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Teaching Theology as a Christian Spiritual Practice:
The Example of Stanley J. Grenz

A DISSERTATION

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Teaching Theology as a Christian Spiritual Practice:  
The Example of Stanley J. Grenz

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This dissertation explores the recent work on spiritual practices in the academic discipline of Christian spirituality, gathering together the strengths of various conceptions of practice from the literature and developing a rigorous definition of a Christian spiritual practice: Christian spiritual practices are things God enables Christian people to do together over time to address fundamental human needs in light of the gospel of Jesus Christ, activities that together form a way of life that pleases God and through which God teaches and transforms persons into the image of the Son.

Practices may be Christian or may not be, depending upon whether practitioners ground their practices in the Christian tradition, reflect critically upon them in light of that tradition, and recognize God’s agency within them. Thus, teaching theology may or may not be performed as a Christian spiritual practice. This study examines the activities of reading, writing, and teaching—all broadly defined—as the three necessary and sufficient practices of theological education, and determines that each of them may be done in an engaged or a disengaged fashion, an “academic” or a “spiritual” orientation (or some mixture of the two). Engaged theological educators tend to exhibit the dispositions of humble hospitality, reflective and attentive contemplation, and prayerful conversation in their reading, writing, and teaching.

After carefully correlating the aspects of the definition of Christian spiritual practices with the composite practice of theological education, the thesis contends that
teaching theology can meet the definition of a Christian spiritual practice. The work of Stanley J. Grenz (1950–2005), a prominent evangelical theologian, establishes that he employed reading, writing, and teaching while exhibiting the dispositions enumerated above, marking him as an engaged theological educator. His pursuit of teaching theology as a Christian spiritual practice can serve as a model for others to emulate, possibly contributing to a reunion of spirituality and theological pedagogy in the lives of individual teachers, their students and colleagues, and the corporate people of God.
This dissertation by Laurie A. Mellinger fulfills the dissertation requirement for the doctoral degree in Spirituality approved by Raymond Studzinski, Ph.D., as Director, and by James A. Wiseman, S.T.D., and Donald J. Heet, D.Min. as Readers.

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INTRODUCTION

Some recent work in the academic discipline of Christian spirituality focuses upon a variety of concrete actions that persons weave together into unique tapestries of Christian life. Scholars in the field call these actions spiritual practices. In her work on congregational practice, Diana Butler Bass draws three distinct frameworks for understanding spiritual practice from various other authors: one anthropological, one ascetical, and one moral. 1 Although not included in Butler Bass’s work, Craig Dykstra and Dorothy Bass used the moral framework to construct yet a fourth framework, this one with an explicitly Christian foundation, for understanding practices. 2 The first chapter of this dissertation thoroughly explores each of these four frameworks before constructing a precise and rigorous definition of a Christian spiritual practice that will guide the rest of the study.

The theological educators who contributed chapters to L. Gregory Jones and Stephanie Paulsell’s edited volume The Scope of Our Art: The Vocation of the Theological Teacher articulate several foundational actions and possible dispositions of theological


educators. The second chapter of this thesis contends that three specific practices are necessary and sufficient to define theological education: reading, writing, and teaching. Each of these practices may be performed in ways that are largely disengaged from the subject matter, the students, the self, and God; each may also be performed in ways that are more deeply engaged. Engagement may be assessed by examining the dispositions of hospitality, humility, contemplation, attention, reflection, conversation, testimony, and prayer as these are portrayed herein. If theological educators practice reading, writing, and teaching in hospitable, contemplative, and conversational ways, they may be said to be engaged theological educators.

How does teaching theology relate to the rigorous definition of a Christian spiritual practice? Theological educators certainly apply a variety of methodologies, and employ them with differing rationales. For some, theological education is largely the isolated act of an individual, the performance of a job that may be largely disconnected from any faith commitment. Such persons may first seek to develop professional skill in order to produce knowledge, then to transmit that knowledge through lectures, publishing, and presentations. In this scenario, the production and transmission of knowledge may be the primary objectives, and this method of theological education could be considered “teaching as an academic practice.” However, for others, theological education is an act sustained by a way of life in a community of learning, a service to others and to God arising directly from a personal faith commitment. Such a teacher seeks to develop personal virtue and to discover knowledge of God, then to apply that knowledge through teaching and learning relationships with the people of God. In this alternate scenario, the development of virtue and the application of truth are the primary objectives, and

3. The Scope of Our Art: The Vocation of the Theological Teacher, ed. L. Gregory Jones and Stephanie Paulsell (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).
theological education could thus be considered a “teaching as a spiritual practice.” The third chapter correlates the definition of a Christian spiritual practice with the description of the composite practice of theological education to determine whether teaching theology as a Christian spiritual practice is possible.

Stanley J. Grenz (1950–2005) was an evangelical Christian theologian who taught in a variety of settings, especially as a professor and lecturer at universities and theological seminaries and as a prolific writer for both academic and popular audiences. One might say that he perceived and conducted his work in theological education as a spiritual practice, as a communal activity spanning a lifetime of engagement with church and culture, practiced for the purpose of training thoughtful Christians to glorify God. Chapter four closely analyzes his teaching materials and written work to determine whether Grenz employed the foundational educational practices of reading, writing, and teaching while exhibiting the dispositions enumerated above in such a way that his practice of theological education can be said to correspond to the definition of a Christian spiritual practice. If so, his work will offer an instructive contemporary example of teaching theology as a Christian spiritual practice.

Although scholars have written at length about a variety of spiritual practices, no scholarship to date specifically addresses teaching theology (or theological education) as a Christian spiritual practice. By establishing that this composite practice may only be recognized as a spiritual practice if certain specific activities and rationales are operative, this research attempts to lay the foundations for reviving some of the connections between theological education and spiritual formation for contemporary theological educators, providing a groundwork upon which to build a more nuanced understanding of the interplay between theology, spirituality, and educational praxis. The conclusion suggests
that practicing theological education as a specifically Christian spiritual practice may
contribute to the reunion of spirituality and theological pedagogy in the lives of individual
teachers, their students and colleagues, and the corporate people of God.
CHAPTER 1
DEFINING CHRISTIAN SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

What is a practice? What sorts of attributes make a practice a “Christian” practice, or a “spiritual” practice, or both? The literature of practical theology and spirituality reveals four different conceptions or frameworks for understanding practice: an anthropological conception, an ascetical conception, a moral conception, and a theological conception.¹ This chapter considers each of these in turn, drawing tenets from the anthropological, moral, and theological conceptions to highlight the distinctions that make a practice “Christian,” and drawing tenets from the ascetical conception to highlight the distinctions that make a practice “spiritual.” After examining the similarities and differences and the strengths and weaknesses of these conceptions, the chapter will conclude with a composite, rigorous definition of Christian spiritual practices.

Introduction: The Idea of Practices

What is a practice? Common uses of the term abound. The Oxford English Dictionary provides three helpful definitions: (1) “The actual application or use of an idea, belief, or method, as opposed to the theory or principles of it”; (2) “a habitual action or pattern of behavior; an established procedure or system”; and (3) “repeated exercise in or performance of an activity so as to acquire, improve, or maintain proficiency in it; activity undertaken to this end.”² These basic definitions of the word combine to form a broad


understanding of what a practice is: not a theory, but an action or group of actions that is repeated or habitual, done according to an established procedure and with the goal of proficiency in the action involved.

Dorothy Bass offers a more nuanced preliminary or general definition of practice: “a dense cluster of ideas and activities that are related to a specific social goal and shared by a social group over time.” This definition highlights the aspect of activity, as does the dictionary definition, while including the category of ideas as well. Bass’s definition also makes clear the social nature of practices. Her definition extends the goal of proficiency to a social goal; moreover, a social group shares the practices themselves. This sharing of practices by a group of persons, and the mention of practices being performed over time, both add a richness to Bass’s definition that is missing from a simple dictionary definition. She eventually creates a distinctively Christian and theological definition of practices that will appear later in the chapter.

However, the distinctive richness of Bass’s definition is not part of most people’s implicit understanding of what practices are, according to Craig Dykstra. He argues that not only the general public, but especially those who serve in “theology and theological education are burdened by a picture of practice that is harmfully individualistic, technological, ahistorical, and abstract.” He defends at length his claim that most people think practice means someone doing something in order to achieve a specific result, using

3. Dorothy Bass is director of the Valparaiso project on the Education and Formation of People of Faith, located at Valparaiso University and funded by the Lilly Endowment.


5. Craig Dykstra is senior vice president for religion at Lilly Endowment, Inc.

resources and methods that appear to be useful in light of present circumstances. Consider each part of the definition in turn. Who does a practice? Someone—an individual. Why does she do it? In order to achieve a specific result—we measure her effectiveness in operant or technological terms. What does she use? Resources and methods—drawn from history, yet abstracted from their historical contexts. How does she choose among them? In light of present circumstances. “What we are after are theoretical principles and guidelines, together with tested methods, approaches, and techniques, which we regard as historically and culturally neutral.” He concludes that this common conception of practices as individualistic, technological, ahistorical, and abstract does not allow practice to constitute a way of life; rather, it reduces practice to simple functionality. We will return to Dykstra’s construction of a revised conception of practice when considering both the moral and theological conceptions.

Dykstra demonstrates that people generally hold to the sort of definition of practices reflected in an English-language dictionary, as seen above. Practices are not theoretical, but active (and implicitly activities of an individual); they are systematic and repeated (though often ahistorical and abstract); and they are done according to established procedures, with the goal of proficiency or effectiveness in a technological sense. Dykstra’s work clarifies the differences between that implicit definition and Bass’s richer one that includes the often-neglected social and historical aspects. Four other frameworks by which practices may be more clearly understood extend this preliminary definitional work.

7. Ibid., 35–41.
8. Ibid., 40.
9. Ibid., 41.
An Anthropological Conception of Practices

Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002), Michel de Certeau (1925-1986), and many other social scientists have explored the idea of practices according to an anthropological rubric, defining practices simply as social activities in which human beings engage. They examine practices both in their simplicity and in their complexity—for instance, from the simplicity of taking a walk to the complexity of “pedestrian speech acts” in New York City. This conception of practices also “emphasizes [their] improvisational character” and the ways in which they change and develop over time. In addition, practices understood anthropologically offer insight into the behavior of groups of people as well as individuals, capturing the intricate interrelationships between and among them. Sociologists and ethnologists study specific practices, seeking to discover how they are constructed and carried out, both within specific subcultures and across them. From this research, some believe they can derive or identify theoretical principles that govern particular practices; however, others argue that this is simply not possible.

French philosopher and anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu did fieldwork in the late 1950s in Kabylia, a region of northern Algeria characterized by persistent ethnic political conflict that continues to the present. Bourdieu had earlier done military service as a soldier in a resettlement camp there, and his position in both cases as a so-called “objective observer” highlighted for him the contradictions between attempting to understand a culture through such observation and actually experiencing the culture as a participant immersed in it. The apparent dichotomies between theory and practice,


12. Deborah Reed-Danahay, “*Tristes Paysans: Bourdieu’s Early Ethnography in Béarn*
between object and subject, between system and event, moved from the periphery to become the focus of his inquiry.\(^{13}\) Thus, he shifted from his earlier study of philosophy and anthropology into the fields of ethnology and sociology, where he believed he could explore these implicit separations more scientifically. His classic *Outline of a Theory of Practice* offers his analysis of practice as not necessarily the “negative obverse of theory.”\(^{14}\)

Bourdieu argues that persons who participate in practices do so through a largely unconscious mechanism that he terms a *habitus*:

> A *habitus* [is] understood as a system of lasting, transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a *matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions* and makes possible the achievement of infinitely diversified tasks, thanks to analogical transfers of schemes permitting the solution of similarly shaped problems, and thanks to the unceasing corrections of the results obtained, dialectically produced by those results.\(^{15}\)

The *habitus*, the organizing principle of persons’ actions,\(^{16}\) produces or generates practices which relate the conditions that elicited them to the conditions that elicited similar practices in other circumstances.\(^{17}\) In other words, practices emerge from a complex but inarticulate mechanism that has a logic of its own, taking into account all of the past and present.
present circumstances that apply to the practice. “The ‘customary rules’” by which people discern what to do, he writes, “are themselves the product of a small batch of schemes enabling agents to generate an infinity of practices adapted to endlessly changing situations, without those schemes ever being constituted as explicit principles.”

Since the schemes behind the practices are inexplicit, Bourdieu also argues that they are not apprehensible via reflection on the practice itself. Even someone who is trained in anthropology or ethnology is unable to bridge the distance between practices themselves and the principles that underlie them. As he conducted his early research, for example, his own childhood in a modest, rural French home offered him only a slightly “less abstract idea than some people of what it [was] to be a mountain peasant . . . [Nevertheless,] I was also, and precisely to that extent, more aware that the distance is insurmountable, irremovable, except through self-deception.” First, it is impossible for the ethnographer to enter fully into a particular practice and then describe it. Moreover, the practitioners themselves are “ignorant both of the objective truth about [their] practical mastery (which is that it is ignorant of its own truth) and of the true principle of the knowledge [their] practical mastery contains.” Therefore, when we ask someone to describe how or why he does a certain thing in a certain situation, we are asking him for abstract knowledge that he cannot access, because that meta-knowledge is very different from the knowledge of the practice itself. The logic of the habitus is rationally inaccessible both to the theoretician and to the practitioner; therefore, deriving theoretical principles from descriptions of discrete practices is impossible, in Bourdieu’s view.

18. Ibid., 16, emphasis added.


In Bourdieu’s anthropological understanding of practices, then, there is an insurmountable distance between the practices themselves and the principles or theories that inform them. Michel de Certeau agrees with Bourdieu that this distance is fixed, although he uses the terms “specialist” and “expert” to distinguish between those skilled in practices and those skilled in theories. A person who has achieved excellence in doing certain practices, a specialist, “is more and more often driven to also be an Expert, that is, an interpreter and translator of his competence for other fields.” As the specialist attempts to translate, however, he abandons the actual competence he has in the practice, until “he no longer knows what he is saying.” Social scientists who operate under an anthropological conception of practices, then, generally deem it impossible to comprehend fully the knowledge or logic inherent within practices, and similarly argue that it is impossible to discern the theory or principles that bring the practices about.

De Certeau also offers a helpful comparison between Bourdieu’s work and that of Michel Foucault (1926-1984). Foucault’s ascetical understanding of practices (to be considered in the next section) focuses upon the results that the practices produce, whereas Bourdieu’s anthropological conception focuses more on the *habitus* that produces the practices. According to de Certeau, both men use similar methodologies, in which they first “cut out” discrete practices and then attempt to “turn them over” to discover the theories underneath. Both Foucault and Bourdieu apparently use “a part (which is observable because it is circumscribed) . . . to represent the totality (itself undefinable) of practices.” Nonetheless, neither is primarily concerned with the practices themselves.


22. Ibid., 8, emphasis original.

23. Ibid., 62.
Christian theologian Kathryn Tanner, developing and applying this anthropological conception of practices within explicitly Christian contexts, defines practices as “large-scale, ongoing forms of coordinated social action.” Her understanding stresses three particular attributes of Christian practices: their ambiguity, their inconsistency, and their open-endedness. Regarding the ambiguity of practices within Christian communities, she notes that “the belief and value commitments involved in such practices [generally remain] undeveloped, ambiguous, or many-sided. In that way, the actions of participants remain coordinated—the practice of offering and accepting the Lord’s Supper, for example, runs smoothly—despite the fact that the participants do not precisely agree on what they are doing, or why.” Moreover, she describes Christian practices as inconsistent, highlighting flexibility and improvisation as practices are applied across a broad variety of circumstances. Finally, she discusses the open-endedness of these practices, since they are always being re-formed (in part due to their ambiguity and inconsistency) as circumstances change. “Apart from deliberate efforts to make them so, Christian practices, and many of the beliefs and values that inform them, do not hang together all that well.” To this point, she appears to agree with Bourdieu and de Certeau that although there is knowledge inherent within the practices themselves, it is rationally inaccessible to the practitioners, and although the practices arise from a theoretical framework, that, too, is inaccessible, by participants or observers.

Tanner also avers that it is almost impossible to establish the characteristics that distinguish Christian practices from non-Christian practices. “Christian practices seem to


26. Ibid.
be constituted in great part by a slippery give-and-take with non-Christian practices; indeed, they are mostly non-Christian practices—eating, meeting, greeting—done differently, born again, to unpredictable effect.”

In her book *Theories of Culture*, she explores this question in more detail, asserting first that one cannot simply say that Christian practices are those performed in Christian communities, because these “are neither self-contained nor self-sufficient.” Second, the boundaries that could be considered to separate a Christian way of life from a non-Christian one are too permeable and unstable to serve as guidelines. Third, that which unites Christian practices as Christian is not to be found within the practices themselves. Rather, “what unites them is concern for true discipleship, proper reflection in human words and deeds of . . . who and what Jesus was, the difference he made in human life, [and] the practices and beliefs that came into the world with him.” She concludes therefore that the ambiguity, inconsistency, and open-endedness of Christian practice require theological reflection: “Because Christian practices are like this, they will not work without critical theological engagement.”

Here, then, is where Tanner parts company with Bourdieu and de Certeau. Rather than maintaining that meta-analysis of practices is impossible from within and from without, she insists that both types of analysis will strengthen the practices themselves by bringing to light the theological and theoretical principles that undergird them. She believes that such reflection must be both ongoing and explicit, and will in fact assist in

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27. Ibid.


29. Ibid., 151, 153.

gathering Christian practices together to form a whole way of life. In addition, theological reflection combats the tendencies toward ambiguity, inconsistency, and open-endedness. It does these things

(1) by sharpening commitments; (2) by guiding performance of Christian practices in the face of the ambiguities, disagreements, and shifting circumstances of everyday life; (3) by contributing to the excellence of such practices by making them more meaningful and meaning-giving; and (4) by imbuing them with a historical, contextual, and theological richness that might otherwise be lost from view at any one place and time, and thereby (5) enhancing their resourcefulness to meet the challenges of that place and time.\(^\text{31}\)

For Tanner, then, theological reflection on practices is not only possible, but vital if Christian practices are to continue to be both Christian and attuned to the ever-changing situations Christians face in their interactions with one another and with the broader cultures in which they live and minister. In the final analysis, one can argue that such theological reflection, which can highlight connections among practices, practitioners, and those they serve, as well as the purposes of their service, is the distinguishing factor determining which practices are Christian and which are not.\(^\text{32}\)

In summary, those using an anthropological conception of practices define them in sociological terms, as social activities in which human beings engage. Bourdieu’s work offers a rubric for describing practices in their various forms and contexts, highlighting ways in which changing contexts and circumstances force practitioners to improvise and make changes in practices over time. This rubric also captures the social relationships among practitioners, within a given subculture (such as Christianity) and across subcultures (as Christians relate to the cultures around them). This anthropological framework, moreover, provides ways to explore how Christian practices may be

\(^{31}\) Ibid., 234.

\(^{32}\) For further explanation indicating some possible results of such theological reflection, see the discussion below on pp.34-35.
distinguished from non-Christian ones, according to Tanner. Nevertheless, the reluctance of those using an anthropological conception of practice to define practices in specific and rigorous ways, as required by this project, calls for the examination of other possible conceptions of practice.

**An Ascetical Conception of Practices**

Drawing from Greek and Roman philosophers and early Christian sources, Michel Foucault and other philosophers have explored the idea of practices according to an ascetical rubric, defining practices as activities that persons use to train both their bodies and their souls in order to relate more deeply with the Transcendent.\(^{33}\) The expected outcome of these activities is a maturing or transforming of the entire person in thought, feeling, and action. This ascetical understanding of practices, which draws its name from the Greek term *askēsis*, meaning exercise or discipline, is older and somewhat more specific than the anthropological understanding.\(^{34}\) In addition, the ascetical framework, unlike the anthropological one, focuses more upon the results of the practices than upon their motivations. The resulting wisdom, virtue, and maturity are inextricably linked in some fashion to a growing awareness of or relationship with the Divine.

Social critic and philosopher Michel Foucault understood practices as “technologies of the self,” which he argues “permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain


\(^{34}\) Dykstra and Bass, “A Theological Understanding,” 20.
a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality.”

Drawing upon his study of Greek and Roman philosophy, Foucault notes that persons believed themselves to be commanded both to know themselves and to take care of themselves. Moreover, that “care” is not merely care of the body; rather, it is care of the soul, understood as the non-physical realm of the person. The only way to exercise such care for the soul is to “know” it—and the only way to know it is to examine it in a mirror, which is the Divine or the Transcendent. Combined with meditation (meletē, defined as “imagining the articulation of possible events to test how you would react”) and physical training (gymnasia, defined as “training in a real situation, even if it’s artificially induced,” with examples like sexual abstinence and physical privation), regular self-examination in that transcendent mirror could produce deep knowledge of the self. The goal of askēsis was to be able to answer the question, “Is [our belief] assimilated enough to become ethics so that we can behave as we must when an event presents itself?”

According to Foucault, Christian ascetics added two more distinctive and important practices: self-disclosure to a spiritual master, and utter obedience to that master’s direction. Disclosing oneself by confessing one’s sins, whether privately to the master or publicly to the entire community, “effaced” the sins by permitting the fallen one


36. Ibid., 25.

37. Ibid., 36–37.

38. Ibid., 36.

39. Ibid., 35.
to subject himself to a form of martyrdom. Further, a relationship of obedience to the spiritual master “is modeled on the renunciation of one’s own will and of one’s own self. Disclosure of self is the renunciation of one’s own self.” The only way for a person to discern whether his thoughts are pure is to speak them all aloud to his master, who will help him to clarify his motives. Thus, in Foucault’s analysis, the purpose of ascetical practices for the classical philosophers was the pursuit of self-knowledge in the mirror of the Divine, leading to self-control and a life of virtue and wisdom; for those who exercised these practices in the context of a Christian commitment, the end result was the renunciation of self and a purity of soul that is the prerequisite for access to the truth and knowledge of God.

As does Foucault, Sarah Coakley highlights the ascetical practices of early Christians, asserting that they understood them as “deepening” their relationships to God. She articulates three different types or levels of practices, each leading to a result that is more complex than the one before. First, she describes what could be called elementary Christian practices, which issue from the faith commitment and infusion of grace present at baptism. These practices, which she links with purgation, the first stage of spiritual ascent toward God in the tradition of mystical theology, include refraining from everything in one’s life prior to baptism that cannot be used to inculcate Christian virtue (e.g. changing one’s style of dress, manner of interacting with others, eating habits, etc.).

40. Ibid., 43.
41. Ibid., 48, emphasis added.
42. Ibid., 40.
44. Coakley draws here from Clement of Alexandria’s “The Instructor,” noting that
She asserts that these practices are notable for their extrinsicism, and that they do not shape belief, but rather are shaped by it: “Authoritative newfound belief is used as an ethical touchstone for distinguishing appropriate behavior (practice) from inappropriate.”

Such practices are designed to delineate the boundaries of the Christian community as over against those of the secular one.

As new Christians mature, they may enter the second stage or level of practices, which Coakley identifies with illumination, the second stage of the spiritual ascent. She hypothesizes that the believer begins to experience “a form of identification with Christ,” such that the extrinsicism of the elementary practices becomes unsettling. Rather than merely trying to maintain boundaries that assure ritual purity, believers begin to recognize Christ in everyone they meet—both their brothers and sisters in the Church and those outside it. Practices like those in St. Benedict’s *Rule for Monks*, such as working in the fields and offering hospitality to strangers, begin to exert a “re-modulating” effect on beliefs. “They will cause us to find Christ, for instance, in new and unexpected places—in the beggar at the door, in our own spiritual endurance, in the ministrations of the abbot.”

The repetition of practices daily, throughout a lifetime of faith-filled service, unconsciously but surely transforms the practitioners spiritually. Chanting the Psalms, working together to accomplish what is needed for the community, eating and sleeping at fixed times of day that vary according to the season—practices such as these, which might

Clement “expatiates on everything from bed coverings to earrings; what would the ‘instructor’ [Jesus] think of hair-plucking, makeup, body-piercing, gold jewelry, kissing your spouse in front of the ‘domestics,’ or appearing naked at the baths?” “Deepening Practices,” 84-5. She does not mention instances where Clement addressed *ethical* behavior per se.

45. Ibid., 85.

46. Ibid., 84.

47. Ibid., 86.
on the surface appear to be ineffectual at producing virtue, nevertheless result in an imitation of Christ that is not merely external, but that comes from within, a “habituating of love.”

Coakley concentrates on contemplation as the best example of the third stage of practices, associated with the third level of spiritual ascent: union. At this deepest level, she asserts, certain kinds of theological knowledge or belief become possible as a direct result of the practice. Although she recognizes that contemplation is not so much a human practice as a gift from God, the resulting knowledge of personal union with God and incorporation into the life of the Trinity is a knowledge that is unavailable except as a result of years of faithfulness. “Sustained prayer practices here are clearly the prerequisites of certain forms of theological knowledge—direct contemplative knowledge of the Logos.” Moreover, the union with God that makes this knowledge possible is to be maintained not only during times of prayer, but also as one continues to operate in the first two stages of practice that have to do with the physical body and communal relationships. In this highest stage of the ascent, once beliefs have offered boundaries for practice in the first stage and practices have imparted depth of meaning to beliefs in the second stage, the rich knowledge of relationship with God both comes as a result of the practice of surrender and infuses all practices with that knowledge.

This ascetical conception of practices also permeates much contemporary Evangelical Christian writing on the subject of spirituality. Beginning with the publication

48. Ibid., 86.
49. Ibid., 88, emphasis original.
50. Ibid., 89.
51. Ibid., 92–93.
of Richard Foster’s landmark *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* in 1978, Evangelicals and others began to reclaim this heritage. Some authors in this stream use the term *spiritual disciplines* to describe ascetical practices; others use the term *spiritual practices*. These authors use the adjective *spiritual* as a modifier for two primary reasons. The first is that they, like others who understand practices in the ascetical sense, are focused upon the effects that these practices produce. They identify these effects as *spiritual* growth and formation into the image of Christ, and the deepening of relationship with the Transcendent, which in this case is the Christian God (who *is* Spirit, Jn 4:24).

The second, however, highlights another aspect of a thorough understanding of practices in a Christian context. These authors explicitly affirm that *spiritual* practices, unlike Foucault’s “technologies of the self,” are not merely ways in which women and men transform themselves. Rather, they argue, these practices enable human persons to offer themselves to God in order for him to effect a *spiritual* transformation within them, conforming them into the image of his Son. As a result of this transformation, humans’

actions will change—not as a direct result of faithful ascetical practice via strengthened willpower, but as an outgrowth of their strengthened relationship with God through the Holy Spirit. “The spiritual disciplines are the product of a synergy between divine and human initiative, and they serve us as means of grace insofar as they bring our personalities under the lordship of Christ and the control of the Spirit. By practicing them, we place our minds, temperaments, and bodies before God and seek the grace of his transformation.”^53 The practices themselves do not have inherent power to make changes at the deepest level of human persons; they are not “technologies” that persons use for the purpose of “self-help” to try to achieve a state of virtue or blessedness. Rather, if these practices are technologies at all, they are technologies that God uses to transform persons into his image. Humans play a role in their own transformation, to be sure, by continually offering themselves to God through the use of certain disciplines or practices. Nevertheless, the agent of transformation is God, not the self.

In essence, those articulating an ascetical conception of practices define them as activities used to train both bodies and souls in order to pursue deeper relationship with the Transcendent. Foucault’s work discusses how “technologies” such as meditation, physical training, and self-examination in light of the Divine were all understood as ways to produce results such as wisdom, virtue, and happiness. He also articulates the two distinctive additions made by early Christians: self-disclosure and obedience to a master, asserting that they produced a purity of soul required for access to truth and knowledge of God. Coakley extends this framework by describing three levels or types of practice and the reciprocal relations between belief and practice that the practices illuminate. The ascetical understanding, in addition, offers a comprehension of the significance of calling

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practices *spiritual*—not only that they assist with spiritual growth and relationship to the spiritual realm, but also that God is the agent of that growth. However, the tendency of those using an ascetical conception of practice to focus almost exclusively upon individuals rather than upon the community, as required by this project, continues to demand the examination of other avenues for discussing practice.

**A Moral Conception of Practices**

Moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre and other scholars have explored the idea of practices according to a moral rubric, offering lengthy and complex definitions of practices that emphasize their communal or social nature. These scholars also unite discussion of practices with discussion of the virtues, noting that practices allow present virtues to be expressed and that practices may inculcate virtues in practitioners as well. Indeed, in order for something to be classified as a practice in this framework, “internal goods” must issue from excellence in the practice. The moral understanding of practices, which relies upon classical treatments of morality to provide a tradition by which to understand the *telos* of humanity, focuses both upon the virtues that motivate human practices and the goods that develop as their result. Among those goods are particular types of knowledge and ways of knowing that are inaccessible to those who do not participate in the practices.

MacIntyre constructed a well-known conception of what he calls “social practices.” In *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, he explores the history of moral thought in Western civilization by telling two stories.\(^{54}\) The first is the story of the

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\(^{54}\) Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984). All references will be to this second edition; a third edition was published in 2007 with a new prologue in which he reiterates his commitment to the original tenets of his argument. I am grateful to Jonathan R. Wilson, *Living Faithfully in a Fragmented World: Lessons for the Church from MacIntyre’s* *After Virtue*, Christian Mission and
development of a theory of virtue during the Enlightenment; the second is the older story of a different understanding of virtue developed by Aristotle. MacIntyre argues that in contemporary culture, heavily influenced by the Enlightenment tradition, virtue is largely missing both in the public square and in personal life. He proposes that humanity is at a point of decision: either civilization will continue to understand morality as an individual expression of emotional preference, with social relationships serving only as vehicles for exercising one’s power over others, or it will reclaim the Aristotelian ideal of morality grounded in tradition and expressed through specific virtues and practices.55

After a complex and lengthy account of how virtues were expressed in various societies, MacIntyre notes that virtue requires practical action in order to be evident, explained, or understood. “Exhibiting excellence in some well-marked area of social practice” demonstrates the qualities characteristic of a virtue.56 Thus, particular practices provide actions whereby virtues may be exhibited and recognized. In this light, then, MacIntyre offers a specific definition of practices:

By a “practice” I am going to mean any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended.57

MacIntyre then weaves this definition of practices into further discussion of the virtues, specifically focusing upon the relationship between virtues and the “internal goods”

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Modern Culture Series (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997), for much of my understanding of MacIntyre’s complex monograph.

55. Wilson, Living Faithfully, 6.

56. MacIntyre, After Virtue, 187.

57. Ibid.
available by pursuing excellence in certain practices. Without virtue, he asserts, although many “external goods” may accrue to an individual who participates in a practice, the internal goods—which benefit not only the individual but all those who participate in the practice, and even society as a whole—will remain out of reach.\footnote{Ibid., 191.}

Many other scholars have borrowed MacIntyre’s definition as a foundation upon which to build their own understandings of practice.\footnote{Examples include Bass, \textit{The Practicing Congregation}; Jeffrey Stout, \textit{Ethics After Babel: The Languages of Morals and Their Discontents} (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988); Wuthnow, \textit{After Heaven}; and many of the chapter authors represented in \textit{Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People}, ed. Dorothy C. Bass (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997); \textit{Practicing Theology}, ed. Volf and Bass; and \textit{For Life Abundant: Practical Theology, Theological Education, and Christian Ministry}, ed. Dorothy C. Bass and Craig Dykstra (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).} Early in his own work in this area, Craig Dykstra was among the first theologians to do so. After articulating what he believed to be the current implicit understanding of practice, including its character as individualistic, technological, ahistorical and abstract, he contended for a reconception, adopting most of its tenets from MacIntyre’s description. His own definition of practice was “participation in a cooperatively formed pattern of activity that emerges out of a complex tradition among many people sustained over a long period of time.”\footnote{Dykstra, “Reconceiving Practice,” 43.} He unpacked this definition, then, by explaining MacIntyre’s meaning and later amplifying it.

First, he agreed with MacIntyre that in order to be identified as a practice, an activity must be \textit{cooperative}. MacIntyre’s presentation of practices as “socially established cooperative human activity” meant that they involved not only individuals, but groups of persons. Dykstra declared, “These people are not doing things \textit{to} one another so much as they are doing things \textit{with} one another. Though each may be engaged in different specific actions, they are not doing different things. Individual actions interrelate in such a way that
they constitute engagement in a common practice.”\textsuperscript{61} Dykstra also clarified that not every group activity qualifies as a practice, while many apparently individual activities do qualify. Three small children banging on the keys of a piano is a group activity, not the practice of piano playing. However, an individual playing the piano alone can still be participating in the cooperative practice of music, if she learned to play from a teacher, plays music composed by others, or is preparing to perform a concert for a group of people.

Second, Dykstra agreed with MacIntyre that practices are \textit{socially established}, meaning that the practices themselves have been shaped and formed over time by groups of people. “The form [of a particular practice] itself comes to embody the reasons for the practice and the values intrinsic to it. This is why, in order to participate in a practice intelligently, one must become aware of the \textit{history} of the practice.”\textsuperscript{62} In this way, a Mozart piano sonata played by someone trained to interpret the music as the composer intended “embodies” or displays why piano playing is a valuable practice. Dykstra argued that the history of a practice is inextricably interwoven with it:

An implication of this feature of practices is that a practice cannot be made up, created on the spot by an individual or even a group. Because practices come into existence through a process of interaction among many people over a sustained period of time, individuals can only participate in them; they cannot create them. This does not mean, of course, that new practices never emerge or that established practices do not change. As people participate in practices, they are involved in their ongoing history and may in the process significantly reshape them. Practices may be deepened, enriched, extended, and to various extents be reformed and transformed. Individuals, usually persons profoundly competent in a practice, may have considerable historical effect on its shape and direction.\textsuperscript{63}

When persons attempt to apply practices without regard for their inherent and inescapable

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 42, emphasis original.
\item \textsuperscript{62} Ibid., 44; compare to MacIntyre, \textit{After Virtue}, 194.
\item \textsuperscript{63} Dykstra, “Reconceiving Practice,” 44.
\end{itemize}
historical situatedness, the activities cease to be identifiable as practices and become identifiable only as group activities.

Third, again drawing specifically from MacIntyre, Dykstra asserted that a practice must be coherent and complex enough to generate “goods internal to that form.” The activity itself, whatever it is, must produce not only external goods—things like wealth, fame, or pleasure. Rather, it must produce one or both kinds of internal goods: products generated by participation in the practice (e.g., a song one composes), or effects brought about by the practice, whether physical, intellectual, emotional, or spiritual (e.g., coordination, concentration, or expressiveness). These products and effects, unlike those accruing as external goods, involve and affect not only individual practitioners, but the community as well.64 Taking again piano playing as an example, those who seek simply to make money by writing books about playing the piano, or those who always practice their songs diligently in hopes of receiving public acclamation, may be participating in the activity of piano playing and accruing external goods, but are not participating in piano playing as a practice. Those who are engaged in the practice in MacIntyre’s and Dykstra’s sense may experience similar external goods—making money from the ticket sales at their recitals, or receiving acclamation for their excellence in performance or in teaching. But, more importantly, those who participate in the practice of playing the piano experience internal goods—whether improved hand-eye coordination, recall of a broad repertoire of material, the joy of making music with others, or the ability to touch another’s spirit through the music. Moreover, the entire community benefits from listening to the music and from supporting the performer.

64. Ibid., 45; compare to MacIntyre, After Virtue, 188–91.
Fourth, the goods afforded by a practice become recognizable and available only as practitioners pursue standards of excellence that are also inherent to the practice. “The goods internal to a practice can be realized,” wrote Dykstra, “only by participating well in it.” 65 Those who excel in particular practices are best able to experience and discern the values of such practices. Returning to the example of the practice of piano playing, a non-musician listening for the first time to someone playing is likely unable to understand some of that which makes the music excellent, or to receive all of the benefits of excellent music. He could not recognize notes the composer or performer had not intended, for example, or conversely could not recognize subtle nuances of expression or improvisation. Similarly, a novice who is just beginning to study the piano may not experience many of the internal goods of the practice at first; only continuing practice can make those goods attainable. Only by playing and by continuing to play, only by learning about and studying the piano, in pursuit of that which makes the playing and the music excellent, can one begin either to comprehend or to experience the values inherent in the practice—things like the ability to concentrate, diligence in preparation, submission to the composer’s wishes, or enjoyment of the art of playing. Such values are not only results of the practice of playing the piano; they constitute it as the practice it is. Because these values both constitute the practice and result from it, Dykstra echoed MacIntyre’s claim that “practices themselves bear moral weight.” 66

Departing from MacIntyre, Dykstra then added that in his conception, practices also bear epistemological weight. “In the context of participation in certain practices we come to see more than just the value, the ‘good’ of certain human activities. Beyond that, we

may come to awareness of certain *realities* that outside of these practices are beyond our ken. Engagement in certain practices may give rise to new knowledge.”

Different types of knowledge are available via practices; the first is somatic knowledge, like the knowledge that a pianist has of how firmly to touch the keys to produce varying amounts of sound, or the knowledge of how far to depress the damper pedal to allow certain notes to resonate while others are dampened. This somatic knowledge, however, may be a prerequisite for other types of knowledge or ways of thinking; one’s ability to perceive these somatic “facts,” so to speak, may augment her ability to perceive other types of reality as well, or may open the way to insights that would be unavailable otherwise.

Moreover, placing this idea into the context of Christian faith, Dykstra wondered “whether complicity in certain practices provides physical, social, and even intellectual conditions necessary to knowledge intrinsic to the life of faith.” While he hastened to add that no practice provides *sufficient* conditions for obtaining the knowledge of faith, his contention was that some types of knowledge crucial to Christian faith may be conditional upon undertaking some distinctly Christian practices.

In any case, he asserts that just as MacIntyre thought practices to be essential aspects of “the good life” for humankind, practices are also essential aspects of the Christian life of faith.

In summary, those working with a moral conception of practices provide complex definitions with multiple facets. MacIntyre stresses the complexity, the coherence, and the

67. Ibid., emphasis original.

68. Ibid., 46.

69. See Dykstra’s discussion at his footnote 21, p. 63. As recorded in the Gospel of St. John, Jesus said, “If anyone chooses to do God's will, he will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own” (Jn 7:17 NIV).
communal or social nature of practices. Also, he highlights their historical embeddedness, which leads to understanding the standards of excellence inherent to the practices. He argues that the goods internal to the practices can only be fully realized by engaging in them, and that a life of virtue results from the pursuit of excellence in practice. He concludes that the virtues developed and sustained by practices provide and demonstrate humanity’s knowledge of the good. Dykstra assents to MacIntyre’s presentation while adding that practices enable persons to access not only moral knowledge, but also somatic knowledge and even “new” knowledge that would be inaccessible otherwise. However, since MacIntyre did not identify a specific tradition to define the parameters of the good, Dykstra then turned his attention to ways in which MacIntyre’s thought could be applied using the Christian tradition (broadly conceived) as normative. Thus, he and Dorothy Bass began to develop an explicitly Christian theological conception of practice from their earlier interactions with MacIntyre.

**A Theological Conception of Practices**

Craig Dykstra and Dorothy Bass, along with other practical and systematic theologians, have explored the idea of practices according to a Christian theological rubric. Developed from the moral conception of practices, their definition of Christian practice is robust: “things Christian people do together over time to address fundamental human needs in response to and in light of God’s active presence for the life of the world in Jesus Christ.”70 While subsuming most of the tenets of the moral definition, the theological one specifies Christianity as the normative tradition by which practices are transmitted, extended, and evaluated. Like the anthropological framework, the theological

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70. Dykstra and Bass, “A Theological Understanding,” 18. I have taken the liberty of adding the final clause, “in Jesus Christ,” as the authors indicate (see their note 3, p. 18) they wish they had done when they crafted this definition for *Practicing Our Faith.*
conception plumbs the depths of relationships between and among human persons and institutions. Similarly, like the ascetical framework, the theological conception recognizes the importance of awareness of and relationship with the Transcendent, in this case the God of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures.

As Dykstra and Bass elaborate upon their definition, they begin with the idea that “Christian practices address fundamental human needs and conditions,” and note that such practices must be “big enough, rich enough, and complex enough to address some fundamental feature of human existence.”

Giving examples of human needs or conditions, they describe humans as having physical bodies that must be cared for; as being mortal and needing reassurance that their lives have meaning; as being vulnerable to exhaustion and requiring rest. Hence, practices such as honoring the body, dying well, or celebrating the Sabbath offer assistance in the face of limitations and possibilities which are common to all humanity. Moreover, Christian practices offer assistance that reflects the practitioners’ convictions about God’s purposes for humanity and the truth of how things really are. In this conception, Christian doctrine functions normatively, especially as Christians reflect upon particular human conditions and ways in which God would have them respond. God also guides them in their reflection and decision-making, in fact permitting them in some sense to “share in the practices of God, who has also honored the human body, embraced death, and rested, calling creation good. And the other practices are like this, providing concrete help for human flourishing that is informed by basic Christian beliefs about who human beings really are and what God is doing in the world.”

71. Ibid., 22.
72. Ibid., 23.
Therefore, “Christian practices...involve a profound awareness, a deep knowing: they are activities imbued with the knowledge of God and creation.” Although quick to say that this knowledge may be neither articulate nor orderly, Dykstra and Bass recount several examples of these profound types of knowing. First, those who participate in Christian practices come to know that God is immanent in human experience, and that all that is—including every human person—belongs to God. Working attentively to address the needs of others also offers expansive knowledge of other persons and their needs, and of the resources creation offers for meeting those needs. Both the needs and the knowledge may be physical, intellectual, emotional, or spiritual, or any of these in combination with others. In addition, by cooperating with God’s plans for “the life of the world,” practicing Christians grow in their own individual and corporate knowledge of the Triune God. Discussing the Christian practice of Sabbath-keeping as an example, the authors clarify some of these ways of knowing. Those who keep Sabbath glean an “embodied knowledge” that although the work may never be completely finished, it can be set aside for a day without undue harm, and that neither life nor work are ultimately under human control. They learn intellectually about the traditions and actions of Sabbath, especially as they gather for worship with others. Their emotional capacity to wait patiently for expected results, and their physical capacity for work itself, are enlarged. They begin to recognize that Sabbath is a gift from God, and to find God in the work, in the rest, in the worship, in the fellowship with others. The capacity of the entire community to participate in Sabbath-keeping extends as various persons engage in the practice and teach it to others.

73. Ibid., 24.
The third facet of Dykstra and Bass’s definition considers the social and historical aspects of practice. They aver that these activities are not only practiced and sustained by communities of people, but that these communities may be located anywhere in the world, whether in different towns or on different continents. This social aspect of practices enables practitioners to improvise and expand upon practices in concrete and particular ways to better meet human needs in their specific geographic and cultural locations. In the same manner as the moral conception, the theological conception of practices makes room for an individual to participate in a practice alone, since he is inextricably united with others who participate in the same practice. One example could be the practice of praying the hours. A person who prays the Morning Office by himself at home is nevertheless united with others who are praying the same office at the same time, or in other time zones across the world. Moreover, that individual is also united with those who originally developed the idea of fixed-hour prayer, those who developed the particular resources he is using to pray the office, and those who taught him that this practice can be beneficial. Further, Dykstra and Bass mention that this socio-historical aspect of Christian practices is founded in the way God has worked with humanity, dealing with and calling people-groups in particular places throughout human history. Christians’ understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit in uniting particular congregations and traditions across the ages into the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church illustrates this foundation as well.

The fourth aspect of the theological definition is that “Christian practices share in the mysterious dynamic of fall and redemption, sin and grace.” One of the “fundamental human conditions” Dykstra and Bass acknowledge is the problem of evil and sin. Any

75. However, despite this acknowledgement of God’s agency, Dykstra and Bass’s definition itself places the focus of action on people, not on God.

practice, no matter how carefully normed by the Christian tradition, may be distorted by human or cultural influences into something that results in oppression and pain rather than freedom and health. Unfortunately, practices “can become abodes of bondage rather than freedom for practitioners who forget that it is God’s activity rather than their own that is healing the world. . . . While the point of most human practices is the achievement of some form of mastery over a specific kind of conflict or chaos, Christian practitioners . . . seek to enter more fully into [a] receptivity and responsiveness, to others and to God,” in the midst of the conflict or chaos.  

This is a key point: Christians do not so much try to do God’s work for him; rather, they try to allow him to work both within and through them to accomplish his purposes. When Christian practices are subject to recurring critical theological reflection, often God will reveal distortions to the practitioners, along with ways to redeem the practices and to reform them in ways that reclaim their original excellence.

Finally, the theological conception of practices furnishes a means by which the practices intersect and interact, constituting what Dykstra and Bass call “a way of life abundant.” The practices of Christian living do not exist in isolation. Critical theological reflection on practices creates the possibility and the responsibility for practitioners to discern the connections among practices, among practitioners, and among those they serve. First, Christian practices are integrally related to the global church and her history, simply because they are identified as Christian, indicators of a living tradition throughout the world. Second, the practices themselves relate to one another, allowing practitioners to

77. Ibid., 28; see also Miller-McLemore, In the Midst of Chaos, and her “Contemplation in the Midst of Chaos: Contesting the Maceration of the Theological Teacher,” in The Scope of Our Art: The Vocation of the Theological Teacher, ed. L. Gregory Jones and Stephanie Paulsell (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 48–74.

develop rich understanding. For example, “when practicing hospitality, one is drawn into forgiving those once considered alien, and into perceiving one’s own forgiveness [by them and by God] as well; in keeping sabbath, one honors the body, reorders the economics of the household, and grows in capacity to participate in the practice of saying yes and saying no.” Practices also open the doors to theological understanding, in which those who practice eating at the table with family begin to realize that their table is related to the eucharistic table, and ultimately to the table that all God’s children will share in the eschaton.

Dykstra and Bass recapitulate their theological conception of practices by noting that this way of life abundant has the same characteristics as the practices that constitute it: it “addresses fundamental human conditions and needs. It involves its adherents in God’s activities in the world. It arises from and imparts a profound knowledge of God and creation. It is lived together with others, and in continuity across many years. It catches up those who live it in the mysterious, dynamic process by which God is bringing a new creation into being.”

**Comparisons and Contrasts among Conceptions**

This careful examination of four different understandings of practices has offered a variety of ideas to consider in crafting a rigorous definition of Christian spiritual practices. Evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of each conception, as well as areas of overlap between and among them, will illuminate which aspects of each should become key elements of that definition.

79. Ibid., 29.
80. Ibid.
Those who favor the anthropological conception focus upon what drives or creates practices, whether Bourdieu’s concept of the *habitus* or Tanner’s Christian understanding of a faith commitment. For Bourdieu, the *habitus* is unconscious, and although complex and logical in itself, the principles by which it operates are inexplicit and inaccessible. A Christian understanding of the anthropological conception, however, would argue that the practitioner’s Christian faith commitment, first made explicit as the confession of faith at baptism, continues to become more and more explicit through individual and corporate study and theological reflection. Strengths of this conception include its emphases on the social or communal nature of practices, on their improvisational and ongoing nature, and on their historical and cultural situatedness—whether understood as subsumed within the *habitus* or as indicating continuity with Christian tradition. The Christian understanding rejects Bourdieu’s and de Certeau’s assertion that the *habitus* is entirely unconscious and inaccessible, arguing instead that a Christian *habitus* requires critical theological reflection in order to produce practices that are distinctively Christian. That Christian distinctiveness is not merely nominal, nor bounded by participation in the Christian community, nor by some commonality in the practices themselves. Rather, that reflection about practices may be what identifies them *as* Christian, since Christians insist upon norming practices in light of their relationship to beliefs about Christ, which only become explicit via such reflection.

Those who favor the ascetical conception, rather than focusing upon the mechanisms that produce practices, center their attention on the results of the practices. These activities develop maturity, wisdom, and virtue in the practitioners, characteristics required for deeper relationship with the Transcendent. For Christians, the ultimate result of spiritual practice is union with and transformation into the image of God. This ascetical
understanding of practices also highlights the interrelatedness of practices, such that they combine to form a way of being (Foucault) or a way of life (Coakley) wherein the practices and the beliefs that undergird them have a reciprocal relationship. At first, beliefs shape practices; later, practices remodulate beliefs; still later, practices such as self-renunciation and contemplation serve as gateways to certain types of knowledge and union with God. However, the focus tends to be upon the individual practitioner, with the gathered community included as something of an afterthought. Another strength of this framework is its discussion of agency in transformation. For Foucault, the person is the agent of transformation, which is achieved by looking into the Divine mirror; for Christians, God is the agent of transformation, acting as the human person submits to God. In other words, Christians do not work to transform themselves; they work to put themselves in a place where God can do the work of transformation within them. Finally, in the Christian ascetical conception, practices are “spiritual” because God the Spirit is the agent of transformation and renews a person’s likeness to Christ not only physically, emotionally, and intellectually, but also spiritually.

Those who favor the moral conception of practices pay little attention to the Transcendent or the spiritual, centering their attention instead on the role of practices in earthly human existence. Operating from MacIntyre’s complex and specific definition of practices, they highlight the cooperative and socially established nature of practices, akin to the anthropological conception. They extend the anthropological view by noting that proficient practitioners can identify standards of excellence in practices, and echo the ascetic view that practices result in kinds of knowledge that would remain inaccessible without pursuit of those standards of excellence. Another strength of the moral conception is its dual understanding of virtue—that virtues may be expressed and recognized through
practices, and that virtues may be inculcated and developed through practices as well. Perhaps the greatest strength of this framework is its development of the idea of internal and external goods, and its insistence that a group activity may only be identified as a practice if internal goods may result for the individual and for the community from the pursuit of excellence in the practice. Its greatest weakness is its lack of mooring in a particular tradition that could define “excellence” and “internal goods,” leading other scholars to adapt it to specific traditions.

Those who hold to a Christian theological conception of practices generally use the moral definition as their starting point. Thus, they echo the anthropological understanding in that they focus upon the social, historical, and improvisational nature of practices, as well as upon the impact of practices on relationships between and among persons and institutions. Additionally, they adopt the idea that Christian faith commitment elicits practices, and that critical theological reflection applies that faith commitment as the norm for evaluating practices. From the ascetical framework they glean an understanding of the results of practices, one of which is the ability to learn new things in new ways as the result of lifelong faithfulness to practices. The Christian theological conception also uses the ascetical understanding’s assertion that practices offer the opportunity to become more aware of oneself and more deeply related to God. They transfer the moral conception’s discussion of virtues to their own idea that practices must address fundamental human needs, as well as be vehicles by which the practitioners themselves will be transformed. As in the ascetical and moral frameworks, the theological conception sees practices as interrelated and forming a way of life. This understanding of practices gathers together the strengths of all three of the previous conceptions, but leans a bit too heavily upon human agency to the neglect of God’s agency in the development of practices and in their transforming power.
Conclusion: A Definition of Christian Spiritual Practices

Dykstra contends that a harmful understanding of practices as individualistic, technological, ahistorical and abstract must be replaced by a more comprehensive and cooperative conception. However, the definition that he and Bass offer to replace it can be criticized as too focused upon human activity and not focused enough upon God’s agency in human flourishing. Taking into account the strengths of each of the four conceptions of practice—the anthropological, the ascetical, the moral, and the theological—while shoring up the weakness of the theological one by drawing more explicitly upon the ascetical conception, the following definition emerges: *Christian spiritual practices are things God enables Christian people to do together over time to address fundamental human needs in light of the gospel of Jesus Christ, activities that together form a way of life that pleases God and through which God teaches and transforms persons into the image of the Son.*

This definition adapts Dykstra and Bass’s theological definition by adding language stressing God’s agency in the human transformation which occurs through spiritual practices, thus eliminating the possibility of misinterpreting them as some form of works righteousness by drawing in this key principle from the ascetical framework. It also makes explicit the idea that practices together form “a way of life abundant,” as Dykstra and Bass put it, and hints at the internal goods and virtues inherent in such practices as explained by the moral conception. Perhaps most importantly, while focusing upon a specifically Christian description of practices, this definition clarifies the basis, the purpose and the result of Christian spiritual practices: they please God, and help humans

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82. See Col 1:9-12 and Rom 8:29.
submit to God so that they can grow in their knowledge of and likeness to him. This
definition of practices will serve as a touchstone for the remainder of this project.
CHAPTER 2
PRACTICING THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

This chapter defines theological education as a composite practice comprised of the practices of reading, writing, and teaching. It examines each of these practices as they are described in essays from Jones and Paulsell’s *The Scope of Our Art* and other sources. Although those who teach theology may employ any or all of these three practices in ways that are disengaged from their students, the subject matter itself, or God, they may also teach in more fully engaged ways. Engagement is defined as practicing reading, writing, and teaching while simultaneously exercising the practices or dispositions of hospitality, contemplation, and conversation. These dispositions of engaged teaching apply to the three necessary and sufficient practices of theological education. Reading, writing, and teaching interweave, especially in the presence of hospitality, contemplation, and conversation, to form the practice of teaching theology.

**Defining Theological Education**

What does it mean to practice theological education? Practicing theological education involves a number of discrete yet interconnected activities, as does practicing


1. Please note that I often use “teaching theology” as a synonym for theological education. Reading, writing, and teaching are posited as the activities that make up the composite practice of theological education whatever the particular subject being taught (theology, biblical studies, history, etc.); nonetheless, when I speak of “teaching theology” I usually mean the composite practice, not teaching as over against reading or writing.
medicine. As a physician, for example, one welcomes and examines patients, orders tests and evaluates their results, makes diagnoses, and prescribes and monitors treatments—all common medical practices that involve interactions with patients. However, doctors also engage in the practice of medicine as they read medical journals, perform research studies and publish the results, attend conferences to learn from other medical professionals, or teach classes for medical students—practices that may or may not involve direct patient contact, but nonetheless are necessary to the practice of medicine. Each one of these actions merits examination as a discrete part of medical practice, just as each complements and connects with the others in what can be called the composite practice of medicine. In fact, although caring for patients might at first seem to be the only important criterion when exploring what it means to practice medicine, a more thorough exploration demonstrates that activities apart from direct patient care are also important to the practice. If doctors do not practice reading, researching and writing, or consulting and teaching, they will have less assistance to offer their patients, and to that extent will be less effective medical practitioners.

2. Although the specific discussion and examples below are my own, I acknowledge my debt to Charles R. Foster, Lisa E. Dahill, Lawrence A. Golemon, and Barbara Wang Tolentino, *Educating Clergy: Teaching Practices and Pastoral Imagination* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006), for the insight that the education of clergy is fundamentally similar to the education of physicians, lawyers, or engineers. However, Daniel Aleshire, Executive Director for the Association of Theological Schools, notices significant differences as well (for example, that pastors are expected to assume leadership roles immediately after graduation); see Daniel Aleshire, “Theological Education in the Twenty-First Century” (Montreal School of Theology, October 19, 2005), 2, available from http://www.ats.edu/LeadershipEducation/Documents/Papers2005Aleshire4.pdf (accessed 6–30–09).

3. “Composite practice” is a term of my own construction. It seems clear to me that all practices are composites of a number of actions; no single action, standing alone, will fit the definition of a practice. Nonetheless, this chapter probes the practice of theological education by reflecting deeply upon three other practices that comprise it. Thus, I thought it necessary to develop a term for a “broader” practice comprised of other practices. “Composite practice” is that term. In this light, then, this chapter establishes the composite practice of theological education as comprised of the practices of reading, writing, and teaching, as developed below.
Similarly, as a theological educator, one welcomes students, speaks to them and listens to them, offers them information and answers their questions, creates assessment tools (projects, papers, tests) and evaluates their results, and reports grades—all common educational practices that involve interactions with students. However, theological educators also engage in this practice as they read theological texts and journals, do research and write for publication about what they have learned, attend national conferences to learn from other theological educators, or participate in administrative and committee work—practices that may or may not involve direct student contact, but nonetheless are necessary to the practice of teaching theology as well. Each one of these actions merits examination as a discrete part of the practice of teaching theology, just as each complements and connects with others in the composite practice of theological education. In fact, although classroom teaching might at first seem to be the most important criterion when exploring what it means to practice theological education, a more thorough exploration demonstrates that activities prior to and outside of direct student contact are just as important to the practice. If professors do not practice reading, researching and writing, or consulting and administrative work, they will have less to offer their students, and in that sense will be less effective theological teachers.\(^4\)

Looking at the lengthy lists of activities above makes clear that an almost infinite number of things could qualify as practices of theological education. How might theological education itself be defined, so that its principal elements can be articulated? As Glenn Miller and Robert Lynn put it some time ago, “Neither history nor contemporary use provides a single sufficient definition of Christian theological education.” They believed three aspects should be included: “the academic, or technical, study of theology;
the preparation of ministers for their vocation; and the institutions devoted to the academic
study of theology, the preparation of ministers, or both.”

Hence, they settled upon the academic/technical, the professional, and the institutional facets of theological education. Modifying and building upon Miller and Lynn’s article, Craig Dykstra also constructed a definition of the term. He wrote that the three “essential practices” of theological education are “conducting the academic study of theology, educating the church and the public in Christian faith and practice, and preparing ministers for church leadership.”

Thus Dykstra retained the academic/technical and professional aspects, but eliminated the institutional aspect that Miller and Lynn described, choosing instead to discuss the broader practice of educating church and public in its place. All of them agreed, however, that the preparation of clergy for their vocational service to the church is a primary facet of theological education.

Others doing research concerning theological education view ministerial preparation not as a primary facet, but as the primary facet of the practice. David Kelsey notes that although this view is rather narrow, it nonetheless coheres well with the ancient understanding of theological education as paideia or character formation—in this case,

5. Glenn Miller and Robert Lynn, “Christian Theological Education,” in Encyclopedia of the American Religious Experience III, ed. Charles H. Lippy and Peter W. Williams (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1988), 1627. Kelsey would agree with these three aspects. He would call the first the Wissenschaft pole of his “Berlin” model of theological education; the second paideia, the core of his “Athens” model; and the third the professional pole of the “Berlin” model. Despite a lengthy search of other encyclopedias and dictionaries of theology, religion, education, and Christianity, I was only able to locate one other such article to assist me with this definitional work; see note 7 below.


7. I found it interesting that Dykstra did this in an address to theological educators about the future of their institutions! Still, I recognize that he was preparing to discuss these as the practices of theological education, and “institutions” are difficult to conceive as a practice. Moreover, institutions are not explicitly educational—they “do” education, but they “aren’t” education, per se.
character formation for ministry. Numerous others who write about teaching theology operate within this narrow definition of theological education as the teaching-learning process experienced by seminary professors and their students, although generally this definition is implicit rather than explicit. For instance, Malcom Warford’s introduction to *Practical Wisdom on Theological Teaching and Learning* does not offer a detailed explanation of theological education. Rather, he says simply, “Teaching and learning are a matter of relationships significantly shaped by the community in which they occur. For theological teachers, this community is the seminary.” Much of the work that has been done over the past three decades concerning the purpose and practice of theological education has derived from and applied itself to seminary and divinity school teaching and learning. Therefore, this understanding—the narrow conception of theological education


10. Important books that have shaped this conversation include Edward Farley, *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983) and *The Fragility of Knowledge: Theological Education in the Church and in the University* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988); Kelsey, *To Understand God Truly* and *Between Athens and Berlin*; and Barbara Wheeler and Edward Farley, eds., *Shifting Boundaries:*
as graduate-level education designed to prepare women and men for ministry—guides this project.\textsuperscript{11}

Having thus defined theological education as teaching those who will minister, which specific activities from the list above—or others not enumerated there—might serve to comprise a sufficient understanding of the practice? Another scholar, W. Clark Gilpin, argues that three practices are fundamental for those who teach theology: reading, writing, and teaching. He identifies these as “the disciplined formative practices through which the scholar pursues his or her work” each day—the way of life of a theological educator, so to speak.\textsuperscript{12} Of course, practitioners of theological education may employ many other practices as well. These practices also may be understood as activities of certain theological teachers, perhaps just as important to them as the three fundamental practices.\textsuperscript{13} For instance, some theology teachers practice hospitality: they welcome students, attempt to “speak their language,” listen generously to them, and exercise humility as they do so. Some practice contemplation, also understood as attention or

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\textsuperscript{11} I do not by any means intend to deny that a working definition of theological education can include the academic study of theology, the institutions mentioned by Miller and Lynn, or the education of church and public indicated by Dykstra. In fact, these are all vital to a broader understanding of theological education. I simply chose to focus this study specifically upon the teaching of theology at the graduate level.


\textsuperscript{13} The contributors to The Scope of Our Art have written individual chapters about several of these (contemplation, conversation, and prayer) as well as about reading and writing as practices inherent in the vocation of theological teaching. However, due to the inescapable interconnectedness of these activities, most of the essays also refer, whether obliquely or directly, to several additional practices—and all of them refer to writing, reading, and teaching in some fashion. I have included the practices or attitudes of hospitality and testimony because several contributors allude to them, although neither practice had a specific chapter devoted to it.
reflection: they ponder carefully as they choose textbooks, as they assess student performance, and as they research and write. Some practice conversation: they choose their words carefully, invite others to respond, and open themselves to consider unique contributions. Some practice prayer: they intercede with God for student needs, center themselves before meeting with colleagues, and simply stand mindfully in the presence of God daily. Some practice testimony: they speak of their own experience of God, read and listen to the experiences of others, and reflect critically on how these experiences demonstrate God’s immanence and transcendence.

Although all of the above practices (hospitality, contemplation, conversation, prayer, and testimony) could be important aspects of teaching theology, they may also be understood as *characteristics* of particular theology teachers, as attitudes or dispositions which operate within and among the three fundamental practices of reading, writing, and teaching. Hence, some teachers write, read, and teach hospitably—or, they practice hospitality simultaneously as they practice reading, writing, and teaching. Similarly, they read, write, and teach contemplatively, attending and reflecting as they engage in these fundamental practices. They also read, write, and teach conversationally, while practicing prayer and testimony as well. In other words, the five dispositions enumerated above interweave with the three essential practices, yet are not *necessary* to teaching theology as are the three that Gilpin outlines. For the purposes of this project, then, reading, writing, and teaching comprise the necessary and sufficient practices of theological education.

**The Practice of Reading in Theological Education**

In his essay entitled “Reading as a Spiritual Discipline,” Paul Griffiths begins by quoting with approval the definition of a theological school offered by John Webster: “A theological school is a place where Scripture and the classics of theological response to Scripture are read in common to the end of the formation of Christian intellectual
habits.’”14 Such reading, Webster declares, “is primary or basic for theological education: without such reading no theological formation can occur, and with it all things are possible. . . . Any other reading done in such places ought to be subservient to and framed by that sort of reading.”15 However, Griffiths declares that such a description of theological education begs the question, “What does it mean to read?” Theological educators rarely ask the question, because they believe they already understand what reading is and how to do it. Nonetheless, Griffiths decries what he observes as the standard conception of reading prevalent in theological schools, in similar fashion to the way Craig Dykstra denounced the common understanding of the term “practice” in theology. In fact, Griffiths’ initial description of reading coheres with Dykstra’s generic definition of practice as individualistic, technological, ahistorical, and abstract. After this description of how not to read, so to speak, Griffiths offers a brief look at the method of reading taught by Hugh of St. Victor in the Didascalicon, which he argues should be considered as an alternative to much of current practice. After describing Griffiths’ different typologies of reading and their helpful and less-helpful attributes, this section turns to explicating how the dispositions of hospitality, contemplation, and conversation can affect the practice of reading in theological education.


15. Griffiths, “Reading as a Spiritual Discipline,” 32–33. These are Griffiths’ words, summarizing Webster’s ideas. Griffiths comments here that he prefers the word “formation” to “education” to describe the purpose of theological education “because it emphasizes that Christians are made, not born, and that their Christian-ness must be given them rather than educed (drawn out) from them” (note 3, pp. 32-33).
Different Types of Reading

In his essay in *The Scope of Our Art*, Griffiths provides brief sketches of several types of reading—lectio divina, academic reading, Proustian reading, and Victorine reading. Of these, he believes that the academic method of reading is most prevalent in theological education, despite its significant limitations, and that the Victorine method of reading ought to be reexamined as one possible alternative. In his earlier book titled *Religious Reading*, Griffiths makes the case that academic reading is actually hostile to religion, and pleads for scholars of religion to recover the practice of religious reading; otherwise, he fears, religious institutions will be unable to endure in the consumerist cultures common to Western civilization. Griffiths notes that most educators equate reading with literacy, reducing it to the technique of recognizing and decoding the characters of written language with the purpose of understanding the factual material contained therein. In this academic conception of the practice, reading is an individual, solitary, and generally silent exercise, which the reader wants to perform with ever-increasing technical prowess (measured in terms of speed—faster readers are thought to be better readers). The reader intends to master the text, to consume it: to glean the factual information found within it and to apply those facts to complete an assignment or solve a problem. Often the reader not only knows little about the history of the practice of reading in general, but also knows little about the historical context of the work being read. The search for facts in the text abstracts them from any context or value that might have been intended by the author:

This mode of reading establishes a certain kind of relation between reader and text read. It is, above all, a relation in which the reader is the agent and the text the patient; the text lies supine before the reader, awaiting the exercise of intention and desire that only the reader can bring. . . . There is no moral relation between book and reader for the academic reader; anything at all can be done with the book that

serves the reader’s purposes. What the work being read claims, its topic and goals, bear no intrinsic relation to what academic readers do and the purposes for which they do it: the academic reader (in his ideal type, at least) can as happily read a work on the methods of making papyrus rolls from the reed *cyperus papyrus* as one on how best to love God, and remain equally unaffected, morally, by each.\(^{17}\)

Moreover, theological educators tend to assume that their students know how to perform this informational type of reading, and to assign large amounts of it as if such reading were both necessary and sufficient to provide students what they need for ministry.\(^{18}\)

Nevertheless, according to Griffiths, this individualistic, technological, ahistorical and abstract understanding of reading in theological education must be revised by appropriating the riches available through more traditional religious understandings of reading. “We [can turn] our attention to the Christian past as though it might have something to teach us about what intellectual work is and how best to do it, and thus also about how best to form in our students and ourselves the habits proper to such work.”\(^{19}\)

Simply said, Christians should learn from their movement’s own history and practice of reading as they shape the way they approach reading today.\(^{20}\) Early in his essay, Griffiths alludes to one of these historical Christian practices of reading: *lectio divina*. From Augustine to Benedict of Nursia, from Guigo II to the recent resurgence of interest in this discipline, Christians have practiced “close and repeated scriptural reading as an essential

\(^{17}\) Griffiths, “Reading as a Spiritual Discipline,” 38.


\(^{19}\) Griffiths, “Reading as a Spiritual Discipline,” 36. I refer to “religious understandings of reading” because Griffith’s book deals with both Christian and Buddhist literature about reading, and his goal is to promote religious reading, not necessarily Christian reading.

\(^{20}\) One simple but excellent text that encourages attention to biblical genres and describes how Christians have historically interpreted Scripture is Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003).
part of the Christian life.”

This slow, repeated reading flows into meditation and prayer as the reader engages the text and permits the text to speak into both the outward circumstances of her life and the innermost recesses of her heart. Raymond Studzinski contends that this form of reading actually transforms its practitioners, enabling them to embody what they read and to act accordingly. Before beginning that process of rumination and eventual memorization and “incorporation” of the text, in order to guard against the very real dangers of eisegesis, several contemporary teachers of lectio insist that the reader must first do the intellectual work of exegeting the text. In this sense, lectio may begin with techniques familiar to those who practice an academic method of reading, but moves beyond them into deeply personal engagement with the text.

Griffiths provides a more extensive description of another traditional Christian way of reading, that promulgated by Hugh of St. Victor in his Didascalicon: De studio legendi. This Victorine method of reading offers different procedures for different types


of texts being read. Victorines believe that all non-canonical texts will contain error; nevertheless, careful reading in an attitude of humility before the text still can provide intellectual and spiritual benefit. When one reads these texts, he begins with an analysis on the level of grammar, syntax, and semantics, later doing an analytical study of the organization of the text that seeks to understand its central topic and to develop an outline of its assertions. Then the reader gathers important quotations from each section of the outline in order to meditate upon and memorize them. Finally, after having memorized both the outline and the selected quotations, the Victorine reader is in a position to continue his reflection, considering carefully the significance and implications of what he has read. The reader expects the text to contribute to his wisdom and to offer the possibility of growing in divine wisdom as well.  

In contrast, Hugh of St. Victor describes three different attitudes or motivations that readers may bring to the canonical text, understood as inspired by God (thus, the only kind of text without error). For instance, some desire to have others recognize and honor them for their knowledge of Scripture; others read for their own enjoyment. Neither of these motivations for reading produces wisdom, however. Only readers who read in order to know and understand the deep things of God will obtain such wisdom. These readers apply the same types of techniques listed above—analyzing the words and the organization of ideas within the biblical text, then memorizing and meditating upon them. So, for example, Victorine readers work hard to comprehend the words, phrases, and concepts of Scripture, to apprehend the development of each image and argument, to commit much of this to memory, and to explore its implications.


25. Griffiths, “Reading as a Spiritual Discipline,” 44.
However, readers also must attend, through repeated reflection and meditation, to the multiple layers of meaning present in Scripture.\(^{26}\) First, one reads with “the eyes of the flesh,” doing the work of analysis and memorization, looking for the literal or material sense. Next, one reads with “the eyes of the mind, which contemplate the self and the world that it mirrors,” seeking the allegorical interpretation of the passage. Finally, one reads with “the eyes of the heart, which penetrate to the innermost reaches of God.”\(^{27}\) A Victorine reader returns to the same passages over and over, expecting that they yield their riches only through this disciplined process, and recognizes the impossibility of exhausting the meaning of the biblical text, despite years of study and meditation.

In addition, Christian conceptions of reading, whether *lectio divina* or Victorine reading or others, explicitly affirm both a different relationship between text and readers and a different purpose for reading. For academic readers, the text is a thing to be mastered and used, an object upon which the readers operate. In contrast, the kind of readers Griffiths envisions relate to the text—especially the biblical text—as if it were the agent and they the ones formed by the reading. Such Christian readers would perceive themselves as subordinate to the agency of the text and as subject to the Lord of the text. Moreover, while academic readers work to “separate fact from value,” the ones who read with a Christian appreciation of the text read “with the knowledge and love of God always before them as the point and purpose of their reading.”\(^{28}\) In short, academic readers cannot experience reading as what Griffiths calls “a transformative spiritual discipline,” whereas Christian readers should be aware of the possibility of transformation available through

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\(^{26}\) Griffiths does not go into detail about this aspect of reading in the Victorine tradition, other than to mention that Hugh of St. Victor recognized three levels of meaning; for further discussion of this idea, see Illich, *In the Vineyard of the Text*.

\(^{27}\) Illich, *In the Vineyard of the Text*, 25–26, 48.

\(^{28}\) Griffiths, “Reading as a Spiritual Discipline,” 45.
Griffiths closes by pleading for theological educators to reexamine the ways in which they approach texts and the ways they teach students to do so, concluding that if they neglect this task, “the formation of Christian intellectual habits, which is the proper and primary task of a theological school, will remain a task left undone.” Griffiths, then, offers pictures of two overarching types of reading that may be employed by teachers and students of theology. One, the academic or consumerist, portrays the reader as a disengaged agent who performs operations on and with the texts at hand, but remains generally unconscious of any possible agency of the texts themselves. The other, which Griffiths calls “religious,” portrays the text (and, in the case of Scripture, the One who inspired it) as an agent that operates to transform the reader as he carefully and repeatedly engages it. Both lectio divina and the Victorine method of reading deliberately apply some of the same techniques as the academic method, including for example in-depth grammatical and textual analysis, note-taking, and memorization, yet the relation between the reader and the text and the purpose or goal of the reading differ. The ultimate difference between these two types of reading, then, lies in whether or not the reader allows the text to engage both her mind and her heart.

These two types of reading can thus be understood as disengaged and engaged. Disengaged reading is disengaged from others (individualistic), disengaged from any hypothetical purposes of the author or values in the text (technological), and disengaged from the text’s historical and textual context (ahistorical and abstract). Engaged reading,

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29. Ibid., 46.

30. Ibid., 47.

31. The term spiritually engaged reading is used by David I. Smith and John Shortt, “Introduction: Reading, Spiritual Engagement, and the Shape of Teaching,” Journal of Education and Christian Belief 11, no. 2 (Autumn 2007): 5. My decision to use engaged and disengaged, however, was not based upon their essay.
on the other hand, engages the reader in extended conversation with other readers and with the author(s) of the text, engages her repeatedly and deeply with the text itself, and engages her with its contexts to the end that the reading shapes or forms her and others who read with her. Contemporary theological education relies far too heavily on disengaged reading, in Griffiths’s opinion; however, reading as a spiritual practice offers the opportunity for theological teachers and their students to engage more deeply with one another, the texts they read, and the God they worship.

**Dispositions of Engaged Reading**

To argue that engaged reading benefits theological educators and students far more than disengaged reading requires a more detailed understanding of what engaged reading looks like. Describing how other practices or dispositions of particular theological educators (and their students) apply to the essential practice of reading offers a broader view. This section considers three broad dispositions—hospitality, contemplation, and conversation—to help clarify the picture of engaged reading.

32. At least one author contends that the perceived dichotomy between education and formation is flawed at best and unnecessary at worst: theological educators need “to recognize that education is intrinsically formative (for good or for ill), and formation is intrinsically educational. . . . Theological education, precisely because of the centrality of spiritual and moral formation to our task, could lead the way toward a rethinking of the categories and a reframing of the questions.” L. Gregory Jones, foreword to Cunningham, ed., *To Teach, to Delight, and to Move*, xii. In this sense, it might be best to think of disengaged reading as forming attitudes and habits not conducive to Christian faith, while engaged reading forms attitudes and habits more amenable to Christianity.

33. Discussion of these three dispositions subsumes numerous others, specifically humility (included with hospitality), attention and reflection (included with contemplation), and testimony and prayer (included with conversation). The arrangement of this rubric is entirely my own. After its construction, I reencountered a list of dispositions, specifically geared for discussion, in the excellent book by Stephen D. Brookfield and Stephen Preskill, *Discussion as a Way of Teaching: Tools and Techniques for Democratic Classrooms* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999), 9–17. Brookfield and Preskill list nine dispositions for what they call “the practice of democratic discussion”: hospitality, participation, mindfulness, humility, mutuality, deliberation, appreciation, hope, and autonomy.
Hospitality. Engaged readers read hospitably. Dykstra describes hospitality as “receptivity and responsiveness,” and Paulsell calls reading “a way of receiving the world.” Such readers read widely, not restricting their reading to only one genre or to only one author. Rather, they open themselves to learning from a variety of types of literature and authors from different time periods, or from a variety of works by authors from the same time period, as they research and study. Moreover, they read deeply, perhaps using more than one translation or edition of a particular work, or reading numerous works by the same author, seeking to understand more clearly by comparison. They read persistently, not abandoning a work after reading the first chapter, even if they do not yet understand it; rather, they continue reading, making room and allowing time for understanding to emerge. Engaged readers would agree with Bonnie Miller-McLemore, who notes that reading requires both a great deal of time and an openness to engagement. Finally, they read consistently, daily, spreading assigned reading or planned research over a span of days and weeks. In this way they form the habit of reading without needing to hurry through the text.

Then, after receiving, engaged theological readers respond in ways that bring their Christian faith to bear on what they read. For instance, they endeavor to respond with love and compassion. Whether they read secular literature or biblical narrative, they attempt at first to withhold judgment, offering a thorough and fair hearing to authors, characters, and ideas before responding. David Cunningham, who uses classic literature to teach theological principles, says that “getting to know” even evil literary characters can help


readers to respond with pity or compassion rather than hatred or superiority.\textsuperscript{36} These readers also respond with humility. Unlike one undergraduate reader, who declared a poem by the German master poet Hans Magnus Enzensberger to be “sophomoric” upon first reading, engaged readers realize that they need to receive the text humbly before attempting to bring critical resources to bear upon it.\textsuperscript{37} Theological educators constantly remind students to read primary sources for themselves before reading the critical scholarship surrounding the texts. Susan Simonaitis insists that her students “‘submit’ themselves to the discipline of learning through perspectives that may or may not be ultimately embraced, and [that] she will encourage students, in the process of this submission, to persistently and courageously discover and develop their own perspectives, their own voices.”\textsuperscript{38}

In addition, these readers endeavor to respond with encouragement. Professors reading their students’ work look for the true and the good, and respond to these with positive comments in the margins. They also read critically and guide students toward more thorough understanding of concepts and principles. Students who read one another’s work can encourage each other in similar ways. “Showing students how to read and critique each other’s writing can further sharpen their attention to words and to others and help shape . . . generous-spirited readers.”\textsuperscript{39} Yet in some fashion, engaged readers do respond to what they have read. Whether they determine that a particular text points them toward godly wisdom and therefore recommend it to others and make time to reread it


\textsuperscript{37} Smith and Shortt, “Introduction,” 6.

\textsuperscript{38} Susan M. Simonaitis, “Teaching as Conversation,” in Jones and Paulsell, \textit{The Scope of Our Art}, 107, note 10.

\textsuperscript{39} Paulsell, “Writing as a Spiritual Discipline,” 29.
themselves, or whether they decide that a text demonstrates too many flaws to be helpful and turn to other texts instead, they endeavor to respond rather than almost immediately forgetting what they have read.

**Contemplation.** Another disposition of engaged readers is that they read contemplatively, using a broad understanding of contemplation. Miller-McLemore claims, “In general, scholarship and good teaching require periods of quiet study and serious thought. Theological teaching and scholarship for the sake of the church require a contemplative mode that deepens understanding and wisdom.”

In terms of theological education, then, she defines this disposition as steadily focusing one’s attention; as “attending carefully without exploiting”; as “fostering awareness [and] cultivating wonder.” Like the Victorine readers described earlier, engaged readers read closely, noticing unfamiliar words and looking them up, endeavoring to understand both the outline and the particulars of the material thoroughly. As a result, they begin to recognize how certain authors use vocabulary, and they become familiar with differing styles of writing. They employ this familiarity to help them grasp and interpret the author’s meaning. They also read repeatedly, going over a difficult section numerous times as they seek to comprehend the author’s assertions and their implications. As they read and reread, they notice connections and propositions they had not seen before, leading them to ponder deeply. “Teachers of theology . . . are especially called to contemplate and engage life’s deepest mysteries and meanings.”

They may even read aloud to slow themselves


41. Ibid., 58.


down, enabling them to attend more deeply to what they are reading. Another teacher of reading notes that “hearing a text read aloud provides access to one person’s interpretation . . . , [but] reading a text aloud requires the reader to examine the text carefully, to pay close attention, to make choices, and to deal honestly with the words on the page.”\textsuperscript{44}

Moreover, engaged readers read meditatively, gathering ideas or nuggets of truth (or areas of question) to “live with” throughout the day.\textsuperscript{45} These readers think about what they are reading for one class as they prepare for another; they think about what they read for last week’s discussions as they develop questions for this week’s—and they come to see connections as they ruminate on what they have read. Finally, they read unselfishly. Cunningham says that entering the world of the text an author has constructed helps us to focus on others rather than ourselves, which he associates with Jesus’ coming not to be served, but to serve (Mk 10:45).\textsuperscript{46} In biblical terms, readers empty themselves kenotically to enter the world of the text in hopes of learning from it.\textsuperscript{47} Also, as they read, they attend not only to their own needs, but to the needs of others as well. They might notice a reference to a text that a classmate might be able to use for a paper she is writing, and pass it on; they might make a note to remember a particular verse of Scripture for a sermon that will speak to the needs of a congregation. Hence, practitioners of engaged reading endeavor to read contemplatively: closely, repeatedly, meditatively, and unselfishly.

\textsuperscript{44} Slagter, “Reading Aloud,” 95.

\textsuperscript{45} This idea of “living with” an idea or a piece of a text throughout the day appears repeatedly in Christian discussions of reading. Paulsell talks about “living with our ideas in our reading” and writing, mulling them over repeatedly; see Paulsell, “Writing as a Spiritual Discipline,” 23. Teachers of lectio divina also employ this technique of “taking a word”; see Pennington, Lectio Divina, 38–41.

\textsuperscript{46} Cunningham, Reading Is Believing, 10.

**Conversation.** Engaged readers also read conversationally. As Cunningham insists, even if professors or students are reading alone, they “carry around within [them]selves a thousand conversations and encounters amassed over the years and brought back to mind by new encounters with a text.”  

Robert Banks calls conversation “a metaphor for interaction with and writing of texts . . . a model and metaphor for dealing inclusively with theological diversity, and a concrete way of doing ministry and theological education.” In his classic exposition of conversation, *Plurality and Ambiguity*, David Tracy delineates the “rules” of the “game” of conversation, which consists of asking questions and following them where they lead—a way to interact with other persons or with texts:

Say only what you mean; say it as accurately as you can; listen to and respect what the other says, however different or other; be willing to correct or defend your opinions if challenged by the conversation partner; be willing to argue if necessary, to confront if demanded, to endure necessary conflict, to change your mind if the evidence suggests it. These are merely some generic rules for questioning. As good rules, they are worth keeping in mind in case the questioning does begin to break down. In a sense they are merely variations of the transcendental imperatives elegantly articulated by Bernard Lonergan: “Be attentive, be intelligent, be responsible, be loving, and, if necessary, change.”

On the basis on this definition of conversation as interaction with others and with texts, operating largely under implicit rules, a picture of conversational reading emerges. First, readers may “converse with the text” as they read, asking questions and seeking answers to them. This is standard advice for beginning academic readers—they are instructed to flip through the text, reading introduction, conclusion, and headings, then to

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jot down questions they develop as they skim and to seek answers as they read. Engaged readers can also “moderate” conversations among variants of a particular text as they produce critical editions or study from various Bible translations, or hold conversations with and among different works by the same author, continuing to seek understanding. Sometimes these comparisons help to clarify difficulties; sometimes they seem simply to create more of them. In addition, readers “converse” by taking note of important quotations or ideas, and also by jotting their responses in the margins.51 Conversing with the text helps readers maintain their engagement as they read.

After doing the work of engaging with the text, these readers examine the history of the time period in which the text was written, and read some of the critical commentary already published about the work in question, “conversing” with the historians and other scholars in order to evaluate their own interpretations in a scholarly light. Lois Malcom contends that theological readers must become aware of “the range of ways [texts] have been interpreted over time . . . and the range of ways they are interpreted and appropriated by Christians and Christian communities in the contemporary context.”52 Engaged readers also learn about the context from which the author wrote, looking for assumptions common to the period, for specific uses of language that differ from contemporary usage, or for biographical details that may shed light on certain themes.53 As they converse with

51. I can often tell how “engaged” I was with a particular book by looking either at my typewritten notes (the more extensive they are, the more engaged I was) or at my jottings in the margins. One particular book was so controversial—and I happened to be reading with a red pen!—that the author’s words can barely be read, because the subsequent reader’s attention is immediately drawn to my somewhat heated “conversation with the author” in the margins.

52. Lois Malcom, “Teaching as Cultivating Wisdom for a Complex World,” in Jones and Paulsell, The Scope of Our Art, 149.

53. Tracy disagrees here, contending that “once a text exists, we should question the text, and not the author’s biography, for its meaning. It was Proust who insisted that art is produced by some self distinct from the self of the everyday life” (Plurality and Ambiguity, 19–20). I hold that our biographies surely affect what we write, whether implicitly or explicitly. We could say, using
these secondary sources, they begin the process of evaluating their own interpretations and those of others as well.

Having gathered information from their own reading and from secondary sources, engaged readers proceed to talk about their reading with fellow students, with their professors, or to discuss it occasionally with colleagues from their own and other disciplines. These conversations may assist readers to articulate what they comprehend from their reading, may provide fresh perspectives, or may permit readers to make connections between fields of inquiry. Along these lines, Gilpin argues that doctoral programs in particular should provide opportunities for students both to talk about their work with professionals from other fields and to teach what they are learning in supervised settings. “Dissertation writers might [then] better recognize the scope and import of the questions they are pursuing . . . [and] cultivate [the] capacity for accessible, substantive

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this language, that there is a constant conversation going on between the author and her/his biography. There may not be a necessary relation between one’s life and one’s art . . . but I suspect that there is a relation, more often than not. Cunningham, Reading Is Believing, 10–11, agrees with me: “When we begin to discern the entire shape of a person’s life, we also begin to understand why a particular belief might or might not be important to that person—and why that belief might lead a person to act in particular ways.”

54. Many contemporary authors explicitly encourage their readers to engage regularly in conversation with others about the contents of their books; for one example, see Cunningham, Reading Is Believing, 26. At least one author is calling his books “conversations”; see Eugene H. Peterson, Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places: A Conversation in Spiritual Theology (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005); Eat This Book: A Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006); The Jesus Way: A Conversation on the Ways That Jesus Is the Way (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007); Tell It Slant: A Conversation on the Language of Jesus in His Stories and Prayers (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008); and Practice Resurrection: A Conversation on Growing Up in Christ (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010).

55. Brookfield asserts that the purposes of discussion (which, unlike Tracy and others, he understands to be more rigorous than conversation) are to help participants grow in self-awareness and in appreciation for others’ opinions, to help them construct a more critical understanding of topics, and to catalyze responsive action.
dialogue about their work.” Moreover, these conversations highlight the “otherness” of both text and readers. As Tracy writes, “Conversation in its primary form is an exploration of possibilities in the search for truth. In following the track of any question, we must allow for difference and otherness. At the same time, as the question takes over, we notice that to attend to the other as other, the different as different, is also to understand the different as possible.” Hence, readers converse with their peers and with others, cooperating and collaborating, involving one another in the conversation and following the questions, until they arrive at what Tracy calls a “relatively adequate interpretation.”

In addition, two other practices or dispositions of reading-related conversations deserve attention. First, testimony often serves as a moment in conversation, whether conversation with one another or conversation with God. “In testimony, people speak truthfully about what they have experienced and seen, offering it to the community for the edification of all. . . . The practice of testimony requires that there be witnesses to testify and others to receive and evaluate their testimony. It is a deeply shared practice—one that is possible only in a community.” Tracy reminds readers that they must speak as accurately (or as truthfully) as possible to one another in conversation. Specifically, the truth they speak often concerns their experiences of the work of God in their lives, and they may testify either to the church and the world, or to God. Indeed, much of the reading involved in the practice of theological education qualifies, at least in part, as

57. Tracy, Plurality and Ambiguity, 20, emphasis original.
58. The language of cooperation, collaboration, exchange and inquiry comes from Brookfield and Preskill, Discussion, 7–8; “relative adequacy” comes from Tracy, Plurality and Ambiguity, 25–27.
testimony. Whether biblical poetry and narrative, the classics of Christian theology, or the lives of the saints, texts offer testimony about God and the ways God deals with created beings.

Therefore, as Christian readers engage with texts and with others in conversation, they become witnesses to and evaluators of the testimony of others. Then they testify about their own experiences of that textual testimony, and about the multiple conversations they have had with it—their own questions and comments, insights gleaned from secondary sources and prior conversations with others, etc. Miller-McLemore notes that all these kinds of testimony demonstrate that conversation is not only “a vital source of spiritual centeredness”; it is also the place wherein we discover the message of the gospel by hearing with faith (see Rom 10:14). “Individual readings of sacred texts were never meant to stand on their own. They must be abetted, amplified, corrected, and amended by the insights and inspirations of others.”61 These insights and inspirations become available as engaged readers testify truthfully and transparently to them.

Second, readers can practice the discipline of prayer within and around their “conversational reading.” Engaged Christian readers may invite God’s guidance and illumination before they read, as they question, and as they meditate on key themes, remembering that one of the roles of the Holy Spirit is to guide the faithful into all truth (Jn 16:13; 1 Cor 2:10-16). They may do the same during conversations with other texts and with other persons, remembering that Jesus Christ promises to be present wherever two or three are gathered in that name (Mt 18:20). In these ways, they can “converse” with God in prayer simultaneously while engaging the text(s) under consideration, depending upon the Holy Spirit to help them to be fully present to the text(s) and to God while reading. Rather than thinking of prayer as a specific moment in reading, sometimes

engaged readers begin to experience prayer within their reading as a way of living, a way of being.\textsuperscript{62}

Additionally, reading the testimonies of other Christians sometimes evokes strong personal desires to see God at work in similar ways in one’s contemporary context, inviting readers to petition God to act. Reading biblical narratives about Jesus’ healings, for instance, invites readers to pray for those who suffer. Notice here the connection between the readers’ beliefs and their (hypothetical) actions. Cunningham maintains that reading can help persons to understand the relationship between beliefs and actions, as they discover the connections between them present in many pieces of literature and in their own minds and hearts in response. In fact, he asserts that reading literary narratives “can lead Christians to a clearer and deeper understanding of their own beliefs, and thereby to a deeper faith. In this sense, then, for Christians, ‘reading is believing.’”\textsuperscript{63}

Prayer can preface reading, accompany it, and follow it; answers to prayer can lead to testimony; testimonial conversations, written down, can lead to further reading—and strengthened faith and action may result.

Contending that one can read prayerfully, then, gathers together all three dispositions. Reading hospitably and humbly can make space to hear from God, from the text, and from others; reading contemplatively, attending carefully and reflecting repeatedly, may do the same. Reading conversationally opens the engaged reader to recognize what is “other,” to testify of that recognition, and to respond—to God, to others,

\textsuperscript{62} For a similar argument—that \textit{lectio divina} is not a “moment” of prayer (or even a “method” of prayer) but rather a way of life—see Armand Veilleux, “\textit{Lectio Divina} as a School of Prayer Among the Fathers of the Desert,” translation of a speech given in Rome, November 1995, http://users.skynet.be/scourmont/Armand/wri/lectio-eng.htm (although this link is occasionally inaccessible). Other links to this speech also exist; one of the more reliable is www.osb.org/lectio/about.html, which provides links to Veilleux’s speech in English, French, and Spanish (accessed 6–30–09).

\textsuperscript{63} Cunningham, \textit{Reading Is Believing}, 10–11, 23.
and to that “other.” The following chapter will evaluate whether this detailed description of engaged reading as hospitable, contemplative, and conversational meets the definition of a Christian spiritual practice.

The Practice of Writing in Theological Education

In her essay entitled “Writing as a Spiritual Discipline,” Stephanie Paulsell tells the story of Marguerite d’Oingt, a 13th-century French Carthusian nun, “a woman who sought God through the practice of writing, who wrote to understand God and language and the world around her, a writer whose every word was a response to what God had written in her heart.” Paulsell asserts that writing can be a way of learning, of understanding, of communicating, and of deepening relationship with the God who reveals truth. As did Griffiths, Paulsell recognizes that there are different types of writing—not in the sense of genres, but in the sense of purposes or reasons for writing—and that difficulties beset those who seek to write as a spiritual discipline essential to the practice of theological education. Nonetheless, she also recognizes that such writing results in internal goods, including increased capacity for attention, awareness of and relationship with the community of believers, and a richness and depth of critical thinking, which teachers may find unattainable without it. After describing these different reasons for writing and their helpful and less-helpful attributes, this section explicates how the dispositions of hospitality, contemplation, and conversation affect the practice of writing in theological education.

Different Reasons for Writing

Paulsell notes that in the academy, writing often becomes a commodity, “the currency we trade for tenure, for promotion, for a better job . . . We must produce to

advance. In recent years, many thoughtful voices in theological education have sought to question the academy’s commodification of writing and its embrace of publications as the central criterion for advancement.\textsuperscript{65} This questioning, however, has done little to change the prevailing atmosphere in both universities and seminaries, succinctly summarized as “publish or perish.” Theological educators simply must make time for writing if they hope to be able to continue teaching, for the most part. Thus, many try to fit it in where they can, writing during sabbaticals, during semester breaks, or over the summer—or spending that time bemoaning their lack of “production.”\textsuperscript{66} At least, Paulsell offers, this necessity for producing written work pressures educators to continue trying to make time for writing. Unfortunately, the quality of such “commodified writing” tends to be less than optimal, and its contribution to scholarship questionable at best.\textsuperscript{67} So, although “good writing . . . demands creativity, originality, analysis, and thoughtful reflection [and] lends clarity and precision to thought,” such writing rarely results from a publish-or-perish mentality.\textsuperscript{68} In addition, this pressure to publish often creates a perceived conflict between writing and teaching. Paulsell describes those who “disappear into their writing,” professors who are “forever turning away—turning from students, colleagues, and

\textsuperscript{65} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{66} Christopher J. Lucas and John W. Murry, Jr., \textit{New Faculty: A Practical Guide for Academic Beginners} (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 133, who note wryly, “The mechanistic metaphors to which faculty typically resort when talking about writing are revealing.”

\textsuperscript{67} Many editors and others argue that the pressure to write, especially early in one’s career, is less than helpful. See Coakley, “Deepening Practices,” 81–83, for an argument that years of faithfulness to contemplation and theological reflection can issue in high-quality scholarship later in life; compare with similar views in Jacques Barzun, \textit{Begin Here: The Forgotten Conditions of Teaching and Learning} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991) and Page Smith, \textit{Killing the Spirit: Higher Education in America} (New York: Viking, 1990). For a lengthier discussion of this issue, see Lucas and Murry, \textit{New Faculty}, chapter 6.

\textsuperscript{68} Lucas and Murry, \textit{New Faculty}, 137.
responsibilities, in order to sit alone in a room and write.”⁶⁹ Those who instead pour
themselves into preparing for classes, into fostering mentoring relationships with students
via academic advisement, or into assessing student work promptly and thoroughly may
argue that they have no time for writing. Denying the presumed connection between
scholarly research and dynamic instruction, some professors see teaching and writing
almost as opposites. Those who try to hold teaching and writing in tension make the case
that theological education must include both practices; they “remind us that the vocation
of the theological teacher is made up not only of the work we do alone but the work we do
together.”⁷⁰ But Paulsell argues that neither commodifying writing nor isolating oneself in
order to write clarifies how writing may be practiced as a spiritual discipline that forms
both educators and their students.

Perhaps because one common view of spiritual disciplines portrays them as
difficult to establish and maintain, Paulsell begins her discussion of writing as a spiritual
discipline by listing three of the difficulties of writing. First, writing takes time, and little
time is available unless one schedules it and then guards that time jealously. Second,
writing is difficult, “frequently unbearable,” not only because it can determine the
trajectory of one’s academic career, but because choosing the proper words and phrases to
convey one’s intended meaning is a delicate and challenging task. Third, an even greater
difficulty is finding the right words when one is writing theologically. Citing Augustine’s
_De trinitate_, she comments, “There is no way of speaking and writing of God that is
completely true. One can never speak fast enough to say Father, Son, and Holy Spirit at
the same time, and no matter how carefully one writes, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit

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⁷⁰. Ibid., 21.
always occupy their places separately on the page.” Paulsell concludes, then, that in order to establish and maintain the spiritual discipline of writing theologically, one needs both humility (understood as being open to critique and revision, and aware that one will never completely “get it right”) and audacity (understood as being willing to write at all, and believing that what one writes matters).

How does one pursue writing as a spiritual discipline, then? By ensuring that the ultimate telos for which one writes is the love of God and neighbor. Paulsell refers extensively to an essay entitled “Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God” in Simone Weil’s *Waiting for God*, in which Weil argues that academic work increases one’s capacity to attend fully and deeply to something or someone other than oneself. She writes:

The key to a Christian conception of studies is the realization that prayer consists of attention. It is the orientation of all the attention of which the soul is capable toward God. The quality of the attention counts for much in the quality of the prayer. . . .

The highest part of the attention only makes contact with God, when prayer is intense and pure enough for such a contact to be established; but the whole attention is turned toward God.

Of course school exercises only develop a lower kind of attention. Nevertheless, they are extremely effective in increasing the power of attention that will be available at the time of prayer, on condition that they are carried out with a view to this purpose and this purpose alone.

Not only does the love of God have attention for its substance; the love of our neighbor, which we know to be the same love, is made of this same substance. Those who are unhappy have no need for anything in this world but people capable of giving them their attention. The capacity to give one’s attention to a sufferer is a very rare and difficult thing; it is almost a miracle; it is a miracle.

Academic work is one of those fields containing a pearl so precious that it is worth while to sell all our possessions, keeping nothing for ourselves, in order to be able to acquire it.


72. Simone Weil, “Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the
Therefore, when teachers and their students write as a means of paying attention to what they speak about God and God’s ways, when their purpose is specifically to deepen their relationships with God and with one another, the increased capacity for attention developed by the discipline of writing will bear fruit in their lives of prayer and service.

Paulsell describes this attentiveness as the source of the choices all writers must make. Writers who are attentive to the words they use, to their meanings and nuances, to what their combinations suggest, will recognize the “right” words for a particular circumstance or writing project. Identifying deeply with and attending closely to their audiences helps writers make the “right” choices in terms of tone and voice in their writing. Reflecting repeatedly on what one is writing, what Paulsell calls “living with our ideas in our reading and our teaching, our conversation and our meditation,” helps the writer to recognize the apt phrase, the perfect example or analogy, when it crosses his mind. All these choices matter a great deal: “The intellectual and aesthetic choices we make when we write are also moral, spiritual choices that can hold open a door for another to enter, or pull that door shut; that can sharpen our thinking or allow it to recline on a comfortable bed of jargon; that can form us in generosity and humility or in condescension and disdain.” Paulsell argues together with Weil that attention is a key to writing as a spiritual discipline.


73. Certain audiences, for example, would be offended if a writer chose to refer to the Trinity using exclusively the biblical terms “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit”; other audiences would be offended if a writer chose gender-neutral language such as “Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer” instead. Being hospitable to one’s readers requires speaking in language that they can “hear” without undue offense.

Those who pursue such writing also realize that it is not necessarily the solitary, lonely work that it is often portrayed to be. Another key to this kind of writing is recognizing that writing can engage the author with others in community, whether those others be faculty colleagues and peers, students, laity outside the academy, or others still further removed from academia. Whoever the members of the audience, writers who are aware of this communal nature of writing keep them in mind. Paulsell, moreover, maintains that writers must also carefully gather and then consider the work of others, inviting their experiences and expertise to shape one’s own ideas. By writing those ideas and submitting them to the consideration of others, professors and students explicitly or implicitly encourage their audiences to join the conversation by writing in response. Indeed, submitting one’s writing to the examination and critique of others can foster deep humility about one’s work, and can also supply enough acclamation (or at least encouragement) from others to enable continued writing and thinking and learning. Those who write as a spiritual discipline invite others into the conversation as they research; they welcome critique and response from the broader community as they publish their work; they write with readers in mind, seeking to discover truth and wisdom and to articulate it for the good of all. As Paulsell summarizes, “When we write with attention, we write in and for community.”

A third key to writing as a spiritual discipline, which Paulsell hints at without devoting a section of her chapter to the idea, is that persons can write both as a way of

75. After all, the generic purpose of writing anything at all is to communicate something to others; for further explanation in a theological context, see Lucretia B. Yaghjian, Writing Theology Well: A Rhetoric for Theological and Biblical Writers (New York: Continuum, 2006), 4–5.

76. Paulsell, “Writing as a Spiritual Discipline,” 27.
thinking critically about a topic, and as a way of communicating those thoughts.\textsuperscript{77} They write, then reflect upon what they have written, perhaps “in conversation with others, to ‘try to discover what [they] have done.’”\textsuperscript{78} They ask questions, seek answers, articulate them in writing, then reconsider the questions and the answers. They explore ancient sources and contemporary ones, looking for ways in which similar questions have been asked and answered throughout history, then trying to restate those responses in light of their own contemporary contexts. They look again at their sources, making sure that they have represented them fairly; they reexamine what they have written in light of the biblical text, making certain they have interpreted it correctly and applied it graciously. They revise and rewrite, and as they do so, they “find out what belongs to what, or . . . heal and reunite, or . . . reach across boundaries, or . . . illuminate invisible connections.”\textsuperscript{79} In the process, they discover that their beliefs and practices have been transformed.

Thus, Paulsell portrays two broad purposes for writing in the context of theological education. The first, the academic, views writing as a commodity, necessary for career success, but often profoundly isolating for the writer. The second views writing as a spiritual discipline that engages both writer and readers in communal conversation, allowing both to attend, to think, and to be transformed. The difficulties she highlights apply to both purposes for writing: writing takes time away from other activities; writing means making delicate and crucial choices; and making those choices is even more

\textsuperscript{77} This presumes an understanding of knowledge as inherently dialogic (developed through conversation and dialogue) rather than acquisitional (“fed” to students according to Alison King’s “sage on the stage” model); see John C. Bean, \textit{Engaging Ideas: The Professor’s Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom} (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996); Alison King, “From Sage on the Stage to Guide on the Side,” \textit{College Teaching} 41, no. 1 (Winter 1993): 30–35; and Maryellen Weimer, \textit{Learner-Centered Teaching: Five Key Changes to Practice} (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002).

\textsuperscript{78} Yaghjian, \textit{Writing Theology Well}, 4.

\textsuperscript{79} Paulsell, “Writing as a Spiritual Discipline,” 30.
difficult when one endeavors to write about God and God’s ways. In short, writing requires both humility and audacity, no matter what its purpose. The ultimate difference between these two purposes for writing, then, lies in whether or not the writer allows his writing to engage both his mind and his heart.

These two types of writing can thus be understood as *disengaged* and *engaged*. Disengaged or “academic” writing is disengaged from others (isolated) and often disengaged from the author’s life and work of teaching and learning as well (commodified)—necessary, but somehow useless. Engaged writing, on the other hand, engages the writer in extended conversation with other authors and their contexts, with her own context and audience, and with herself (and God) as she repeatedly considers and revises what she has written in the light of Christian history and revelation. This way of writing thus shapes or forms her, and also forms the others who join the conversation by reading what she has written. Paulsell grieves the reliance of theological institutions on disengaged forms of writing, and calls teachers of theology to make the most of the opportunity to use their writing as a way to engage their attention, their audiences, and their intellects in the ongoing search for knowledge—especially knowledge of God.

**Dispositions of Engaged Writing**

Arguing that engaged writing benefits theological educators and students far more than disengaged writing requires a more detailed understanding of what engaged writing looks like. Describing how other practices or dispositions of excellent theological educators (and their students) apply to the essential practice of writing offers a broader view. 80 This section considers three broad dispositions—hospitality, contemplation, and conversation—to help the picture of engaged writing to become clearer.

80. My discussion of these three dispositions, as did my earlier discussion of engaged reading, subsumes humility (included with hospitality), attention and reflection (included with contemplation), and testimony and prayer (included with conversation).
Hospitality. First, engaged writers write hospitably. Dykstra’s understanding of hospitality as “receptivity and responsiveness” cultivates the awareness that such authors make space for themselves to receive and to give. They receive from many sources: from God by the Holy Spirit through the biblical text; from other authors’ texts written throughout history; from their own and others’ experiences in the world; and even, as professors, from their students’ writing and experiences. Paulsell notes that theological educators should teach this receptivity to their students: “We should model writing as a way of . . . receiving the world that turns what we read and experience over and over in the crucible of language until we learn something new and say something meaningful.”81 Engaged writers also give: they make space for the audacious thought that what they write could be helpful, that it could make a difference for them, their students, the church, or the world. They endeavor to remember that God’s Word will not return without having its desired effect (Is 55:11), and to hope that God may permit a similar blessing to rest upon their words as well. As a result, they work diligently to form the habit of writing, to practice writing as a discipline of the spirit.82 They write today, and again tomorrow, allowing themselves to persist in trying to frame their messages in words that will speak clearly and resonate with their audiences. They do not abandon a project at the first sign of difficulty; rather, they allow themselves to spend hours, days, or weeks writing drafts that do not seem quite right, making space for the sudden “aha!” of discovering how to say what they mean to say.


Engaged writers make space for others to receive and to give, as well. One important way to accomplish this is providing opportunities for others to write. Professors can develop meaningful writing assignments that introduce their students to the process of drafting and revising, teaching them that their best work will not develop in the middle-of-the-night, up-against-the-deadline writing sessions they may be accustomed to. They might also consider asking students to present the same material for different audiences. Writing a research paper on a theological topic, then crafting a sermon presenting that topic to their congregations, students begin to recognize that writing for various audiences can generate different ideas and thoughts in their own minds, as well as requiring them to make changes in vocabulary, format, and style. Engaged writers seek to make space for these various audiences by rigorously considering word choices, styles, and the languages or “voices” they employ, always trying to make understanding possible. As Paulsell indicates throughout her essay, these writers work to “write in language that invites rather than excludes, in forms that are full of doors through which a reader might walk. To write this way requires . . . that each writing project begin and end with others, both those near at hand, and those we may never know, but to whom and for whom we write.”

As another aspect of hospitality’s receptivity, humility typifies both the receiving and the giving of engaged writers. Engaged writers are willing to permit others to read

83. This advice is repeated in almost every book about writing. For discussion, see Nancy Jean Vyhmeister, *Quality Research Papers for Students of Religion and Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), chapter 11, and Yaghjian, *Writing Theology Well*, passim. For discussion of designing writing assignments, see Bean, *Engaging Ideas*, chapters 5 and 6.

84. Paulsell, “Writing as a Spiritual Discipline,” 30; for an interesting explanation of these different voices in theological writing, see Lucretia B. Yaghjian, “Teaching Theological Reflection Well, Reflecting on Writing as a Theological Practice,” *Teaching Theology and Religion* 7, no. 2 (April 2004): 83–94; and Yaghjian, *Writing Theology Well*, chapter 2, especially p. 23.

what they have written and to accept their comments graciously. They choose to seek others’ commentary, knowing that grappling with alternative understandings and perspectives will make their subsequent work stronger. They recognize that their purpose for writing is not merely to prove their own ability to resolve issues that have puzzled Christians for centuries. Moreover, they are willing to modify or possibly even renounce their own positions when others demonstrate the flaws therein. They humbly recognize the inherent difficulty of writing theology, and have made peace with their inability to say everything—or even to say anything perfectly. However, they also write what they believe to be true, unwilling to compromise or distort the claims of Christ to appease others.

Returning once again to Dykstra’s understanding of hospitality as “receptivity and responsiveness,” engaged writers write responsively. For instance, they may respond to a published article by writing a letter to the editor of a journal or to the author of the article, or may respond to a book by writing a review recommending the book to others. They also respond to others’ writing by encouraging them whenever possible, whether in written comments on submitted student papers or in e-mail conversations among faculty members who have read another’s recent work. Often, such writers jot notes as they read, responding in the margins to comments that interest them, making connections to other reading or writing they have done or encountered. In addition, they respond to needs, questions, and difficulties by writing about them—perhaps in a personal journal, perhaps to answer questions students pose via e-mail or post on an online message board. As they write, they think through the complexities of an issue; later, they may share what they have learned or the conclusions which they have drawn. They engage in writing across various fields of inquiry, maintaining a lively interest in their specializations and often other

86. When I encounter a paper that seems disorganized, I often begin to attempt to “outline” the claims made by the paper. By writing down what I can glean from the writing, I sometimes discover what the author was trying to convey.
corollary fields as well, and writing in response. Simply, they write in order to think about issues and respond to them.

**Contemplation.** Second, engaged writers write contemplatively. Recall Miller-McLemore’s broad understanding of contemplation as careful attention and steady focus that fosters awareness and serious thought. In this light, as mentioned above, they write as a way to attend to others’ writing, as a way to record their own thoughts about an issue, as a way of meditating on what they or others have written. Also, they attend carefully to the words they choose. Although they may “freewrite” at first, simply letting the ideas flow without deliberation, as they edit and revise these authors reflect repeatedly upon whether the words they have chosen will communicate clearly. They also focus upon organizing their ideas carefully, again with the goal of transmission and reception in mind. One author might use a straightforward approach, linear and hierarchical; another might circle back again and again to restate an idea from different angles, developing her argument further each time she does so. In either case, they read and reread what they have written, ascertaining that any necessary background information or transitional material has been included, that paragraphs are unified and coherent, that citations support the arguments well.87 They diligently examine the context for which they are writing, and do everything they can to ensure that their message will be received by those for whom they write.

Another aspect of contemplation or reflection in theological writing is its repetitive nature. Engaged writers may write repeatedly on the same topic, or on different aspects of the same topic. As Paulsell indicates of St. Augustine, “He came at the same ideas over and over, recasting them in different forms, putting them in conversation with different texts, burnishing them with his pen until they glowed.”88 Such writers read what they have


written, then rethink it, perhaps noticing new connections or deciding to change what they were going to say. They set drafts aside for a period of time, then return to polish them again, or to destroy them and begin again. Furthermore, they “meditate” on what they have written, keeping it in mind as they read and as they teach, “playing” with the concepts and the wording. This meditation can produce new ideas, or new ways to drive a point home, or possibly new difficulties that must be addressed. These writers persist in attempting to clarify their thinking and writing, discriminating between the necessary and the superfluous; they reexamine their sources, assuring themselves of the truth or falsehood of their assertions. They think about the critiques they receive, and make changes based upon that input. They may even keep a list of ideas to which they add when an interesting one arises, and turn to that list when doing the daily writing to which they aspire.

**Conversation.** Third, engaged writers write conversationally. Remember the definition of conversation as a “game” with specific but largely implicit “rules,” in which one asks questions of oneself, of another person or group, or of texts. The rules for answering the questions include explicit truth-telling and accuracy, inclusiveness and respect for others, and willingness to defend one’s opinions or to change them if the evidence points in that direction. In light of that definition, the vast majority of theological writing issues directly from conversation of some kind. Textbooks that teach writing skills argue that academic writing generally supports or refutes a specific thesis, which arises from some previous interaction or conversation. In fact, the thesis itself often emerges during a series of conversations, whether reflective conversation with oneself while freewriting or conversation with others (verbal or written). According to Bean, “Writing


90. “Freewriting” is a technical term for writing “whatever comes to consciousness in relation to a given topic,” with the purpose of assisting the writer to “find out what [she wants] to write by writing.” Yaghjian, *Writing Theology Well*, 27. For a more thorough introduction to the
means joining a conversation of persons who are, in important ways, fundamentally disagreeing. . . . A thesis implies a counterthesis and . . . the presence of opposing voices." Hence, theological writing is inherently conversational because it issues from questions raised in conversation—it picks up a strand from one conversation and attempts to extend or develop it in a subsequent one.

Engaged writers also moderate conversations among those who “fundamentally disagree” with one another. Only rarely can a theological writer merely summarize how everyone interprets a particular biblical text or historical event. Those who write biblical commentary, for instance, must survey the history of interpretation of a specific word in Hebrew or Greek, making an honest effort to portray accurately the range of possibilities, even those the author rejects. Only then can he argue that one of them most likely captures what the biblical author intended to convey. Theological authors also moderate conversations across cultures and contexts, perhaps reinterpreting one context for members of another. For example, those who translate classic works from their original languages into contemporary ones almost always offer commentary as well, explaining the historical, cultural, linguistic, sociological, and symbolic background in which the classic was written so that those immersed in the modern or postmodern mindset may more deeply comprehend the significance of the text. In fact, any type of research-based article or book moderates a conversation among its various sources, choosing which to use to support or refute its own assertions.

Engaged theological writers also participate in conversations about their writing, as indicated earlier. Such conversations help them to see where they have clearly presented

concept, see Natalie Goldberg, Writing Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within (Boston: Shambala, 1986); for a discussion of its use in the writing process, see Bolker, Writing Your Dissertation in Fifteen Minutes a Day, passim.

91. Bean, Engaging Ideas, 18, emphasis original.
their material and where revisions would be appropriate. Asking a broad variety of persons to read what they have written can alert them to possible misinterpretations of their work, or introduce them to other sources with which they were not previously familiar. Occasionally, a writer loses perspective in the midst of a project, and a conversation with a colleague or a student can illuminate jumps in reasoning or places where a reordering of propositions might make the argument stronger. In short, engaged writers seek others’ input via conversation.

Another type of conversation inherent in theological writing is testimony. Authors may respond to a question in a reflection paper or a devotional essay that makes reference to their own experiences. Those writing sermons in response to questions raised by their congregants may testify to the works of the Lord in the lives of biblical characters, the lives of the saints, or their own lives. Theological educators may write about what they are reading, offering their testimony of what has been helpful and what has not in a particular context or in light of a particular question. Moreover, they write about their own work of teaching and writing, testifying to where they have found God in and through it. Any or all of this writing can serve as testimony to the larger world as well. Christians write about their experiences of God in order to remember them, to think critically and deeply about them, and to share them with others. Consideration of theological writing in terms of testimony again highlights the inherently communal nature of writing, since testimony is also inherently communal—it requires one person to speak or write, and another person or group to listen or read. This consideration also focuses attention on the truth-telling and accuracy essential to reliable theological conversation, since testimony must be accurate to be effective.

Another part of the conversation inherent in theological writing is prayer. Authors may write in response to what God appears to be doing in their lives, whether in reflection
papers, journals, or sermons. Sometimes they develop their prayers in written form, for their own reflection and repetition or for public use. Moreover, not all prayer practiced within and around theological writing must be in written form. Theological educators may pray aloud or silently in preparation for writing, as they write, or even as they occasionally find themselves unable to write. They may invite God to guide them at various points in the writing process, and especially to guide the conversations taking place within and around their writing. They may pray for clarity of expression, or pray that the writing will be fruitful and used for God’s purposes. Engaged theological writers, in fact, may maintain a running conversation with God throughout their writing processes, depending upon the Holy Spirit for inspiration. As indicated in the earlier discussion of reading, one’s writing life also can be infused with prayer.

Contending that one can write prayerfully, then, gathers together all three dispositions. Writing while exercising hospitality toward the Holy Spirit, toward one’s sources, and toward one’s audience makes space where communication can occur. Practicing humility while hospitably inviting comment by others about one’s writing makes space to listen deeply and to improve one’s written work. Writing contemplatively, attending carefully and recognizing the recursive process inherent in writing does the same. Participating in conversations by writing opens the engaged writer to notice the activity of God and others, and to respond in ways that can benefit many. As Henri Nouwen concluded, “In theological education it is of great importance to rediscover writing as a spiritual discipline by which we can come to discern the active presence of

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92. For example, see the discussion on “Breath Prayer” in Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, which describes how to develop a personal breath prayer for continued use.

93. For an interesting story about prayer during one writing project resulting in the production of an entirely different project, see the preface to Gerald G. May, *Care of Mind/Care of Spirit: A Psychiatrist Explores Spiritual Direction*, paperback edition no. 1 (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992).
God among us.”

The following chapter evaluates this detailed description of engaged writing as hospitable, contemplative, and conversational in order to establish whether it meets the definition of a Christian spiritual practice.

**The Practice of Teaching in Theological Education**

The practice of teaching is perhaps the most obvious of the three practices that comprise theological education—education of any sort requires learners and teachers. In his groundbreaking book *The Courage to Teach*, Parker Palmer states simply, “To educate is to guide students on an inner journey toward more truthful ways of seeing and being in the world.” He argues that the goal of teaching is for teachers to connect with their students, and thus to enable students to connect with the subject matter being taught. His articulation of this goal harmonizes with David Kelsey’s, who writes that the specific goal of theological education is “to understand God truly,” the result of encounter with God through the study of Christian practices. In order for this goal to be met, for that encounter with God to be facilitated, teachers must engage with students by infusing their


96. Ibid.

97. Although the language of connection may seem novel, Palmer insists upon connectedness (in terms of relationship) as of vital importance to his understanding of education: “Real learning does not happen until students are brought into relationship with the teacher, with each other, and with the subject. We cannot learn deeply and well until a community of learning is created in the classroom.” Parker Palmer, *To Know as We Are Known: Education as a Spiritual Journey*, reprint ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), xvi.

practices of teaching with their personal identities. As did Griffiths with regard to the practice of reading and Paulsell with the practice of writing, Palmer affirms that there are different ways to practice teaching. He does not speak in terms of the wide variety of teaching techniques, however; rather, he refers to varying levels of understanding and involvement with which the teacher may engage himself, the students, and the subject matter. Simply put, according to Palmer, one can practice teaching of any subject either inauthentically or authentically, as a largely academic practice or as a spiritual one.

Although he acknowledges that those who pursue teaching as a spiritual practice face daunting challenges, he recognizes that such teaching can result in “great things”: more and better learning, love of God, personal and corporate joy and satisfaction, and strengthening of ecclesial and civic life. After describing both of these ways of teaching and their possible outcomes, this section discusses how the dispositions of hospitality, contemplation, and conversation influence the discipline of teaching in theological education.

**Different Types of Teaching**

Although none of the chapters in *The Scope of Our Art* specifically treats the differences between teaching as an “academic” practice and as a “spiritual” one, many of the contributors to the book—and other authors as well—describe various aspects of these

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two ways of teaching. For example, those who understand teaching as more of an academic practice tend to view it as the isolated act of an individual, specifically of the teacher who performs this action in a room full of students.\footnote{Daniel Aleshire, “The Work of Faculty and the Educational Goals of Theological Schools,” ATS Seminar for Newly Appointed Faculty in Theological Education (2005), 3–4, http://www.ats.edu/LeadershipEducation/Documents/Papers2005Aleshire5.pdf (accessed 6–30–09).} In this context, the most important aspect of teaching may be presenting the subject’s “content” to students, that they might “master” it well enough to reproduce relevant aspects of it under examination.\footnote{Palmer, \textit{The Courage to Teach}, 6.} The professor has gathered a great deal of information in a specific area of knowledge through scholarly research, and her goal is to “cover” as much of this content as she possibly can in the classroom in order to convey it to her students, to transmit what she has learned to them. In the classroom she is “the main performer, the one with the most lines, or the one working harder than everyone else to make it all happen.”\footnote{Weimer, \textit{Learner-Centered Teaching}, xviii, 72–3. For more on this performance model of education, and ways in which it can develop into something much more like entertainment than education, see Jane Tompkins, “Pedagogy of the Distressed,” \textit{College English} 52, no. 6 (October 1990): 653–4; and Paul J. Wadell, “Teaching as a Ministry of Hope,” in Jones and Paulsell, \textit{The Scope of Our Art}, 123–4.} Students may hold her in high esteem as a master of her subject; such professors often tell their students that love for their subject matter is what motivates them to teach.\footnote{Aleshire, “Work of Faculty,” 5.}

However, she may also teach with an eye toward the external benefits garnered by her work. Teaching is her job, her career, her chosen profession that supplies needed income.\footnote{Wadell, “Teaching as a Ministry of Hope,” 130.} Classroom teaching also can result in securing tenure with an educational institution; achieving tenured status offers both job security and the promise of regular,
paid sabbatical leaves during which teaching may be set aside to pursue other interests, including further research in the field she loves. Other external goods resulting from theological education can include recognition in the church and the academic community, along with the power that accompanies that recognition—power in the classroom, the department, the church, or broader society.\textsuperscript{107} Such teachers, according to Cornell West, may sometimes allow their pursuit of institutional goals in the academy or the church to obscure the concerns of the kingdom of God.\textsuperscript{108}

Additionally, certain teachers view their teaching as a means to accomplish an operational end: the intellectual preparation of students for ordination and ministry. Although theological educators rarely have to deal with the sorts of “teaching to the test” that their colleagues in elementary and high school contexts do, they nonetheless must remain aware of the requirements of judicatories in various denominations. These groups require a level of competence from seminary graduates, and professors must prepare their students to reach that level as best they can. Each decision about what to include in a particular course and what to eliminate must be made with that awareness, which must also endeavor to balance theological precepts with discussion of their practical implications in ministry situations. The primary goal of theological education, in this model, is the stewardship and development of theological knowledge by professors and its transmission to students via publication and teaching.

Sometimes in this paradigm, the classroom teaching itself carries a secondary status. The production or construction of knowledge in the field through research and disciplined inquiry, especially in terms of its publication, counts for far more than the

\textsuperscript{107} For more on the economic and cultural benefits of working in the field of theological education, see Glenn T. Miller, \textit{Piety and Profession: American Protestant Theological Education, 1870–1970} (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), xv-xvi.

actual classroom teaching of that hard-won knowledge to students. Instead, the classroom work apparently takes the professor away from the more exciting—or at least more profitable—work of research and writing. An old maxim sums up the sentiment: Those who can, do; those who can’t, teach. In addition, many of those who hold this view of teaching generally have had little or no instruction about the art and craft of teaching and learning. Ph.D. programs in theology and related disciplines rarely require doctoral students to study research literature in the field of education. Thus, they have little familiarity with the history of teaching, and have only their own classroom experiences (as students, certainly, and perhaps as teaching assistants) to draw upon as they seek helpful ways to manage and motivate students. They may have had wonderful mentors who gave them techniques whose value has been proven over time; conversely, they may have only uncomfortable examples of what not to do, or have picked up methods of questionable usefulness. Thus, most professors teach as they were taught, following the examples set for them by their own professors over the years, rather than seeing themselves as a link in the historical chain of teaching and learning.

Also, an unrelenting focus upon the academic practice of teaching theology can create a disconnect between professors’ classroom work and the other facets of their lives. In his essay in The Scope of Our Art, L. Gregory Jones argues that theological


110. See Maryellen Weimer, Improving Your Classroom Teaching, Survival Skills for Scholars (Newbury Park, CA: SAGE Publications, 1993), 1–3, 5. My own experience illustrates this as well. I remember encountering Stephen Brookfield and Stephen Preskill’s Discussion as a Way of Teaching at an AAR book table and marveling at the insights it contained (in retrospect, I can’t imagine what I was doing at the Jossey-Bass display!). I had had no academic inculcation in pedagogy during my doctoral studies, but reading that book had a tremendous effect upon my own teaching. For a similar story, see Weimer, Learner-Centered Teaching, 3, 6.

111. Palmer uses “the pain of disconnection” as a term to describe the pain that he believes permeates education. “Everywhere I go,” he writes, “I meet faculty who feel disconnected from their colleagues, from their students, and from their own hearts.” Palmer,
educators should continually be “narrating and re-narrating the dramas of [their] lives in relation to God,” but when they approach their work from a purely academic viewpoint, professors may lose touch with the very relation to God that likely drew them toward teaching in the first place.¹¹² Teachers’ ability to connect who they are with what they do encapsulates good teaching, in Palmer’s view. Sadly, however, many teachers of theological disciplines find that the ability to maintain this connection slips from their grasp—if they were ever able to grasp it at all. Palmer notes that most teachers sense a calling to teach, but that many lose heart as a result of what he calls the “discouraging, oppressive, and sometimes cruel conditions” under which they work.¹¹³ The professional requirement for increasing specialization in one’s subfield of theological education, combined with the explosion of knowledge within that field and the countless others to which it relates, can obscure the role of a personal faith commitment in teaching as a professor attempts to juggle the numerous responsibilities he carries.¹¹⁴

However, another portrait of teaching paints it primarily as a spiritual practice, rather than an individualistic, technological, or disconnected “academic” one. One aspect of this second portrait reflects the communal and cooperative nature of teaching,

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¹¹³ Palmer, The Courage to Teach, xii. Miller-McLemore identifies these conditions as the “maceration” of faculty; see Miller-McLemore, “Contemplation in the Midst,” passim.

portraying the community of learning as sustaining the act of teaching. Teaching theology “requires a community because I cannot just rely on my own experience of God to come to know God; I must [also] rely on others’ experience with God to make God known to me.” Kelsey admits that learning can partially be described as individualistic, because each person must work at the task and cannot rely entirely upon the group to do the work; nevertheless, if the goal of theological education is to understand God more deeply and truthfully, then the quest for discovery both constitutes and nourishes the community of learning. In many cases, the results of learning through careful and thoughtful participation with a group surpass those produced by individuals alone. Large organizations often gather a small group of representatives together to consider specific topics, knowing that the thinking will be deepened and broadened by the participation of many who are able to build upon (or to call into question) the insights of others. As Stephen Brookfield and Stephen Preskill explain, “Discussion is a particularly wonderful way to explore supposedly settled questions and to develop a fuller appreciation for the multiplicity of human experience and knowledge. To see a topic come alive as diverse and complex views multiply is one of the most powerful experiences we can have as learners and teachers.” In fact, teachers often remember fondly these experiences of communal


117. For a fascinating glimpse of how this happened in a course called “War and the Modern Imagination,” taught by a self-proclaimed pacifist, see Mary Rose O’Reilley, “The Peaceable Classroom,” College English 46, no. 2 (February 1984): 103–12. For another, which I often use to portray engaged discussion to my own students, see Brookfield and Preskill, Discussion, 1–3.

118. Brookfield and Preskill, Discussion, 3. Compare Banks, Reenvisioning Theological Education, 179–81, on the role of conversation in specifically theological education. Using discussion in the classroom need not be merely a pooling of individual ignorance; requiring
learning in the classroom. Henri Nouwen reminisces:

> With deep gratitude I remember the many years of teaching in theological schools. The times in which I experienced my teaching as another way to pray, to be in community, and to proclaim the Good News have stayed with me as timeless times. . . . The moments that God’s Word really broke through to my own and my students’ hearts, during which we sensed how good it was to be together, and felt spoken to in a very healing way stand out as great teaching and learning moments. It seemed that the Word was happening then and became a true event in which the distinction between words and acts was transcended. Every time this took place it was an experience of pure grace, a gift from God who allowed us to catch a fresh glimpse of the great mystery of which we [together] have become part.119

Hence, both teachers and students deeply value the communal nature of teaching and learning as professors collaborate mindfully with their colleagues and their students.

Community appears in numerous forms across the various contexts of theological education (and beyond into the rest of faculty and student lives). First, Christian professors often participate as members of worshiping communities. They also develop and maintain relationships with their colleagues on campus, and with others who teach in their disciplines through academic societies such as the American Academy of Religion or the Society for Biblical Literature. They may preach and teach in other contexts as well, and may occasionally participate in opportunities for mission across the country or across the world. The relationships formed through these activities, as well as those between teachers and students, are fertile soil for the application and demonstration of Christian virtue and knowledge.120 Moreover, professors have the opportunity to serve both as teachers and learners in such settings. Whether presenting a paper at an academic society or listening to one; whether offering a presentation to a class or listening to student presentations;

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participants to supply evidence for their assertions from the reading done in preparation for the discussion can restrain them from offering baseless opinions.


120. Banks says that teachers of theology serve as “working models” of what they teach, just as Jesus and Paul both taught didactically and lived authentically; Banks, Reenvisioning Theological Education, 169–81.
whether helping to build a church building in a two-thirds-world country or reading a report from a student who did so—professors can participate in many communities of teaching and learning.  

Moreover, those who teach as a spiritual practice acknowledge that they are agents of God in the formation of students. As they teach, they strive to work together with God for two major purposes: that they and their students might know and love God better, and continue to be made fit for action in the contexts where God calls them to serve. In other words, these teachers consider the internal goods of teaching to be more valuable or noteworthy than the external ones. The stewardship and transmission of centuries of Christian theological knowledge are still important. However, the telos in view is not merely operant, in terms of graduates who can pass ordination exams; rather, the telos is primarily formational, in terms of graduates who love God deeply and demonstrate that love by behaving as disciples of Jesus Christ. As a means to this end, God works in the life of the professor and simultaneously in the lives of students as well; indeed, the professor’s personal formation has a deep and lasting impact upon his students. Watching a professor deal with the death of a parent, the ever-increasing responsibilities of personal

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121. Weimer maintains that every teacher should take a for-credit course in a discipline unrelated to what she teaches at least once every three years. *Learner-Centered Teaching*, 87. Palmer notes that although supportive communities are easy neither to create nor maintain, “If we can create such communities of collegial discourse, they could offer...healing for the pain of disconnection from which many faculty suffer these days.” *The Courage to Teach*, 166.

122. I want to insert a “selah” here; these “two major purposes” encapsulate the core of my argument in this thesis. For more on the telos of loving God, see Battle, “Teaching as Ceaseless Prayer,” 159; Miller-McLemore, “Contemplation in the Midst,” 52; and Smith and Shortt, “Introduction,” 9.

123. Wadell writes, “If teaching is a form of stewardship, we should see our students as gifts God entrusts to us. They are not ours to possess, manipulate, or control; rather, they are God’s and God gives them to us with the expectation that we will continue God’s good work in them by caring for them, respecting them, and, above all, nurturing the image of God in them. This makes teaching a sacred trust and a solemn responsibility; it makes teaching a noble vocation.” “Teaching as a Ministry of Hope,” 132.
and public life, or the birth of a child can teach just as much as a classroom presentation or a journal article.\textsuperscript{124} Students need to see “the good life” promised in the gospel as their professors live it, or they may be unable to even hope that such a life is possible.\textsuperscript{125} Those who view teaching as a spiritual practice see themselves as persons of God for the people of God, receiving whatever comes as from God’s own hand and as useful for ministry. In this sense, then, authentic teaching is akin to spiritual guidance: attending to and reflecting on the presence of God at work in our own lives, and assisting students as they come to know themselves and discern how God is present and at work in theirs as well.\textsuperscript{126}

The third aspect of this portrait of teaching theology as a spiritual practice demonstrates that such teaching is thoroughly contextual. Numerous contexts come to mind as these teachers reflect upon their teaching and learning. For instance, one vital context—perhaps the most significant of all—is the religious context. This type of teaching serves God and others, and arises from one’s faith commitment; theological educators neglect this context at their own peril. A second influential context is the historical context of Christian belief and practice. These teachers draw extensively from the tradition as they decide what and how to teach. Third, also crucial, is the present context, the one in which professors and students currently live and serve. Students and professors, at least those in physical classrooms, share the common context of their

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{124} Miller-McLemore, “Contemplation in the Midst,” 72; Banks, \textit{Reenvisioning Theological Education}, 170.
\item \textsuperscript{125} Wadell, “Teaching as a Ministry of Hope,” 129–30.
\item \textsuperscript{126} Mary Rose O’Reilley, “The Centered Classroom: Meditations on Teaching and Learning,” \textit{Weavings} 4 (September-October 1989): 30. Kelsey notes that along with breadth and depth of learning in Christian texts and practices, the “Athens” model of theological education also requires that professors have gifts enabling them to teach indirectly, to “midwife” others toward “personal appropriation of revealed wisdom.” \textit{Between Athens and Berlin}, 20. Banks goes so far as to claim that transformation in students’ lives “comes primarily from self-sacrifice on their behalf,” because Jesus’ own teaching did not result in eternal transformation of lives until his atoning death. \textit{Reenvisioning Theological Education}, 172.
\end{itemize}
theological schools. Fourth, just as pressing, is the future, the times and places in which graduates will be serving (and professors will continue to serve). This fourth context hints at the truth that teaching in light of these varied and sometimes competing contexts is tremendously complex.

Despite its complexity, though, the value of the contextual nature of authentic teaching cannot be overestimated. Because of these contexts, teaching in this fashion involves the entire lives of both professors and students, and allows them to pursue wholeness and integrity rather than attempting to juggle varying roles as if they were entirely disconnected from one another. These professors teach as a vocation, a calling from God situated in the whole of their lives, not simply a career. Additionally, they view their work in terms of its contribution to the already-but-not-yet kingdom of God: not only declaring its coming, but living daily in its grace. The historical traditions of Christian belief and practice ground their analysis of theological questions and provide authority to undergird current and emerging synthetic responses to them. Then these responses, old and new, can be examined in light of the circumstances and cultures in which they originated, offering clues about the kinds of contemporary cultures that might receive those responses gladly—and about others that may reject them out of hand, and why.

Students examine their own cultural backgrounds and current commitments with an eye to


whether or not these honor God, and discover how God’s hand has led them. They can also apply what they are learning in their relationships with other students and faculty, as well as in their own families and faith communities; those applications, too, serve as further subjects to investigate and evaluate. These cultural contexts weave together as tapestries, different for every individual, yet held together by faithfulness to the gospel of Christ.

Hence, these authors portray two overarching rationales for teaching theology. The first, the academic, depicts the isolated act of a teacher in a classroom, presenting content to students when he might instead be adding to the store of knowledge by doing research and writing. Although theology is important, its presentation in the classroom can sometimes be difficult, and the act of teaching can seem disconnected from the rest of the teacher’s life. The second rationale, the spiritual, describes teaching as an act sustained by a community of learning, where knowledge is mutually discovered and shared within and among varied contexts. The professor understands himself primarily as a co-laborer with and an agent of God, and his teaching as integrated with the other facets of his life because he lives his faith in whatever context he finds himself.130 The ultimate difference between these two rationales for teaching theology lies in whether or not the teacher permits his teaching to engage both his mind and his heart.

These two types of teaching, therefore, may be identified as disengaged and engaged. Disengaged or “academic” teaching is individualistic, disengaged both from other people and from the other activities of the professor’s life. It is technological, disengaged from many of the internal goods that can arise from teaching and concerned

130. The dichotomy here may seem rather overdrawn, perhaps here in the “teaching” practice more than in either reading or writing. The contrast between “academic” practices and “spiritual” practices serves the purposes of my argument well, but certainly the attitudes and actions portrayed here could fall more onto a continuum of more and less engaged, and less into black and white categories, within the academy.
with external benefits and operant ends. In this view, it is of secondary value. Engaged teaching, on the contrary, engages the teacher in a community of learning and way of life. He is engaged in God’s work of formation, offering himself to God for his own formation and demonstrating the life of faith to his students for their formation as well. He engages with numerous interrelated contexts as he seeks to articulate the Christian faith with authority in each of them. Several of the scholars featured in this section contest the disengagement of many theological faculty. They believe that teaching as a spiritual practice offers the opportunity for them and their students to engage wholeheartedly with each other, with the Christian tradition, with those to whom they minister, and with God.

**Dispositions of Engaged Teaching**

Declaring that engaged teaching enhances theological education requires a more detailed understanding of what engaged teaching looks like. Describing how other practices or dispositions of some theological educators (and their students) apply to the essential practice of teaching offers a more extensive view.\(^{131}\) This section considers three broad dispositions—hospitality, contemplation, and conversation—to help the picture of engaged teaching to become clearer.

**Hospitality.** Engaged teachers endeavor to exercise the gift of hospitality in their teaching. Recalling Dykstra’s description of hospitality as “receptivity and responsiveness” provides a rubric for highlighting aspects of hospitable teaching. Considering hospitality in the classroom evokes the idea of hosts receiving guests, the idea of some making space to welcome others who are, at first, strangers. Indeed, if Paul Wadell is correct that teaching is a ministry of hope, and Henri Nouwen is correct that all ministry can be understood as a form of hospitality, then teaching itself can be a form of

\(^{131}\) My discussion of these three dispositions, as before in the sections on engaged reading and writing, will also cover humility (with hospitality), attention and reflection (under contemplation), and testimony and prayer (under conversation).
hospitality.\textsuperscript{132} Hospitable teachers receive students into their classrooms and into their lives, in ways reminiscent of Benedict of Nursia’s guidelines for welcoming the traveler.\textsuperscript{133} These teachers try to empty themselves in a kenotic way, thus making space for deep listening to their students and to God.\textsuperscript{134} Nearly everyone writing about teaching hospitably mentions active listening as a key component of the practice: inviting everyone to participate, listening for everyone’s contribution, then looking for truth and understanding to emerge through the conversation.\textsuperscript{135} These professors do what they can to provide and maintain free space, safe space, by being slow to contradict others or to impose their own views and quick to encourage further and deeper exploration.\textsuperscript{136} This


134. Nouwen, “Education to the Ministry,” 52. As Nouwen points out, thinking of teaching as a ministry of hospitable listening calls to mind the ministry of spiritual guidance. He notes that “the relationship between teaching and spiritual guidance is...closer than we have been willing to admit.” “Education to the Ministry,” 55.


practice requires courage: courage to keep the space open when more heat than light is generated in a class period, when students make mistakes or refuse to speak at all, or when the teachers themselves do not know what to do or to say.\textsuperscript{137}

Moreover, as these teachers receive and listen to students, they practice humility.\textsuperscript{138} They acknowledge that humans know only in part (1 Cor 13:9, 12), and therefore not only do they not know everything, but they will often be able to learn much from those they teach.\textsuperscript{139} They also receive the biblical teaching from the book of James that teachers incur stricter judgment (3:1), which assists them in maintaining their humble stance. Such professors welcome students as “other,” as “stranger,” offering space for them to explore subjects of study (whether people or issues) without fear.\textsuperscript{140} They also work to offer themselves to students “as healer, sustainer, and guide whenever needed or sought.”\textsuperscript{141} They endeavor to continue learning, receiving the expertise of others in their areas of specialization and with regard to pedagogy; they try to accept the experience, critique, and advice of their colleagues and peers as well.\textsuperscript{142} Palmer contends that

\textit{Discussion}, chapter 5.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{137} Both Palmer’s \textit{The Courage to Teach} and Brookfield and Preskill’s \textit{Discussion as a Way of Teaching} address the issue of courage numerous times throughout their presentations. On student resistance, see Weimer, \textit{Learner-Centered Teaching}, chapter 7.

\item \textsuperscript{138} Lichtmann, \textit{The Teacher’s Way}, 94–5, is only one example.


\item \textsuperscript{140} On teaching as welcoming the stranger, see Lichtmann, \textit{The Teacher’s Way}, 92–108 passim; McAvoy, “Hospitality,” 23; Nouwen, “Education to the Ministry,” 54; and Wadell, “Teaching as a Ministry of Hope,” 131.

\item \textsuperscript{141} Nouwen, “Education to the Ministry,” 57.

\item \textsuperscript{142} For a candid discussion of ways to elicit and process this kind of information, see Palmer, \textit{The Courage to Teach}, chapter 6.
\end{itemize}
“humility is the virtue that allows us to pay attention” and receive in these multiple ways.\textsuperscript{143}

Throughout these encounters, teachers give as well, responding whenever possible with humility and grace. Primarily, they respond by giving their lives to their students, both their time and talents and their own experiences and life history.\textsuperscript{144} These professors welcome students by permitting them access into their lives, then respond to them by living the faith before them, so that through their lives God’s work can become visible to students.\textsuperscript{145} They respond to student questions and comments by being willing to enter humbly into the questions, indeed, to question with others as they search for truth. They also respond by being willing to change their own opinions if the evidence demands or evokes such changes.\textsuperscript{146} Sometimes their humility allows them to respond to questions or comments with a time of silence; not an emptiness, but a patient waiting for others to speak, for other ideas to emerge, for discussion rather than lecture to permit truth to emerge through the gathered community.\textsuperscript{147} Finally, perhaps the most important aspect of responsive humility involves a willingness to speak the truth in love. As seminary professors humble themselves before God, considering other students and colleagues to be more significant than themselves, they continue to judge with “sober judgment” their own

\textsuperscript{143} Palmer, \textit{Know as We Are Known}, 108–9. For a discussion of the ethical side of humility in theological education, see Coakley, “Scholarship as Vocation,” 67.

\textsuperscript{144} Nouwen, “Education to the Ministry,” 54.


\textsuperscript{146} Brookfield and Preskill declare that those claiming to have an open mind must be “flexible enough to adjust their views in the light of persuasive, well-supported arguments and confident enough to retain their original opinions when rebuttals fall short. Although agreement may sometimes be desirable, it is by no means a necessity. Indeed, continued disagreement may be a productive outcome of conversation, particularly if some explanation for those differences can be found.” \textit{Discussion as a Way of Teaching}, 7.

\textsuperscript{147} Palmer, \textit{Know as We Are Known}, 80; O’Reilley, “The Centered Classroom,” 28–9.
ability to ask piercing questions or to offer the “word fitly spoken” that can bring clarity and closure to an issue or discussion. Indeed, although he insists on the value of humility, Palmer also notes that “humility alone can lead to imbalance. It can create a teacher who . . . defaults on the community by receiving but not giving, listening but not speaking.” Engaged teachers must both receive and respond.

These professors also respond in other ways after (and as) they receive. They respond with thanksgiving to God for their students, who energize, bless, and enrich them—despite the truth that sometimes students enervate, anger, and drain them. In any event, they take them seriously, and they seek to respond with grace, compassion, appreciation, and encouragement. They respond with diligent reflection, and work toward consensus where possible and acceptance of differences where needed. They respond by risking themselves and their own comfort to engage and educate their students. They attend to the concerns of both the church and the academy, both pastoral and technical issues, holding these in creative tension as their students also must to minister effectively. In these ways and countless others, to the best of their abilities, engaged professors do receive and respond, practicing hospitality as they teach.

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148. Eph 4:15; 1 Pt 5:6; Jas 4:10; Phil 2:3; Rom 12:3; Prv 25:11.
149. Palmer, Know as We Are Known, 109.
150. Wadell, “Teaching as a Ministry of Hope,” 131–32.
Contemplation. Engaged, hospitable teachers receive and respond, in part, through their careful listening to others. This sort of contemplative listening is an integral part of teaching as a spiritual practice. Remembering Miller-McLemore’s broad description of contemplation as careful attention and steady focus that fosters awareness and serious thought, why might such attention and reflection be important for theological educators? First of all, “scholars are called to ponder, ruminate, pause, and create. Teaching requires a high degree of consciousness, intentionality, and discernment.... Teachers of theology . . . are especially called to contemplate and engage life’s deepest mysteries and meanings.”155

Certainly if St. Thomas Aquinas understood teaching as *tradere contemplativa*, sharing the fruits of contemplation, then such contemplation must serve as a foundation for its practice.156 Participation in what might be called religious contemplation, understood as spending time attending to the Triune God in prayer and biblical meditation, forms part of that foundation. Moreover, what might be called practical contemplation about teaching itself, also known by educators as critical reflection, also grounds theological teaching.157 Although some might think it a waste of time, teachers who do not


take the time to deeply consider themselves, their teaching, and their students’ learning in the light of the Spirit miss countless opportunities to celebrate their victories as teachers and make changes that could mitigate their defeats. On the other hand, those who do regularly attend to and reflect on their teaching note that such reflection “can contain . . . disclosive power,” and can result in both better and more satisfying teaching.

How can engaged teachers cultivate and apply contemplative attention and reflective focus? They can do so by deliberately slowing down: slowing their response times when students comment or ask questions, increasing the wait time after they themselves comment or question, simplifying their lives where possible to make time for reflection, and doing this “in the midst of chaos” in their classes and in their lives when simplicity is not an option. According to Battle, “Attention [is] an operation that cannot be hurried.” Rather, contemplative attention is a practice, a discipline; thus, as does any other spiritual discipline, the kind of attention that unites intellectual rigor and religious

(Malabar, FL: Krieger, 2008).

158. For more on the unexpected results of time “wasted” in contemplation, see Coakley, “Deepening Practices,” 80, 88. For more on what we miss when we do not make time to reflect, see Joyce Rupp, Walk in a Relaxed Manner: Life Lessons from the Camino (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2005), 251, who concludes simply that “without reflection . . ., my memories and insights might have slipped away. Without taking time to look back, much of what the pilgrimage provided for ongoing growth could easily have disappeared in the flurry of daily busyness.” The same insight applies to teaching and learning.


160. Please notice that I am not asking how they “pay” attention. I am persuaded by the argument in Lichtmann, The Teacher’s Way, 47–48, that this metaphor perpetuates the commodification of knowledge and obscures the true nature of contemplative attention and reflective listening.


piety requires time. Engaged professors use this time they have carved out to attend. They attend to themselves, to what they are doing, saying, feeling; they attend to their students, to facial expression, body language, written or spoken responses and questions; they attend to the sources, the scholarship they bring to bear on the subject(s) under consideration; they attend to the immanent presence of God who is all, and in all. Hence, for example, they may sit down after class and make notes about what seemed to work and what obviously did not. They may sit down after evaluating an exam or assignment and do the same, considering changes in their practice as a result of such reflection. They attend before class, as they prepare, during class, as they present, and after class, as they reflect. They listen closely, working to understand both what is said and what may be unsaid, listening for who speaks and who does not. They may attend by repeating the question or comment; they may attend to God while waiting in the silence; they may attend to students who have not yet spoken. They continue to endeavor to think critically, to focus steadily, each class period, each course, each semester.

Moreover, engaged theology professors attempt to inculcate this contemplative attentiveness and critical reflection in their students as well. They help their students to slow themselves down and make space to attend, both by modeling this behavior and by leading their students to practice it. They may use the silence that often follows a


165. A thorough explanation of critical reflection and its use and impact upon the practice of teaching is beyond the scope of this project. In the background here are Stephen Brookfield’s four tenets of critical thinking: identifying and challenging assumptions, noting the importance of context, attempting to Imagine and explore alternatives, and reflective skepticism; see Developing Critical Thinkers, 7–9.

166. This idea, though in the context of writing rather than attending, is from Paulsell, “Writing as a Spiritual Discipline,” 30.
question to ask students to reflect and then write their possible responses to it, or to consider and then write about why they do not want to answer it, or think about why it seems like the wrong question to ask.\textsuperscript{167} They may offer five minutes at the end of a wide-ranging discussion for students to summarize for themselves what the main arguments and conclusions were, or to jot down particular insights or questions that remain.\textsuperscript{168} These professors seek to model for their students the practice of waiting thoughtfully, “in unexpected and unplanned places,” for truth and wisdom to be made manifest.\textsuperscript{169}

What can happen when both teachers and students engage in contemplation? They can train themselves and be trained by God to see in new ways.\textsuperscript{170} Learning this kind of attentiveness fosters our love for God, and enables persons to offer the gift of focused attention and discernment to one another.\textsuperscript{171} Such attention allows them to make connections, identify assumptions, envision new possibilities, and draw well-reasoned conclusions. It can both improve their teaching and learning and intensify their faith.\textsuperscript{172} In

\begin{itemize}
\item 168. Weimer, \textit{Learner-Centered Teaching}, 61. The “I&Q” insights and questions technique was standard practice in a course taught by Klaus Issler at the Talbot School of Theology at Biola University during the summer of 2004, and I have used it in my own teaching as well.
\item 170. Ibid., 58; Wadell, “Teaching as a Ministry of Hope,” 130.
\item 171. Battle, “Teaching as Ceaseless Prayer,” 160, referring (as do many of the essays in the collection) to Simone Weil’s intriguing essay “Reflections on Studies,” mentioned earlier in this chapter. For Weil, the “right use” of all education is to train the mind to attend, so that one’s attention may then be focused upon God. The idea of focused attention as a gift comes from Margaret Guenther, \textit{Holy Listening: The Art of Spiritual Direction} (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1992), 3. Jacobs, “On Charitable Teaching,” 17, calls such attention “the pearl of great price for teachers and students alike.”
\end{itemize}
the end, McAvoy insists, “critical reflection . . . is key to the future success of theological education.”

**Conversation.** In addition, engaged teachers teach conversationally. Here again, conversation is understood as a “game” involving interaction with others and with texts, with specific but largely implicit “rules.” In this “game,” one asks questions of oneself, other persons or groups, or texts, and follows the questions and answers where they lead. The “rules” include accurately saying what you mean, listening and respecting both the contributions and differences of others, being willing to argue, confront, endure conflict, and change if necessary. Viewed through the lens of conversation, then, teaching and learning theological disciplines involve joining conversations that have been going on for centuries, and inviting others to do the same. These conversations involve asking or recognizing questions, developing possible responses, and supporting or refuting those answers by interacting with others who have written and spoken on those same questions. That interaction may be with students in the classroom, colleagues in the same discipline or across disciplines, classic texts in the field or in related fields, or even (or especially) with God.

The key to understanding conversational teaching lies in recognizing it as founded upon interaction. Of course, even the most disengaged teachers interact with their disciplines to a certain degree, conversing with texts and sources; however, such teachers rarely interact with those they teach, applying the “sage on the stage” model of teaching or the “banking” model of education. Engaged professors try not merely to deliver the


results of their own interactions to their students. Rather, they pose the questions to their students, while considering them again together with the students pursuing responses to them. Guiding them in ways that they hope will permit truth to emerge, these professors ask students to struggle with timeless questions in light of the contexts from which the questions and the students come, and those in which the professors and students will minister as well.

The importance of these interactions cannot be overstated. First, Jesus modeled the use of conversation as a model for teaching. As he walked along the roads with his disciples and ate meals with them, he asked questions and answered them. Second, such conversations can allow for developing openness to differences among people. Take, as only one example, the pedagogy revealed by the fact that Jesus was able to help Simon the Zealot and Matthew the tax collector to walk with him and learn together from him, despite their widely divergent political views. Third, these interactions permit students and teachers to learn from one another, such that the more experienced can both teach the less experienced and learn from them in the areas where others may have greater expertise. Fourth, conversation stands as a model of formative education that can enhance ministry in almost any context. From simple evangelistic encounters among

175. See Weimer, Learner-Centered Teaching, 82–91, for a discussion of how the professor can structure classes such that they “do less telling [so that] students do more discovering.” The resources for this conversational, learner-centered, constructivist model of teaching are legion; along with Weimer, the above-mentioned article by Alison King and the book by John Bean, Engaging Ideas, are excellent places to begin to explore this model.

176. This model of guided questioning also comes from Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed.

177. Banks, Reenvisioning Theological Education, Part Two, chapters 3 and 4, details the biblical accounts.

178. Ibid., 180–81.

friends to sophisticated convocations of scholars concerning the visible unity of the
curch, human contact—and thus ministry—involves conversation.¹⁸⁰ Fifth, interaction
can involve numerous learning styles and multiple intelligences in a single encounter, and
permits students to see firsthand how propositions and support for them must change in
specific contexts.¹⁸¹ Sixth, conversations can help students and professors alike to
discover more clearly what they believe, and provide avenues by which they can
remember God’s immanence as they listen for that Voice in the words and actions of
others.¹⁸² For these and other reasons, teaching as inviting others into conversation is a
vital discipline of engaged teachers.

Teachers engage in these conversations by taking the risk of letting go of some of
the almost-absolute control they could exercise in the classroom, inviting students to
engage interactively as well.¹⁸³ They teach them how to participate in substantive
discussions, and work to convince them that they must prepare for in-class discussions in
order for them to be as helpful as possible for everyone’s learning.¹⁸⁴ They encourage
students to attend to unexpected possibilities, to what seem to them to be novel
connections or new ways of approaching a topic.¹⁸⁵ They articulate questions and
propositions, make connections between things where necessary or possible, and arrive at

¹⁸². Simonaitis, “Teaching as Conversation,” 101; Miller-McLemore, “Contemplation in
the Midst,” 69.
¹⁸⁵. Simonaitis, “Teaching as Conversation,” 104. Such novel connections or new
approaches should result from critical thinking on the topic(s) at hand, according to Brookfield’s
understanding of critical thinking.
fresh perspectives and imaginative syntheses—and nurture the same skills in their students. They understand and endeavor to foster the kinds of classroom dynamics that permit students to speak and to respond to one another rather than always to the professor, and thus permit them to experience both the positive and negative aspects of collaborative learning. Although aware of the potential for conflict, they seek to model for their students that persons can disagree and yet remain committed to relationship with one another. As one such professor declares to her students, “We are likely to offend, disappoint, and surprise each other, and we will probably be hurt and challenged. . . . However, we are in a space for learning, a space in which we may learn how to work with conflict and how to learn from each other.” Perhaps most importantly, they remind themselves repeatedly that the role of the Holy Spirit is to guide professors and students alike into the truth that liberates, and they endeavor to trust the Spirit’s leading and activity in their classrooms. Whether using generative lectures (issuing from and leading back into conversation) or structured improvisation (guiding reflection and keeping the conversation flowing), whether in small or large groups in class or online, engaged teachers devote themselves to moderating conversations among the people of God.

186. Weimer, Learner-Centered Teaching, 57 and Improving Your Classroom Teaching, chapters 4 and 5; O’Reilley, “The Centered Classroom,” 105.

187. Welch, Sweet Dreams, 107, cited in Simonaitis, “Teaching as Conversation,” 113. See also Brookfield and Preskill, Discussion, 18–21 and passim.


The practice of testimony is clearly linked to conversational teaching. Incorporating the earlier explanation of testimony, it serves as what might be called a recurring moment in teaching. Testimony involves truth-telling about experience to edify others and is inherently communal, whether the teacher is the witness and the students the receivers and evaluators, or whether students testify and the teacher receives. Interpreting nearly all speech about God and God’s ways as testimony in this fashion leads to a comprehension that theology classrooms resonate with such testimony—testimony from biblical texts, historical texts, and contemporary texts, as well as testimony from the experiences of students and professors who have seen God at work in their lives. In fact, numerous instances in the New Testament illustrate that the Triune God models testimony from which his people can learn. Additionally, this broad conception of testimony also subsumes much teaching about other topics in the seminary or university curriculum. For example, those who teach others how to think critically, or how to read and interpret biblical languages, or how to assist others to grow in grace, also testify about what they have learned and their own experiences in learning these things. Hence, conversational and testimonial teaching witnesses the testimony of others and evaluates it on the basis of earlier testimony from reliable witnesses. That evaluation leads to further testimony, and


191. “God” testifies (Heb 2:4); “the Lord” testifies (Acts 14:13); Jesus testifies (Jn 8:14 and 18:37); the Holy Spirit testifies (Acts 20:23, Romans 8:16, Heb 10:15, and 1 Jn 5:6). In each case God is testifying to human beings about things they need to learn or to know. The sense of “testify” here is that of testimony delivered in a courtroom, by which the onlookers learn the truth about events (for this idea I am indebted to H. Douglas Buckwalter, Professor of New Testament at Evangelical Theological Seminary). Of course, the New Testament is also replete with instances of men and women testifying, both formally and informally, to what they have experienced of God and his ways, which also applies here.
the conversation results in those who “have ears” being able to “hear,” “understand,” “turn,” and be healed—surely desirable outcomes of theological education.\(^{192}\)

As professors and students include God in their conversations, the practice of prayer is also clearly linked to conversational teaching. Thomas Groome calls upon theological educators and their students to “pray and study [their] way into an ever deepening appreciation” of the Christian tradition.\(^{193}\) In the same ways in which he connects prayer and study, prayer may be connected with teaching, preaching, testifying, or indeed any Christian practice at all.\(^{194}\) Prayer invites God’s guidance and illumination during the teacher’s preparation for class, during her evaluations of student work, or as she responds to questions; it also provides a constant reminder of God’s active presence at the beginning and ending of class periods. Prayer among students and faculty gathered for campus chapel services, or prayer within the context of a class discussion, enriches and enlivens their relationships with God, the subjects at hand, and one another.\(^{195}\) Faculties may spend time during regular meetings praying for students, for the needs of the seminary and the world outside it, and for one another. Even the momentary, internal “Lord, help!” arising from conflict in the classroom or in one’s personal life can help professors discover and strengthen the connections between faith and vocation.\(^{196}\) Before

\(^{192}\) Mt 13:15-16; see also Mt 11:15, 13:9, 43; and Ac 28:27.


\(^{195}\) For a disturbing but illuminating vignette about prayer within the context of class discussion, see Battle, “Teaching as Ceaseless Prayer,” 165–67.

and after, within and around conversational teaching, prayer can weave the disparate threads into a tapestry.

Given the fragmentation within many theological schools, students in classrooms that welcome aspects of prayer, testimony, and conversation may experience more of that weaving and formative integration than their peers in other classrooms.\footnote{197} Also, they often demonstrate “higher intensity and quality of engagement” with others and with the material at hand.\footnote{198} Conversations with texts, with people, and with God can foster discernment, personal growth, and theological understanding.\footnote{199} They also help to increase one’s comfort with diversity and ambiguity, to bring assumptions to light, and to enhance one’s ability to think on his feet and communicate ideas clearly.\footnote{200} Moreover, a person who learns how to discern truth and permit others’ words to guide him can become more willing to receive guidance from God through the Word.\footnote{201} Despite the risk of outcomes that faculty may not have planned or expected, the results of conversational teaching can give glory to God and “lead . . . deeper into the mystery of God’s self-revelation.”\footnote{202}


\footnote{200} These and other benefits from Brookfield and Preskill, \textit{Discussion}, are listed on pages 22–23 and discussed in detail throughout chapter two.

\footnote{201} Nouwen, “Theology as Doxology,” 96. This is similar to Weil’s notion that learning to attend carefully to academic work can translate into deeper, more focused attention upon God; see “Reflections on Studies,” passim.

\footnote{202} Nouwen, “Theology as Doxology,” 97, 101.
Considering the many beneficial outcomes associated with conversational teaching and learning completes the picture of these three dispositions of engaged teaching. Humbly exercising the gift of hospitality as one teaches makes space to hear from God, from texts and other sources, and from other persons as well. Giving contemplative attention to what one hears opens avenues for further conversation and response, including testimony and prayer. The following chapter evaluates this detailed description of engaged teaching as hospitable, contemplative, and conversational in order to establish whether it meets the definition of a Christian spiritual practice.

**Conclusion: The Composite Practice of Theological Education**

Much ground has been covered in this chapter. Theological education has been defined, for the purpose of this investigation, as a composite practice comprised of a group of discrete yet interconnected activities, specifically focused upon graduate-level education designed to prepare persons for ministry. Three specific practices have been identified as essential to the composite practice: reading, writing, and teaching. In addition, any or all of these three discrete yet interconnected practices may be pursued in ways that have been described as disengaged or engaged. Disengaged practice has been portrayed as largely individualistic, technological or operant, and disconnected from historical or contemporary contexts in ways that create various disjunctions—among professors, between professors and students, or even within the professors themselves (dividing head and heart). Engaged practice, on the other hand, has been depicted as corporate or communal, pursued for both individual and communal benefits internal to the practice, and founded upon historical and contextual realities in ways that create or maintain unity—among faculty, between faculty and students, or within the ones who teach (uniting head and heart, faith and action). Finally, engaged practice, whether reading, writing, or teaching, has been explained more thoroughly through explorations of three
related dispositions: hospitality (combined with humility), contemplation (combined with attention and reflection), and conversation (combined with testimony and prayer). It has been argued that more engaged readers, writers, and teachers practice these disciplines hospitably, contemplatively, and conversationally.

It remains to reiterate that although these three practices have been examined singly in detail, they are nevertheless interconnected in the composite practice of theological education. Their interconnections are clarified by the similarities demonstrated throughout the sections on engaged reading, writing, and teaching. Since hospitality, contemplative attention, and willingness to converse are dispositions of the inner person revealed through outward behavior, one who reads hospitably likely also teaches hospitably; one who writes with careful attentiveness and reflection likely reads in a similar fashion as well. Thus, one can say that theological educators are more disengaged or more engaged as they read, write, and teach. The subsequent chapter takes up the question of whether the composite practice of theological education, performed in engaged ways with the dispositions of hospitality, contemplation and conversation in evidence, fits the definition of a Christian spiritual practice.
CHAPTER 3
ENGAGED THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION AS A CHRISTIAN SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

In the first chapter, Christian spiritual practices were defined as things God enables Christian people to do together over time to address fundamental human needs in light of the gospel of Jesus Christ, activities that together form a way of life that pleases God and through which God teaches and transforms persons into the image of the Son. In the second chapter, the composite practice of teaching theology was depicted as comprised of the necessary and sufficient practices of reading, writing, and teaching. Further, engaged theological teaching was described as involving those same three disciplines practiced simultaneously with the dispositions of hospitality, contemplation, and conversation. The third chapter addresses this question: Can engaged theological education be an example of a Christian spiritual practice?

To answer the question, each of the practices of theological education is analyzed in light of each facet of the first part of the definition of Christian spiritual practice, to establish that reading, writing, and teaching can be 1) enabled by God, can be 2) fundamentally both corporate and historically/contextually grounded, and can 3) address human needs and help persons to achieve the telos that God has in mind for humanity. Then, the composite practice of theological education is analyzed in light of the second part of the definition, to establish that the composite practice forms a way of life that pleases God and which God uses to enable humans to know and to become like God. These analyses will determine whether engaged theological teaching can be understood and pursued as a Christian spiritual practice.
“Things God Enables Christian People to Do”

Simply, Christian spiritual practices are things God enables Christian people to do. First of all, this phrase clarifies that spiritual practices are activities, “things . . . people . . . do,” rather than theories or abstract concepts. In addition, these things that people do involve every type of activity—physical, mental, or spiritual; these practices apply to the whole human person, in both material and immaterial aspects.

Second, this implies that a form of dual agency operates through these activities. If spiritual practices are things people do, then certainly human agency is involved. Practitioners, whether Christian or not, may develop practices, expand upon them, improvise within them, and generally operate with freedom in the practices. Christian practitioners do this with an awareness that they must carefully examine significant developments or changes in light of the Christian story. However, to say that these Christian practices are enabled by God requires that God’s agency also be involved. God the Holy Spirit may generate or motivate practices that could be carried out by persons.\(^1\) God may also work through people and their practices, combining divine power with human agency to meet needs.\(^2\) Further, God may reveal to practitioners both distortions of the practices and possible improvisations or reforms to fit evolving contexts and circumstances.\(^3\) In any case, this definition of Christian spiritual practices requires this understanding of dual agency to guard against the idea that Christian practices are things Christians do in order to be accepted by God. Participation in Christian practices may, indeed, be a prerequisite to certain kinds of knowledge and experience of God; nonetheless, such participation does not make one Christian more righteous—nor, indeed, more “Christian”—than another.

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1. 1 Cor 12:4-11; Rom 12:3-8. I have placed all biblical references for this chapter in footnotes, given that the large number of them would interfere with the flow of the text.


Third, these activities do not qualify as “Christian” merely because Christians engage in them, nor because they form part of the Christian way of living in the world, nor because there is a special, Christian “something” within the practices themselves. Rather, as indicated in the previous paragraph, Christian practices are Christian because they are normed by the tenets of the Christian faith. This norming occurs as practitioners reflect critically and theologically upon the practices at various points, whether before, during, or after a particular practice. This norming also need not involve only select practitioners; rather, anyone who participates in the practices may reflect upon ways in which the practices intersect with and reflect biblical and traditional doctrines as understood by the community of faith. Aside from that careful, critical reflection, Christian practices can appear identical to practices of adherents to other faith traditions, or of those who hold to no faith tradition at all. Communal reflection may open new avenues of practice that better represent the Christian faith to others and that more clearly help persons to love God and their neighbors more deeply.

In order for each of these practices of theological education to fit the definition of a Christian spiritual practice, then, it needs to be an activity that God enables Christian people to do, with reference to the expanded aspects of the definition above. As described in the previous chapter, reading, writing, and teaching in theological education stand as activities. Using reading as an example, the persons doing the reading may use a largely disengaged method of reading, focusing upon decoding the words and mastering the content of the texts at hand. Conversely, they may engage in one of the Christian methods of reading, such as lectio divina or the Victorine method. In so doing, they may focus more broadly: upon comprehension, upon the effects the authors and texts have on the readers, and upon the multiple levels of meaning within canonical texts. In either case, though, the readers are active. Similarly, writing is also an active process. One may write in a more disengaged fashion, viewing one’s writing as a commodity to be produced under pressure, alone before a computer screen. On the other hand, one may write in an engaged fashion, as a means of
attending to God and to others, a means of hospitably opening doors to deepening relationships. Again, either method involves human action. The same applies to teaching. Whether one’s teaching methods engage every facet of her being to connect with her students by God’s grace, or whether they stand as somewhat disconnected from who she is as a person, she remains active in the process of teaching. In each of these cases, then, reading, writing, and teaching are activities, not merely theoretical constructs.

Moreover, each of these practices involves both physical and mental or spiritual activity. Examples for reading encompass holding a book; reading aloud; using one’s eyes to scan the text on a computer screen; decoding the words of a given language via the language centers in the brain; listening to a book on tape; and thinking about, meditating on, or praying with what one has read. Examples for writing involve holding a pen or pencil; typing on a computer keyboard; speaking words aloud while transcribing them; thinking about synonyms for frequently used words; creating schemas for organizing information while writing; and reflecting upon, revising, or discussing what one has written. Examples for teaching include speaking during a class; moving around a classroom; gesturing to make a point; considering responses to questions; keeping track of time; and interacting with, evaluating, or praising God for student work. Clearly, reading, writing, and teaching can employ both the material and immaterial aspects of human persons.

In addition, all three of these practices can exhibit both human and divine agency. For instance, the engaged reader is an agent, the person who is doing the reading. He chooses what to read and how to read it, whether or not to take notes, and whether to compare the text to other similar or divergent ones. The engaged writer is also clearly an agent at work in his writing. He chooses the words to open the doors to draw others into his writing; he endeavors to communicate clearly; he sets out to publish his work upon its completion. Third, the

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4. The profiles of disengaged practices from the previous chapter often reveal only the practitioner as agent, because the largely disengaged practitioner tends to be unaware of any other agency. However, more engaged practitioners in theological education tend to be more aware of other agents, whether other texts, other persons, or the Divine.
teacher is unquestionably the agent doing the teaching. He constructs the lesson plan; he engages student questions; he adapts to different groups of students. Whether reading, writing, or teaching, human agency definitely is operative. As these few sentences clarify, these practices allow for flexibility; practitioners can devise new methods, elaborate upon older ones, or modify these freely so long as they continue to allow their practices to be grounded in and guided by Christian doctrine. Theological educators can borrow from others and shape what they borrow to fit their own contexts—or those of their students—as evidence that they are growing in their practice.

However, God must also be recognized as an agent in these Christian practices. Certainly God enables them in any number of senses, some less direct than others. For instance, God has superintended all of creation, and anticipated the development of people who would have both the capacity to read and write and the opportunity to create symbol systems and transmit decoding skills to others. Many who teach and learn in theological schools testify of God calling them to those places, where God offers them abundant opportunities to practice these disciplines. In these ways and others, God works indirectly to make reading, writing, and teaching possible. Nonetheless, God also displays agency more directly by speaking to readers through the texts being read, inspiring writers as they struggle to communicate with others, and teaching students as they compare texts while studying. As an enabling agent, God can encourage particular practices, inspire changes or reforms in others, and guide persons into deeper knowledge of themselves and of the Divine, leading to transformed lives. Thus, reading, writing, and teaching all evidence both human activity and God’s enabling simultaneously.

If these specific practices within theological education were to fit this portion of the definition of a Christian spiritual practice, then they would also look a great deal like those done by others, whether Christian or not; their distinctive Christian quality would issue only from reflection upon their relationship with the tenets of Christian faith. The practice of
reading as presented earlier fulfills this requirement. Indeed, Christians who do either disengaged or engaged reading use the same methods as non-Christians—whether solitary, silent, fast reading abstracted from the original context of the text at hand, or communal, oral, close reading fully cognizant of both the original context and the contemporary one. Additionally, both engaged and disengaged writing and teaching also demonstrate this characteristic. No one can identify a writer or a teacher as Christian merely on the basis of the methods she uses to organize her material, to choose how to state her propositions, or to interact with her sources. Hence, the specific methods used by readers, writers, or teachers do not in themselves identify their practices as Christian.

Rather, reflection on both the methods used and the content considered provides insight into how these practices serve God and others. The dispositions of hospitality, contemplation, and conversation reveal their importance here. Being the kind of reader who, before beginning to read, invites the guidance of God’s Spirit, or who stops occasionally during reading sessions to compare what one is reading with tenets drawn from biblical texts or from knowledge of orthodox doctrine, or who takes time after reading to consider together with others how God might be speaking through a text can exemplify how Christian faith can affect the spiritual practice of reading. Being the kind of writer who invites others to comment upon one’s writing, attends carefully to those comments while drafting and revising, or moderates conversations among sources while writing so that many voices can be heard also can demonstrate the intersection of faith and practice in writing. Finally, being the kind of teacher who endeavors to make space for everyone to engage with the subject, who reflects carefully and repeatedly upon how to connect with students, or who prays faithfully for God’s will to be done in the lives of students can indicate how reflection centers practice upon and within Christian faith. Consistent attention to the theological foundations and implications of one’s practices is the only thing that can norm them as Christian.5 Hence,

5. I do not here mean to indicate that only Christian teachers exercise hospitality, contemplation, or conversation in their teaching, nor that only Christian professors can be engaged
reading, writing, and teaching within theological education can be “things God enables Christian people to do.”

“Together over Time”

Christian spiritual practices are things God enables Christian people to do together over time. This phrase highlights the corporate nature of practices, and focuses attention on their historical and contextual aspects. For example, practices are developed by groups of people working together. Practices arise when someone has an idea, and another person adds another, and they implement the ideas together with a small group. They consider the outcomes and make changes, then try again. They collaborate and cooperate, building upon their shared context and history, and share their activities and the rationales behind them with others. Gradually, a practice may begin to emerge.

In the case of specifically religious practices such as prayer or the Christian Eucharistic celebration, God’s agency may become evident at various points in the development of the practice—as when Jesus led his disciples in the Jewish Passover celebration and then declared, “Do this in remembrance of Me,” or when he taught his disciples to pray by saying, “Our Father . . .” In any event, practices find their foundations in complex traditions involving many people acting together.

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rather than disengaged. However, I am contending that professors exhibiting such dispositions within engaged theological education are more likely to do so as a facet of their commitment to Christ than those with no such commitment.

6. I acknowledge my debt to Dykstra, “Reconceiving Practice,” for much of my understanding of how practices are corporate while involving both individuals and groups.

7. One scholar uses baseball as an example. Someone had an idea for a game; a group of people made up rules as they went along; some were kept, others were discarded, more were added. Over time, the practice and the tradition grounding it became quite complex. Although not everyone involved does the same thing, all are participating in the practice—not only the position players on the field, but also the coaches, managers, team owners, concession stand workers, announcers, sportswriters, and fans. All together engage in the practice of baseball. Stout, Ethics After Babel, xiv, 271–72, 276, and 303.

Second, practices are performed by groups. This does not necessarily mean that a single individual cannot participate in a practice; rather, it indicates that the single individual is one of a collection of persons who perform that practice even if the individual is currently doing so alone. Craig Dykstra explains:

You do not have to be in a group to be participating in a practice. Prayer is a practice of the church. People praying by themselves are involved in this practice . . . because [they] pray, even when praying alone, as participants in the praying of the church . . . . The cooperation comes not primarily through persons interacting physically so much as it does through persons engaging in activities that gain their meaning from the form that emerges through a complex tradition of interactions among many people sustained over a long period of time.9

So those who pray can be participating in the Christian practice of prayer whether they gather with others in a chapel or whether they pray alone in their homes. Of course, participating together with others offers opportunity to learn more about the practice, to develop and extend relationships with others through joint practice and reflection, and to rejoice that others share one’s convictions about the meaning and purpose of the practice.10 The interrelationships among practitioners both within and among differing cultural contexts provide a rich source for both modifying and maintaining practices, and for developing the goods internal to them. Finally, Jesus promised that wherever two or more gathered together in his name, his presence (and, presumably, his agency) would be with them,11 adding his blessing to groups knit together by shared Christian practices.

Third, practices are modified by groups. Practices develop and change over time as they spread from one geographic or cultural context to another, as well as changing in the same contexts as different individuals and groups take them up. Sometimes these contexts or


10. The teaching of Qoheleth comes to mind: “Two are better than one because they have a good return for their labor. For if either of them falls, the one will lift up his companion. But woe to the one who falls when there is not another to lift him up. Furthermore, if two lie down together they keep warm, but how can one be warm alone? And if one can overpower him who is alone, two can resist him. A cord of three strands is not quickly torn apart” (Eccl 4:9–12, NASB).

circumstances may force changes to the practice. For example, the third-century practice of withdrawing to the desert to seek God would look significantly different for someone who lived in such a densely populated area that such solitude seemed physically impossible, or for someone who lived in a more temperate climate where the harshness of the desert could not be found. As such, then, practices benefit from the kinds of reflection required for norming them as Christian, because such reflection can indicate or reveal possible or necessary alterations. For example, as a group of seminary students studies and implements a Christian practice, they may note ways in which its historical context formed the practice originally, and recognize that some of the changes to it implemented in other contexts cause its contemporary use to be less closely aligned with Christian faith than it was originally. They could then improvise within the contemporary practice, endeavoring to reclaim the best aspects of the historical practice as they eliminate objectionable ones, while asking God for wisdom in the process. However, no single person can reform a practice alone; the most she could do would be to make changes in her own practice and suggest the same to others. Only a group of people can successfully modify a practice.

Fourth, just as groups develop, perform, and modify practices, they also sustain them. Practices persist because group members teach the practices to new members, and because some members leave the group geographically and transmit the practices in other places. They also persist because groups reflecting on the practices evaluate them, acknowledge their value, and thus continue to pursue them and transmit them to others. This transmission over time can assist practitioners to keep the practice grounded and faithful to the tradition in which it arose, if they take care to transmit to newer practitioners the history behind the practice and the rationales that support it.\(^\text{12}\) When practices become separated from their

\(^{12}\) There is a story of a young woman who always cut both ends off a ham before baking it. Her husband wondered why, and she told him her mother had taught her to do so, but she didn’t know why. She called her mother to ask, and her mother said she had been taught to do that by her mother, but didn’t know the reason. A call to the grandmother proved telling; she said, “I always cut the ends off the ham, and taught you to do the same, because my pan was too small to hold the whole ham!” In this story, the lack of explaining the history of the action and its rationale brings laughter,
history, however, they lose much of their significance and can eventually become reduced to mere group activity, cut off from their ability to demonstrate and inculcate virtue. Sustaining practices by keeping them connected with their history also ensures the unity and coherence of practices over time, as contemporary practitioners strengthen the relationships among themselves, their communities, and the communities that developed and transmitted the practices to them. In short, then, practices are developed, practiced, modified, and sustained by groups of people together over time.

In order for each of the practices of theological education to fit the definition of a Christian spiritual practice, then, it needs to be an activity that Christian people do together over time, with reference to the expanded aspects of that phrase above. As depicted in the previous chapter, reading, writing, and teaching in theological education have been corporate practices throughout history. For instance, the development of reading as a practice required a group of persons to work together. For one person to create symbols that stand for objects or sounds could serve that single person quite well, but the development of an entire language system simply necessitates the involvement of more than one individual. Moreover, the sorts of reading done in a theological school benefit from the practice of centuries of readers, reading what has been written by those who have gone before them in the Christian faith. The relationship between reading and writing illuminates writing’s status as developed by groups as well. Again, without those who write and those who read, in each case representing groups of people, such practices could never have gained a foothold. Teaching, of course, follows the same pattern. That postulated first human who made marks with one object upon another to represent something needed to explain to someone else what the purpose had been, and thus began to teach. All three of these practices clearly were developed by groups of people.

because the circumstances probably have changed so that the action is no longer necessary. With a Christian spiritual practice, however, such a lack of historical grounding can prove disastrous.

13. Craig Dykstra, “Reconceiving Practice,” 44.

14. Of course, one person teaching another to do something likely started before the advent
In addition, these practices are also performed by groups of persons. Consider for a moment the explanation above concerning how participation in a practice may be a solitary activity or a group activity without ceasing to be a practice, because the individual practitioner remains connected to others who have performed, currently perform, and will perform the practice (and related practices as well). This explanation holds true for reading, writing, and teaching. The one who reads is connected to the one who wrote, and vice versa; the one who teaches, even if teaching by writing down information for someone else, is connected to the ones who will read and implement what she has written. Supplementing this understanding of the corporate nature of practices, many of these practices can be undertaken by groups of people simultaneously as well. Reading together in a classroom, perhaps with one person reading aloud as others follow, or writing together, whether actively collaborating while compiling a report for a group project or simply writing simultaneously during an examination, represent communal activities. Nearly any example of teaching involves a minimum of two persons, and often many more. In these ways and others, reading, writing, and teaching are performed by groups of persons.

Each of these practices reflects modifications that practitioners have made together over time. The descriptions of each practice in the previous chapter describe at least two varying types of the practice, academic or disengaged and spiritual or engaged.\footnote{Again, this somewhat forced dichotomy serves this argument, but rarely is someone totally engaged or completely disengaged.} The simple truth that there is more than one way to do things in each case indicates that changes have been made to the practice. As only one example, early readers read aloud, but as punctuation was added to written language, reading silently became possible. Nonetheless, more than one person needed to comprehend (in English, for example) that a comma indicated a pause, and a period a full stop. The modification came about within a group of people. As another example, reflect upon the development of shorthand, a change in the practice of writing that
made transcription faster and more accurate. Again, the change must have arisen as one person entertained and experimented with an idea, and others adopted it and added to it. Teaching meets the same qualification; its practice can change when one teacher has an idea, experiments with it and appreciates the results, and passes it on to others who may also adopt it. These simple examples represent scores of other possible demonstrations that these practices of theological education have been modified by groups across the centuries.

Moreover, these practices are also transmitted and sustained by groups. Straightforwardly stated, the groups that develop, practice, and modify practices are the same groups that pass them on to others and work to maintain them over time. Seasoned students may tell newer students how to make time for reading, or what tactics to use to glean important information more quickly when possible. Students may also take courses in writing, in which methods or techniques for easing the transition from thoughts in one’s mind to words on paper can be mastered. Teachers learn how to teach by watching others, by reading books written about the practice, or by attending seminars concerning specific approaches or systems. In every case, though, these activities involve multiple participants. Thus, reading, writing, and teaching within theological education are not only “things God enables Christian people to do,” but they are done “together over time.”

“To Address Fundamental Human Needs in Light of the Gospel of Jesus Christ”

Having discussed what Christian spiritual practices are, who is involved with them, and when they are performed, we turn our attention to their purpose and method. This definition declares that such practices “address fundamental human needs in light of the gospel of Jesus Christ.” Exploring each word or phrase begins with the verb to address. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary reveals that the etymology of this verb, from the Anglo-French adrescer, means “to direct [or to] put right.” Thus, its contemporary meaning is “to direct the efforts or attention of (oneself)” and “to deal with [or] treat.” Addressing fundamental human
needs signifies directing one’s efforts or attention, as well as that of others, to deal with (“to concern oneself with” or “to take action with regard to someone or something”) fundamental human needs.  

16 So, those employing Christian spiritual practices concern themselves with endeavoring to meet human needs, taking action to ameliorate lack and suffering, putting right what is wrong to the best of human ability as enabled by God.  

17 Saying that these practices address fundamental human needs begs the question: What human needs are fundamental, and which are secondary or supplemental? To respond to this question in light of the gospel of Jesus Christ, we must briefly explore what humans need as these needs have been revealed by God through Christ, remembering that Christian understandings of humanity and its telos both ground and norm Christian practices. Jesus taught that the greatest commandment, the telos of humanity, is to love God and to love one’s neighbor as oneself. Thus, humans need to come to know God, to be taught about God and by God, to learn to know God better and love God more deeply—to grow in grace and the knowledge of God. Concurrently, they need to come to love others as they love themselves, to learn to care for one another as God cares for them. Without knowledge and love of God


17. I make no claim that Christian spiritual practices can eradicate human need. Jesus himself told his disciples that poverty, as one example of human need, would never be completely eliminated (Mt 26:11, Mk 14:7, Jn 12:8). I appreciate Bass and Dykstra’s choice of the verb “to address” rather than another (perhaps to meet) that could lead toward this claim, and chose to adopt their wording here with that in mind.

18. I acknowledge my debt to Dykstra and Bass, “A Theological Understanding,” for much of my understanding of “fundamental human needs.” However, the decision to use the greatest commandment to summarize this phrase, and the choice of biblical references that support it, is entirely my own.

19. Mt 22:37; Mk 12:30; Lk 10:27.

20. To know God, Jn 17:3; to be taught about God, Mk 6:30, Eph 4:21, Col 2:7; to be taught by God, Mt 5:2, Mt 13:54, Mk 1:22 (Jesus); 1 Cor 2:13 (Holy Spirit); Jn 6:45, 1 Thes 4:19 (God); to love God, Eph 3:19; to grow in grace and knowledge, 1 Pt 3:18.

21. Mk 9:50; Jn 13:34; Rom 12:10, 16, 15:5, 7, 14; 1 Cor 12:25; 2 Cor 13:11.
and neighbor, humans experience slavery and bondage to sin; with such knowledge and love, they experience freedom from sin and liberty in Christ, the abundant life Jesus promised.\(^{22}\) Humans need to be restored to fellowship with God and with one another; the message of the gospel is that this restoration is possible through the finished work of Jesus.

The light of the gospel of Jesus Christ, however, also affects how Christians address these needs. First, they understand themselves as responding to God’s own initiative in whatever they do. God creates; Christians steward and care for that creation. God reveals his attributes and nature; Christians respond in worship and praise, and tell others what God has revealed. God redeems; Christians rejoice in restored relationship, and endeavor to share the good news and live in peace. In every case, nonetheless, God acts first, and humans respond. Second, they seek to relate their beliefs to their behavior. For instance, they hear the prophets cry out for justice for the oppressed, and hear God’s own commands for the people of ancient Israel and first-century Jerusalem to care for widows and orphans.\(^{23}\) Believing that God’s concern for justice and mercy continues, they work for justice for any who are oppressed and try to act mercifully toward everyone. They listen to Jesus’ teaching about anger, lust, or greed, and set themselves to live in reconciliation, chastity, or generosity toward others. Here again, they rely on God’s enabling power, since apart from that power issuing from relationship with God, they can do nothing.\(^{24}\) To summarize, then, Christians strive to engage in spiritual practices that address fundamental human needs in light of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

\(^{22}\) Rom 7:14, 8:15, 8:21; Jn 8:31-36; Gal 2:4, 5:1; Jn 10:10.

\(^{23}\) Prophets speaking of justice include Isaiah (1:17), Jeremiah (21:12), and Ezekiel (18:5-9); God’s commands to care for the widows and orphans include Dt 10:18, 14:29; Is 1:17; and Mal 3:5.

\(^{24}\) Jn 15:5.
Can the practice of reading in theological education address fundamental human needs in light of the gospel of Jesus Christ? Can readers direct their efforts and focus their attention on discerning actions that help themselves and others to know and love God and each other more deeply? The simple answer to both questions is “yes.” First, the practice of reading itself can provide answers for questions and help for those who suffer. Jesus himself repeatedly asked his hearers, “Have you not read . . . ?”, suggesting that information they needed about God or answers to questions they were asking were available in their sacred texts. In the book of Matthew alone, Jesus asks this question five times. Paul also encouraged those who received his letters to read them and to send them on for others to read as well, in one case noting explicitly that reading would help them to understand. Although readers sometimes may not comprehend what they are reading, God’s enabling can change their blindness to sight. Moreover, engaged reading both acknowledges the agency of the Holy Spirit and engages in conversation with others in the community of faith; hence, it can provide both understandable information about the sorts of actions to undertake to grow in the ability to love God and neighbor, and motivation to undertake those actions. Learning about God through reading can lead to freedom from bondage and to restored fellowship.

Second, those who practice engaged reading attend deeply to what they read, and that deep attention combined with the hospitality they uphold in their choices of what to read inevitably brings them to awareness of human need. Because need so deeply marks the human condition, it is nearly impossible to escape it for long, no matter what one reads. From biblical stories to the wisdom of the desert, from the writings of political reformers to best-

selling fiction, one encounters human need again and again. Even systematic theology texts and technical biblical commentaries can bring readers into contact with God’s grace and freedom offered to all creation. Because Christian practices integrate belief and behavior, the awareness of human misery in lives ruined by sin calls readers to reach out to those in need. Feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, speaking for the voiceless—those who engage not only their heads but their hearts as they read will scarcely be able to resist the call to action, to serve their brothers and sisters in Jesus’ name and to develop their capacity to love others. They nurture a deep desire not only to hear the Word through their reading, but to obey its commands.²⁹

However, if the telos is not only active love for others but also knowledge of and love for God, can reading inculcate that as well? Of course it can. Missions groups work tirelessly to translate the Bible into every known human language, and to distribute copies of the written Word of God to all who wish to obtain them despite significant financial and political difficulties, because reading that Word can develop knowledge of, faith in, and love for God in those who read.³⁰ The written work of those who have testified to God’s presence in their lives in autobiographies and devotional classics can have the same effect. Although one could argue that these latter types of reading lead only to indirect knowledge of God, they nonetheless inculcate knowledge of God. When one person learns what another person knows about God, God’s Spirit often also works within the learner to desire experiential knowledge of God like that of the other person, and then provides for that need to be met in countless ways.³¹ In addition, even reading texts that ostensibly have nothing to do with God can still highlight human need, and reading about and pondering that need can create a thirst for the knowledge of God. If the reading itself does not initially provide knowledge of God but does

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²⁹. Jas 1:22.
³¹. For one example, see John 1:35-51.
call the reader into working for the common good of her neighbors, that very work can also reveal God’s character.  

32 In these ways and others not described herein, reading can address fundamental human needs in light of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Writing

The practice of writing in theological education also can meet this portion of the definition of Christian spiritual practice. As described in the previous chapter, engaged writing can be a means of paying attention as well as a means by which the capacity for such attentiveness develops. If to address fundamental human needs is to direct one’s attention toward them, then writing offers both the promise of enhancing one’s ability to attend deeply and a method for doing so. In fact, many writers first attend to needs as they prepare to write, then endeavor to meet those needs through their writing. Luke the physician, for example, recognized that Theophilus needed assurance that what he had heard about Jesus was true, so he wrote the Gospel attributed to him (as well as the book of Acts) to meet that need for Theophilus to know God more thoroughly.  

33 Moreover, the texts that writers produce can continue to meet needs over time. “It is written” appears more than eighty times in the Bible, as speakers and writers remind those who listen and read about the words and works of God in human history. Jesus himself quoted or referred to passages from the Scriptures to resist temptation, to explain the provenance of events, or to justify his actions.  

34 In these cases and countless others, carrying weighty authority, the written word serves as a primary source for addressing human need.

Furthermore, non-canonical texts illustrate the same traits. Those writing for theological journals, for example, may read previous articles that allow them to recognize

32. Col 1:10.

33. Lk 1:3; Acts 1:1.

34. To resist temptation, as in Mt 4:4, 7, and 10; to explain the provenance of events, as in Mt 25:24, 31 or Mk 7:6; to justify his actions, as in Mt 21:13 or Acts 1:20.
specific needs, whether needs for more knowledge of or love for God or others; they may also
discover those needs as they converse with others and offer hospitality to them. They can
begin to write in ways they believe may address those needs in some fashion—by furthering
an argument in a previous article, by tackling an issue left unresolved by another scholar, or
simply by reflecting upon their own experiences in hope that others will consider what they
write and add their own experiences and wisdom. As they write, they both learn and
communicate that learning to others who can learn from them and teach others. Students read
these texts as professors select those which best meet needs they perceive in their students,
and the pattern continues. In part, at least, those who write do so from their awareness of
human need and their desire to address it.

Can writing address both humanity’s need for knowledge and love of God and its
need for knowledge and love of other created beings? Of course it can. Turning again to
biblical texts, persons write to testify of what they have learned about God, and of their love
for the One who is making, saving, and guiding them. Examples include the writings of John
(the Gospel and the letters), the letter to the Galatians, and much of the book of Revelation—
all written to testify. These authors wrote so that others might come to know this God, and so
that the authors themselves might remember what they had learned and experienced as well
as pass it on to others.35 The second letter to Timothy clearly speaks of Scripture’s usefulness
in these areas.36 Many writers after the closing of the canon had the same ideas in mind:
testifying to their knowledge and experience of God so that others might come to know and
cherish their Beloved. Additionally, biblical texts teach readers more about how to love one
another. Obviously, the command to love one’s neighbor comes directly from these texts,
whether generally throughout the writings of the prophets or specifically as summarizing the

36. 2 Tm 3:16.
entire law of Moses. Jesus’ sermons and Paul’s epistles offer particular examples for myriad situations, offering reasons why believers should love others, and motivations and directions for doing so (see the gospel of Matthew or the first letter to the Corinthians, for instance). Again, some later writers have given their lives to teaching others how to love one another. From hymn-writers to parenting experts, martyrs to marriage counselors, saints to self-help psychologists, writers can and do offer their work as ways to address fundamental human needs in light of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

**Teaching**

As do the practices of reading and writing, teaching in the arena of theological education can also address these needs. The previous chapter depicted engaged teaching’s contemplative, reflective disposition, which values and cultivates careful attention that fosters awareness. Therefore, as with engaged reading and engaged writing, engaged teaching can both develop the capacity to attend and apply it to the problems humanity faces. Being in a classroom or participating in an online community highlights the inevitably communal nature of teaching, which brings professors into the midst of countless interactions with students, allowing them to recognize students’ needs and their own as well. As they share their lives with their students and colleagues, engaged teachers acknowledge more and more deeply their vocation as those whose primary goal is to address such needs both personally and professionally.

David Kelsey’s conception of the goal of theological education—to understand God truly—makes clear that those who teach theology can focus their attention upon disseminating knowledge of God in hope that such knowledge will lead to experience of and love for God. Theological education that focuses upon discerning the presence and activity of the Divine, upon testifying to one’s awareness of that presence and activity, and upon


38. Kelsey, *To Understand God Truly*. 
sharing that awareness with others presses toward the goal of knowing and loving God. Professors and students form communities of faith and learning that can deepen and broaden the individual’s and the community’s sensitivity to recognizing God at work, their willingness to work together with God to see the kingdom come, and their abilities to do so. Indeed, the deeply contextual nature of theological teaching can create situations in which the multifaceted Christian tradition can be translated faithfully so that people groups worldwide can receive the message of the gospel. Simply stated, teaching can provide the knowledge of God that can lead to love for the God who provides for human needs.

Describing the human telos as knowledge of and love for God and love for others as well means that teaching in theological education must also be able to lead toward restored fellowship and demonstrated caring for those others, not only for God, to meet the definition of a Christian spiritual practice. Certainly engaged theological education meets this criterion as well. Attending classes in a theological school assures contact with other persons, both classmates and faculty members. Learning corporately and cooperatively provides the opportunity for relationships to develop wherein respect and mutual service can grow. Professors who demonstrate the receptivity and responsiveness of hospitality provide models of what loving others looks like, and encourage students to imitate them as they imitate Christ. As teachers reflect upon their students and their teaching, they can endeavor to respond to needs for learning about God and about themselves in relationship to God and others; similarly, observant and reflective students can learn from the professors’ examples how to respond to the needs of those to whom they minister. Therefore, teaching in a theological milieu also can be characterized as addressing fundamental human needs in light of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

39. 2 Thes 3:7, 9; Heb 13:7; 3 Jn 1:11.
“Activities that Together Form a Way of Life”

Having affirmed that the practices of reading, writing, and teaching each can meet the definition of Christian spiritual practice, as things God enables Christian people to do together over time to meet fundamental human needs in light of the gospel of Jesus Christ, we gather them together again into the corporate practice of theological education to analyze whether this corporate practice can also “form a way of life that pleases God and through which God teaches and transforms persons into the image of the Son.” Dykstra and Bass’s recent anthology *For Life Abundant* closes with a brief essay in which the authors describe their understanding that Christian spiritual practices, taken together, can constitute a way of abundant living that Jesus described. They describe “five salient features that characterize [this] life-giving way of life,” which will serve here as a rubric against which to evaluate whether teaching theology can serve as an example of such a life.

First, this way of life develops and is lived both over time and in time. It maintains its reliance on core historical documents and doctrines while extending and adapting them to address current concerns. Second, this way of life occurs in specific and diverse places, incarnated by those who seek to live their faith in practice. As it must adapt over time, so it must adapt to apply to various persons and contexts; Dykstra and Bass use the terms “embodied and placed” to describe this aspect. Third, Christian living is shared and collaborative; this way of life only flourishes when communities form and persons work together both within and across them. Fourth, it “affirms the intelligence of practice”: “practices such as prayer, forgiveness, and hospitality bear knowledge of God, ourselves, and the world that cannot be reduced to words . . . Such practices embody certain kinds of

40. Jn 10:10. They also contend that the discipline of practical theology demonstrates the same five features that they note in this way of life. If practical theology can be practiced as a vibrant part of a faithful Christian life, one could suspect that the broader discipline of theology as a whole could be as well.

wisdom and foster certain kinds of intelligence when engaged in serious and critical ways."^{42}

In other words, because this way of life involves the entire human person, its depth and complexity cannot be condensed completely into textual material, but must be experienced to be communicated or understood fully. Lastly, the Christian life is “nourished by Scripture and reliant on the grace of God.”^{43} As Christians immerse themselves in biblical teaching and example, the Spirit of God teaches, unifies, empowers, convicts, and sends them into the world for God’s purposes to be fulfilled.^{44} Bass and Dykstra conclude:

> These features . . . give practical shape to our commitment to attend in all our work to the presence of the Triune God in and for the life of the world. The practical, communal, temporal, and situated features of this [life] reflect our desire to serve one whose very being is relational, and whose creative presence infuses all that is, and who meets humankind as a person born in a body like our own at a specific time and place, and whose Spirit breathes new life in countless actual situations today. In the presence of this Triune God, all our endeavors are set on an eschatological horizon of judgment and hope on which both the dreadful inadequacy of our efforts and God’s gracious capacity to work in, through, and in spite of them are revealed.^{45}

According to this rubric, theological education can, in fact, serve as an example of a way of life. First, theological education develops and is practiced both over time and in time. While remaining grounded in the inspired Word of God, in salvation history, and in the tenets of the Christian faith, theological educators blend old methods with new ones that emerge. They recognize the strengths and weaknesses of the older “Athens” model and the newer “Berlin” model of theological education, and perhaps do what they can to bolster the strengths and mitigate the weaknesses of each in their teaching.^{46} They understand themselves as teaching timeless truths in contemporary ways, serving as a bridge between the past and the future. In addition, they both employ and teach the art of interpretation of texts,

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42. Bass and Dykstra, “In Anticipation,” 358.

43. Ibid., 359.

44. Lk 12:10, Jn 14:26; Eph 4:3; Rom 15:13, 2 Tm 1:7; Jn 16:8; Acts 10:19, 11:12.


46. Kelsey, *Between Athens and Berlin*. 
situations, and relationships as these emerge and change. In these ways, theological education is historical and temporal, developing and being practiced in and through time.

Second, teaching theology occurs in specific and diverse places, and thus can adapt to address the needs of many groups of people in many places throughout the world. Various theological emphases emerge in particular contexts, and the teachers in those contexts can develop, embody, and transmit these emphases while continuing to derive and foster their ideas within the Christian story. Others hear of these contextual theologies, so to speak, and can glean what applies to their circumstances while thinking critically about the faithfulness to Christian doctrine that these theologies exhibit. Although the core tenets remain by which contextual theologies must be evaluated and normed, theology and pedagogy can look different or sound different as lived and expressed in widely divergent settings and situations. As one example, the theological emphases developed in Germany during the early part of the 20th century contrast with those developed in Latin America in the latter part of that same century—without ceasing to be Christian theological emphases. Similarly, the classroom-based theological pedagogy accepted in some contexts may diverge from the more apprenticeship-based pedagogy established in others. Nonetheless, theological educators contextualize both the message and the method to engage their students as deeply as possible, demonstrating that theological education is both situated and contextual.

Third, engaged theological teaching can be shared and collaborative. As described in the previous chapter, teachers converse with other scholars, with texts, with their own faith communities, and with students as they read, write, and teach. They can also collaborate in the classroom, team-teaching or acting as guest lecturer in another’s courses, and ask the students to collaborate with one another in discussion groups or presentation teams as well. These theological educators can see themselves as co-laborers with God, the One who ultimately superintends the intellectual, dispositional, and habitual formation of those who seek to follow Jesus Christ. Moreover, as teachers and students collaborate and share, all who
participate in these relationships find themselves being formed in various ways as a result of that collaboration. Although all strive to be formed into the image of Christ, one person or group may emerge to demonstrate compassion for the poor as a hallmark of ministry, while another is marked by zeal for renewed faithfulness within the church, or by energy for taking the gospel to the unreached. Hence, theological education can also be both shared and collaborative.

Fourth, theological education can affirm the intelligence of practice. Although some view the academic discipline of theology as precisely that—merely academic, with little relation to practice—others recognize that much of the information taught in theological classrooms developed from experience and is thoroughly understood only as it is applied in the lives of the faithful. Biblical figures such as Abraham, Sarah, Moses, Hannah, David, Mary, and John all learned the character and ways of God not only through what might be construed as academic instruction, but also through their experiences of walking before and interacting with God as he revealed himself. These men and women did not merely know about God via a general revelation or a natural theology; they knew God specifically and intimately because he addressed them. Similarly, students today who attempt to comprehend the mystery of the Trinity in a purely rational fashion can find their efforts fruitless and frustrating. Only as they encounter both the transcendence and immanence of God, or contemplate Christ’s sacrifice on the Cross with the aid of the indwelling Spirit of God, do they begin to see that deeper understanding of God’s tri-unity can come through practice and application.\footnote{Although I cannot remember the source, I once heard someone use John 7:17 (KJV) to make this point: “If any man will do [God’s] will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I [Jesus] speak of myself.” The speaker explained that if someone obeys what she knows of God’s will, more knowledge will be given to her. In other words, practice can lead to knowledge.}

Thus, many engaged theological educators seek to incorporate practice into their teaching. They use pastoral case studies or questions designed for application, or use a hymn
or a piece of artwork to illustrate a theological principle as an introduction to a discussion of that principle. They teach future preachers how to preach theologically by having them craft theologically grounded sermons, and requiring that students preach them in congregations; they teach future teachers how to teach doctrine by having them design engaging lesson plans, and insisting that students sharpen their skills by teaching small groups in the church. In other words, they use pedagogies of performance to inculcate in their students the knowledge that only comes from practice. They endeavor to weave doctrine and practice into a seamless garment, doing this work of weaving, in part, because they affirm the intelligence of practice.

Fifth, engaged seminary teaching is nourished by Scripture and reliant on grace. While engaging with the biblical text and its commentators, these professors try to make the most of the opportunity to learn from God’s word for themselves. They recognize that their personal nourishment will provide resources, both personal and professional, for their teaching. As members of learning and worshiping communities, they nurture others and are nurtured themselves in the practices that open that living Word even more fully to their minds and hearts. Moreover, they understand that without the grace of God operant in their lives and in classrooms, in their churches and in their homes, they will find themselves weakened, nearly unable to function. With that grace, though, they draw from a steady source of strength and ability. Therefore, they rely upon God’s agency and grace to inspire and empower them in everything they do as they pursue their profession.

As indicated throughout the discussion above, the practices of theological education can together be characterized as activities that form a way of life that is historical and temporal, situated and contextual, shared and communal, experiential and practical, and

48. Scripture actually reminds us that Jesus taught that he could “do nothing” if he did not see the Father doing that very thing (Jn 5:19, 30, emphasis added), and without his gracious abiding in us, we also “can do nothing” (Jn 15:5 ESV). See also Rom 7:8.

biblical as well. In addition, interwoven with Bass and Dykstra’s rubric have been references to interpretation, formation, contextualization, and performance. These various pedagogies describe what Charles Foster and his colleagues called the “signature pedagogy” of theological educators.\(^{50}\) As they studied the lives and work of professors in seminaries and divinity schools, they sketched a picture of men and women who have devoted their lives to developing and implementing various pedagogical practices in all of these areas. In this manner too, scholars have examined the composite practice of theological education and determined that it can constitute a way of life. Next we turn our attention to the character of this way of life from a biblical perspective.

**“That Pleases God”**

In order for theological education to meet the next aspect of the working definition of a Christian spiritual practice, it must be a way of life that pleases God. In order to evaluate the practice by that measure, one needs to determine what sorts of actions and attitudes are pleasing to God. Perhaps the most thorough single biblical description of pleasing God comes from the first chapter of the epistle to the Colossians, where the writer prays that his audience may “walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God” (vs. 10). From this description come three facets of pleasing God: walking in a manner worthy of the Lord, bearing fruit in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God. Following a more thorough description of each of these facets, they will be used to assess theological education’s capacity to serve as a way of life that pleases God.

What does it mean to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord?\(^{51}\) A brief survey of the biblical record indicates numerous aspects, only a few of which can be treated here. For


\(^{51}\) Col 2:6-7; Eph 4:1; 1 Thes 4:1.
instance, this manner of living involves accepting the discipline of the Lord, which produces righteousness, peace, and holiness in human lives. Christians must also accept God’s empowerment so that they can do his will, which is the core of pleasing God. Doing his will means rejoicing always, praying ceaselessly, thanking God in every circumstance, serving Christ, and doing everything “in his name.” It also means living as children of light who exhibit goodness, righteousness, and truth, and who try always to keep in mind what God desires. Of course, accepting discipline and provision, not to mention doing God’s will, proves to be impossible without the gift of faith. With that gift, however, and God’s own provision of a clean heart that wants to please the Lord, doing God’s will can lead to deeper knowledge of God.

What does it mean to bear fruit in every good work? This admonition reminds Christians that they “are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for [them] to do.” Indeed, to bear fruit in every good work could signify that the good works themselves represent the fruit borne by godly lives. Since Christians have repented from sin and “died” to the old covenant law, they are chosen, appointed, and commanded to bear this fruit to glorify God and to demonstrate that they are

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52. Heb 12:6, 11, 14.
54. 1 Thes 5:16-18; Col 2:7; Rom 14:18; Col 3:17.
55. Eph 5:8-9; 2 Cor 5:9, 8:21.
57. Col 2:7; Jn 7:17.
58. Col 1:10.
59. Eph 2:10 NIV.
60. Ps. 1:3; cf. Ez 47:12.
disciples of Jesus who abide in Him. Often the biblical writers developed agricultural
metaphors to explain this principle; Jesus spoke of grains of wheat producing a harvest, of
vineyards being pruned to increase their fruitfulness, or of unfruitful trees being cut down and
used as firewood. What typifies this fruit? In general terms, bearing fruit connotes acting in
ways that represent God faithfully, demonstrating God’s love and compassion to others,
speaking truth to everyone, and devoting oneself to obeying whatever God requires in order
to do his will in his name. Most importantly, fruit-bearing Christians must constantly recall
that the impetus for their single-minded pursuit of good works comes from God, and that God
is the one who works within them to permit them to hear and understand the Word of God, so
that this fruit will develop and be made manifest in their lives.

What does it mean to be increasing in the knowledge of God? According to scripture, it means believing, then coming to know, that Jesus is “the Holy One of God.” Of course, increasing knowledge of God must be far more than simply a rational belief that Jesus is God’s Son and our Savior, but a deeply heartfelt knowledge of Christ is a foundation point from which believers can grow. God makes such growth-producing knowledge available in a variety of ways: 1) persons may acknowledge God’s power as revealed in creation; 2) they may attend to “the fragrance of the knowledge of himself” as it is spread through other believers wherever they go; 3) they may recognize God’s “shining in [their] hearts,” giving

61. Mt 3:8; Ro 7:4; Jn 15:4, 8, 16.
62. Jn 12:24; Jn 15:2; Mt 3:10, 7:19; Lk 6:34, 13:6-9. Examples from the Hebrew Bible include Dt 29:16; 1 Kgs 19:30; Ps 92:14; Pr 12:12; Is 45:8; Jer 17:8; and Ez 17:8.
63. Mt 9:13; Mt 22:39; Ro 13:9; Gal 5:14; Eph 4:15, 25; Dt 10:12; Mi 6:8; Heb 13:20-21; Col 3:17.
64. 2 Tm 2:4; Heb 13:20-21; Php 2:11; Mt 13:23; Mk 4:20.
them knowledge of God through Jesus; 4) they may accept God’s gift of repentance, which will lead them to a knowledge of the truth.\textsuperscript{67} In addition, persons can 5) allow God to write his laws into their minds and hearts; 6) endeavor to discern what pleases God and also to do those things; and 7) pursue a deepened relationship with the Holy Spirit who indwells believers to teach them.\textsuperscript{68} Such knowledge means the possibility of eternal life, loving behavior, spiritual wisdom and understanding, freedom, and maturity, being filled with God’s fullness.\textsuperscript{69}

Given these descriptions of pleasing God—to walk worthily, to bear fruit, and to know God more and more—can the composite practice of theological education be said to please God in these ways? Indeed, it can. As one teaches others, whether current or future leaders in the church, the general people of God, or those who do not yet know God, she can “walk worthy of the Lord.” For example, she can accept the discipline of the Lord, both in her personal life as a member of the body of Christ and in her professional life as a teacher. Even more importantly, she can accept the enabling power of God to do his will, which is a central way to please him, again both professionally and personally. Since part of Jesus’ mission was to teach others about the one he called Father, and Christians are commanded to imitate his example, her imitation of him can be pleasing to the Lord.\textsuperscript{70} Professors can serve Christ, practicing their craft in Jesus’ name as they strive to inculcate the truth of the faith. They can rejoice, pray, and give thanks as they do so; they can live as “children of light,” demonstrating in their own lives the fruit that the Lord is cultivating within them and through them. They can rely on God for strength and wisdom to accomplish the educational and formational task, in faith that provision will come, and can learn to know God better by doing

\textsuperscript{67} Rom 1:19-21; 2 Cor 2:14; 2 Cor 4:6; 2 Tm 2:25.

\textsuperscript{68} Jer 31:31-34 and Heb 8:10-11; 2 Cor 5:9; 1 Cor 2:11, 3:36, 6:19; Jn 14:26.

\textsuperscript{69} Jn 17:3; 1 Jn 4:7-8; Col 1:9; Gal 4:8 and 2 Cor 3:17; Eph 4:13, 3:18-19.

\textsuperscript{70} References to Jesus’ teaching include Mt 11:1, 22:16; Mk 4:1, 6:2, 34; and Ac 1:1; Christians’ call to imitation can be found in 1 Cor 11:1; Eph 5:1; Heb 6:12, 13:7; and 3 Jn 1:11.
his will. Surely in all these ways and countless others, theological educators can walk in manners worthy of the Lord.

Also, as indicated above, Christian teachers can and do bear fruit that glorifies God. As participants in the body of Christ, they can demonstrate God’s love and compassion, perhaps by making time to meet individually with students who struggle with the course material or with their Christian walks. They can speak truth to all, for instance by endeavoring to evaluate student work as justly as possible. They can devote themselves to obedience, and serve their colleagues and their students in Jesus’ name. Finally, they must always pursue humility, by giving glory to God when a class goes especially well, or by offering thanksgiving when a sudden insight into a situation occurs. Certainly, as persons indwelled by the Holy Spirit of God, theology teachers can bear much fruit for the kingdom of God.

Furthermore, they clearly are able to increase in the knowledge of God. Simply by virtue of their baptism and faith commitment, they have embarked upon the path toward such increasing knowledge. Whether discussing creation or teaching ecclesiology, whether describing some facet of general revelation or testifying to a specific moment of their own experiences of grace, theological educators can continually encounter God at deeper and deeper levels. As members of the church, they can receive the sacraments and benefit from the preaching of the Word of God, pursue obedience to God’s will, and submit to the workings of the Spirit in their lives. As they continue to grow in love, wisdom, freedom, and maturity, they can experience the fullness of God available to every Christian. Therefore, since theological educators have the same capacity to walk in ways that God approves, to bear fruit in keeping with repentance, and to enjoy an intimate knowledge of God, their practice of theological education can, in fact, serve as a way of life that pleases God.
“Through Which God Teaches and Transforms Persons into the Image of the Son”

This final aspect of the definition of Christian spiritual practices indicates God’s agency within them and through them, as well as the results of the practices. Recall from the first chapter that God is the agent of transformation, acting on persons as they submit themselves to God’s working. As the transforming agent, God the Spirit renews a person’s likeness to Christ in every way, and inculcates maturity, wisdom, and virtue in the practitioners, which are necessary in order for them to pursue deeper relationship with God. Can teaching theology serve as an example of a practice through which God teaches and transforms human persons? Indeed, it can.

The Bible is replete with references to God as one who teaches. In fact, the biblical writers represent each of the persons of the Trinity as teaching. Under the old covenant, the people of God reflected upon the one God as a teacher. Under the new covenant, the Father, the Son, and the Spirit all teach. In some of these instances, God teaches persons directly. In others, God works through men and women so that they may serve as teachers in God’s stead, in which case we say that God uses or works through these people to teach. Examples include Moses, the former and the latter prophets, David and his son Solomon, the four evangelists, the apostle Paul, and Priscilla and Aquilla. In fact, God appoints persons to teach, or commands them to do so; God also inspires those who teach, filling them with the Holy Spirit and skill in specific areas.

71. For examples, see I Kgs 8:36; Jb 36:22; Ps 94:10 and 119 passim; and Is 30:20.

72. Jesus says those who have “learned from the Father” come to him (Jn 6:45). References to the Son as teacher abound (including Mt 22:16 and parallels Mk 12:14 and Lk 20:21; Lk 10:39 and 11:1, and Ac 1:1). Luke, John, and Paul all refer to the Holy Spirit as teaching (Lk 12:13; Jn 14:26; 1 Cor 2:13).

73. God appoints, see 1 Co 12:28, cf. Eph 4:11; 1 Ti 1:7; and 2 Ti 1:11; God commands, see Lev 10:11 and Dt 6:1; God inspires, see Ex 35:31, 34-5, where God “filled [Bezalel] with the Spirit of God, with skill, with intelligence, with knowledge, and with all craftsmanship,” and “inspired [Bezalel] to teach, both him and Oholiab” (ESV).
Testament writings declare that the people of God should teach one another.\(^{74}\) In this sense, then, theological educators may be commanded or appointed to teach, inspired and used by God to teach God’s word and God’s ways.

With regard to God’s work of transformation, New Testament sources clearly indicate that humans cannot transform themselves. Rather, they are being transformed by God, the one who acts to qualify them, deliver them, transfer their citizenship from the kingdoms of this world to the kingdom of God, and offer them the gifts of faith and righteousness—indeed, every good gift.\(^{75}\) Paul affirms that Christians are to be transformed, to be conformed, or that they are being transformed or renewed; not that this work is theirs to do, but that it is being done in them and for them by God.\(^{76}\) However, in this case as well as in the case of teaching, God invites Christians to work together with him to accomplish his purposes. Since transformation can occur through beholding the Lord Jesus, teachers who help their students to see Jesus are being used by God to bring about human transformation.\(^{77}\) Since transformation can occur through renewing the mind, teachers who address their students’ minds with the truth of the gospel are being used by God as well.\(^{78}\) Simply put, since Jesus is both full of truth and truth itself, and the Word of God is also truth, then if Christians will be like Jesus when they see him as he is, or see him in truth, then knowledge of the truth both sets persons free and begins or continues the transforming process.\(^{79}\) Therefore, teaching truth about God and God’s Word, in Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit, by engaging with God and students, with texts and contexts, with those who are familiar and those who

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75. Phil 3:20-21; Col 1:12-14, Eph 2:8, Phil 3:9; Jas 1:17.

76. Ro 12:2, 8:29; 2 Cor 3:18; Col 3:10.

77. 2 Cor 3:18.

78. Rom 12:2.

79. Jn 1:14, 17; Eph 4:21; Jn 14:6; Jn 17:17; 1 Jn 3:2; Jn 8:32; 1 Ti 2:4; 2 Ti 2:25.
are strangers—engaged teaching, in other words—is a way in which God can accomplish the work of transformation in human lives.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has sought to demonstrate that engaged theological education, the composite practice formed by reading, writing, and teaching while being disposed to hospitality, contemplation, and conversation, can meet the definition of a Christian spiritual practice. Reading, writing, and teaching all qualify as activities that God enables Christian people to do together over time, and as practices that address fundamental human needs in light of the gospel of Jesus Christ. In addition, the composite practice of theological education demonstrates that those three practices and their associated dispositions can be understood as a way of life that pleases God, and through which God can teach and transform persons into the image of the Son. Biblical and experiential evidence combine herein to illustrate the numerous ways in which teaching theology can fulfill this definition of a Christian spiritual practice. Nonetheless, the question remains: Does this actually happen, or is engaged theological education as a spiritual practice merely a tidy theoretical construct? In order to respond to that query, the next chapter will describe the life and work of Stanley J. Grenz, a theological educator who endeavored to pursue his vocation as a Christian spiritual practice.
CHAPTER 4
THE EXAMPLE OF STANLEY J. GRENZ

Stanley J. Grenz (1950 - 2005) was a North American Baptist theologian and educator. He published dozens of books and hundreds of articles during his career, and was respected not only as an author, but as a classroom teacher as well. Although he did not write directly about his philosophy of theological education, a close reading of both his published work and his lecture materials demonstrates that he was an engaged theological instructor. Throughout his life, he practiced reading, writing, and teaching while exhibiting the dispositions of hospitality, contemplation, and conversation as they have been defined in Chapter 3. In addition, he practiced the composite disciplines of theological education as a Christian spiritual practice. He relied on God’s enablement while demonstrating unswerving Christian commitment, living and working in a community of persons who loved God and endeavored to address fundamental human needs with the wisdom and power of God. His work in theological education was not merely an academic pursuit, but a way of life that he believed was pleasing to God, and he desired God’s agency to be evident throughout what he wrote and taught. This chapter substantiates these claims by presenting a brief biographical sketch of Grenz, then by documenting examples of these practices, attitudes, and behaviors from a careful examination of his life and work. Thus, he will serve as an example of a person who undertook theological education as a Christian spiritual practice, as both of those terms have been defined thus far.
Biography and Context

Stanley James Grenz was born in Alpena, Michigan, on January 7, 1950, the youngest of three children. His father, Richard Grenz, served for thirty years as a Baptist pastor in numerous different congregations in several states, and his prayer-filled, disciplined example of ministry deeply influenced his younger son. His mother, Clara Frieda Ruff Grenz, was also an heir of the Baptist pietism that marked Grenz’s Christian life from its inception at his baptism. In 1988, Grenz dedicated a book on the subject of intercessory prayer to his mother, “in gratitude for her prayers.” Although his father died before Grenz graduated from college, his mother continued to support him and many others in prayer, as Grenz indicated in the revised edition of the same book (prepared seventeen years later and published posthumously). Grenz attended services in his father’s churches, and participated in a variety

1. The general information herein (names, dates, places, etc.) appears in numerous sources, and thus is generally known by those familiar with Grenz. However, I have taken care to cite my sources when I offer specific information or opinions that do not appear in a minimum of three sources.


3. Comprehending Grenz’s understanding of pietism is a crucial aspect of his context, necessary to comprehending his life and work. Therefore, I have included here one of his published descriptions of what he means by the term: “I view myself above all as one whom God has encountered in Christ, whose heart the Holy Spirit has regenerated, and therefore whose highest desire is to be a faithful disciple of Christ within the community of Christ’s disciples and the world. This makes me a pietist.” “Concerns of a Pietist,” 75.

4. Clara Grenz’s genealogy is available from www.daveruff.com/williamjr.rtf (accessed 10–26–09). According to that genealogical information, Clara’s father and mother were both baptized by a Baptist minister in North Dakota while they were in their twenties. No evidence exists of an earlier baptism for either of them, likely indicating that they professed the Christian faith as adults.


6. Grenz, Prayer, xii.
of para-church organizations throughout his childhood and young adulthood, learning about and practicing the Christian faith.\(^7\) Throughout his life he maintained a balance between personal and corporate spiritual practices and rigorous intellectual work, a balance which was evident to others.\(^8\)

Grenz originally entered the University of Colorado intending to study nuclear physics, but sensed the call of God to full-time Christian ministry before beginning his junior year and thus changed his major to philosophy.\(^9\) He met Edna Sturhahn from Vancouver, British Columbia, while they were both studying at the University of Colorado. They served together on an evangelistic youth team during college, and were married just six weeks after his father’s sudden death in 1971. After completing his bachelor’s degree in philosophy and mathematics in 1973, Grenz pursued a Master of Divinity degree from Denver Seminary. He also served as a youth director and an associate pastor at Northwest Baptist Church in Denver, Colorado during their years there in college and graduate school. He graduated in 1976, the same year as his ordination to ministry in the North American Baptist Conference. The Grenzes then moved to Munich where Grenz completed a Doctor of Theology degree at Ludwig-Maximilians University, studying the life and work of Puritan Baptist Isaac Backus under Wolfhart Pannenberg. The Grenz’s son Joel was born in Munich in August of 1978.

\(^7\). *Revisioning Evangelical Theology*, 10. Grenz mentions participation in Child Evangelism Fellowship, Youth for Christ, Campus Crusade for Christ, InterVarsity, the Navigators, and the Baptist Student Union.


\(^9\). Grenz, “Concerns of a Pietist,” 59. Grenz refers there to this subjective call to ministry as “dramatic,” but did not provide details.
Upon their return to the United States, Grenz pastored a bilingual (German-English) congregation in Winnipeg, Manitoba from 1979 to 1981, and also began teaching courses as an adjunct professor at the University of Winnipeg and at Winnipeg Theological Seminary (now Providence Seminary). The Grenzes’ daughter Corina was born in Winnipeg in December of 1979. Then, in 1981, Grenz began to teach theology full time at the North American Baptist Seminary in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, assuming the post after the retirement of Dr. Ralph Powell, a lifelong friend and mentor. After nine years, Grenz became the Pioneer McDonald Professor of Baptist Heritage, Theology and Ethics at Carey Theological College and a professor of theology and ethics at Regent College in Vancouver, British Columbia. Twelve years later, he spent one year as Distinguished Professor of Theology at Baylor University and Truett Seminary in Waco, Texas (2002-2003) before returning to Carey/Regent the following year. He taught there until his death in 2005.

Grenz referred to himself as “a Pietist with a Ph.D.,” and alongside his prolific writing and teaching career, he continued to pursue his ministerial calling as well. He served as an interim pastor on several occasions in various places, and continued to preach as a guest

10. Grenz, Prayer, x.


12. Over the years, Grenz held a variety of shorter-term additional faculty appointments: from 1996 to 1999 as an Affiliate Professor of Theology and Ethics at Northern Baptist Theological Seminary in Lombard, IL; in academic 2002-3 as Visiting Distinguished Professor of Theology, Associated Canadian Theological Schools/Trinity Western University in Langley, BC; in academic 2003-4 as Scholar in Residence at Mars Hill Graduate School in Seattle, WA; and in academic 2004-5 as Professor of Theological Studies at Mars Hill. He also taught stand-alone courses at (alphabetically) American Baptist Seminary of the West; Baptist Theological Seminary, Tartu, Estonia; Bethel Seminary—West Campus, San Diego; Fuller Seminary (in both Colorado and California); George Fox Evangelical Seminary; Northwest Graduate School of the Ministry; Orebro Theological Seminary, Sweden; Tabor College, Adelaide, Australia; and others too numerous to mention.

speaker in his own family’s church (First Baptist Church in Vancouver, BC) and many others each year. In fact, he greatly enjoyed preaching, and was known to shift between preaching and teaching in the classroom as well as behind the pulpit.\textsuperscript{14} He traveled extensively, preaching and teaching in academic and ecclesial contexts in North America, Europe, Africa, Australia, and Asia; still, he remained an active member of First Baptist, where his wife Edna served as Minister of Worship. Grenz wholeheartedly supported her ministry there, and also played the guitar and trumpet on the worship team and sang in its choir whenever he was able to do so. He remained committed both to the academy and to the Church throughout his career.\textsuperscript{15}

Another aspect of his ministry included working with people both inside and outside the church, whether in groups or as individuals. Many described Grenz as “an irenic bridge builder” who brought “his evangelical colleagues together with theologians of other traditions for common causes.”\textsuperscript{16} He served on academic, ecclesial, and social committees across a broad variety of organizations, and spoke willingly to countless organizations in each of those three arenas.\textsuperscript{17} Personally he was very approachable, and people were drawn to him nearly

\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{14}] See http://www.stanleyjgrenz.com/bio/personal-bio.html (accessed 10–28–09). Despite his enjoyment of preaching, however, one of his teaching assistants noted wryly that “he was a better teacher than he was a preacher.” Jay Smith, personal communication, March 23, 2007.
\item[\textsuperscript{15}] So much so, in fact, that Carey Theological College has inaugurated The Grenz Lectures, given each year (near the anniversary of Grenz’s death) to “both church and academic audiences, reaching out to the two localities where Grenz worked.” See http://www.careycentre.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=285&Itemid=186 (accessed 11–2–09).
\item[\textsuperscript{17}] At the time of his death, Grenz was working on committees of the American Academy of Religion (both the Upper Midwest Regional affiliate and the national organization), the Canadian
everywhere he went. For example, his roommate at meetings of the American Academy of Religion remarked that Grenz “was like flypaper at conferences.”\textsuperscript{18} He was the type of person who seemed to be interested in everyone, remembering their stories and situations and committing himself to prayerful support for friends and acquaintances in difficult situations.\textsuperscript{19} He was generous to a fault, and some accused him of being too accommodating and not discriminating enough theologically as a result.\textsuperscript{20} Moreover, Grenz took seriously his role as a theological and spiritual mentor. He made a practice of seeking out promising students or younger scholars and generously co-authoring books with them, teaching them lessons about writing and publishing while also tutoring them in living a life of Christian integrity combined with theological scholarship.\textsuperscript{21} He believed that his role as a theologian was “to be

Evangelical Theological Association, the Evangelical Theological Society, and the National Association of Baptist Professors of Religion; he also served in editorial capacities for Ashgate Publishing Ltd., the Atlantic Journal of Theology, Brazos Press, Christianity Today, Cultural Encounters: A Journal for the Theology of Culture, and Paternoster Press. He was also involved with Allelon: A Fellowship of Churches, the Baptist World Alliance, and Christians for Biblical Equality. And these are just the “current” associations from Grenz’s CV (available from www.stanleyjgrenz.com/bio/StanleyJGrenz_CV.pdf, accessed 11–2–09).

\textsuperscript{18} Roger Olson, a long-time friend and colleague of Grenz’s, made this comment during his remarks at the memorial service, held March 20, 2005 at First Baptist Church in Vancouver, BC. Video of the service had been available at www.mhgs.edu/stan/service.asp (accessed 4–11–07), but the link is no longer active.

\textsuperscript{19} Prayer was, in fact, “a central passion of [his] life and ministry” (Grenz, \textit{Prayer}, xi). For only one example of Grenz deliberately praying for others, see the story therein on pages 117-118. For stories indicating that Grenz continued actively to pray for others throughout his life, see Bill Reimer’s tribute to Grenz, “Stanley J. Grenz, 1950–2005,” Regent Bookstore Blog, \textit{Footnotes}, 17 March 2005 (Vancouver, BC: Regent College, 2005), www.regentbookstore.com/footnotes/2005/03/stanley-j-grenz (accessed 7–18–08). It is no longer available online, although I have a paper copy.

\textsuperscript{20} Jay Smith, personal communication, April 2, 2007. Jay noted that some critics want to “lump him in with Schleiermacher, but he wasn’t that at all.”

a servant to the people of God in our mission in the world. My desire is to offer my resources, to be faithful.”

Grenz seemed poised to advance to the next level of theological education on a broader platform, believing that God was calling him to a more global and a more ecumenical ministry than ever before. Perhaps to this end, he had been invited by a search committee at Harvard Divinity School to apply for the position of Alonzo L. McDonald Family Professor of Evangelical Theological Studies, Harvard’s first endowed chair in evangelical theology. He had twenty-five books to his credit, including the first book in a projected six-volume Matrix of Christian Theology series for Westminster John Knox Press. His 2005 projected schedule included numerous speaking engagements both in North America and on other continents, and he had several other writing projects in the works as well, including a treatise detailing a trinitarian theology of culture for Eerdmans. However, his life came to a sudden...

tentatively titled God and the Experience of Suffering, that was in progress at the time of Grenz’s death).

22. Quoted in Karen Stiller, “Stanley Grenz: Bridging Academy and Pew,” Faith Today, November/December 2002, http://www.stanleyjgrenz.com/articles/trailblazers.html (accessed 11–2–09). However, Grenz believed that his primary ministry was not behind the pulpit or in the church as an institution, not as a theological educator in the classroom, but rather through his writing. (Jay Smith, personal communication, March 23, 2007.) He arranged his teaching and travel schedules to provide the maximum amount of uninterrupted writing time possible, and did most of his teaching in short bursts during week-long intensive courses.

23. This information is in a document in Grenz’s files (written in 2002) in which he reflected deeply about his vocational direction for what he believed to be the remaining fifteen years of his ministry, and also in his letter of application for the Harvard appointment (written in early 2005).

24. Grenz’s computer files contain a copy of the letter sent to him by Ronald Thiemann, the chair of the search committee for the position, and the three-page letter of application with which Grenz responded two days after receiving the invitation. One of Grenz’s friends told me that Grenz had thought himself very likely to get the position; Francis Schüssler-Fiorenza, who holds the chair in Roman Catholic theology at Harvard, told an audience at the AAR meeting in November 2005 (I was in attendance) that Grenz had been a strong candidate. Grenz’s website, under “On the Road,” indicates that he was slated to give a plenary lecture at the Conference on Evangelical Spirituality held at Harvard on May 6–7, 2005.

25. The complete list of engagements can be found at www.stanleyjgrenz.com/on_the_road/2005.htm (accessed 11–2–09).
end in the midst of these plans. Grenz suffered a ruptured aneurysm in his brain early in the morning of March 11, 2005, which caused a massive cranial hemorrhage. He died in the hospital about 24 hours later. Only hours before he was stricken, he had completed the page proofs for what would be his final book, only the second in the Matrix series, titled *The Named God and the Question of Being: A Trinitarian Theo-Ontology*. With his earthly life ended, however, Grenz continues to teach, both through the written record of his theological scholarship and through the reminiscence and critical reflection of those he influenced.

**Grenz as Engaged Theological Educator**

In order to examine Grenz’s example of teaching theology as a Christian spiritual practice, we must first establish that he was an engaged theological educator. Did he practice reading, writing, and teaching as this thesis defined the composite practice of theological education? If so, did he do this while simultaneously exercising the practices or dispositions of hospitality, contemplation, and conversation? In other words, do his life and work appear to be that of an engaged theological educator? Establishing that Grenz was such an educator will permit us to evaluate his practice to see whether it also meets the definition of a Christian spiritual practice.

**Grenz as Engaged Reader**

Chapter two described engaged reading as engaging the reader with the text at hand, its author and its context, and with other readers such that the practice of reading forms the one doing the reading. It seems clear that Grenz pursued reading in just such an engaged fashion. He wrote twenty-seven books and dozens of articles with extensive bibliographies, which demonstrates without doubt that he read. His engagement with his sources and their contexts is also unquestionably evident in his written work. In the introduction to his doctoral dissertation, for instance, within a series of dense and thorough footnotes, Grenz engages with and critically evaluates the four major published sources of information on his topic, the
life and work of Puritan Baptist Isaac Backus.\textsuperscript{26} He ably sets each previous work into its
historical and cultural context, then evaluates each in light of current research, offering both
strengths and weaknesses of each.\textsuperscript{27} A book he co-authored with Roger Olson called \textit{20th-Century Theology} also demonstrates such engagement. Given the task of producing a volume
about important theologians of the century, they not only “offer[ed] a synopsis of key thinkers and their thoughts, but [told] a story, the story of theology in a transitional age.”\textsuperscript{28} They
discussed the lives and work of more than sixteen theologians within their varied historical and theological contexts, highlighting shifting conceptions of God’s immanence and God’s
transcendence as they varied throughout the century in the writings of men and women from
numerous schools of thought. Moreover, they referred to an average of eleven substantive
primary sources for each of the sixteen major theologians treated in the book.\textsuperscript{29} Again, Grenz


\textsuperscript{27} The sources include an 1859 biography (valuable for its numerous quotations of Backus, flawed because completely uncritical—a mere factual accounting), a 1939 doctoral dissertation (valuable for locating most of the extant Backus documents, flawed in its “overemphasis upon the minister’s indebtedness to his immediate environment [which] resulted in a distorted picture of the Baptist leader,” p. 3), a 1959 doctoral dissertation (valuable for its theological insights, flawed “only by a surprising overemphasis upon the conservative elements in Backus’ background, influences, and thought,” p. 4), and a work in the 1960s by a Brown University professor (which Grenz calls “well written and very helpful, [but] approaches the subject from a ‘popular,’ as opposed to scholarly, level,” p. 4). Grenz then uses another lengthy footnote to set out three “misunderstandings” of Backus perpetuated by the professor, and to refute each one by referring to Backus’s life and writings.


\textsuperscript{29} The number of primary sources used ranged from two (for Ritschl and Schleiermacher) to more than twenty (for Carl F. H. Henry, Wolfhart Pannenberg, and Bernard Ramm). Over 425 sources appear in the bibliography, and although I did not do any statistical analysis on them, the authors also referred extensively to secondary sources (other “readers,” if you will) for most of these major theologians. There is no mention in the preface or introduction about how the work on the book was distributed between the two men; thus, I chose above simply to attribute the entire work to both of them. However, Grenz’s files seem to indicate that the work on particular chapters was done largely by Grenz (chapters I believe he would have undertaken, such as Pannenberg’s, are in his preferred computer font, while other chapters are in another). Three chapters that I am therefore nearly certain Grenz wrote (Pannenberg, Henry, and Ramm) interact with 22, 24, and 26 primary
demonstrates through his writing that he read and engaged deeply with texts, authors, and other readers.

The other component of engaged reading involves being formed by what one reads. Was Grenz formed by what he read? Examining the development of his thought throughout his lifetime indicates that he was. First, and perhaps most important, Grenz read, studied, and meditated upon the Bible, pursuing personal piety and formation into the image of Christ. The countless tributes to him at his death, as well as numerous references in others’ writings to his Christian character during his life, offer others’ evaluations of that Christian formation. Friends and students, and even those who disagreed with some of his theological emphases, all described him as joyful, irenic, generous and kind.30 One eulogist noted that if Grenz could speak only once more, he would choose to say, “Love one another, love one another, love one another!”31 Another commentator referred to him as “a gentle radical.”32 He patiently handled difficult situations; he responded with kindness when criticized (so much so that others sought him out for advice when they were being criticized).33 He remained faithful


31. Bruce Milne, meditation at the memorial service, March 20, 2005. Video of the service had been available at www.mhgs.edu/stan/service.asp (accessed 4–11–07), but the link is no longer active.


33. For two examples, see Brian McLaren’s foreword to Renewing the Center, 9; and Franke, “Let Us Now Praise,” 95.
to the ministry to which he believed God had called him, and also remained faithful to his family and to the Church throughout his life. In these ways and many others, he displayed the fruit of the Spirit, one sign of his Christian maturity, formed in part by the depth of his engagement with Bible reading.

Moreover, Grenz’s theological reading formed him as well. Early in his career, his written work centered on making others’ theological work accessible mostly to Baptist audiences. After publishing his dissertation about Isaac Backus in 1983, his next book was *The Baptist Congregation: A Guide to Baptist Belief and Practice*, written to offer Baptists “a clear understanding of their unique identity, their calling, and the divine resources available to them.”

During this early period, he also wrote dozens of book reviews for publication, and a few articles that hinted toward his later constructive proposals. However, with the publication of *Prayer: The Cry for the Kingdom* in 1988, Grenz entered a period of engagement in which he wrote more for the broader evangelical community, and also began to offer constructive theological proposals in light of current evangelical issues. The books he published from 1988 through 1996 concern contemporary issues like petitionary prayer, ministry to AIDS victims, sexual ethics, eschatology, clergy sexual misconduct, women in ministry, and evangelical identity (and theological methodology), all pressing issues for the evangelical movement.


intentions—Revisioning Evangelical Theology: A Fresh Agenda for the 21st Century and his systematic theology text Theology for the Community of God.\textsuperscript{37} Although clearly still a committed Baptist, Grenz’s reading and study had formed in him both a more comprehensive theological agenda and the desire to speak not only to Baptists, but to members of the broader evangelical movement. His work remained “firmly anchored in the mainstream of Christian wisdom,” but was no longer directed only at those in his own denomination.\textsuperscript{38}

Grenz’s formative reading continued throughout his life, eventually developing within him the desire to bridge the divide between evangelicalism and mainstream Christianity. During the final years of his career, then, Grenz turned toward the broader ecumenical Christian conversation. “Stan's goal in the Matrix series was to demonstrate that constructive and contemporary theological reflection could be \textit{both} thoroughly evangelical \textit{and} mainline; he wanted to overcome the lingering sectarianism of much evangelical theology and help breathe new life into mainline Protestant theology.”\textsuperscript{39} In this final group of books, Grenz turned from addressing particular groups within Christianity to participating more fully in the mainstream conversation without giving up his own warmhearted evangelical faith commitment. The development of Grenz’s thought demonstrates that he continued to be formed by his reading throughout his career, and this formation indicates that he met the definition of an engaged reader. The following section explores whether he also met the definition of an engaged writer.

\textbf{Grenz as Engaged Writer}

Chapter two depicted engaged writing as extended conversation with other authors and their contexts, with one’s own audience and context, and with God and oneself, resulting

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{37.} Theology for the Community of God (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994).
\textsuperscript{38.} This quote comes from J. I. Packer’s comment on the back cover of the paperback version of Theology for the Community of God (Grand Rapids and Vancouver: Eerdmans/Regent College Publishing, 2000).
\textsuperscript{39.} Olson, “Remembering Stanley J. Grenz,” emphasis original.
\end{quote}
in formation for both the writer and the subsequent readers. Again, Grenz demonstrably fulfills this description. As in the case of his reading, the publication of two dozen books and numerous articles clearly establishes that he participated in the practice of writing. Moreover, much of his work offers examples of extended conversation with other authors, his readers, their contexts, himself and his own work, and God. For instance, Grenz interacted repeatedly with specific authors and their contexts. He did his doctoral work with Wolfhart Pannenberg, and later wrote articles and then a book about his theology and its context; still later, he summarized Pannenberg’s work in three other books, wrote further articles, and referred to Pannenberg’s writings throughout his more comprehensive projects as well. Such recurring attention to one person’s work indicates Grenz’s ability and willingness to engage other authors. In addition, as discussed earlier, Grenz’s work with Roger Olson in 20th-Century


41. Although Grenz did not write a complete book about any other theologian’s work, he engaged in extended conversation with a number of other authors, ancient and modern. His early work on contemporary theologies allowed him to continue and extend his written conversations with Millard Erickson, Hans Frei, Carl F. H. Henry, Catherine Mowry LaCugna, Jürgen Moltmann, Reinhold Niehbur, Paul Tillich, and many others in his later work.
Theology showcases his ability to converse at a deep level with a variety of authors and their contexts, not merely Pannenberg and his particular context.

In addition, Grenz conversed with a variety of audiences and their contexts in two particular ways. First, he wrote theology at different levels for differing audiences. Grenz was able to write for laypersons—those who read his work in Christianity Today or The Christian Century, or who read books like Created for Community, Who Needs Theology?, and What Christians Really Believe—and Why. In the books at this level, fairly short chapters and nearly invisible endnote markers make the text seem accessible to lay readers. Grenz also wrote for undergraduate and graduate students, employing more elevated vocabulary, more breadth of exposure to varying points of view, and thorough supporting citations. Books such as 20th-Century Theology, Prayer—The Cry for the Kingdom, and Theology for the Community of God were clearly designed to serve as texts for courses.

42. By “levels,” I mean the levels of vocabulary, complexity, conceptual difficulty, etc., as indicated in what follows. For an impassioned call to do precisely this type of writing in the service of solidarity with the church and with those who suffer, see James F. Keenan, “Impasse and Solidarity in Theological Ethics,” third plenary address in Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America, vol. 64 (Halifax, Nova Scotia: Catholic Theological Society of America, 2009), 64:55–57. Keenan asked his academic listeners to “imagine [the good we could have done] if we had written...in academic journals and presented research at [academic society meetings] but also wrote public pieces and engaged [not only academicians, but] clergy, religious, and lay people” (p. 54). Grenz did both of these types of writing, regularly and passionately, throughout his life.

43. Created for Community: Connecting Christian Belief with Christian Living (Wheaton: Bridgepoint/Victor, 1996). Other books in this category include The Baptist Congregation; The Millennial Maze; Betrayal of Trust; and A Primer on Postmodernism (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996).

44. As an example, I analyzed Created for Community, which has about 22 pages of 12-point text per chapter and fewer than one endnote per page of text (13 chapters, 282 pages, 232 endnotes). Who Needs Theology? has almost 16 pages per chapter, with only about one note for every ten pages; What Christians Really Believe—and Why (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998) has about 22 pages per chapter and about one endnote per page. Because these books are shorter, I looked at all three examples to be sure I was on the right track.

45. Other books in this category include Sexual Ethics: An Evangelical Perspective; The Moral Quest: Foundations of Christian Ethics (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1997); Miller and Grenz, Fortress Introduction to Contemporary Theologies; and Grenz and Franke, Beyond Foundationalism.
These books contain longer chapters with clear footnotes on many pages, as well as an extensive Scripture index. Finally, he wrote for academic theologians as well. Although other academicians interacted with Grenz and his material throughout his career, no matter what audience he had originally intended, the books in the Matrix series address at a highly technical level the constructive theological task in light of postmodern culture. In his introduction, Grenz commented, “The volumes [in the Matrix series] form an attempt to set forth a coherent Christian theological articulation that is cognizant of the intellectual challenges posed by central postmodern sensitivities.” Lengthy chapters, numerous footnotes on nearly every page, and thorough indexes also mark the scholarly nature of these works. Thus, by directing his work to different audiences, Grenz included many groups of people in the theological conversation sparked by his written work.

Second, Grenz wrote in a manner that demonstrates his understanding and appreciation of the cultural contexts of his varied audiences. For example, when writing specifically for academic theologians, he acknowledged the academic culture by exhaustively documenting the sources upon which his ideas had been built, referring extensively to both classic and contemporary sources. For example, brief analysis of *The Named God* demonstrates that nearly all of Grenz’s references were to scholarly works, both ancient and modern. In contrast, when writing for an audience of undergraduate or graduate theological

46. As an example, I analyzed *Theology for the Community of God*, which has nearly 34 pages of 12-point text per chapter and an average of 1.3 footnotes per page of text (25 chapters, 843 pages, 1117 footnotes). The extensive Scripture index points to Grenz’s evangelical audience, always insistent upon all assertions being grounded in the biblical text.


48. As an example, I analyzed *The Named God*, which has 39.3 pages of 9-point text per chapter and an average of 4.4 footnotes per page of text (10 chapters, 336 pages, 1604 footnotes).

49. In comparing the footnotes in this book to those in the ones I am about to discuss, for instance, I observed in the first three chapters alone copious references to Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, William of Ockham, Newton, Hegel, Jonathan Edwards, and Alfred North
students, his material retained its scholarly intent, but was simplified somewhat. The author was more attuned to introducing readers to ideas new to them while providing documentation for further study than he was to demonstrating an exhaustive knowledge of the sources to his colleagues.\footnote{50} While the documentation remains solid, reducing the average number of footnotes by two-thirds and referring often either to classic theologians or to others’ contemporary systematic texts evidences the simplification.\footnote{51} When he wrote for a popular audience, he simplified the same material still further without sacrificing the important theological content he wanted to convey. In addition, he added references to popular culture to engage this audience and aid their comprehension. He referred to syndicated cartoons (\textit{Betty}), familiar literature and art (Lewis Carroll’s \textit{Through the Looking Glass} and Edvard Munch’s \textit{The Scream}), television shows (\textit{Star Trek: The Next Generation}), and gospel songs (Elisha Hoffman’s “Leaning on the Everlasting Arms”)—in one case, all in a single chapter!—to make his points clear.\footnote{52} Grenz did this for a clearly developed purpose: to make theology accessible to non-specialists so that they could incarnate their Christian faith. In the introduction to one of his “popular” books, \textit{Created for Community}, he told readers,

\begin{quote}
Whitehead, as well as secondary sources offering detailed commentary on both Grenz’s ideas and those of his sources.
\end{quote}

\footnote{50} I appreciate the distinction drawn by James Keenan between a strictly academic style of writing that is “frigid, conceptual, abstract, though well-documented,” and a style that is “broader, less academically oriented, but clearly intellectually rich.” “Impasse and Solidarity,” 56, 57. Nearly all of Grenz’s writing falls into the latter category: clearly intellectually rich, no matter who the intended audience.

\footnote{51} Again, on average, 1.3 footnotes per page in \textit{Theology for the Community of God} versus 4.4 per page in \textit{The Named God}, with references to Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Barth, Pannenberg, and Erickson in abundance.

\footnote{52} References are to the first chapter, “Why Believe?”, in \textit{What Christians Really Believe}. The comic strip \textit{Betty} (I had never heard of this strip, but an Internet search revealed that it’s drawn by Gary Delainey and Gerry Rasmussen out of Alberta, Canada and is syndicated by United Features Syndicate) is referenced on pages 4-5 and 15; \textit{Through the Looking Glass} on page 6; \textit{The Scream} on page 17; \textit{Star Trek} on page 7; and “Leaning on the Everlasting Arms” on page 17. Grenz was famous for using \textit{Peanuts} cartoons to illustrate his points in classroom work; he referred to several of these in \textit{Who Needs Theology}? as well.
This book is about theology, more specifically, Christian theology. It sets forth my understanding of the core beliefs we share as believers. My goal is to make theology accessible to people who are reticent to read a theology text. More specifically, I want to survey the Christian theological landscape with you, so that you might sharpen your core set of beliefs—not for the sake of priming you to win theological arguments, but to assist you to live as a Christian in the society in which God has placed us, that is, so that you can connect Christian belief with Christian living.

In a sense, this volume is the distillation of my lengthier book, *Theology for the Community of God* . . . In that volume I take the reader through the process by which I arrive at the theological conclusions presented in more summary fashion here. You might view *Created for Community* as an extended “sermon,” similar to what a pastor might say in twenty-five minutes. *Theology for the Community of God*, in contrast, represents the diligent work that would occupy the pastor throughout the week of preparation for that Sunday sermon.53

Therefore, Grenz exhibited a deep and continuing engagement with his audiences and their contexts by tailoring his writing to their abilities and expectations, always serving as a messenger of the gospel.

Did Grenz also engage in extended conversations with himself and with God in his practice of writing? Indeed, he did. First, he conversed with himself and his own work by referring to his previous work in later writing, and by condensing, revising, or expanding upon certain works and topics across his career. One needs only to scan the footnotes in books Grenz wrote any time after the early 1990s to locate numerous references to previous work he had published.54 Of course he did not rely exclusively on his own previous work, but rather conversed with numerous authors and with his own earlier writings in crafting new pieces. As discussed in an earlier section, Grenz also condensed, updated, or extended his work in certain areas as he continued writing. *Theology for the Community of God*, to take

53. Grenz, *Created for Community*, 12.

54. For example, I explored chapters 6, 12, and 18 (chosen rather at random) of *Theology for the Community*. Chapter 6 refers to more than 40 other authors, but Grenz refers to one of his articles (“Abortion: A Christian Response,” *Conrad Grebel Review* 2, no. 1 [1984]: 21–30) on p. 216, and to his book *Sexual Ethics: An Evangelical Perspective* on pages 217, 227, and 231. Chapter 12 refers to more than 20 other authors, but Grenz also references two of his books (*Prayer* and *Reason for Hope* on pages 462 and 460, respectively). Chapter 18 refers to about 30 other authors, and contains one reference to *Prayer* on p. 647. Previous references herein to his use of his own work indicate the truth of this assertion as well.
only one example, he shortened significantly and simplified somewhat to compose *Created for Community*. *Prayer: The Cry for the Kingdom and Reason for Hope* were both revised and reissued, the first seventeen years after its original publication, the second fifteen years later. As an example of a work he later expanded, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology* served as something of a prelude to much of Grenz’s later work. It called for theologians to shape their thinking while carefully engaging and addressing the developing postmodern cultural context. In later years, he sought to demonstrate this methodology himself, perhaps most notably in *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* and the two volumes of the Matrix series. So, by referring to his own work and by shaping and developing it, he conversed with himself in his practice of writing.

Second, Grenz conversed with God as he wrote. The preface to his book on prayer describes the life of prayer modeled for him and taught to him by his parents, as well as his subsequent pursuit of a disciplined life of prayer in his young adulthood. He speaks of “sensing” that he should do particular things, notably that he should offer a course for seminarians on the theology and practice of petitionary prayer—the kind of “sense” of God’s call that often issues from prayer. As a result of that sense, he searched in vain for a suitable text for the course, and eventually made the prayerful decision to write it himself, calling it “the first [of his published books] to give expression to a central passion of my own life and ministry.” Finally, Grenz told students in his course “Thinking Christianly: The Method and

55. This understanding of the book comes from the preface to Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, x.


57. This instance of sensing a nudge from God comes from the preface to *Prayer*, xi. Another instance (among many) can be found in the preface to *Welcoming but Not Affirming: An Evangelical Response to Homosexuality* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), x, where Grenz recounts the process by which he rather hesitantly came to write that book. A third one, even more personal and pastoral, appears in Grenz, “Concerns of a Pietist,” 58.

Application of Theological Reflection” that he had discovered, through more than two decades of writing for publication, that theological writing is a partnership between the writer and God. As he understood it, such writing required diligent work by the writer, but required that such work be done in an attitude of waiting upon God for direction and insight. He reminded students that their efforts were necessary, but that their success in writing (and in ministry) issued not solely from their efforts, but from God “showing up” in response to their “eager, expectant, and humble anticipation” of his presence. Hence, Grenz also conversed with himself and with God throughout his practice of theological writing.

The last aspect of the definition of engaged theological writing states that such engagement leads to formation in the lives of both the writer and the readers. This formation has already been detailed in the discussion to this point. Grenz experienced both theological and personal/character formation as a result of his reading and writing, indicated by the progression of his thought and by the personal tributes of many who knew him well. Those same tributes repeatedly articulate the effects that reading Grenz’s work had upon the readers. Simply put, he wrote with such grace and clarity that those reading were often convinced of the truth of his assertions and enabled to apply them in a variety of ways into their own lives. His humility and transparency allowed his readers to feel they knew him, that they could encounter this God for themselves as he had. As they read and reflected upon his words, God met them and worked within them. In closing, then, Grenz conversed in deep and ongoing fashion with other authors and their contexts, with his audiences and their contexts, with himself and with God in his writing life, to the end that he and his readers experienced theological and personal formation, marking Grenz as an engaged writer. The following section explores whether that engagement also characterized his classroom teaching.

59. This information comes from Grenz’s teaching notes for the first day of this course, offered at Carey Theological College for their Master of Pastoral Ministry program, 9/28/04 - 10/1/2004.
Grenz as Engaged Teacher

Chapter two portrayed engaged teaching as commitment to communities of teaching and learning as a way of life, commitment to fostering God’s work of formation both for oneself and for one’s colleagues and students, and commitment to integrating those engagements in light of interrelated contexts (religious, historical/traditional, contemporary, and future). Just as Grenz was an engaged writer and reader, he was also an engaged teacher. As in the cases of his reading and writing, his years of service as a professor in various contexts—North American Baptist Seminary and Carey Theological College/Regent College, just to name the locations of his two longest-term positions—proves that he practiced teaching throughout his working life. His biography, teaching materials, and written work also offer examples of engagement with communities of teaching and learning, of fostering formation in himself and others, and of cultural and contextual integration.

For example, as indicated earlier in the biographical sketch, Grenz participated in local church communities from his birth until his death. He attended worship regularly, preached occasionally, served together with his wife in the music ministry, taught and learned in Sunday school classes, and in general served as both pastor and parishioner. He worked energetically to teach every Christian believer, whether in church or academy or on the street, to “think of and live in the light of God . . . not just as individuals, but as the community of God’s people.” In the classroom, he used opening devotional exercises and closely related ice-breaking questions to aid in the development of a sense of community that he hoped would persist long after the course had ended. Moreover, he faithfully responded to many

60. Leighton Ford, foreword to Grenz, Created for Community, 9.

61. For example, in his lecture notes for Theology 501, “Thinking Christianly: The Method and Application of Theological Reflection,” offered at Carey in the late fall of 2003, one notes that he began each of the four full days of class with a 15-minute devotional (I recognized some of these as essays he had previously written for publication, based on biblical passages and personal experiences). Then he asked students to introduce themselves by answering two questions that offered them the opportunity to open their lives to one another: “1. Who are you and why are you here? and 2. What did you leave behind to come [to campus for an intensive class] this week?” The
unsolicited letters and e-mail messages, graciously answering questions and clarifying assertions for those who turned to him for help, engaging a community that he might never meet in person.62

In the institutions where he taught, he engaged with the community in numerous ways. He took time to speak to people—not merely faculty and students, but also staff members and visitors—and to remember their stories, assisting them as he was able.63 He also referred to his appreciation of the faculty communities at institutions where he taught, mentioning for example “the opportunities that being on the Carey faculty has given us to think together, work together and pray together,” and of the friendships that developed in such communities.64 Additionally, he recognized these collegial friendships in book

next day, the question was, “What aspect of your ministry brings you the greatest joy?” The third day’s question was, “What is the greatest struggle that you face in ministry?” The final day’s question: “What awaits you when you leave this course today?” In DCO 991, “Reflecting Theologically in Ministry,” offered about six weeks later, he used the same questions, labeling them “Community Building” in his notes.

62. There are a few letters in Grenz’s computer files addressed to persons who had read his work and had asked substantive questions. Although the original questions are unavailable to me, these responses are uniformly generous, concise, and clear. One example, written to Christopher G. Petrovich in 2005, begins, “Thank you so much for your kind letter... I wanted to send you a quick note immediately.... I deeply appreciate your kindness in writing to me...and I am honored that you would take the time to raise the questions that came in your correspondence. Let me offer an all-too-brief response to each of these.” Grenz concludes, “I hope these few remarks have provided some clarification... More importantly, however, I hope that your engagement with my writings is being used by the Holy Spirit to encourage and strengthen you for the ministry to which our Lord has called you.” See also comments in the various extant tributes and weblog entries online, including one by Jason Clark: “One of the reasons I went back to do post-graduate theology, was a private conversation with Stan in 1999, talking in the warm night air of Corona, about my background, our churches, and the value of thinking through things theologically. For someone as busy as he must have been, his care, attention to people, encouragement, and ongoing support on e-mail, amazed me.” Available from http://www.knightopia.com/journal/archives/000604.html (accessed 1—25—09).

63. As only one example, from another tribute to Grenz: “In the lunchroom one staff member commented on Stan’s kindness and how Stan would always ask as to how she was doing after a time of illness rather than simply ask something innocuous about her job. Another friend related how, when he was struggling with unemployment, Stan offered to help with organizing an old-fashioned cottage prayer meeting for him... A Bookstore colleague recalls Stan as someone who remembered your name and took an interest in you as a person.” Reimer, “Stanley J. Grenz, 1950–2005,” para. 2.

64. Stanley J. Grenz and Roy D. Bell, Betrayal of Trust: Confronting and Preventing Clergy
dedications, warmly honoring those he had come to know deeply. He often selected particular students or colleagues to mentor for a period of time, working with them on projects and also providing them with letters of reference when they moved on into other positions or institutions.

Grenz not only demonstrated commitment to worshiping communities and institutional communities; he also remained committed to broader communities throughout his career. He served on committees dedicated to advocacy, citizenship, the sanctity of human life, and various Baptist denominational committees. Moreover, he served as an editorial board member or a referee for a variety of journals and publishing houses, participating in the communities of readers that each journal maintained. Grenz likewise participated actively


65. Again, a few examples: “To Prof. Kermit Ecklebarger, a celebrative, hopeful evangelical scholar,” who had been his faculty adviser at Denver Seminary; “To Roger E. Olson: Scholar, Educator, Friend” and co-author; “To Phil C. Zylla, D.Th., in gratitude for over twenty years of friendship”; and “To Jim Hoover, Rodney Clapp, Dan Reid in gratitude for their friendship and interest in sparking revisioning of theology among evangelicals.” Renewing the Center; Created for Community; Rediscovering the Triune God; and Revisioning Evangelical Theology.

66. I have encountered in Grenz’s files letters of reference for numerous people, meticulously logged in folders labeled “Letters 2003” or similarly, including letters for several of his teaching assistants, various co-authors, and members of academic societies of which he was also a member. However, I have little evidence that Grenz was this approachable in the classroom setting itself. Although clearly engaged with the subject matter at hand, with the sources, with their contexts, etc., I suspect that his actual style of teaching was far more content-delivery or lecture oriented than what the literature would call “learner-centered.”


in a variety of professional academic societies, giving regular presentations at the Evangelical Theological Society’s annual and regional meetings and occasional ones at the American Academy of Religion, the Society for Biblical Literature, and the Baptist World Alliance meetings.69 All these activities, in church or academy, exhibit his deep and continuing engagement with various communities of teaching and learning, one mark of engaged theological teaching.

Another mark of such engaged teaching is commitment to fostering formation in oneself and in others, especially one’s students, seeing that formation into the image of Christ as the telos of theological education. Professors who are deeply engaged care for, respect, and nurture their students, demonstrating their own faith both in and out of the classroom, to the end that they and their students may know and love God better, and continue to be made fit for service wherever God leads. Grenz fits this description as well. He opened his own life in healthy ways to his students, whether in the classroom or in his written work, by using incidents in his own faith journey to testify to God’s faithfulness and to model responsiveness to God’s Spirit.70 Indeed, he shared times of worship and prayer with them, leading them in simple songs with his guitar and demonstrating his own love for God.71 He developed long-


70. Some illustrations have already been offered as attestation. Another concerns an automobile accident in Germany during a 1995 sabbatical, in which Grenz drove over a cliff with his family in the vehicle, certain that death was seconds away. Instead, the car fell into marshy soil and no one in the vehicle suffered harm. Grenz referred to this incident occasionally, mining it for illustrations of God’s surpassing peace in the midst of fear, God’s providential care for persons, etc. The story had a significant impact upon students, as described by Reimer, “Stanley J. Grenz, 1950–2005”, para. 3.

71. I stumbled upon this practice of beginning theology classes with singing, usually a hymn or a song illustrating the theme of the day’s discussion, in my first year of teaching. I had spent years leading worship music in churches, and it seemed important to me that students be able to integrate theological topics with the worship of the church. When I discovered that Grenz had been known for this practice as well, I knew he could be something of a kindred spirit. However, Jay Smith (and others as well) remarked that although Grenz used this practice, he wasn’t very skilled at it. Grenz had been a youth pastor years before, and led “campfire songs” that were somewhat out of date.
lasting relationships with those who had mentored him and those he had mentored, maintaining friendships across the United States and Canada despite time and distance. In so doing he helped to cultivate others’ gifts and encouraged them, preparing those he mentored to serve in varieties of contexts. In fact, his own understanding of his mission clearly indicates his understanding of the importance of Christian formation: “My concern [is] to advance the mission of the church and the transformation of persons, communities and society. . . . My goal in all that I do is to seek to glorify God, to follow what I sense to be God’s calling on my life in a manner that honors God.”

Certainly Grenz was committed to having God’s image re-formed within him and those he taught.

The third aspect of engaged theological education involves the integration of one’s commitments to community and to formation across interrelated contexts—religious, historical, contemporary, and possible future contexts. In other words, to be an engaged theology professor means to pursue a kind of wholistic integrity whereby one’s participation in various communities and one’s personal formation weave together to form a Christian way of life. Grenz’s life stands as an example of such integration. He understood his practice of teaching as arising from his faith commitment, the religious context. That religious context blended with his grasp of the historical context, whereby he drew from the history and

Smith said that students found it “cute” or “quaint” more than they recognized it as a possibly powerful teaching tool. Documentation of this practice in Grenz’s teaching comes from Davies, “Remembrance,” para. 9; Brian McLaren’s foreword to Renewing the Center, 8; and Andy Rowell, “Comparing Stanley Grenz and Stanley Hauerwas,” in Church Leadership Conversations Blog (2009), www.andyrowell.net/andy_rowell/2009/03/comparing-stanley-grenz-and-stanley-hauerwas.html (accessed 11–02–09).

72. Examples include Ed. L. Miller from the University of Colorado (see “How I Took Barth’s Chair, and How Grenz Almost Took It from Me,” Princeton Theological Review 12, no. 1 [Spring 2006], http://www.princetonthologicalreview.org/issues_web/34_text.htm [accessed 11–7–09]), Gordon Lewis from Denver Seminary (to whom Grenz dedicated Beyond Foundationism, and with whom he’d had a “recent” conversation in 2002, 25 years after graduating from Denver, referred to in Grenz, “Concerns of a Pietist,” 72), Roger Olson (“Remembering Stanley J. Grenz”) and Brian McLaren (see previous note).

73. This quote comes from the letter Grenz wrote in application for the McDonald Chair at Harvard, January 2005.
traditions of the Christian faith as it has been lived out by those who came before him. He both taught that history and tradition and lived within it himself. In fact, that historical context had become part of the fabric of Grenz’s contemporary context. While engaged in numerous communities of faith and learning, both academic and religious, he applied truth revealed to those who came before him in full awareness of the contemporary contexts in which he worked. He was well known for his understanding of culture as a “source” for theological reflection, and for deriving examples and applications of theological truth from contemporary cultural expressions—from fine art to cartoons, from classic movies to televised comedies, from classical music to the newest pop tunes. Lastly, he drew together the religious, historical, and contemporary contexts as he lived and taught, working to prepare students for ministry in future contexts. He tried to develop their abilities to understand cultures, using the developing shift from modernism to postmodernism as a springboard to launch them into assessing and thinking critically about other cultures, enabling them to spread the gospel in ways that persons could comprehend.

This kind of integration, gathering these varied contexts into a multifaceted unity, completes the description of Grenz as an engaged theological educator. As an engaged reader, writer, and teacher in the church and the academy, he meets the qualifications explored in chapter two. In order to fulfill them completely, however, he also needs to exhibit the dispositions of hospitality, contemplation, and conversation in his reading, writing, and teaching. Hence, we now move to mining his life and work in search of those dispositions.

**Grenz as Hospitable**

Chapter two repeatedly represented hospitality (which subsumes humility) as an attitude of receptivity and responsiveness that permeates the behavior of an engaged theological educator. With regard to reading, hospitality and humility mean reading widely, 

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74. For perhaps the clearest expression of Grenz’s understanding of culture as a source or “norm” for theology, see *Theology for the Community of God*, 16–20.
deeply, persistently, and consistently, and responding compassionately, humbly, and encouragingly. In the area of writing, hospitality and humility signify receiving from God, from other authors, from one’s own experiences, and from students. They also signify giving, whether by being diligent to form the habit of writing, by persisting in offering one’s writing to others, or by considering voice and context to make the message clear to varied audiences. In addition, engaged theological educators make space for others to receive and to give by encouraging them to write as well, whether academic papers or congregational sermons. They demonstrate their humility by permitting others to read their work, and by accepting both positive and negative comments as graciously as possible. They may modify their positions when the evidence requires such modification, but remain unwilling to do so in ways that distort their understanding of the gospel. In the end, they respond to what they have received: writing reviews, offering commentary on student work, and answering questions about what they have written.

In terms of teaching, the hospitality and humility of theological educators appear as they welcome students and other “strangers” into their lives. They continue to receive these others by listening actively to them, striving to be slow to contradict and quick to encourage. In addition, they remind themselves that their own grasp of theological concepts is incomplete, aware that humans only “know in part” (1 Cor 13:9, 12). This humble stance permits them to learn from their students and also from their peers, whether in their chosen discipline or in others. They can see themselves as lifelong learners who continue to pursue truth with others who are on the same journey. Their responsiveness can take the form of offering their time, talents, and experiences to the community; being willing to question themselves and to enter into questions with others; and speaking the truth in love while counting the cost. Indeed, they may also respond by means of diligent critical reflection as they work together with others toward Christian consensus, or by attending to the needs of both church and academy.
This brief recapitulation of the picture of hospitality and humility in theological education reads like a description of Grenz’s own practice. For example, he read widely, drawing from scholarly sources across the Christian spectrum and also from what might be called “cultural” sources as well, as indicated earlier. He read deeply, engaging large numbers of works by specific authors in his effort to understand them. He also read persistently and consistently, returning repeatedly to many of the same authors and sources throughout his life. Moreover, he responded compassionately by giving others a fair hearing, and was able to take issue with others’ ideas without attacking them personally. He responded humbly, calling himself irenic yet firm, “believing that no side in a controversy among concerned Christians could be either devoid of truth or totally free from error.” Finally, he responded encouragingly even to those with whom he disagreed. According to Olson, “He could be counted on to give encouragement and support, regardless of a person’s particular theological persuasion.”

Grenz’s reading, therefore, demonstrates a humble hospitality.

Moreover, he partnered with God in his writing, referred repeatedly to learning from his students and from other authors, and reflected on his own experience in his written work, as detailed earlier. As he received, so he gave, producing hundreds of manuscripts of varying lengths (from short e-mails to lengthy textbooks) for readers around the world in styles that accounted for his audiences’ differing preferences and capacities. Furthermore, he elicited

75. I have no specific record of the amount or extent of Grenz’s reading, but refer to the numerous book reviews he wrote early in his career, which of course required that he read the books, and to the bibliographies of the books he published, with their hundreds and hundreds of sources with which he must also have been acquainted. I believe that unless Grenz had been a prodigious reader, he could not have written as deeply and broadly as he did.

76. Grenz and Kjesbo, Women in the Church, 9. Other scholars called Grenz “the most gracious man they’d ever met,” according to Jay Smith, his long-time teaching assistant (personal communication, March 23, 2007).

77. From Olson’s remarks at the memorial service (see note 18 in this chapter). McLaren agrees: “Stan gave me helpful feedback, and even though he disagreed with some of my conclusions, he still encouraged me, believing that diverse opinions need to be heard to enrich the theological conversation.” Brian McLaren remembers Stan Grenz (2005), http://emergent-us.typepad.com/emergentus/2005/03/brian_mclaren/r.html (accessed 1–29–10).
writing from other colleagues as he worked on book projects with them, and from students as he evaluated their learning in his classes. He received critical commentary on his writing with poise and passion, contending for the Christian faith as he understood it. Others lauded Grenz’s responsiveness, both personally and professionally, in his writing and his teaching.78 He welcomed students, colleagues, and countless others into his life.79 As detailed earlier, he listened to persons and remembered their stories, offering consistent encouragement and lifelong friendship to many. Despite his intellectual prowess, he endeavored to remain open to learning from others. He strove for excellence not only in theology, but also in pedagogy and ministry.80 He served a broad variety of organizations, and expended himself to work toward answers to pressing questions. What Grenz called “the pastoral impulse and [a] relational orientation . . . continued to inform all that [he did] as a theological educator.”81 In summary, he exhibited hospitality in every arena of his practice of theological education, marking him as more engaged than disengaged.

78. Even Grenz’s professional critics praised his work. For instance, the back cover of Welcoming but Not Affirming quotes James B. Nelson, Emeritus Professor of Christian Ethics, United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities, saying, “I strongly disagree with Stanley Grenz’s major conclusions at virtually every point. Nevertheless, I can highly recommend this book... Why? Simply because it is the clearest, fairest presentation...yet written.”

79. Zylla, “Tribute to a Mentor,” says that as a brand-new seminary student, overflowing with anxiety about the Greek qualifying examination, he was wandering the halls at North American Baptist Seminary when he saw the brand-new theology professor arranging books in his office. Grenz engaged Zylla in conversation, then reassured Zylla that he would be fine—and sent him off to review with Grenz’s own Greek grammar text in hand. Such hospitality characterized Grenz.

80. Mark Davies, in an e-mail on March 17, 2007, told me, “Stan always wanted to give the best of himself to his students.” In his letter of application for the McDonald Chair at Harvard Divinity School, Grenz stated, “I continually strive for excellence as a classroom teacher, as a scholar who is making an ongoing contribution to the theological enterprise, and as a mentor who seeks to empower both students and . . . younger colleagues so that they might fulfill their own callings.”

81. This quote comes from the letter Grenz wrote in application for the McDonald Chair at Harvard, January 2005.
Grenz as Contemplative

Chapter two broadly defined the disposition of contemplation as an indication of engagement. There, contemplation was described as careful attention and steady focus that fosters awareness and serious thought, an attentiveness and focus that characterizes the life of an engaged theological educator. Moreover, contemplation involves the two related dispositions of attention and reflection: attention, in that one must be able to attend in order to be described as contemplative; reflection, in that the recursive nature of contemplation requires the ability to reflect upon the matter under consideration.

In terms of reading, contemplative practice means not merely glancing over a text, but engaging it deeply enough to foster understanding for oneself and others. The educator tries to read closely and repeatedly, interpreting carefully, noticing connections, and pondering deeply. She also reads meditatively, gathering ideas and insights to weave into both her own life and her teaching, and reads unselfishly, setting herself aside for the moment in order to enter the world of the text, often attending to others’ needs as she reads. When writing, the engaged theological educator often demonstrates contemplative attention through the practice of writing itself. She uses writing as a method for attending to or meditating on a concept, reflecting as she chooses words and phrases that best express her developing understanding. She attends to the needs of her audience as she organizes assertions and supports them in ways that she hopes will resonate with her readers. She also may write repeatedly on the same topic or on varied aspects of it, and takes time to reconsider what she has written as she revises and edits. When teaching, she listens carefully to what she is saying and encourages her students to do the same. She also listens to them as they contribute to the conversation, helping them to weave together the sometimes disparate threads into a deeper comprehension of the material. In fact, she may also reflect critically on her practice of teaching, seeking to sharpen the focus and clarity of her presentations. She attends to her own perspectives as well as to those of her students, and endeavors to offer continued attention to the sources and texts
under discussion as well as to God, and to inculcate the same sort of contemplative attention in her students.

Grenz exhibited these related dispositions throughout his practice of theological education. As described to this point, the depth of his engagement with texts, authors, contexts, other readers, and students reveals his attentiveness. He clearly read deeply and understood what he read, and his ability to appreciate a broad variety of theological frameworks issuing from multiple historical and cultural contexts also demonstrates his contemplative attention. His steady focus on theological reading from this variety of contexts led him from Baptist to evangelical to mainstream, allowing him to broaden the scope of his theological endeavors. In addition, his proficiency in integrating theological propositions into forms comprehensible for students and readers of differing ability levels, as well as across the spectrum from academy to pew to street corner, requires just this type of recursive attention.

Furthermore, Grenz attended in his writing and teaching to specific issues when circumstances warranted that attention, as when he focused upon issues of morality or church polity at times when those issues were uppermost in the minds of many. He also returned repeatedly to previous topics, extending and updating or simplifying his work for new audiences, again illustrating his recursive attention. He used opening devotional exercises and ice-breaking questions to help others practice this same kind of attentiveness individually, and used discussion in the classroom to encourage it corporately. He drew upon incidents in his own faith journey to illustrate theological issues, testifying to God’s faithfulness and modeling responsiveness to God’s Spirit, which means he must have engaged in reflection as a prelude to his writing and teaching.

His insistence upon fostering integration of doctrinal beliefs into personal and corporate behavior, his own and that of others, also reflects his contemplative disposition. The testimonies of the formation and demonstration of Christ’s character in Grenz’s life, and

82. See again the list of “issues” books in footnote number 36 of this chapter.
of the impact that both his piety and scholarship had upon the Christian formation of those
whose lives he touched, clearly indicate that his reading, writing, and teaching issued from
careful attention and serious thought. Apparently he not only modeled this kind of
contemplative attention, but enabled and inculcated it in others as well, further evidence of
his engagement as a theological educator.

**Grenz as Conversational**

Chapter two repeatedly indicated that the disposition of conversation marks engaged
teaching and learning. There, conversation was described as like a “game,”
recognizable by its focus on questioning and interaction among people and texts. The “rules”
of the game included accuracy and honesty in presentation, hearing and honoring the
contributions and diversity of others, and willingness when warranted either to defend or to
modify one’s position.

As observed in the practice of engaged reading, conversation signifies interacting with
the text at hand, with other texts one is reading or has read, and with other readers of the texts
as well. Such readers converse with the text, questioning and seeking answers to those
questions. They moderate conversations between variants of a particular text, or among
different works by the same author. Also, they converse with experts in other fields as they
seek to clarify their interpretation of the text under scrutiny, learning about the context from
which the author came and toward which the author was writing. As they write, such
educators continue these interactions with other authors, audiences, and contexts, as well as
with self and God, resulting in transformed character and behavior. Then, as they teach, these
professors demonstrate their commitment to conversation across communities of teaching
and learning, integrating the conversations and the resulting formation in light of interrelated
contexts.

All in all, they converse as they read, write, and teach, cooperating and collaborating
with others in the process. This involvement with others recalls the mention of testimony as
an aspect of conversation. Testimony requires speaking, writing, and teaching truth to witnesses who evaluate the testimony, recalling conversation’s requirements for accuracy and honesty, hearing and testing what has been presented. The final aspect of conversation in this context is its prayerfulness—inviting God’s guidance and illumination, and conversing with God simultaneously as one interacts with others and texts.

Grenz stands out as a master of the “game” of conversation who obeyed its “rules” in his practice of theological education. Drawing from his biography and the descriptions of his reading, writing, and teaching, one notices the extensive bibliographies from which he drew ideas and support for his arguments—evidence that he interacted with a broad variety of texts and their authors. In addition, the types of audiences for whom he wrote and to whom he spoke, whether persons from differing Christian denominations or from differing academic levels, demonstrate that he engaged with and honored the positions of others across contexts. Even those who disagreed with him acknowledged the fairness of his presentation of their positions. Given the books in his corpus that raised questions or proposed novel understandings, his willingness to question and seek answers, to moderate conversations among other texts and authors, to defend positions where possible, and to modify them where needed seems clear.83 The depth and breadth of the development of his thought, over time and in differing contexts, also illustrates this disposition. Last, Grenz testified to what he believed to be the truth with a straightforward accuracy commended by friends and critics alike, and understood his writing as a partnership between himself and God. In all these ways, his composite practice of theological education identifies him as a conversational educator, demonstrating that he more often functioned as engaged than as disengaged in his practice.

Thus, Stanley Grenz meets all of the facets of the definition of an engaged theological educator. He read, wrote, and taught while displaying the dispositions of hospitality,

83. Examples of such books include Revisioning Evangelical Theology; Grenz and Franke, Beyond Foundationalism; Grenz, Welcoming but Not Affirming; and Grenz and Kjesbo, Women in the Church.
contemplation, and conversation. However, this does not yet establish him as an example of one who approached his work as a Christian spiritual practice. For that to be the case, his teaching must also meet the rigorous definition of such a practice as developed in the first chapter. Hence, we turn our attention to whether his practice also fulfills the requirements of this definition.

**Grenz’s Practice as a Christian Spiritual Practice**

Chapter one offered a complex definition of Christian spiritual practices as *things God enables Christian people to do together over time to address fundamental human needs in light of the gospel of Jesus Christ, activities that together form a way of life that pleases God and through which God teaches and transforms persons into the image of the Son.*

Chapter three then established that engaged theological education can be an example of such a practice. If Grenz’s work in this area can be demonstrated to meet this rigorous definition, then he can serve as an example of someone who endeavored to pursue his vocation as a theological educator as an outworking of his Christian faith commitment.

**God’s Enabling and Christian Faith**

This definition requires that Christian spiritual practices be “things God enables Christian people to do.” In other words, these practices are activities, not abstract concepts, and the definition can apply to physical actions such as looking at a student who is asking a question, mental or spiritual actions such as considering how to respond to a student’s question, or simultaneously material and immaterial activities such as answering the question during a lecture. In addition, such activities exhibit dual agency: both God and humans can be at work. God may motivate an action or work through human action; humans can also conceive of actions and perform them according to their own desires. Lastly, noting that these practices are done by Christian people recalls that Christians’ practices can appear much like those of non-Christians. Practices are Christian (or not) based upon the practitioners’
reflection upon the relationship of their practices to their Christian faith, and their use of those faith commitments as a norming tool.

Grenz’s engaged practice of theological education demonstrates both physical and non-physical action, both divine and human agency, and both his Christian faith and his reflection upon educational practice. As described above, his reading, writing, and teaching exhibit physical activity and non-physical activity—whether sitting in front of a computer scanning a page with his eyes, or mentally constructing an outline for a new writing project, or typing those thoughts into the computer. He speaks and writes of sensing God’s activity in his teaching and writing, and yet clearly comprehended these practices as requiring his own activity as well. Moreover, he clearly testifies to his own Christian faith commitment, and reflected upon his composite practice of theological education as he mentored others in its practice. He continued to ground his work in an understanding and application of Christian truth, viewing all persons as valuable in God’s sight and demonstrating God’s love to those whose lives he touched. Hence, Grenz’s teaching clearly meets this aspect of the definition of Christian spiritual practices.

Together with Others, Over Time

Remember from the previous chapter the second aspect of engaged theological education as a Christian spiritual practice: that it is accomplished together with others and over time. Rephrased, this means that this practice has its foundations in complex traditions involving many people acting together to develop it. The practice itself is also a corporate practice; even though individuals may be doing parts of the practice by themselves at certain junctures, they continue to be understood as participating in the practice as a member of groups associated with the practice. Groups of people also modify the practice over time, and they sustain it by transmitting it to others. Engaged reading, writing, and teaching—the practices of theological education—have already been demonstrated to be possible examples of Christian spiritual practices. Can Grenz’s practice serve as a concrete example?
Indeed it can. Again, no further evidence need be presented; rather, a brief reiteration of these aspects of his practice will suffice. Grenz took his place in the group of men and women who have taught Christian theology to others, a group which one might say began with Christ himself and extends from the early Church to the eschaton when teaching will cease because “they all shall know” the Lord (Jer 31:34). Before he became a professor he spent years as a student, and continued to learn and develop throughout his life. His practice of teaching groups of students in classrooms, and individuals who read his books, also marks it as corporate, and his emphasis on both teaching and living in community as an overarching motif for understanding Scripture and theology does so as well. He taught courses together with other men and women, participated on faculty committees, and wrote books jointly with other scholars. Furthermore, he assisted in modifying the practice of theological education, consulting with faculty at other institutions as they revised curricula, and passed on the practice to others as he worked with younger scholars. Thus, as a reader, a writer, and a teacher, Grenz participated in theological education together with others over time.

**Addressing Fundamental Human Needs in Light of the Gospel**

The third aspect of engaged theological education as a Christian spiritual practice involves its purpose: addressing fundamental human needs in light of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Chapter three described ways in which teaching theology addresses these needs in that light. For instance, professors can direct their attention and effort to answering questions raised by Christians and non-Christians, and to taking action to provide assistance to those who need it. They also may use their work to draw others’ attention to needs and questions, or to elicit others’ assistance in working to ameliorate needs. Specifically, they can help other people to encounter the Triune God, and to grow in knowledge and love of the Holy One.

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84. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God.*

85. In his letter to the search committee at Harvard, Grenz noted that he had “help[ed] shape curricula at several schools that are keenly interested in exploring the future shape of theological education.”
They can also help others learn to love one another, to bear one another’s burdens and thereby fulfill God’s law (Gal 6:2). They endeavor to respond to God’s initiative as they recognize it, and to relate their beliefs to their behavior by cooperating with God’s power at work within and through them. In other words, they work toward deepening their own love for God and for others, and to act in ways that manifest that love. As before, the previous chapter established the possibility of practicing theological education in these ways, but offered no objective example of doing so.

Grenz, however, provides such an example. Certainly he directed his attention to questions raised by his students inside and outside the classroom, but the breadth and depth of his written work even more clearly demonstrate his passion for addressing needs and offering coherent, practical answers to pressing theological questions. The numerous books tackling pressing issues in the church, cited earlier in this chapter, offer a pertinent illustration of this. Moreover, he acted to offer tangible assistance to those in need as well, whether by praying with and for them or by serving charitable organizations. He wrote and taught about changes in the cultural landscape of the United States and Canada, helping others to become aware of emerging issues and questions and calling them to action.86 In the academy, whether in the classroom or in his writing, Grenz made space for others to come to know God through theological inquiry and to respond in worship and praise. Similarly, in the church he proclaimed the message of the gospel and helped others to enter God’s presence in worship and prayer. In both arenas, he taught others how to love their neighbors, most poignantly by welcoming those he encountered and blessing them by using his gifts and talents in Jesus’ name. Those who knew him remark again and again that he was an example of a Christian whose beliefs became visible through his treatment of others. Here too, then,

Grenz’s practice as a theological educator demonstrates that he sought to address fundamental human needs in light of the good news of God’s grace.

**Activities that Together Formed a Way of Life**

The fourth aspect of theological education as a Christian spiritual practice proposes the idea that the practices of engaged reading, writing, and teaching together form a way of life. Recall from the previous chapter the five features of what Bass and Dykstra called “a way of life abundant.” This way of life is historical and temporal, meaning that it remains grounded in the Christian tradition while extending and adapting that tradition in culturally appropriate ways. It is also situated and contextual, occurring in specific and diverse places. It is shared and communal, in that it involves working together both within and across communities. It affirms the importance of practical experience as a way of learning, knowing, and communicating the faith. Finally, it is nourished by Scripture and reliant on the gracious agency of God. In summary, this way of life displays a “commitment to attend in all . . . work to the presence of the Triune God in and for the life of the world.”\(^87\) Nonetheless, having demonstrated that theological education *may* be practiced in this fashion does not necessarily signify that it actually *is* so practiced. Does Grenz’s life fit this description? Yes, it does.

This theology professor continually kept himself and his teaching rooted in the Word of God and orthodox doctrine, as described earlier. Nonetheless, he unfolded that tradition for emerging contexts, into worldwide encounters with other Christians, and into broader and broader audiences. He taught timeless truths in contemporary ways, interpreting culture in light of the gospel and using cultural icons—from television shows to comic strips to pop music—to illustrate the truths he taught. In addition, his work was both situated and contextual. When writing for popular audiences, he used a particular style understandable to them; when writing for academics, he used a different style, one suited to the different

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\(^{87}\) Bass and Dykstra, “In Anticipation,” 359.
context. As another example, he taught both in the classroom and behind the pulpit, both in his writing and in his living.

Clearly, Grenz’s work exemplifies shared and communal theological education. From co-authoring texts to speaking to other scholars at conferences, from mentoring younger scholars to participating in innumerable communities of faith and learning, he worked together with others in the educational enterprise. He also wove doctrine and practice together as he taught: not only lecture, but also application; not only sermons, but also songs; not only mental assent, but lived experience. He would have heartily agreed that theology is thoroughly understood only as it is experienced and practiced in daily life. Last, his life and work meet the qualification of being nourished by Scripture and reliant on grace. Grenz learned from God’s word himself, and also used those lessons as resources for teaching. He recounted them to his students, his colleagues, his friends, and his readers. He recognized himself as depending upon the grace of God in everything he did. Thus, Grenz’s life can be described as historical and temporal, situated and contextual, shared and communal, experiential and practical, and biblical as well. As such, it illustrates this fourth aspect of the definition of a Christian spiritual practice: forming a way of life.

That Pleased God. Two facets of this life formed by a Christian spiritual practice remain to be discussed. The first of these is that this way of life must please God. As the previous chapter clarified, pleasing God, according to Colossians 1:10, means walking in a manner worthy of the Lord, bearing fruit in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God. The expanded representation of a person whose life pleases God includes demonstrating righteousness, peace, and holiness as evidence of accepting both the equipping and the discipline of God. It involves being the sort of person who can be characterized as joyful, prayerful, and thankful. Further, it calls for producing a harvest that glorifies God as evidence of ongoing discipleship, and for displaying love, compassion, truthfulness, and obedience to God as the outworking of God’s grace. Finally, it requires deepening encounter
and engagement with God which becomes evident via loving behavior, spiritual wisdom, and Christian maturity. Does Grenz’s life work appear to be coherent with such a description, such that he can continue to serve as an example of a theological educator who pursued his vocation as a Christian spiritual practice?

Although one must tremble a bit even to attempt to “prove” that a man’s life was pleasing to God, Grenz did show these characteristics in his life. He was recognized as a world-class theologian who traveled the globe to teach and preach, and people from all walks of life learned more about God from him. He loved his wife, understood her ministry to be as important as his own, and remained faithful to his marriage covenant.\footnote{88} Nearly everyone spoke well of him both personally and professionally, even those who strongly disagreed with some of his theological commitments. These assertions harmonize with righteousness, peace, and holiness, and Grenz would claim that none of them would have been possible without God’s equipping. Recall the tributes cited earlier in this chapter depicting him as hospitable, engaging, joyful, prayerful, and thankful. In addition, the crop of publications he produced brought him acclaim, and the large number of students, colleagues, and teaching assistants he mentored also sang his praise as a person of integrity. Some of Grenz’s own words, taken from his application letter for the McDonald Chair at Harvard, may attest to his character:

I have been committed throughout my 24 years as a theological educator to the task of preparing women and men for service to the church and society as ministers, teachers and leaders in a variety of professions. Moreover, I have sought to fulfill this calling within the context of academic communities that are comprised by a diversity of persons who share a devotion to the pursuit of truth and who take seriously the global context in which we live. As a participant in the academic institutions that I serve, I continually strive for excellence as a classroom teacher, as a scholar who is making an ongoing contribution to the theological enterprise, and as a mentor who seeks to empower both students and, as a senior faculty member, younger colleagues so that they might fulfill their own callings. . . . I believe that I would bring a variety of strengths to the McDonald Chair. These include my track record as a seasoned theological educator, my stature in the global evangelical community, my growing

\footnote{88. When Grenz was considering his move to Texas to teach at Baylor, one of his main concerns was that his wife Edna be able to find a place of ministry somewhere in the area. She was pursuing her Doctor of Worship Studies at the Institute for Worship Studies at the time, and he was hopeful that God would confirm their joint decision to move to Texas by providing meaningful work there for her as well.}
reputation in the academy and the wider church, my background in church ministry which enhances my ability to wed scholarly reflection with pastoral concerns, my active attempt to advance a theological program that can foster the renewal of church and society, and my sense of the importance of living as a Christian within the context of relationships with others. . . .

I continually seek to produce solid, credible scholarly work, while contributing to both the mission and the ongoing renewal of the church in society. This desire not only to bridge academy and church but also to contribute in both contexts has given shape to many of the tasks that I have pursued. [I have been involved] in the debate over the essential character of evangelical theology and of evangelicalism itself. In this conversation, I have sought to advance the classical understanding of “evangelical” as denoting the concern not merely to maintain orthodox Christian doctrine, but, more importantly, to view doctrine as servant to a deeper goal, namely, the development of a spirituality that arises out of a sense of the presence of the Holy Spirit fostering personal, communal and social transformation. . . .

Evangelical piety . . . not only underlies my scholarly work, it also informs the manner [in which] I approach all of life. I want to be known as a person who does not only speak about the faith, but also seeks to live it. Consequently, my goal in all that I do is to seek to glorify God, to follow what I sense to be God’s calling on my life in a manner that honors God.

Love, compassion, truthfulness, and obedience to God; loving behavior, spiritual wisdom, and Christian maturity; these qualities are evident in Grenz’s words and in his life. Therefore, according to this definition and as far as can be known, Grenz’s life may be said to have been pleasing to God.

**Through Which God Taught and Transformed.** The final aspect of a Christian spiritual practice is that such practices must serve as avenues through which God may teach and transform persons into the image of the Son. As before, this aspect indicates God’s agency within and through the practices. Chapter three discussed precisely how God can act as the agent of transformation in the arena of theological education. For example, since God not only teaches directly but may also appoint those who teach or command them to do so, God can be said to use or work through those who teach. God may also inspire those who teach and empower them with the gifts and abilities they need in their teaching. Moreover, since deep knowledge of God, both cognitive and heartfelt, frees humans from bondage and begins or continues the process of transformation into God’s own image, teaching such truth while participating in the body of Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit can also serve as
a way in which God transforms people. However, to claim that God *can* use engaged theological educators to effect this transformation does not mean that God *does* so. Has enough evidence accrued to demonstrate that Grenz was used by God in this way, such that his practice can finally be displayed as an example of theological education as a Christian spiritual practice?

I believe it has. In his own judgment, Grenz said he believed he was following God’s call as he read, wrote, and taught. He tried to live his faith inside and outside the classroom, and to glorify God in all things. The many who eulogized Grenz at his death, without exception, speak of the impact that his endeavors had upon their lives. He taught, led, worshiped, and mentored, and steadfastly maintained that he did so at the behest and with the power of God alone. The results, both in somewhat secular terms such as successful publishing or distinguished stature and in more religious terms such as changed minds and opened hearts, speak for themselves. He directed people back to the Bible and to historic Christian orthodoxy; directed them forward into the innumerable contexts in which they would serve God; and directed them upward and outward toward reconciliation with God and others. Grenz never attained perfection, despite the glowing terms in which his admirers and detractors alike describe him. Nevertheless, it seems clear that God used him mightily in the lives of many who encountered him personally and professionally.

**Conclusion**

This chapter establishes not only that engaged theological education can be pursued as a Christian spiritual practice, but that it has been in at least one specific instance. Stanley Grenz practiced reading, writing, and teaching, which are the necessary and sufficient practices of theological education as defined in the second chapter. As a theological educator, he exhibited the dispositions of hospitality, contemplation, and conversation as defined in that same chapter, thus indicating that he was an engaged theological educator. Moreover, he
undertook his practice in ways that meet the definition of a Christian spiritual practice developed in the first chapter and applied to theological education in the third chapter. He educated others as an outgrowth of his Christian faith commitment, and relied on God’s empowerment; he read, wrote, and taught together with others over time; and he engaged in this composite practice for the purpose of addressing fundamental human needs as understood in light of the gospel. Furthermore, for Grenz the practice of theological education consisted of activities that together became his way of life, an approach to living and teaching that was historical and temporal, situated and contextual, shared and communal, experiential and practical, and thoroughly grounded in Scripture. His way of life was one that both pleased God and was used by God to accomplish some of His purposes in the lives of women and men.

Therefore, Grenz ably serves as an example of someone who pursued his vocation as a theological educator as a Christian spiritual practice. Certainly many who teach theology and related disciplines in seminaries and universities apply their minds and hearts to the task in the same ways. Having demonstrated that theological education can be practiced in this fashion, however, does not answer the final pressing question: Why should people do so? What benefits proceed from engaged theological education as a spiritual practice? The final chapter addresses this question.
CONCLUSION: SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

This study began with a survey of the various scholarly understandings of the meaning of the term *practice*. The anthropological, ascetical, and moral conceptions of practice each offered insights and extensions of the commonly accepted definitions of the term that generally focus upon pursuit of proficiency in a particular area. From the anthropological point of view, practices are by nature social, ongoing, and situated historically and culturally; Christians working within the framework note that in order for practices to be Christian, practitioners must reflect critically upon them and “norm” them in light of Christian tradition. From the ascetical point of view, practices develop maturity, wisdom, and virtue, eventually making possible deeper relationship with the Divine and transformation into God’s image; this viewpoint highlights God’s agency in the development of these virtues within practitioners. From the moral point of view, practices are cooperative and socially established, and develop virtues through the pursuit of standards of excellence inherent within the practices themselves; excellent practitioners produce internal “goods” for themselves and for their communities.

Craig Dykstra argues that Christian theological educators must revise what he claims to be their implicit understanding of practices as individualistic, technological (working toward specific results), ahistorical and abstract.¹ Together with Dorothy Bass, he sets forth a variation on the moral framework in which they indicate that *Christian*

¹ Dykstra, “Reconceiving Practice.”
practices must meet fundamental human needs, and they specify that such practices are transmitted, extended, and evaluated in light of the Christian tradition.² Perhaps the most important addition from this Christian theological conception involves the idea that the virtues developed in practice should address fundamental human needs as well as personally transform the practitioner. Finally, this thesis gathered together the strengths of each of the earlier four frameworks, developing a rigorous definition of Christian spiritual practices as follows: *Christian spiritual practices are things God enables Christian people to do together over time to address fundamental human needs in light of the gospel of Jesus Christ, activities that together form a way of life that pleases God and through which God teaches and transforms persons into the image of the Son.* This definition clarifies the basis, the purpose, and the results of Christian spiritual practices.

Chapter two defined theological education as a composite practice made up of the activities of reading, writing, and teaching (all broadly defined). Further, it described the possibility of pursuing theological education while exhibiting the dispositions of hospitality, contemplation, and conversation. Although the categories are not this starkly opposed in most theological pedagogy, this chapter explored two conceptions of theological education. One involves understanding theological education as the isolated act of an individual who is performing a job that is not necessarily (or even desirably) connected to a faith commitment. Teachers who fall close to this end of the spectrum have developed the professional skill necessary to produce knowledge and transmit it to students in an academic fashion, but do so while largely disengaged from relationships between and among other people or with God, and while rarely disposed to hospitality, contemplation, or conversation. This conception of education was thus identified as

teaching as an “academic” practice, or as disengaged teaching. Teachers who fall closer to the other end of the spectrum understand theological education more as an act sustained by a way of life in a community of faith and learning, a form of service to others and to God arising directly from a faith commitment. This type of teacher is developing the personal virtue and knowledge of God necessary to work toward inculcating that virtue and knowledge in students, and does so while generally more deeply engaged in teaching and learning relationships with others and with God, and while generally disposed to hospitality, contemplation, and conversation. This conception of education was thus identified as teaching as a “spiritual” practice, or as engaged teaching.

Chapter three examined each of the practices of theological education—reading, writing, and teaching—in order to establish whether each met the definition of a Christian spiritual practice, such that the composite practice of theological education could be said to meet that definition as well. Indeed, reading, writing, and teaching can be 1) enabled by God, can be 2) fundamentally both corporate and historically/contextually grounded, and can 3) address God’s telos for humanity, the fundamental human need to love God and neighbor. Having demonstrated that the practices which combine to form theological education met the first part of that definition, the composite practice was analyzed according to the second part of that definition. Again, engaged teaching was substantiated as a way of life that can please God and which God may use to teach and transform both teachers and learners into the image of the Son. However, simply proving that theological education can be performed in ways and for purposes that meet the definition of a Christian spiritual practice indicates neither that it is taught in these ways or for these purposes, nor whether such a methodology would be effective or beneficial. Therefore,

3. “Teaching” here, and at the end of the paragraph, is used to describe the entire practice of theological education, not one of its three necessary and sufficient practices.
chapter four presented for examination an example of a theologian who taught in this manner.

Because Stanley J. Grenz was such a prolific author, his written corpus provided a wealth of information and examples through which one could demonstrate that he pursued the practice of theological education as a Christian spiritual practice. He read, wrote, and taught, and did so while demonstrating the dispositions of hospitality, contemplation, and conversation as they have been described here. Moreover, he was enabled by God, understood his practice as corporate and historically grounded, and addressed fundamental human needs in light of the gospel of Jesus Christ. As he practiced it, teaching theology formed a way of life that pleased God and through which God worked for his glory.

All that remains, then, is to discuss the implications of this study. Clearly, this thesis indicates that teaching theology can be pursued as a Christian spiritual practice, as demonstrated by Grenz’s example (and as practiced by countless others as well). The question persists, however: should it be pursued in this engaged fashion? Is it important

4. Although I never met Grenz in person, my first attendance at a national American Academy of Religion Annual Conference coincided with the year of his death. I had been quite familiar with Grenz’s work, having used several of his books and articles as reading material for various theology courses, so I attended a panel presentation reflecting on his work and his legacy. When I began to explore dissertation topics the following year, I spoke with many of his colleagues, and several of them noted that he had been a master teacher, which each of them independently said was a fact few people recognized (because the focus of attention was on his writing). When I received permission to access all his personal teaching notes and correspondence as well as book manuscripts, lectures, sermons, etc., I decided to use Grenz to illustrate the principles of engaged theological education.

5. I should also clarify here that one need not be as prolific or well-known as Grenz in order to teach theology as a spiritual practice. Although Grenz served well as an example of someone whose life and work seemed to meet all of the aspects of the definitions of theological education and Christian spiritual practice as developed in this dissertation, he was as subject to human frailty as anyone else. Anyone who has made a Christian faith commitment, is seeking to glorify God and to address fundamental human needs in ways that please God, and will allow room for God’s agency can practice teaching as a Christian spiritual practice.
that teaching be pursued as a Christian spiritual practice rather than as a merely or primarily academic one? Is engaged theological education more effective than disengaged?

Simply put, teaching theology as a Christian spiritual practice can help to revive the connections between theological education and spiritual formation, both for professors and for students. Reviving these connections permits formation for ministry to occur at deep levels, and is therefore of great benefit to all involved—teachers, learners, and the Church. Such connections have existed since the earliest days of the Church, but have been especially attenuated in the past two centuries by what Robin Maas and Gabriel O’Donnell call “the demands of academic respectability.”

For centuries, theology was understood as “faith seeking understanding,” and the theologian as “one who is called to a life of wisdom—a life of wholeness and holiness.” The very idea that a person could provide Christian theological training for others without having personally committed himself or herself to a relationship with God through Jesus Christ in fellowship with other disciples would have astounded most Christians living before the time of the Enlightenment. Yet the movement away from character formation as the telos of theological education toward a more scholarly and professional conception of that telos, as so lucidly described by Kelsey in To Understand God Truly, has been one of the factors


7. Ibid., 13.


that somehow strained the connection between theology and spirituality nearly to the breaking point.

Maas and O’Donnell note that “anyone who . . . teaches seminarians is acutely aware of a number of painful divisions. The division between doctrine and morality [or between faith and practice] tends to persist in the training of clergy, despite the efforts of many conscientious faculty.”

When theological faculties became included within the university system in the early nineteenth century, theology was gradually transformed into an academic discipline. Its character became known less as reflection on the lived experience of Christian faith and more as a comprehensive set of doctrinal propositions and disputes to be assimilated into one’s body of intellectual knowledge concerning the faith. Those who taught on these faculties often became gradually more concerned about “academic respectability” than reflection upon the lived experience of faith, more concerned about research or transmission of facts and less concerned about developing and demonstrating the life of faith together with their students. If Parker Palmer is correct that real learning requires relationship, then the relationships among teachers, learners, and God could not be more important to the enterprise of theological education.

Therefore, these relationships must be renewed, celebrated, and strengthened where necessary.

Since theological education exists largely to prepare women and men for a variety of ministries in the Church, as argued in chapter two, and if the *telos* of such education is not merely a cognitive knowledge of theological principles and practical skills for ministry but also a spiritual knowledge leading to obedience to Christ, then those teaching


11. He writes, “Real learning does not happen until students are brought into relationship with the teacher, with each other, and with the subject [or, in this case, the Subject]. We cannot learn deeply and well until a community of learning is created in the classroom.” Palmer, *Know as We Are Known*, xvi.
Christian theological students must endeavor “to learn and to practice a discipline of attention that brings together piety and intellect, theory and practice.” Two quotations from Christian thinkers of earlier eras lend support to this assertion. The first comes from George Whitefield (1747–1770), writing to students at Harvard and Yale who were preparing for ministry. He declared fervently:

> If ministers are warmed with the love of God themselves, they cannot but be instruments of diffusing that love amongst others. This, this is the best preparation for the work whereunto you are to be called. Learning without piety will only render you more capable of promoting the kingdom of the devil. Henceforward therefore I hope you will enter into your studies, not to get a parish . . ., but to be a great saint.

The second comes from Søren Kierkegaard (1838–1855), who would have agreed with Whitefield, not in light of the telos of theological education, but in light of the call of Christ.

> It is well known that Christ consistently used the expression “follower.” He never asks for admirers, worshippers, or adherents. No, he calls disciples. It is not adherents of a teaching but followers of a life Christ is looking for . . . . What then, is the difference between an admirer and a follower? A follower is or strives to be what he admires. An admirer, however, keeps himself personally detached. He fails to see that what is admitted involves a claim upon him, and thus he fails to be or strive to be what he admires.

Surely those who teach women and men who are striving to be followers and preparing to train other followers should be not mere adherents, but fellow travelers along the road. They need to be engaged not only (or even primarily) with the subject matter they teach, but also with its sources, its history, its contexts, their students, their colleagues, the


Church, and the God who remains the ultimate Object of their study and the personal Subject of their reflection. They must strive to be hospitable, humble, contemplative, attentive, conversational, prayerful witnesses to the work of Christ in their own lives, to the best of their God-given ability.

An exploration of teaching theology as a Christian spiritual practice, then, provides what John Whitvliet calls “a promising foundation for effective pedagogy.”¹⁵ Cultivating the disposition of hospitality can open theology classrooms to voices that until now have been suppressed or absent from the discussion, and including those voices can open doors for communication with those previously unknown. Nurturing contemplative attention and reflection can awaken teachers and learners alike to new connections among cultural contexts, fostering more effective evangelization and disciple-making. Encouraging conversation, prayer, and testimony in the theology classroom can promote re-integration of intellect and heart, of faith and practice, of doctrine and godly living.

Since the goal of theological education is to develop men and women who are capable of providing leadership for Christian ministries, who seek to fulfill the telos of loving the Lord with their entire beings and loving their neighbors as they love themselves, the men and women teaching them about God need continually to renew their own commitments to that same telos. Rededicating themselves to engaged teaching as a Christian spiritual practice, as a way of life that pleases God and through which God can transform people’s lives, is of utmost importance. As professors place themselves before God so that their gifts and graces may be nurtured, God will equip and empower them to nurture far more effectively the gifts and graces of their students. Perhaps, in so doing,

¹⁵. John D. Whitvliet, “Teaching Worship as a Christian Practice,” in Bass and Dykstra, For Life Abundant, 118. Whitvliet writes of teaching worship, liturgy, church music, and liturgical arts in ways that prepare students not only with technical skill, but the capacity for faithful practice; I am making a similar case for teaching theology and other related disciplines.
they will be used by God to work toward the reunion of theology and spirituality, doctrine and practice, not only in their own lives and those of seminarians, but in the lives of the faithful as well.


———. “Concerns of a Pietist with a Ph.D.” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 37, no. 2 (Fall 2002): 58–76.


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