



How Shall We Live Now?

(Articles from the *What If...* Series from Lifelong Faith)

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WHAT IF . . .

Imagining Possibilities

How Shall We Live Now? – Part One

John Roberto

(This is the first in a series of articles on formation for Christian living post-pandemic.)

I believe that faith formation (and the whole church) in the emerging post-pandemic world will need to help people of all ages answer the question “How shall we live now?” The pandemic has disrupted our lives in ways that we have only begun to name. We are searching anew for meaning and purpose – now in a post-pandemic world. We are trying to process our losses and the grief that brings. We are struggling to build a world of justice, peace, care for creation, and respect for the dignity of all people. We are starting to rebuild our network of relationships and our resiliency as families and communities. We are all looking to answer the question, “How shall we live now?” in a post-pandemic world. What are the approaches, resources, people, and wisdom we need to address this question?

Theologian and author Miroslav Volf echoes this challenge in his prophetic words from 2002.

. . . the central challenge for pastoral ministry today concerns the most important mark of good ministry: the ability effectively to mediate faith as an integral way of life to persons, communities and cultures. This has been true throughout history, in every culture and for every community of faith. In our time, however, communities of faith seem to be falling short precisely at this point. . . . the main problem is that the communities of faith have not found effective ways to offer a compelling vision of an integral way of life that is worth living. Many people are seeking precisely that.

In an interview with Dr. Peter Senge (senior lecturer at MIT, author of *The Fifth Discipline*) at a conference for Christian pastors, Brian McLaren relates this story that gets to the heart of the matter.

“Hello, Dr. Senge. It’s a great honor for us to have you with us. Your image is being projected to about five hundred pastors. I imagine this is a different kind of crowd than you normally address. What would you like to say to a group of five hundred Christian ministers?”

“Well, Brian, you’re right. I don’t normally speak to pastors. Actually I was thinking about that very question yesterday when I was in a large bookstore. I asked the bookstore manager what the most popular books are these days. Most popular he said, were books about how to get rich in the new information economy, which didn’t surprise me.

“Second most popular, the manager said, were books about spirituality, and in particular, books about Buddhism. And so when I thought about speaking to five hundred Christian pastors today, I thought I’d begin by asking you all a question: why are books on Buddhism so popular, and not books on Christianity?”

“Well, Dr Senge,” I said, trying not to sound as clumsy as I felt, “how would you answer that question?”

He replied, “I think it’s because Buddhism presents itself as a way of life, and Christianity presents itself as a system of belief. So I would want to get Christian ministers thinking about how to rediscover their own faith as a way life, because that’s what people are searching for today. That’s what they need more.” (McLaren, 2-3)

This story, written well before the pandemic, illustrates our central challenge. Most published faith formation curriculum over the past 20-25 years have focused on “what we believe” or “what you should believe if you want to be a (fill in the denomination).” For children and teens we have emphasized either learning the catechism of your particular Christian tradition or learning (memorizing?) specific Bible teachings or stories as the content necessary for developing a Christian way of life.

In his reflection on Senge’s insight, McLaren writes, “The issue, of course, isn’t either/or, but both/and; it’s hard to deny that many of us have lost the “way” of our faith. Without a coherent and compelling way of life, formed in community and expressed in mission, some of us begin losing interest in the system of belief, or we begin holding it grimly, even meanly, driving more and more people away from faith rather than attracting them toward it.” (McLaren, 3-4)

I’m sure you’re familiar with the three-word dynamic of coming to faith: **Believing, Belonging, Behaving**. Since the Reformation and the era of catechisms the formula has been we *Believe* certain truths about the Christian faith, then we *Behave* in a way that reflects these beliefs, and finally we become a (full) member of that particular Christian tradition (Catholic, Lutheran, Anglican, Wesleyan, Calvinist, et al.). This approach continues until the present day.

If the central question in the post-pandemic world is “How shall we live now?” then our focus needs to shift to **Behave** (practices) – **Belong** (a community living those practices) – **Believe** (how the tradition informs our practices. Understanding the ancient Christian practices and their applicability today is the key. Dr. Craig Dykstra, author of *Growing in the Life of Faith* and co-editor of *Practicing Our Faith*, writes:

In my view, an essential task of education in faith is to teach all the basic practices of the Christian faith. The fundamental aim of Christian education in all its forms, varieties, and settings should be that individuals—and indeed whole communities—learn these practices, be drawn into participation in them, learn to do them with increasingly deepened understanding and skill, learn to extend them more broadly and fully in their own lives and into their world, and learn to correct them, strengthen them, and improve them. (71)

People come to faith and grow in faith and in the life of faith by participating in the practices of the Christian community. They come to faith and grow in faith and in the life of faith in the context of these practices as they themselves, participating in them actively, actually doing what the practices involve. And they learn the Christian practices – not only through experience but through the guidance, mentoring, and teaching where people are learn how to live these practices.

Consider what it takes to be an actor, singer, musician, artist, dancer, writer, or athlete. They all require actually performing, developing skills, thinking, and practicing over and over again in order to do it well. While singers and musicians must learn music theory, that is not enough. They have to actually play the instrument and practice. An artist may know art history and the different forms and styles or painting, but the artist must actually paint and continue to do so to master her or his craft. We have a lot to learn from their example. Craig Dykstra notes,

The practice of Christian faith is a lot more physical than we usually recognize or let on. It is a body faith—an embodied faith—that involves gestures, moves, going certain places (where people are hungry and thirsty, for example; where suffering occurs), and doing certain things. As with every other practice, learning the practices of the life of the Christian faith involves practice, repeated participation in the bodily actions that make up those practices. (72)

What if faith formation in the post-pandemic world focused its attention, curriculum, programming, and resources on addressing the question “How shall we live now?” Consider what this might look like in practice.

- ◆ We would begin with **Behave** and formation in the Christian practices that speak especially to our lives today as the primary content of faith formation for all ages, and engage people in learning and performing these practices.
- ◆ We would build supportive communities of practice (**Belong**) in age groups, families, and all ages together that provide the environment for learning, developing skills, performing, and reflecting.
- ◆ We would engage in thoughtful reflection on the Christian beliefs (**Believe**) that inform the Christian practices. Engagement in practices helps us see how core beliefs are to be understood and applied to living as Christians in this ever-changing world. “In most cases, Christian practices come first and Christian beliefs follow—or rather, beliefs are already entailed in practices, so that their explicit espousing becomes a matter of

bringing to consciousness what is implicit in the engagement in practices themselves.”
(Volf)

What does the content of curriculum or programming for all ages look like when it is focused on Christian practices. Craig Dykstra in his book *Growing in the Life of Faith* identifies fourteen practices that appear consistently throughout the Christian tradition and that are particularly significant for Christians today. Briefly, they include:

1. Worshipping God together—praising God, giving thanks for God’s creative and redemptive work in the world, hearing God’s word preached, and receiving the sacraments given to us in Christ
2. Telling the Christian story to one another—reading and hearing the Scriptures and also the stories of the church’s experience through its history
3. Interpreting together the Scriptures and history of the church’s experience, particularly in relation to their meaning for our own lives in the world
4. Praying—together and by ourselves, not only in formal services of worship but in all times and places
5. Confessing our sin to one another, and forgiving and becoming reconciled with one another
6. Tolerating one another’s failures and encouraging one another in the work each must do and the vocation each must live
7. Carrying out specific faithful acts of service and witness together
8. Giving generously of one’s means and receiving gratefully gifts others have to give
9. Suffering with and for one another and all whom Jesus showed us to be our neighbors
10. Providing hospitality and care, not only to one another but to strangers and even enemies
11. Listening and talking attentively to one another about our particular experiences in life
12. Struggling together to become conscious of and to understand the nature of the context in which we live
13. Criticizing and resisting all those power and patterns (both within the church and in the world as a whole) that destroy human beings, corrode human community, and injure God’s creation
14. 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 (42-43)

The next articles in this series will describe what formation in Christian practices looks like, and the resources we need to move toward a practices-oriented curriculum for everyone.

Works Cited

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- McLaren, Brian. *Finding Our Way—The Return of the Ancient Practices*. Thomas Nelson, 2010.
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WHAT IF...

Imagining Possibilities

How Shall We Live Now?

Practices of a Christian Way of Life

(This is the second in a series of articles on formation for Christian living post-pandemic.)

John Roberto

The “How Shall We Live Now?” series of articles is a response to the hungers and concerns of people as we emerge from the many months of the pandemic. This series seeks to address what I believe is one of the most important questions for faith formation (and the whole church) to address today: *How shall we live now?* The first article proposed that we shift the dynamic of forming faith today by focusing first on *Behaving* (practices for Christian living) leading to *Belonging* (being part of a Christian community living those practices) and integrating *Believing* (reflecting on how the Christian tradition informs our practices).

Behaving (Christian practice) is about walking with God, becoming kind, and doing justice: “*what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?*” (Micah 6:8). It is not about believing in God and being a good person; it is about how one becomes a good person through the practice of loving God.

What do we mean by Christian practice?

Dorothy Bass, co-editor of *Practicing Our Faith* and author of several books on Christian practices, describes a Christian practice in this way,

... a set of activities Christian people do together over time to address fundamental human needs in the light of and in response to God’s active presence for the life of the world in Jesus Christ .

... the short definition of practice is “embodied wisdom”—a certain knowledge of the world is embodied and engendered by the way we go through our daily lives. There is an integral relationship between how we live and what we can know of God, other people and the world. What we believe is entangled with

what we do. We can believe more fully as we act more boldly. And we can act more boldly as we believe more fully. Christian practices invite us into Christ's radical way of being in the world.

In his book, *The Heart of Christianity*, Marcus Borg describes the centrality of practice in the Christian faith in this way,

What does it mean to love God? We all know that both the Hebrew Bible and Jesus commend and command us "to love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your life force, and with all your mind, and with all your strength." Indeed, it is the "greatest commandment." But what does it mean to do this? In a word, it means "practice." Loving God means paying attention to God and to what God loves. The way we do this is through "practice.

. . . Christianity is a "way," a path, a way of life. Practice is about the living of the Christian way. And "practice" really should be thought of as plural: practice is about practices, the means by which we live the Christian life. (105)

Practice is about living "the way." The aim and purpose of practice is the two transformations at the center of the Christian life: being born again, opening the heart, dying to an old identity and being born into a new identity; and becoming passionate about God's passion, the life of compassion and justice in the world. Practice is about paying attention to God and living the Christian path. (192)

Reflecting on the work of Dorothy Bass, Marcus Borg, and the authors of *Practicing Our Faith*, we can identify several important characteristics of Christian practices.

- ◆ **Practices are about paying attention to God:** This involves attending to our relationship with God, spending time in it, being intentional and thoughtful about it, valuing it, and ideally enjoying it. Paying attention to our relationship with God will shape and form us. The practices are for the deepening of our life with God and our love for God.
- ◆ **Practices are about the formation of Christian identity.** The formation of Christian identity will always involve a transformation of identity—from an identity given by the “world” to an identity in God, in Christ. The Christian life is about “conversion”—a continuing process that goes on through the course of the Christian life.
- ◆ **Practices are about the formation of Christian character.** How we behave is a function of the kind of person we have become and are becoming. Character and identity are closely connected: the internalization of a deeper Christian identity shapes character. The shaping of character happens through deeds—we become what we do. Our character is shaped by entering into a larger identity and larger self through life “in Christ.” Practice is the way this happens. The Spirit of God works through practice.

- ◆ **Practices are about nourishment.** Practice is not simply something we do. Rather, it nourishes us. Even as practice is about paying attention to God, it also nourishes and nurtures us.
- ◆ **Practices engage us in God’s activities in the world and reflect God’s grace and love.** Teresa of Avila put it this way: “Yours are the eyes through which Christ’s compassion is to look out to the world. Yours are the feet with which Christ is to go about doing good. Yours are the hands with which Christ is to bless all people now.”
- ◆ **Practices are learned with and from other people.** We have been invited into Christian practices by Jesus. Almost always, however, other people have helped us to hear Jesus’ invitation and to learn the moves that make it possible to respond.
- ◆ **Practices come to us from the past and will be shaped by us for the future.** Our challenge and privilege are to join in each practice *where we are*. By drawing on the wisdom of the past and being creative as we put the practice into play in our own situation, we recognize that what we do will have an influence on generations to come.
- ◆ **Practices are thought-full; they rely on beliefs and develops in us certain kinds of wisdom.** The biblical story clothes each practice with images and words. Each practice relies on specific Christian beliefs; for example, the belief in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ gives us hope (grieving) and allows us to repair torn relationships (forgiveness). However, belief doesn’t always come before practice: being members of communities where the Christian practices are really lived can help us to understand and embrace the central beliefs of the Christian faith more fully.
- ◆ **Each practice is a strand in a whole way of life.** Taken all together, Christian practices add up to a way to live. They are woven together: if one is missing, all are distorted in some way. On the other hand, because they are woven together, any one practice can become a gateway into faithful living.

What practices are central to forming a Christian way of life?

We can discover the most important Christian practices by drawing upon the wisdom of the Bible and the Christian tradition. At the heart of Christian practice is Jesus—in his presence and example, a way to live comes into focus. We experiences this model of living whenever we celebrate the blessings of life, serve the poor and vulnerable, offer our lives in prayer, forgive others, keep the Sabbath holy, discern God’s will for us, or make an effort to transform the world.

Without suggesting that the following Christian practices are a definitive list, they do emerge repeatedly in the Bible and Christian tradition, and have demonstrated their importance in forming a distinctively Christian way of life. These practices are illustrative of the wisdom available to us in building a Christian way of life that speaks to the challenges of living faithfully today. (The Appendix has a summary of twelve Christian practices described in the book *Practicing Our Faith*.)

- ◆ Caring for Creation
- ◆ Discernment
- ◆ Doing Justice
- ◆ Dying Well
- ◆ Eating Well
- ◆ Embracing Diversity
- ◆ Finding God in Everyday Life
- ◆ Forgiveness
- ◆ Healing
- ◆ Honoring the Body
- ◆ Hospitality
- ◆ Household Economics
- ◆ Keeping Sabbath
- ◆ Praying
- ◆ Peace and Reconciliation
- ◆ Reading the Bible
- ◆ Saying Yes and Saying No
- ◆ Serving the Poor and Vulnerable
- ◆ Shaping and Forming Communities
- ◆ Singing Our Lives
- ◆ Stewardship and Generosity
- ◆ Testimony
- ◆ Worship

We form people in these practices of the Christian way of life by drawing upon the wisdom of the Bible and Christian tradition, and connecting the practices to the “signs of the times” – the struggles, joys, needs, and hungers of people and communities today, and equipping people with the skills and ways to live the practice in their daily life.

There are many fundamental human needs and hungers of people today (individuals, families, and communities) as we emerge from the disruptions created by the pandemic and broader social issues. Formation connects Christian practices to the signs of our times, such as overcoming isolation and rebuilding community; addressing wellbeing (e.g., stress and anxiety); dealing with loss and grief; working for justice for all people, promoting peace and reconciliation, developing racial understanding and equality, caring for creation, respecting the dignity and rights of all people; and much more.

Reflection

- ◆ *What are the “signs of the times” in your community?*
- ◆ *Which Christian practices can address the hungers and needs of individuals, families, and the whole community?*

Next Article in the Series

In the third article of the series, I will describe what a “practices curriculum” might look like in a church and how we can educate for Christian practices.

Works Cited

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- Borg, Marcus. *Heart of Christianity*. HarperSanFrancisco, 2003.

Twelve Christian Practices

(Based on *Practicing Our Faith*. Dorothy Bass and Craig Dykstra, editors. Augsburg Fortress, 2019)

Discernment

Our decisions and our search for guidance take place in the active presence of a God who intimately cares about our life situations and who invites us to participate in the divine activities of healing and transformation (Frank Rogers, Jr.). Christians believe we are not alone in the midst of uncertain insights and conflicting impulses. Discernment is the intentional practice by which a community or an individual seeks, recognizes, and intentionally takes part in the activity of God in concrete situations.

Dying Well

Those who face death experience the living presence of God through the living presence of the community that cherishes and mourns them (Amy Plantinga Pauw). Death is a frightening prospect, for the specter of death destroys any illusion that we are in full control of our lives. How is it, then, that some people are able to die with the assurance that death is not the final word? In the Christian practice of dying well, Christian people do things with and for one another in response to God's strong love, translating into concrete acts our belief in the resurrection of Christ, and of ourselves. Dying well embraces both lament and hope, and both a sense of divine judgment and an awareness of divine mercy.

Forgiveness

Practicing forgiveness can produce dramatic transformations in our imaginations and the psychological, social and political horizons of our lives (L. Gregory Jones). The practice of forgiveness is not simply a one-time action or an isolated feeling or thought. Forgiveness involves us in a whole way of life that is shaped by an ever-deepening friendship with God and with other people. The central goal of this practice is to reconcile, to restore communion—with God, with one another, and with the whole creation. L. Gregory Jones writes, "Forgiveness works through our ongoing willingness to give up certain claims against one another, to give the truth when we access our relationships with one another, and to give gifts of ourselves by making innovative gestures that offer a future not bound by the past."

Healing

Healing is an indispensable part of the coming wholeness that God intends for all creation (John Koenig). The practice of healing is a central part of the reconciling activity of God in the world. Healing events are daily signs of the divine mercy that is surging through the world and guiding it

toward its final perfection. This is true whether they take place by the sharing of chicken soup, the performance of delicate surgery, or the laying on of hands in a service of worship.

Honoring the Body

To hold a newborn in one's arms is to know both the sacredness and the vulnerability of the body; indeed, it is to know that there is an intimate connection between sacredness and vulnerability (Stephanie Paulsell). The practice of honoring the body is born of the confidence that our bodies are made in the image of God's own goodness. As the place where the divine presence dwells, our bodies are worthy of care and blessing and ought never to be degraded or exploited. It is through our daily bodily acts that we might live more fully into the sacredness of our bodies and the bodies of others. Stephanie Paulsell writes, "The practice of honoring the body challenges us to remember the sacredness of the body in every moment of our lives... Because our bodies are so vulnerable, we need each other to protect and care for them."

Hospitality

To welcome the stranger is to acknowledge him as a human being made in God's image; it is to treat her as one of equal worth with ourselves— indeed, as one who may teach us something out of the richness of experiences different from our own (Ana Maria Pineda). The need for shelter is a fundamental human need. None of us ever knows for sure when we might be uprooted and cast on the mercy of others. But how do we overcome our fear in order to welcome and shelter a stranger? The Christian practice of hospitality is the practice of providing a space to take in a stranger. It also encompasses the skills of welcoming friends and family to our tables, to claim the joy of homecoming.

Household Economics

To choose simplicity is to live into complicated questions without easy answers, taking one step that may make another step possible (Sharon Daloz Parks). Good economic practice—positive ways of exchanging goods and services—is about the well-being, the livelihood, of the whole household. In the face of great economic and environmental challenges, the Christian practice of household economics calls on us to manage our private homes for the well-being and livelihood of the small planet home we all share.

Keeping Sabbath

Sabbath keeping is not about taking a day off but about being recalled to our knowledge of and gratitude for God's activity in creating the world, giving liberty to captives, and overcoming the powers of death (Dorothy C. Bass). "I'm so busy... I just don't have enough time to complete all my work." Do you need a break, but doubt you have time for it? What about those who don't have sufficient

work to sustain themselves? The practice of keeping Sabbath helps us to resist the tyranny of too much or too little work.

Saying Yes and Saying No

Christian asceticism is not spiritual boot camp, but neither is it effortless. Learning when and how, to what, and to whom to give our yes or our no is a lifelong project (M. Shawn Copeland). Tough decisions and persistent effort are required of those who seek lives that are whole and holy. If we are to grow in faithful living, we need to renounce the things that choke off the fullness of life that God intended for us, and we must follow through on our commitments to pray, to be conscientious, and to be in mutually supportive relations with other faithful persons. These acts take self-discipline. We must learn the practice of saying no to that which crowds God out and yes to a way of life that makes space for God.

Shaping Communities

Coordinating a community's practices through good governance helps to make its way of life, clear, visible and viable (Larry L. Rasmussen). The shaping of communities is the practice by which we agree to be reliable personally and organizationally. This practice takes on life through roles and rituals, laws and agreements—indeed, through the whole assortment of shared commitments and institutional arrangements that order common life. In one sense, then, shaping communities is not just a single practice of its own. It is the practice that provides the choreography for all the other practices of a community or society.

Singing our Lives

If music is the language of the soul made audible, then human voices, raised in concert in human gatherings, are primary instruments of the soul (Don Saliers). What we sing and how we sing reveals much of who we are, and entering into another's song and music making provides a gateway into their world, which might be much different from our own. Something is shared in singing that goes beyond the words alone. This something has taken shape over many centuries in a practice that expresses our deepest yearning and dearest joy: the practice of singing our lives to God.

Testimony

Testimony occurs in particular settings—a courtroom or a church—where a community expects to hear the truth spoken (Thomas Hoyt, Jr.). 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 that recognizes that falsehood is strong, but that yearns nonetheless to know what is true and good.



WHAT IF...

Imagining Possibilities

How Shall We Live Now?

Designing a Christian Practices Curriculum

(This is the third in a series of articles on formation for Christian living post-pandemic.)

John Roberto

The first article in the “How Shall We Live Now?” proposed a faith forming dynamic of *Behaving* (practices for Christian living) leading to *Belonging* (being part of a Christian community living those practices) and integrating *Believing* (reflecting on how the Christian tradition informs our practices). This is an emphasis on forming Christians through the practices of faith: “*what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?*” (Micah 6:8).

The second article explored what we mean by Christian practice and which practices are central to forming a Christian way of life. Christian practices are the ways by which we live the Christian way of life and deepen our relationship with God. The Christian community gathers around Jesus, whose way of life embodies the loving, challenging life of God. Through Jesus’ presence and example, a way to live comes into focus. The community, with Jesus at its heart, experiences this model of living whenever we celebrate the blessings of life, serve the poor and vulnerable, offer our lives in prayer, forgive others, keep the Sabbath holy, discern God’s will for us, or make an effort to transform the world.

This third article in the series focuses on building a curriculum to form people of all ages in Christian practices. The fourth article will focus on the processes (methodology) of teaching and learning Christian practices. On the Lifelong Faith website there will learning activities and curated resources for teaching Christian practices, including Praying, Reading the Bible, Keeping Sabbath, Eating Well, Forgiveness, Doing Justice, Serving the Poor and Vulnerable, Honoring the Body, Dying Well, Household Economics, Caring for Creation, and Participating in Community.

A Christian Practices Curriculum

We form people in the practices of the Christian way of life by drawing upon the wisdom of the Bible and Christian tradition, and connecting the practices to the “signs of the times” – the struggles, joys, needs, and hungers of people and communities today, and equipping people with the skills and tools to live the practice in their daily life.

In the second article, I suggested 23 Christian practices that emerge repeatedly in the Bible and Christian tradition, and have demonstrated their importance in forming a distinctively Christian way of life. The list is not exhaustive, but is a great starting point for building a curriculum in your church on Christian practices.

- ◆ Caring for Creation
- ◆ Discernment
- ◆ Doing Justice
- ◆ Dying Well
- ◆ Eating Well
- ◆ Embracing Diversity
- ◆ Finding God in Everyday Life
- ◆ Forgiveness
- ◆ Healing
- ◆ Honoring the Body
- ◆ Hospitality
- ◆ Household Economics
- ◆ Keeping Sabbath
- ◆ Praying
- ◆ Peace and Reconciliation
- ◆ Reading the Bible
- ◆ Saying Yes and Saying No
- ◆ Serving the Poor and Vulnerable
- ◆ Shaping and Forming Communities
- ◆ Singing Our Lives
- ◆ Stewardship and Generosity
- ◆ Testimony
- ◆ Worship

Formation Process

The dynamic of forming people of all ages in a Christian practice has four movements. (The fourth article of the series will explore how to design and teach Christian practices formation programs.)

1. Reflecting on Life Experience:
 - Awareness of the basic human need in this particular aspect of their lives
 - Reflection on the hunger for the Christian practice and how people may already be living this practice.
2. Exploring the Christian Practice:
 - In the Bible and Christian tradition
 - In the lives of people through history and in the community
 - In its connection to the basic needs and hungers of people today
 - In its importance of the practice for life as a Christian
3. Experiencing the Practice
 - Immersion into the practice

4. Applying the Practice to Life:

- Ideas and strategies to integrate the Christian practice into daily life

The essential element in formation programs is for people to experience the Christian practice, to be immersed in the actual experience of doing the practice. Understanding and reflection is important, but the key is direct experience and application to one's daily life and to community life. So decisions about the type of programming need to reflect how well they embody experience and application.

Curriculum Approaches

Here are several approaches for building a curriculum plan for formation in Christian practices in your church. Use as many as apply to your church community in creating your plan.

Approach 1. Engage in the Christian Practices of Your Community

The church teaches in everything it is and does. It teaches about matters large and small by the way it lives and practices its faith. A church teaches the practice of hospitality by how the community welcomes, or does not welcome, the stranger. A church teaches about the place and significance of Scripture by how it is read in worship, by how it is treated in sermons, and by the place it holds in our communal and personal lives.

Begin by exploring how your church is already living Christian practices in its life together. Use the list of 23 practices as a guide. Think about your church's life, ministries, and activities and what they tell you about how your community participates in the Christian practices. Consider which practices are done especially well. Does your congregation have a gift for certain practices?

Second, select one or more practices that can be integrated into current faith formation programming or that can form the basis for new programming with children, youth, adults, families, and all ages (intergenerational).

Third, design "practice learning modules" to integrate into programming using a method such as:

- ◆ *preparing* people with the biblical and theological understanding of the practice
- ◆ *engaging* people in hands-on experience of the practice with the faith community
- ◆ *reflecting* on the experience and its meaning for them
- ◆ *integrating* the practice into daily life

Approach 2. Embed Christian Practices into Existing Formation Programs.

Analyze current faith formation with all ages to determine where Christian practices can be embedded as a session or multiple sessions. For example:

- ◆ A service program or mission trip is an opportunity to teach Doing Justice, Serving the Poor and Vulnerable, and Hospitality.
- ◆ A program preparing for First Communion could embed Eating Well, Praying, Reading the Bible, and Keeping Sabbath.
- ◆ A Christian initiation or new member formation program could incorporate many of the practices such as Discernment, Doing Justice, Keeping Sabbath, Reading the Bible, Praying, Stewardship, Testimony, and Worship.

Christian Practices	Where It Can Be Embedded
Caring for Creation	
Discernment	
Doing Justice	
Dying Well	
Eating Well	
Embracing Diversity	
Finding God in Everyday Life	
Forgiveness	
Healing	
Honoring the Body	
Hospitality	
Household Economics	
Keeping Sabbath	
Praying	
Peace and Reconciliation	
Reading the Bible	
Saying Yes and Saying No	
Serving the Poor and Vulnerable	
Shaping and Forming Communities	
Singing Our Lives	
Stewardship and Generosity	
Testimony	
Worship	

Approach 3. Develop an Annual or Seasonal Christian Practices Plan.

Develop a church-wide annual plan focusing on a Christian practice each month (“30 Days of Practice”) through all of the formational programs in the church—family, intergenerational, and age groups—and integrating the practice of the month into Sunday worship and preaching, church ministries and projects, and even church meetings. The practice of the month can also



be a focus on social media through e-newsletters, Facebook posts, Instagram images, YouTube videos, etc.

One way to sequence the Christian practices over the course of the year is to identify times during the year when the church or society is already focused on a particular practice, such as Stewardship and Generosity for Thanksgiving in November (or October in Canada). During the Lenten Season, a church can focus on several practices, such as Forgiving, Discernment, Praying, Doing Justice, and Serving the Poor and Vulnerable.

A variation on the monthly approach is to go more in-depth on a Christian practice over multiple months, such as a practice each quarter, and focus on four practices each year.

Approach 4. Align Christian Practices with the Lectionary.

Connect the Sunday lectionary readings (and preaching) to Christian practices and offer formation programs for families and all ages, monthly or seasonally. (This approach is another way of implementing Approach 3).

To develop a monthly plan, review the Lectionary readings for each month and determine a Christian practice that emerges from the readings and make that the focus for the month. For example in Cycle B (Mark’s Gospel) the August through November readings provide opportunities to focus on several Christian practices in worship, preaching, and formation:

- ◆ 23rd Sunday (B): Mark 7:31-37 Healing, Honoring the Body
- ◆ 24th Sunday (B): Mark 8:27-35 Testimony
- ◆ 28th Sunday (B): Mark 10:17-30 Discernment
- ◆ 29th Sunday (B): Mark 10:35-45 Doing Justice, Serving the Poor and Vulnerable
- ◆ 30th Sunday (B): Mark 8:27-35 Healing, Honoring the Body

Approach 5. Connect Christian Practices to Milestones and Life Transitions.

Utilize a milestone or life transition to form people in a Christian practice that directly connects to what is happening in the life of the individual or family. For example the many life decisions of the youth and young adult years provide an opportunity for teaching “Discernment.” The beginning of a new life together as a married couple is an opportunity for “Household Economics.”

Milestone or Life Transition	Examples of Christian Practices
Birth / Baptism	Honoring the Body
Young Children	Praying
Young Children in Worship	Keeping Sabbath, Reading the Bible, Hospitality
First Communion	Eating Well, Keeping Sabbath
Receiving a first Bible	Reading the Bible

Children	Praying, Honoring the Body, Forgiving
Adolescents	Praying, Honoring the Body, Forgiving, Embracing Diversity, Discernment, Serving, Doing Justice, Caring for Creation
Confirmation	Serving the Poor and Vulnerable, Doing Justice, Caring for Creation, Keeping Sabbath, Praying, Reading the Bible
Graduation (HS, College)	Discernment, Saying Yes and Saying No
A New Home / Apartment	Household Economics; Hospitality, Eating Well, Stewardship and Generosity
Career / First Job	Discernment, Stewardship and Generosity
Wedding	Household Economics, Forgiveness
Adulthood	All Practices
Retirement	Discernment
Older Adult Transitions	Honoring the Body, Dying Well

Approach 6. Create Christian Practice Apprenticeships.

Identify “Practice Mentors” in your church, who are living embodiments of a Christian practice, such as service or hospitality or prayer. Develop formation programs around these teachers in individualized and small group settings where mentors can apprentice people who want to learn how to live the Christian practice. For example, if people wanted to learn how to serve people in need at the local homeless shelter, they can accompany the “practice mentor” when he or she works at the shelter, and learn about homelessness and the practice of hospitality and serving others. Each apprenticeship can include a study component to learn about the teachings and examples from the Bible and Christian tradition. This model of mentoring could be applied across the entire church and become integral to all learning programs in the curriculum.

Programming Models

There are a variety of programming models that can be incorporated in your curriculum plan—models you are already use and new models you might adopt. With existing models create plans to incorporate formation in Christian practices using one or more the approaches described earlier. This may be a good opportunity to consider implementing one or more new models that are better designed for forming people in Christian practices. Here are a few examples of programming models.

- ◆ **Family and Intergenerational** programs provide an excellent format for exploring and learning Christian practices. The witness of the different age groups, especially older adults, makes for a rich learning environment.
- ◆ **Families at Home** programs can provide playlists of learning (print, video, audio), published on a website, to introduce families to a practice and then provide activities for family experiences of the practice at home.

- ◆ **Extended** programs such as vacation Bible school, summer camps, and mission trips can focus on several practices, and can combine study with hands-on experience.
- ◆ **Courses** and **workshops** can focus on one or more Christian practices with opportunities for people to experience the practice between sessions or as part of the program.
- ◆ **Retreats** provide an extended time setting for the development of practices that need a more reflective environment, such as Praying, Discernment, and Healing.
- ◆ **Discussions** after Sunday worship provide a setting for exploring Christian practices in the Scripture readings.
- ◆ **Field trips** provide an opportunity to see and experience Christian practices in action, such as Dying Well at a hospice center, Serving the Poor and Vulnerable at a soup kitchen, Healing at a clinic.
- ◆ **Small Groups**, focused on a Christian practice, provide a supportive setting for learning, experiencing, reflecting, and applying the practice to daily life.

Next in the Series

The *fourth* article in the series will focus on the processes (methodology) of teaching and learning Christian practices. And the *fifth* and final article will focus on the process of forming habits of faith, i.e., making practices part of one's daily life.

Beginning the week of April 26 on the Lifelong Faith website I will be uploading learning activities and curated resources for teaching Christian practices. Each downloadable kit will include a guide to teaching the Christian practice and document with reproducible activities. Currently scheduled for publication online are Praying, Reading the Bible, Keeping Sabbath, Eating Well, Forgiveness, Doing Justice, Serving the Poor and Vulnerable, Honoring the Body, Dying Well, Household Economics, Caring for Creation, and Participating in Community.

Stay tuned!



WHAT IF...

Imagining Possibilities

How Shall We Live Now? – Part Four *Designing a Christian Practices Learning Program*

John Roberto

(This is the fourth in a series of articles on formation for Christian living post-pandemic.)

The **first** article in the “How Shall We Live Now?” series proposed a faith forming dynamic of *Behaving* (practices for Christian living) leading to *Belonging* (being part of a Christian community living those practices) and integrating *Believing* (reflecting on how the Christian tradition informs our practices). The **second** article explored what we mean by Christian practice and which practices are central to forming a Christian way of life. The **third** article focused on building a curriculum to form people of all ages in Christian practices and presented six ways to develop a plan for your church:

1. Engage in the Christian Practices of Your Community
2. Embed Christian Practices into Existing Formation Programs.
3. Develop an Annual or Seasonal Christian Practices Plan.
4. Align Christian Practices with the Lectionary.
5. Connect Christian Practices to Milestones and Life Transitions.
6. Create Christian Practice Apprenticeships.

This **fourth** article will focus on designing learning programs and the processes (methodology) of teaching and learning Christian practices. Now online in **Practices** at LifelongFaith.com are downloadable learning programs, reproducible activities, and curated resources for teaching Christian practices. Currently available are Praying, Reading the Bible, Keeping Sabbath, and Eating Well. Coming soon will be Forgiveness, Doing Justice, Serving the Poor and Vulnerable, Honoring the Body, Dying Well, Household Economics, and Caring for Creation.

The **fifth** and final article in the series will focus on the process of forming habits of faith, i.e., making practices part of one’s daily life.

A Learning Process for Christian Practices

The dynamic of forming people of all ages in a Christian practice incorporates four movements, which become the template for designing Christian practices learning programs.

Movement 1. Reflecting on Our Lives

The first movement, *Reflecting*, taps into a basic area of human need that can find meaning and purpose in a Christian practice. Reflecting gives people an opportunity to become aware of how they experience a basic human need and hunger for the Christian practice in their own life. Reflecting also provides space for people to become aware of how they already engage in this practice, and the things that distort or hinder the practice.

Oftentimes this first movement begins with real-life stories (presentations, print, audio, and/or video) of people who seek meaning and purpose for their lives through a particular practice. This helps spark people's reflection and storytelling.

Movement 2. Exploring the Christian Practice

The second movement, *Exploring*, grounds the Christian practice in the Bible by describing how the biblical story deepens our understanding of the Christian practice and connects to people's human needs and hungers. We present the wisdom of the Christian tradition on a particular Christian practice, describing what people today, and throughout history, actually do when they are engaged well in a particular practice—how people or communities live the practice with exceptional grace and skill. By connecting the Christian practice to human needs and hungers, people can identify how and why a practice is important to living a meaningful life.

Movement 3. Experiencing the Christian Practice

The third movement, *Experiencing*, immerses people in the actual practice—opportunities to experience activities that lead them into the Christian practice. This immersion can take place in programs, within the life of the Christian community (such as worship and ministry activities), and/or out in the community (serving people, providing hospitality, etc.). The key is that people actually experience the practice.

Movement 4. Living the Practice

The fourth movement, *Living*, includes reflecting on the experience of the practice activities (Movement 3); showing people how to make the Christian practice a part of everyday life; and providing people with a variety of tools and activities to integrate the Christian practice into their daily life—at home, at work, at school, and in the world.

An Example of the Learning Process in Action: The Practice of Prayer

To illustrate how these four elements are incorporated into the learning process here is an example for the Practice of Prayer. (The Prayer Learning Program and reproducible Prayer Activities are available for free on the Lifelong Faith website: <https://www.lifelongfaith.com/practice-of-prayer.html>.)

1. Prayer in My Life Today
2. Prayer is. . . .
3. Prayer is Relationship with God.
4. Prayer is Opening Our Lives to God.
5. Prayer is Being Changed by God.
6. Prayer is Being Attentive to God and Others.
7. Prayer is Living.
8. Prayer Takes Practice
9. Preparing to Pray
10. Contemplative Prayer
11. Centering Prayer
12. Scripture Prayer #1: Reflective Reading
13. Scripture Prayer #2: Imaginative Prayer
14. Scripture Prayer #3: Lectio Divina
15. Scripture Prayer #4: Visio Divina
16. Scripture Prayer #5: The Psalms
17. Intercessory Prayer
18. Praise Prayer #1: Psalm 103
19. Praise Prayer #2: Psalm 95
20. Thanksgiving Prayer
21. Praying with Music
22. Online Resources for Daily Prayer
23. Praying in Color Experience
24. Praying through the Day
25. Closing the Day: The Prayer of Examen
26. Praying in Families with Children

Movement 1. Reflecting on Life Experience

These two activities help people to identify the role of prayer in their life and how they pray today.

Activities

- Prayer in My Life Today (#1)
- Prayer is.... (#2)

Movement 2. Exploring the Christian Practice

These activities explore six descriptions of prayer from the Bible and Christian tradition.

Activities (#3-8)

- Prayer is Relationship with God.
- Prayer is Opening Our Lives to God.
- Prayer is Being Changed by God.
- Prayer is Being Attentive to God and Others.
- Prayer is Living.
- Prayer Takes Practice.

Movement 3. Experiencing the Christian Practice

There are at least two ways to structure the learning design to give people direct experiences of praying through the activities: a *guided experience* and *experience centers*.

Approach 1. Guided Experience with the Whole Group. Guide all of the participants in small groups or family groupings through the selected prayer activities with a mix of presentation and direct experience.

Approach 2. Experience Centers. Offer an experience center for each activity you select. Have the participants move from station to station to experience the prayer activities, similar to attending workshops at a conference. Each learning activity should have its own room or section of a large room. If you want everyone to experience all of the learning activities, then organize the participants into the same number of groups as you have learning stations. Make the groups of equal size and have them rotate from learning station to learning station.

Activities (#10-26)

(Select activities to fit your program design. Each takes about 20 minutes to experience.)

- Contemplative Prayer
- Centering Prayer
- Scripture Prayer #1: Reflective Reading
- Scripture Prayer #2: Imaginative Prayer
- Scripture Prayer #3: Lectio Divina
- Scripture Prayer #4: Visio Divina
- Scripture Prayer #5: The Psalms
- Intercessory Prayer
- Praise Prayer #1: Psalm 103
- Praise Prayer #2: Psalm 95
- Thanksgiving Prayer
- Praying with Music
- Online Resources for Daily Prayer
- Praying in Color Experience
- Praying through the Day
- Closing the Day: The Prayer of Examen
- Praying in Families with Children

Movement 4. Living the Practice

These activities help people to reflect on their experience of the prayer activities and explore how to make prayer a part of everyday life. Provide people with a “Prayer Guide” (print and digital) with all of the activities for their personal and family use.

Application Activity

- Preparing to Pray (#9)

Reflection Activity

Reflecting on the prayer experiences. Use questions like the following to help people reflect on their experience of the prayer.

- Which prayer styles did you like best? Why?
- Which ones did you like least? Why?
- How did you feel God's presence through these prayer experiences?
- Which prayer styles do you (or your household) want to start using in your prayer life?

Integrating prayer into daily life. Use questions like the following to help people imagine how to integrate prayer in their daily lives.

- Which prayer experiences do you (or your household) want to include in your prayer plan?
- When will you (or your household) make time for prayer in your day or week (upon rising, before bedtime, meal time—breakfast or dinner, etc.)?
- Where will you (or your household) pray (at the table, in the car, outdoors, quiet room in the house, etc.)?

Program Designs

The Christian practices learning process and activities can be used in a variety of program designs:

- Intergenerational programs
- Family-centered programs
- Families at home activities (print or digital)
- Children's programming: classes, vacation Bible school, parent-child, grandparent-child
- Adolescent programming: classes, youth gatherings, and retreats
- Adult programming: independent, small groups, retreats, and large gathering settings
- Online playlists of prayer experiences for different age groups published on a website

Here are four examples of program designs for the Practice of Prayer.

One-Session Program (Guided Experience)

The four movements and activities can be used to design a one-session program of 60-90 minutes for children, youth, adults, and/or parents. Each prayer activity plan is approximately 15-20 minutes in length.

Movement 1. Reflecting on Life Experience

- Select Prayer Activity #1 or #2.

Movement 2. Exploring the Christian Practice

- Use content from Prayer Activities #3 through #8.

Movement 3. Experiencing the Christian Practice

- Select experiences (based on program schedule) from Prayer Activities #10-#25.

Movement 4. Living the Practice

- Conclude with Activity #9 “Preparing to Pray.”

Intergenerational or Family Learning Program (Experience Centers)

The four movements and prayer activities can be used to design an intergenerational or family program using prayer experience centers in a schedule that allows for three rounds of activities. Offer as many experience centers to accommodate the size of the group, and the physical space and leaders that you have. All of the Prayer Activities can be published on a website and designed onto a playlist for continuing learning.

Large Group Gathering and Opening Prayer Experience (10 minutes)

Movement 1. Reflecting on Life Experience (10-15 minutes)

- Select Prayer Activity #1 or #2.

Movement 2. Exploring the Christian Practice (10 minutes)

- Use content from Prayer Activities #3 through #8.

Movement 3. Experiencing the Christian Practice: Select from Prayer Activities #10-#25.

- Round 1: Prayer Centers – a mix of all ages and age-appropriate centers (20 minutes)
Break—move to next Center (5 minutes)
- Round 2: Prayer Centers – a mix of all ages and age-appropriate centers (20 minutes)
Break—move to next Center (5 minutes)
- Round 3: Prayer Centers – a mix of all ages and age-appropriate centers (20 minutes)
Break—move to next Center (5 minutes)

Movement 4. Living the Practice

- Reflect on the Prayer Experiences
- Conclude with Activity #9 “Preparing to Pray.”

Closing Prayer

Small Group Program (Guided Experience)

The four movements and prayer activities can be designed into a multi-session small group program of 90 minutes per sessions. Create a Prayer Guide (print, digital) to accompany the program. All of the Prayer Activities can be published on a website and designed onto a playlist for each session. Here’s an example of a 4-week program. (See the list of prayer activities earlier for the numbering.)

Week #1. Movements 1 and 2: Fundamentals of Prayer

Movement 1. Reflecting on Life Experience

- Select Prayer Activity #1 or #2.

Movement 2. Exploring the Christian Practice

- Use content from Prayer Activities #3 through #8.

Week 2. Movement 3. Experiencing the Christian Practice

- Scripture Prayer Experiences: Choose from Prayer Activities #11-14

Week 3. Movement 3. Experiencing the Christian Practice

- Contemplative Prayer (#10), Intercessory Prayer (#15), Praise Prayer (#16 or 17), Thanksgiving Prayer (#18)

Week 4.

Movement 3. Experiencing the Christian Practice

- Praying Online (#21), Praying through the Day (#22) Or Closing the Day: The Prayer of Examen (#23)

Movement 4. Living the Practice

- Preparing to Pray (#9)

Retreat or Extended Time Program (Guided and Experience Centers)

The four movements and prayer activities can be designed into a retreat experience with a blend of whole group prayer experiences and small group experience centers.

Opening Prayer

Large Group: Guided Experience – 1 hour

Movement 1. Reflecting on Life Experience

- Select Prayer Activity #1 or #2.

Movement 2. Exploring the Christian Practice

- Use content from Prayer Activities #3 through #8.

Break

Small Groups: Experience Centers – 2 hours

Movement 3. Experiencing the Christian Practices

- Select from Prayer Activities #10-#25.
- Divide the participants into four groups and have them rotate through four, 20-minute prayer experiences in four spaces throughout the facility with 5 minute breaks to change spaces

Break

Large Group: Guided Experience – 1 hour

Movement 3. Experiencing the Christian Practices

- Select from Praying through the Day (#22) or Closing the Day (#9), followed by Prayer Takes Practice (#8)

Movement 4. Living the Practice

- Preparing to Prayer (#9)

Closing Prayer

Next in the Series

The **fifth** and final article in the series will focus on the process of forming habits of faith, i.e., making practices part of one's daily life.

Be sure to check out the downloadable learning programs, reproducible activities, and curated resources for teaching Christian practices in **Practices** at LifelongFaith.com.



WHAT IF...

Imagining Possibilities

How Shall We Live Now? – Part Five *Forming Habits of Christian Practice*

(This is the fifth and final article in the series on formation for Christian living post-pandemic.)

John Roberto

Habits are not born but created.
Charles Duhigg (*The Power of Habits*)

When you woke up this morning, what did you do first? Did you hop in the shower, check your email or text messages, get the children ready for school, eat breakfast, or....? Did you choose a salad, a sandwich, or hamburger for lunch? When you got home, did you put on your sneakers and go for a run, prepare dinner, help with your child's homework, or....? Most of the choices we make each day may feel like the products of well-considered decision making, but they're not. They're habits.

It wasn't too long ago that children were socialized into the habits of faith by parents, grandparents, and extended family. The daily, weekly, and annual patterns (routines) of families nurtured habits of prayer, Bible reading, celebration, rituals, participation in community life, and much more. Small habits of prayer upon rising, before meals, and closing the day were built into the fabric of daily life. Living in a society that makes our lives much more complex has made sustaining the habits of faith much more difficult. The pandemic has disrupted every aspect of life and disconnected people from the benefit of the habits of faith which give their lives meaning and purpose. If "habits are not born but created," then how do we form people of all ages in Christian practices that become habits of daily Christian living, drawing them more deeply into a life with God in whom we "live, and move, and have our being" (Acts 17:28).

A **habit** is a routine of behavior that is repeated regularly and tends to occur subconsciously. A habit is a choice that we deliberately make at some point, and then stop thinking about, but continue doing every day. In his University of Texas 2014 Commencement Address, Admiral William H. McRaven shared a story from his Navy Seal training about the power of one simple habit.

If you make your bed every morning you will have accomplished the first task of the day. It will give you a small sense of pride, and it will encourage you to do another task and another and another. By the end of the day, that one task completed will have turned into many tasks completed. Making your bed will also reinforce the fact that little things in life matter. If you can't do the little things right, you will never do the big things right.

And, if by chance you have a miserable day, you will come home to a bed that is made—that you made—and a made bed gives you encouragement that tomorrow will be better.

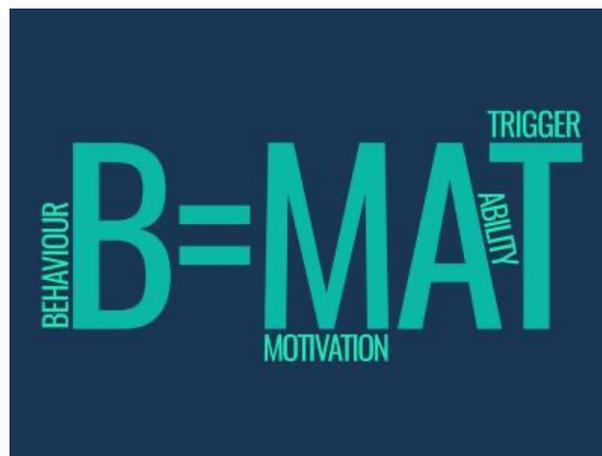
If you want to change the world, start off by making your bed.

(Watch the video of the commencement address at: <https://youtu.be/pxBQLFLei70>).

The Fogg Behavior Model

In his book, *Tiny Habits: Small Changes that Change Everything*, BJ Fogg proposes a model of behavior change that directly applies to forming habits. According to Dr. Fogg, we can change our lives by changing our behaviors. We all know that. But what we may not know is that only three variables drive those behaviors. For behavior to occur, three elements must converge at the same time: **Motivation, Ability, and a Trigger or Prompt.**

Here's the simplest way to explain it: *Behavior (B) happens when Motivation (M), Ability (A), and a Trigger (T) or Prompt come together at the same moment.*



Motivation is a desire to do a specific behavior (eating a healthy vegetable tonight) or a general class of behaviors (eat healthy foods each night). There are three sources of motivation: *yourself* (what you already want), a *benefit* (or punishment) you would receive by doing the action, and your *context* (e.g., all your friends are doing it).

Motivation and ability have a compensatory relationship.

1. The *more motivated* you are to do a behavior, the *more likely* you are to do the behavior.
2. The *harder* the behavior is to do, the *less likely* you are to do it.
3. Motivation and ability work together like teammates.
4. No behavior happens without a *prompt*.

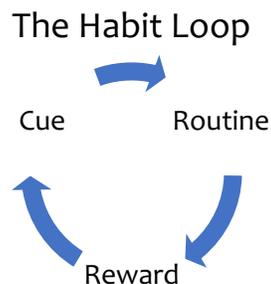
This solution is deceptively simple. On one hand, you can learn to think about behavior in this way in two minutes. On the other hand, you'll find this model applies to all types of behavior, in all cultures, for people at any age. It's universal.

Through his research and coaching with people, Fogg discovered two important principles when designing for behavior change for products, services, and how we design change in our own lives. *We all need to do two things: (1) Help ourselves do what we already want to do, and (2) Help ourselves feel successful.*

The approach resonates with the work of James Clear in *Atomic Habits*: “*The Four Laws of Behavior Change are a simple set of rules we can use to build better habits. They are (1) make it obvious, (2) make it attractive, (3) make it easy, and (4) make it satisfying.*” (Clear, 55)

Forming Habits

A habit is a formula our brain automatically follows: When you see a **Cue** (getting up in the morning), you will do a **Routine** (making the bed) in order to get a **Benefit** or reward (feeling a sense of pride and encouragement). The process within our brains is a three-step loop. First there is a **cue**, a trigger that tells your brain to go into automatic mode and which habit to use. Then there is the **routine**, which can be physical or mental or emotional. Finally there is a **benefit** or reward, which helps your brain figure out if this particular loop is worth remembering for the future:



Over time, this loop—cue, routine, benefit; cue, routine, benefit—becomes more and more automatic. The cue and benefit become intertwined until a powerful sense of anticipating and craving emerges. Eventually, a habit is born. (See Duhigg, 19)

Researchers have learned that *cues* can be almost anything: a visual trigger, a certain place, a time of day, an emotion, a sequence of thoughts, or the company of particular people. *Routines* can be incredibly complex or fantastically simple. *Benefits* can range from things that cause physical sensations (food) to emotional payoffs.

If you want to start reading the Bible each morning, it's essential that you choose a simple cue (like making a cup of coffee, listening to instrumental music) and clear benefit (quiet, reflection, inspiration or encouragement for the day). But countless studies have shown that a cue and a benefit or reward, on their own, aren't enough for a new habit to last. Only when your brain starts *expecting* the benefit—craving the endorphins or sense of accomplishment—will it become automatic to make a cup of coffee and then read the Bible. The cue, in addition to triggering a routine, must also trigger a craving for the benefit to come. (See Duhigg, 51)

How to Create a Habit

1. The Cue

Experiments have shown that almost all habitual cues fit into one of five categories: location, time, emotional state, other people, and immediately preceding action. Each habit has a trigger:

- ◆ What time will this habit occur?
- ◆ Where will you be?
- ◆ Who else will be around?
- ◆ What will you have just finished?
- ◆ What emotion do you think you will be feeling?

We don't need all of these to create a habit. One of them is needed to become a cue. But the more we test it out, the faster the habit takes hold.

BJ Fogg suggests that we can design a new habit by starting with a routine we already do each day. With this routine in mind, we then look for a new habit that would naturally follow the existing routine. He calls an existing routine an "Anchor" because it's stable and solid.

Think about the common routines in daily life. Any one of these could become the anchor for a new habit.

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| ◆ After waking up in the morning | ◆ Sitting on the bus or train |
| ◆ Before going to sleep at night | ◆ Putting the children to bed at night |
| ◆ Before or after breakfast | ◆ Turning off the TV or phone or computer at night |
| ◆ Before or after lunch | ◆ Starting work each day |
| ◆ Before or after dinner | ◆ Finishing work each day |
| ◆ Getting in the car to drive to work | |

2. The Benefit or Reward

Benefits or rewards can range from things that cause physical sensations to emotional payoffs. Here are questions to guide the identification of the benefit or reward.

- ◆ What benefit (reward) will you give yourself at the end of the behavior?
- ◆ Do you actually enjoy this reward? (If no choose a new reward.)
 - After a few days, ask: Do you crave this reward when you are exposed to the cue?
 - After two weeks ask: Do you crave the intrinsic reward of the habit (how it makes you feel) more than the extrinsic reward (what you give yourself as a treat)?
- ◆ If you answer yes to these questions, you have a powerful habit!

3. The Routine

Now we can put it all together by creating a plan for ourselves.

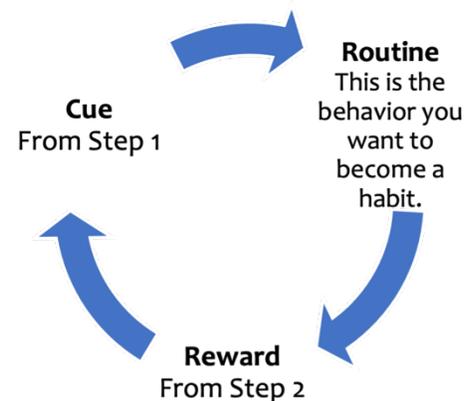
Studies show that the easiest way to implement a new habit is to write a plan:

When _____ (Cue),

I will _____ (Routine)

because it provides me with _____ (Benefit/Reward)

Post this plan where you will see it. Try it for a week. Eventually, studies say, the new behavior will become automatic.



Habits Form Identity

In his book, *Atomic Habits*, James Clear describes how habit formation can change a person's identity.

The first layer is changing your outcomes. The level is concerned with changing your results: Losing weight, publishing a book, winning a championship. Most of the goals you set are associated with this level of change.

The second layer is changing your process. This level is concerned with changing your habits and systems: implementing a new routine at the gym, decluttering your desk for better workflow, developing a meditation practice. Most of the habits you build are associated with this level.

The third and deepest layer is changing your identity. This level is concerned with changing your beliefs: your worldview, your self-image, your judgments about yourself and others. Most of the beliefs, assumptions, and biases you hold are associated with this level.

Outcomes are about what you get. Processes are about what you do. Identity is about what you believe. What it comes to building habits that last—when it comes to building a system of one percent improvements—the problem is not that one level is “better” or “worse” than another. All levels of change are useful in their own ways. The problem is the *direction* of change.

Many people begin the process of changing habits by focusing on what they *want* to achieve. This leads us to outcome-based habits. The alternative is to build identity-based habits. With this approach we start by focusing on *who* we wish to become.

The ultimate form of intrinsic motivation is when a habit becomes part of your identity. It’s one thing to say I’m the type of person who *wants* this. It’s something very different to say I’m the type of person who *is* this. (Clear, 30-31)

True behavior change is identity change. For example,

- ◆ The goal is not to read a book, the goal is to become a reader.
- ◆ The goal is not to run a marathon, the goal is become a runner.
- ◆ The goal is not to learn an instrument, the goal is to become a musician.

Behaviors are usually a reflection of our identity. What we do is an indication of the type of person we believe that we are—either consciously or non-consciously. Our identity emerges out of our habits. We are not born with preset beliefs. Every belief, including those about ourselves, is learned and conditioned through experience.

Our habits are how we *embody* our identity. When we make our bed each day, we embody the identity of an organized person. When we write each day, we embody the identity of a creative person. When we train each day, we embody the identity of an athletic person. The more we repeat a behavior, the more we reinforce the *identity* associated with that behavior

Habits are the path to changing our identity. The most practical way to change *who* we are is change *what* we do.

Application

I believe the research into creating habits (and changing existing habits) can have a direct application in the way we form people in Christian practices. We are seeking to guide the development of a Christian way of life. We want people to experience Christian practices, to be changed by the experience, and to integrate the practices it into their lives. We can summarize the approach in this way:

We form people in the practices of the Christian way of life by drawing upon the wisdom of the Bible and Christian tradition and connecting the practices to the “signs of the times” – the struggles, joys, needs, and hungers of people and communities today – and equipping people with the skills and ways to live the practice in their daily lives.

How do we design formation programs and activities so they nurture habits of faith practice? James Clear’s “The Four Laws of Behavior Change” provides a guide for designing learning experiences and activities that people can use to form habits of Christian practice in their lives. What if we followed these simple guidelines?

- ◆ Have can we make it obvious?
- ◆ How can we make it attractive?
- ◆ How can we make it easy?
- ◆ How can we make it satisfying?

The Christian Practices learning programs and reproducible activities on the Lifelong Faith website provide a starting point for designing learning programs and experiences. Each practice has a teaching guide and reproducible activities that you can use with age groups, families, and intergenerational groups. (Go to <https://www.lifelongfaith.com/practices.html>)

Using the insights of creating habits, here are a few things to consider in designing programs and experiences and in providing Christian practice activities:

1. Suggest times (day, week, month) for forming the habit using the Christian practice activities. For example:
 - *Through the day:* Mealtimes, car times, morning and bedtime, exits and entries, family sharing times, waiting for... times
 - *Through key moments:* Good times and hard times, times of joy and sorrow, highs and lows of the day
 - *Through the year:* Church year seasons, holidays, rituals and celebrations—birthdays, anniversaries, etc.
2. Script the moves by providing “how to live” guidance using examples, videos, and stories that demonstrate the practice in the real lives of individuals of all ages and families.
3. Describe the positive benefits of living the practice—for individuals, the family, the community and world.
4. Make the activities easy to do and easy to understand.
5. Make the activities short: 5 minutes or 10 minutes (15 minutes max). Tell people how long something will take to do.
6. Provide differing levels of depth – Beginning, Growing, Advanced – with a menu of activities from which people can select the one most appropriate for their faith life.

7. Consider developing 30-day or 7-day intensives where an age group or the whole church community can focus on one practice. For example, a 40-day Lent intensive or a monthly plan for “30 Days of Practice” throughout the year.

◆ September	Hospitality (welcoming back)
◆ October	Stewardship (Stewardship Sunday)
◆ November	Reading the Bible (prepare for new Cycle)
◆ December (Advent)	Finding God in Everyday Life (incarnation)
◆ January (ML King)	Doing Justice
◆ February (Lent)	Praying, Fasting, Serving, or Forgiveness
◆ March (Holy Week)	Dying Well
◆ April (Earth Day)	Caring for Creation
◆ May	Peace and Reconciliation
◆ June (Pentecost)	Embracing Diversity

A Last Word

Thinking from the perspective of forming habits of Christian practice in people of all ages and in families/households changes the way we design faith formation. We begin thinking about people’s daily lives and how we can nurture habits of faith in the midst of those lives. This person- and context-centered approach can change everything we do in faith formation, and equip people to live the habits of daily Christian living that draw them more deeply into a life with God in whom we “live, and move, and have our being” (Acts 17:28).

Three Essential Books on Habits

Clear, James. *Atomic Habits: Tiny Changes, Remarkable Results*. Avery/Penguin Random House, 2018.
Duhigg, Charles. *The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business*. Random House, 2014
Fogg, BJ. *Tiny Habits: The Small Changes that Change Everything*. Houghton, Mifflin, Harcourt, 2020.

Websites

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- Website: <https://behaviormodel.org>
- Video: <https://youtu.be/AdKUJxjn-R8>
- Website: <https://tinyhabitsacademy.com>

