throughout time and that we therefore tend to call "universal" are theologically to be identified as belonging to God's economy of creation—due to their very "point," namely the sustenance and enhancement of human life.²⁸

Looking at the list of practices in the book I mentioned at the outset, *Practicing Our Faith*, this distinction proves helpful. The chapter titles of that book are as follows: Honoring the Body, Hospitality, Household Economics, Saying Yes and Saying No, Keeping Sabbath, Testimony, Discernment, Shaping Communities, Forgiveness, Healing, Dying Well, and finally, Singing Our Lives. One can see that most, if not all, of these practices can be found in most cultures as well as in the Christian church, and they are in fact related to the sustenance and enhancement of life.

But Hütter rightly goes on to say that while a distinction between creation and redemption can be made, it is not a dichotomy. For part of our redemption is a revelation of the ends and purposes of creation. This relationship between redemption and creation is reflected in Calvin's famous image of how God's revelation through scripture acts like a pair of spectacles through which we can view creation aright. By this logic, the Christian understanding of a practice such as hospitality would see more clearly how hospitality fits within and is sustained by the larger purposes and actions of God; in this way the Christian practice could be considered the fulfillment of the more universal and general practice of hospitality.

The relevant dictum here is "grace renews and fulfills creation" rather than "grace is opposed to creation."

While this distinction between practices of creation and practices of redemption may seem to solve things, and I in fact think it is helpful, it also raises more questions than it can answer on its own. For one thing, this distinction is complicated by a further question: Is the redemption offered in Christ simply the restoration of original harmonies that were lost in the fall, or is there something more being offered to us in the new covenant? In other words, is the forgiveness of sin and "going back to Eden" the only impetus behind the incarnation, life, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ and the sending of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost? While this may seem to be a rather esoteric question at this point, I believe it is a crucial part of the issue concerning the relationship of core church practices to what we could consider good cultural practices linked to

28. Hütter, "Hospitality and Truth," 206–207 n 1.

the economy of creation.

Distinction 4: The Indwelling Work of the Spirit vs. the Spirit's Providential Direction

In my understanding, the point of the new covenant is not merely to restore patterns or practices of human life to their original integrity. Its intention is also to inaugurate a new relationship between God and all of creation. The economy of salvation involves all of creation participating in a new and special way in the life of God and bearing the image of God more fully. For at least human life, this involves what John Calvin calls the infusion of a principle of “supernatural” life in us. This new principle of life is the Spirit, and this new life has effects on all the different “levels” of life that we share with all humans and other creatures.²⁹ Jonathan Edwards holds similar views. He distinguishes between the Holy Spirit assisting “natural” principles of action and infusing new “supernatural” principles of action.

I will make my point here quickly. This understanding of what redemption entails and how the Spirit brings this about, allows one to look for and appreciate the work of the Spirit more broadly. It allows one to claim that the Holy Spirit is indeed at work wherever we see practices that move people into redemptive patterns of activity. Yet it still allows us to distinguish this more general providential action of the Spirit (assisting “natural” principles) from the more specific indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit (infusing “supernatural” principles) that we claim is occurring in, with and under the core practices of the Church.³⁰

One implication of this is that where we see activities of true human liberation, practices of peacemaking, and practices that overcome the walls that divide us, we can affirm with, for example, certain liberation theologians that the Spirit of God is moving. Yet we can still uphold the uniqueness of Christ and the sovereignty of God in conversion and new birth. This is because we can draw a distinction between God's providential work in what Edwards calls the assisting of natural principles and what Edwards calls the infusion of new principles of action in those involved.³¹

29. Edward Dowey Jr. writes, “Calvin recognizes a kind of hierarchy of the forms of life, ‘universal life,’ which we share with the beasts, ‘human life,’ by which we are sons of Adam, and the ‘supernatural life,’ which only the faithful obtain, and all are included in the renewal of faith and regeneration.” *The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1994), 203. He is drawing from Calvin, *Com. Eph.* 4:18 (CO LI.205b-206a).

30. For example, Calvin writes that “God's grace sometimes restrains where it does not cleanse.” *Institutes* II.iii.3.

31. Other background “ontologies” would require different ways of describing what Edwards calls an infusion of new principles. Hütter uses “enhypostatic” terminology to describe the relationship of the Holy Spirit to the Church in core church practices. I think current understandings of “top-down causality” are one way to establish similar analogies for this relationship that resonate with our current scientific understandings of the world. However, such metaphors for the work of the Spirit must be nuanced in light of God's transcendence; God's action must not be seen as simply a higher-level actor within our world. I have attempted to work through such a picture of divine action in *Sanctification as Participation in Christ*, Ph.D. dissertation, Duke University, 2001.

Conclusions

As I draw to a close, let me suggest three points about the directions I have affirmed here.

First of all, the distinctions I have highlighted paint a very high picture of the church and the core practices that the Holy Spirit brings about there. It distinguishes them from more general cultural activity by showing the “*habitus*” which they embody is not in fact simply the product of another human culture which happens to be called Christian, but is rather the *habitus* or patterns of God. Here, I believe, we are in much the same situation that Karl Barth was when in reference to Schleiermacher’s theology he said, “For the present, I can see nothing here but a choice.”³² Either these practices can be reduced to general cultural forces or else they cannot. I think they cannot. But unlike Barth, I believe the best way to speak of God and not of “man” is not to talk only about punctiliar “events” of revelation. I think we can and should speak (at least in part) of the revelatory and salvific work of the triune God that is partially, imperfectly, and yet truly expressed and embodied in the core practices of the church.

Secondly, this high view of core church practices need not, however, have the effect of dichotomizing these core practices of the church from the practices of culture or from other Christian practices. Indeed, as Yoder puts it, these core practices of the Body of Christ “prefigure” the shape God calls “human socialness as a whole” and offer a “paradigm for the life of the larger society,” which should and can be imitated.³³ Instead, these four distinctions are ways for us to more precisely locate the differences *and similarities* between the larger groupings of Christian practices and the other good cultural practices that surround us and in fact are part of us. We need not be frightened that affirming the work of the Holy Spirit outside the walls of the church risks a rich understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit in the church.

And third, I also believe these distinctions can help us imagine the Holy Spirit’s work in our midst in broader ways. The Holy Spirit is not simply about the work of intellectual illumination so that we can believe certain propositions, nor the creation of an attitude of faith. Neither is our sacramental life simply a reflection or dramatization of those beliefs and attitudes. As the greater Protestant communion of churches continues to reflect on the meaning and best practice of the sacraments, I believe the directions pointed to here may help us more precisely locate what is at stake in the practical form of our sacraments. I think they can also enrich our understanding of the importance of sacramental life and the full range of Christian practices. Perhaps we, like Calvin, might even hunger for the weekly celebration of the Eucharist.

32. Brian Gerrish, *A Prince of the Church: Schleiermacher and the Beginnings of Modern Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 19.

33. Yoder, *Body Politics*, ix–x, 77–78.