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Growing in the Life of Faith, Education and Christian Practices (Book Review)

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Book Reviews

Growing in the Life of Faith, Education and Christian Practices, by Craig Dykstra. Louisville: Geneva Press, 1999. 169pp. Reviewed by Syd Hielema, Associate Professor of Theology, Dordt College.

When I first ran across *Growing in the Life of Faith* a couple of years ago, I was very eager to read it. I was well familiar with the writings of Craig Dykstra (who serves as Vice President for Religion at the Lilly Endowment), and had found his thinking concerning the character of faith and faith nurture utterly refreshing and stimulating. I knew that Dykstra rejected much of the common wisdom in the field of faith development articulated by James Fowler and others, and developed much more comprehensive ways of understanding faith by describing its character in its own terms rather than in terms of human maturation. I was not disappointed. His earlier work is brought to fruition in profound and marvelous ways in this, his latest publication. I would dare say that every pastor and educator in the Christian faith ought to read this book, and communities of faith educators would benefit greatly from discussing this book together.

Growing in the Life of Faith tackles a very difficult topic, but it does so in a systematic manner. Dykstra begins by laying the foundations concerning the character of faith, drawing heavily upon the writings of John Calvin and the Reformed tradition (especially the Heidelberg Catechism) to do so. Because he begins by articulating a *theological* foundation for faith (rather than a *psychological* one, as Fowler *et al* do), his description contains room for the mystery of the power of God as it comes to transform human lives. Dykstra recognizes that faith and faith nurture must always retain an element of mystery, but at the same time he dares to describe what he believes can be described concerning God's work in our lives. This description is appropriately multi-dimensional, but gives a central place to seeing clearly.

In the life of faith, we may come to see our own selves more clearly, including our sin. Struggle with sin has been a central theme in Reformed theology from its earliest days. In Calvin's Institutes we read, for example, that the first of "the effects we feel" in the life of faith is repentance. (26)

This clarity also opens one's eyes so that "in Christ, a whole new world in which to live is opened up to us. It is not just that we live new kinds of lives in the same old world. Rather, the very environment in which we live is both enlarged and transformed" (26). I find here a fresh and lively way of working with that old, cherished term in Reformed thinking: worldview.

Dykstra builds on this foundation to posit the central thesis of his book: we respect the character of faith and

further the work of faith nurture through judicious use of the Christian practices that invite the presence of God. "By participating in certain active forms of life together," says Dykstra, "an environment is created in which people may come to faith and grow in life in Christ" (41). A Christian practice functions as a "habitation of the Spirit"; for example, when a Christian community meets regularly for worship, it is in effect saying, "Lord, as we gather together we are inviting you to build us into a house in which you dwell and do your work of growing us in faith." Or, to use the words of Paul, "let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing Psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God" (Col. 3.16).

Judicious use of these practices requires an understanding of how they encompass all areas of one's life. Dykstra's lengthy list of practices (42f.) includes worshiping; giving generously; "criticizing and resisting all those powers and patterns that destroy human beings, corrode human community, and injure God's creation;" and "working together to maintain and create social structures and institutions that will sustain life in the world in ways that accord with God's will." These practices are personal and/or communal, and complement one another in various ways. For example, giving generously prepares one for worship, and worship equips a community to resist evil powers, and so on. Weaving a variety of such practices within the life of the Christian community creates space for the mysterious presence of God to transform the life of that community. Such a theology of practice is inherently covenantal: as God's people respond to God's promise of presence, He comes to dwell among and within them.

Practices honor both the mystery of God's presence and the need for humans to be taught in very concrete ways. Learning a practice, says Dykstra, is like learning to play baseball. One must practice specific skills over and over again, one must watch the game being played well, and one must be coached properly (71). As he develops the analogy, Dykstra asks, "if the life of Christian faith is truly a practice of practices, shouldn't Christian education and theological teaching be more like good coaching? Isn't this how people learn actually to interpret Scripture themselves? Isn't this how people learn to pray and to confess and to forgive and to practice hospitality to strangers and enemies?" (72) Such coaching requires two dimensions: first, the context of a Christian community which, however stumblingly, models many practices in its daily life; and second, "a planned and systematic education in these

practices" (73). The first without the second assumes that learning of the practices happens automatically, which it does not. The second without the first is hypocrisy.

The second half of *Growing in the Life of Faith* applies Dykstra's account of faith nurture to specific places where such nurture occurs: the congregation, the family, the youth group, the Christian college, and the seminary. These five chapters will obviously have varying degrees of interest for different readers, though the first three have almost universal appeal. I find it striking that Dykstra applies his account in unique and fresh ways in each of these chapters by identifying the central dynamics of each place that he is addressing. For example, he highlights the crucial role which the practice of confession holds in the life of the congregation, for it is comprised of redeemed sinners and without confession its sin creates communal "patterns of mutual self-destruction" (86). Moreover, he adds, "the community of faith is continually susceptible to judgment and renewal from its source and ground, because its source and ground is not itself" (93). Dykstra achieves a unique approach in each of these five chapters by focusing on one particular dimension of the place that he is analyzing. Though this narrow focus is somewhat limiting, the reader who has walked with him to this point has been equipped to apply his understanding of faith nurture to other dimensions of each place as well.

Finally, I also find Dykstra's understanding of the role of Scripture in faith nurture refreshing and illuminating. His thoughts here are both scattered throughout the book and summarized in two brief, concluding chapters. Scripture places us inside the story of God and his world, so that "through the story God is revealed to its hearers as a present reality in the contemporary telling and hearing" (58). As the story is told, "its world becomes more and

more our world...[Scripture acts] on its hearers by rendering a way of living that makes sense in this world and in the light of the God who reigns in it" (59f.). Teachers do not so much teach the Bible as they *co-operate* with what the Bible is doing (154). And just what is the Bible doing?

God is using the Bible, I would say, to give us courage, to set us free of whatever enslaves us, to seduce us into the love God has for us, to call us to account, to turn us around from whatever paths of destruction we may be following, to humble us where we need to be humbled, to lift us up when we are heavily burdened, to forgive us, to redeem us, to make us holy. God is using the Bible not only to inform us, but to form us and re-form us, to shape us into God's own. (155)

As a Bible teacher and preacher of the Word, I am inclined to tape those words over my desk as a daily reminder of a central power and purpose of the Scriptures as they point us to Christ.

I have only one complaint concerning *Growing in the Life of Faith*: it is not accessible to a wide audience. I have tremendous respect for Dykstra's careful scholarship and his determination to reject shallow descriptions of faith and faith nurture, but the result of his depth is that this book cannot capture a popular following. I believe every parent, every office bearer in the church, every Christian teacher, every youth leader, indeed, every believer, will benefit greatly from Dykstra's insights. Perhaps a "small group study edition" of the book is needed so that a leader who has read the book could use the study guide to work through its central concepts with a gathering of believers. In the meantime, I will continue to use the book in my teaching at Dordt College and hope that these students will carry its wisdom into many communities in the years to come.

Political-Economic Activity to the Honour of God, by John Boersema. Winnipeg: Premier Publishing, 1999. 355 pp. \$10.90 [CDN\$15.75]. Reviewed by Jonathan Warner, Professor of Economics, Dordt College.

In this book, John Boersema, professor of economics at Redeemer University College, seeks to relate Biblical principles to political economy. As a Reformed Christian in the Kuyperian mould, he believes that it is incumbent upon us to glorify God in all that we do. As Kuyper famously proclaimed, "There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is sovereign over all, does not cry 'Mine!'" The challenge, then, is to see how God might be honoured in business activity, politics, and policy-formation. Dr. Boersema draws heavily on the Programmes of the Reformed political parties in the Netherlands, notably the *Gereformeerde Politiek Verbond* (GPV), many of whose members he interviewed in the course of his research. One of the values of the book is that it makes the insights of the party

members accessible to an English-speaking audience for the first time.

Dr. Boersema's point of departure is the Cultural Mandate of Genesis 1:28. Mankind's role is to care for God's world. We must, as God's stewards, develop the world to enable man to honour God (19, 33). As he points out, though, equating the cultural mandate with development (rather than, for example, a narrower approach based on the "dominion" of mankind) is controversial; he devotes a helpful appendix to examining these issues, concluding that developing the earth is not an end-in-itself but a means by which God can be honoured.

Moving on from this view of the cultural mandate, Dr. Boersema examines some derivative principles to guide thinking on political economy. The cultural mandate gave