

Dorothy C. Bass, Kathleen A. Cahalan, Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, James R. Nieman, and Christian B. Scharen. *Christian Practical Wisdom: What It Is, Why It Matters*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2016. 368 pages. \$20.

What happens when you bring together five experts in the fields of religion, education, theology, applied research, and seminary administration and ask them to make the case for prioritizing the unnoticed practical wisdom that resides at the core of the Christian life? The result is this volume of essays that privilege the kind of embodied, emotional, relational and spiritual knowledge that is typically overlooked, ignored, and dismissed in favor of disembodied theoretical knowledge. This is a volume that should be on the shelf of every seminary professor, regardless of their field of expertise because within this book is the kind of scholarship that can rejuvenate one's teaching, mentoring and ministry in profound and refreshing ways.

The first part of the book is a series of five essays by each author that gives a vivid example of the kind of Christian practical wisdom they have either experienced or seen at work in churches, in popular culture, in the natural world, in classrooms, families, and in their own lives. Thus we are shown *what* practical wisdom is before being given the *why*, which they do in the second half of the book. Part Two, with five follow-up essays by each author, provides the intellectual history and academic support for lifting up *phronesis/prudentia* as a crucial aspect of educational and religious life in North America.

Readers familiar with feminist thought may be tempted to chalk this book up to the ongoing project of deconstructing traditional male-oriented rationalistic knowledge in favor of a move toward an embodied, experiential epistemology. While this is an implicit undercurrent of the book, the authors are more interested in aiming to “understand better the nature of practical knowledge in order to enrich knowledge as a whole and not to disparage unjustifiably or rule out completely certain kinds of knowledge” (228). In fact, each author displays their formidable academic “chops” in Part Two which provides theoretical, historical, philosophical, and theological support for the kind of relational knowing that is at the heart of Christian practical wisdom. This book may do for the field of the Christian practical arts what Carol Gilligan's *In A Different Voice* did for a feminist ethic of care in psychological theory and ethics, in that it legitimates and enhances a heretofore underestimated, underexplored, and underserved area of theology and Christian academic study. Their goal is to “generate creative ideas for teaching and learning” that articulate, value and refine Christian practical wisdom (17).

From a homiletical perspective, while this book does not include a chapter on preaching (which would have been a wonderful addition), the insights of the authors are profound and generative for those who proclaim the Word. First, the model of leading with story to help people *experience* wisdom is instructive. “Don't just tell—show,” is the mantra often repeated for new preaching students. This book demonstrates the power of story to convey the deep truths of our faith in ways that engage, give pause and delight.

Second, the exquisite writing by each author models for preachers the kind of vigorous language needed in sermons in order to make the Word of God come alive. Each chapter in Part One of the book ushers the reader into the author's world with finely-crafted prose that quickens the imagination and sparks the curiosity to know more. Whether it is describing the “spooning” love of bodies cradled by divine love (Miller-McLemore), the visceral journey into the soul of a teacher (Cahalan), the healing power of God's Creation on a star-strewn mountaintop (Bass), the sloping floor in the parish hall of an old Lutheran Church (Nieman), or the hard-scrabble rock-n-roll music heard in the pews of Nashville's Ryman Auditorium (Scharen), the first half of the

book trusts the instinctive ability of the reader to “get” what Christian wisdom is before trying to explain and analyze it in an academic way.

But on a more fundamental level, this book invites preachers to think about the wisdom within our own bodies, our experiences, and those of our communities. And not just preachers – any person charged with teaching or embodying the way of Christianity for others will find the double treasures of both deductive and inductive approaches to Christian practical wisdom. From a liturgical perspective, for example, I was grateful for Miller-McLemore’s reminder that “our theology partly resides in body memories” (27) as I help seminary students apprentice themselves to the holy mysteries of the sacraments and rituals of the church.

I would also recommend this book for pastor study groups. Each chapter in Part One provides fertile soil for productive conversation about the heart and soul of ministry. And for those desiring the support of thoroughly documented research, the discursive chapters in Part Two do not disappoint. As evidenced by their intentionally collaborative work on this project, this book demonstrates what is possible when the head and heart (and entire body) are brought into conversation to show us the best of what Christian practical wisdom has to offer.

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