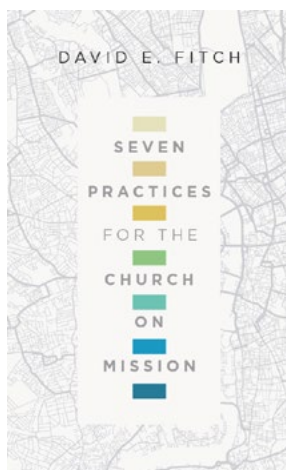


SEVEN PRACTICES FOR THE CHURCH ON MISSION



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(DIGITAL SAMPLE)



*DIGITAL SAMPLE OF
DAVID E. FITCH'S*

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INTRODUCTION

Presence is central to the way God works. As God's people, when we live faithfully, we are being present to His presence in our lives and in the world.

But how are we to do know how, when, where and with whom to be present in a world of increasing complexity and distraction? What anchors us in a world of seemingly endless possibilities are practices. Not rigid, legalistic rote actions, but life-giving, communal and generative practices that help us to tend to God's presence more fully and live with Him more faithfully to those around us.

But practices don't have to be complicated, complex and over-the-top. In fact, what helps us to live presently is to have simple, clear and humble practices in which to engage in our everyday lives. The fact that they aren't overly complex makes them all the more attractive. In our busy world, where our schedules feel maxed out and our plates overflowing, we need practices in the everyday life of living to help us to be present.

In the beginning of Roman chapter 12, Paul encourages followers of the Risen Christ to be faithful in their hours, days and weeks. The helpful and imaginative language of The Message helps us to understand:

So, here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it.

This is the essence of practices lived out for faithful presence – and this is the essence of the 7 Practices you'll find in this short e-book. The 7 Practices come from David Fitch's book 7 Practices for the Church, a compendium of practices to help equip us to live into that presence with both confidence and humility. In this e-book, you'll find creative images (created by a member of Dave's congregation in the suburbs of Chicago), quotes, questions and creative ideas and practical suggestions for you to practice creatively and faithfully in your own context.

PRACTICE 1

THE LORD'S TABLE

The Lord's Table is centered around presence. God's presence to us, our presence with him and with others. When Jesus says 'do this in remembrance of me' He is saying 'when you eat, be present to my presence' here around this Table. Communion, of course, has at its root in the word commune. To spend time with. This is the very nature of the Table. When we gather at the Table, we so easily forget God's presence – in the sensational and in the subtle – and we continually need reminders of that Presence in our lives and in the world.



The Table teaches us to be present to Jesus and others through the postures of confession and submission. We confess our sin to God and others. We submit ourselves to God as King and His Kingdom, as well as submit ourselves to others out of reverence to that King (Ephesians 5:21).

The Table cannot truly be practiced alone. It opens space for God to work between and among a group of people. And as we learn to be present to Him among us here on Sunday, we can be present to Him at work in all the tables of our lives as we eat the rest of the week.

"Because God will not impose himself on us or overwhelm us, our submission to his reign opens up space for him to work. The people who carry the most power must submit first, just as Christ did when he washed his disciples' feet."

Creative ideas:

- Next time you come to the Table, take particular note of the types of people (age, gender, ethnicity), types of vocations and education in those who join you. What power dynamics are at play? Consider the ways in which the presence of Christ at the Table “levels the power dynamics” because of Christ’s work.
- Consider inviting friends to participate in non-formal expressions of the Table in locations outside of a local church setting (your backyard, a living room, etc.). as you do so, have someone read Romans 12:1-2 in *The Message* and a reminder of the everyday-ness of faithful presence. Notice how Christ is present among you as you discern and tend to Christ’s presence in your everyday world. And discuss with others what and how they are thinking and feeling in this unique practice.

Questions:

- How often does your local congregation participate in the Eucharist/Lord’s Table/communion? How often do you believe your community should participate in this crucial practice?
- How has the Table helped you to enter into the postures of confession and submission – to God and others?
- Why is remembering, discerning and submitting to and with others so crucial in our connection with God – and vice versa?
- Are there specific expressions that could be integrated into participation at the Table that could help you to tend to the presence of Christ more deeply? If so, what are they?

PRACTICE 2

RECONCILIATION



“For Jesus reconciliation is not merely an idea or doctrine. It is something we do as his followers. More than a status given to us by God through Christ’s work on the cross, it is what we practice together.”

Dissent and conflict is an ever-present reality in a sin-scarred world. The good news of Jesus is to restore the world – and us - back to shalom. He promises to make all things new. If we could sum up the gospel message into one work it might be reconciliation. Our vocation as followers of Jesus is to live as “reconciliation ambassadors” by first being reconciled to God and then to others (2 Cor 5).

All this means that if we want to obediently live out the imago dei placed inside of each one of us we will seek to proactively reconcile with God and others. Whether sin, conflict or significant friction, we seek out the other in order to strive toward unity and restoration.

“Every neighborhood, social gathering, and meeting place is a flowing stream of antagonistic broken relationships. As we sit and tend to Christ’s presence among these various places of life. The occasion will arise to offer the reconciliation of God in Christ for the whole world.

But submission is not a popular word in our culture today, especially in light of many who have abused power. But submission can be a rich word of affirmation, value and care for others. When we submit to one another – not out of political correctness or duty, but out of reverence to Christ – space is opened up, the kingdom breaks through and reconciliation can occur. It is messy. It is painful. It requires laying down power, control, our preferences and our masks. But it is ultimately worth it.

Creative ideas:

- In Rembrandt’s famous painting “The Return on the Prodigal Son” the artist painted himself into the background of the piece. Search for the painting on Google images and spend unrushed time – by yourself or with others - pondering the painting. Consider who you might be in the painting and reflect on what the Spirit may want to say to you – and how you might respond appropriately to it.
- Take a few moments to list out the name(s) of people with whom you are not in a reconciled state. A parent. A child. A former co-worker. A friend. That person you unfriended – or they unfriended you – on Facebook. Prayerfully, humbly and courageously consider seeking them out and pursuing reconciliation.

Questions:

- Where have you seen submission used or exhibited in an unhealthy or wrong expression? Where have you seen submission used or exhibited in a healthy or beautiful expression? What was the difference?
- How might biblical reconciliation be a form of evangelism in our world today?
- Practically speaking, what might reconciliation look like – practical and specifically – for you this week? What will that require of you to let go of (time, pride, schedules, etc.)?

PRACTICE 3

PROCLAIMING THE GOSPEL

“The heart of the church’s life together is funded by the proclamation of the gospel.”

The good news: God reconciling the whole of creation back to himself. God has come in the person of Jesus Christ and a new world order – the kingdom of God – has arrived. God is making all things new.

So, we must communicate the good news. But good news isn’t just teaching; it’s also proclaiming. Certainly, we need both teaching and proclaiming. But what’s the difference? Proclaiming tells the story of hope, describes an alternative way to live because the story is true and then asks, “Can you see it? Do you receive the truth of this hope-filled news? Do you want to participate in it?”



“Proclaiming the gospel therefore is not only for the people outside of Christ. It must be part of the whole of Christian life, including the worship gathering and everyday life in the neighborhoods.”

Just as the practices of the Table and of reconciliation open up space for Christ’s presence to be among us, proclamation does so also. Proclamation is deeply contextual. In Sunday gatherings, preachers (or proclaimers) tend to the presence of Christ in a community. This is done not above the people, but among them. The preacher submits his or her own life to the good news of Jesus with others. While this shift seems subtle, it is quite significant.

But it's not limited to pulpits; it can happen among all the coffee tables, picnic tables, pub tables, office cubicles and lunchroom tables of our lives. At first it might feel awkward. But if we first tend to being present to each other – and to Christ's presence among us – and if Christ's presence is not limited to a church structure, then we can do this in any setting or context with others.

Proclamation is not a rally speech, lecture, teaching or informative update. It is an announcement of God's new world arriving, that God is lovingly in charge of the world and desires to break in further into our circumstances so as to bring hope, forgiveness and beauty. And because the world is so scarred and marred by sin, death and destruction, it makes proclamation all the more important and necessary as a practice among Christ's followers.

Creative ideas:

- Make a list of the places in your life where there are the least evidences of hope. What situations, dynamics, realities or relationships seem darkest and bleakest?
- It has been said that we are to be "detectors of divinity" as we live our days. This week use your smart phone to capture 3-5 pictures of places where the truth of God has been proclaimed or where proclamation should be communicated. Use those images as a prompt and a guide for your prayers this week.

Questions:

- When you first heard the word "proclamation" what came to your mind?
- Who do you know who proclaims the good news of Jesus' work in the world (past, present and future) in their life, where they live, work and play?
- Consider your context, your relationships and the rhythms of your daily life. Where might there be spaces, opportunities and people where you could engage in hope-filled proclamation of the Sovereign God, the Risen Christ, the at-work Spirit?

PRACTICE 4

BEING WITH THE “LEAST OF THESE”



Naturally and unnaturally – we tend to make the poor into a program. They may be well intentioned programs, but unfortunately, they keep the poor from being a part of our lives and prevent us from being present with the poor at our tables. Honest question: when was the last time you shared a meal with the poor in any capacity?

Jesus doesn't just call us to give to the poor, as great as that is. He calls us to be in relationship with the poor – being with the poor in such a way that they become family. He promises to be present here. Programs are important and should continue. But we must not believe that programs will ultimately redeem the world. It is presence over programs. By tending to the presence of Christ among the poor (where Christ already is present) we find our own experience with Christ deepened.

“The church is called to make being with the ‘least of these’ a practice wherever the poor and hurting are found. It is a practice of community that opens up space for the presence of Christ to become visible. In these spaces, we enter as people who come alongside. We come to be with.”

Creative ideas:

- Notice the language, postures and attitudes used in our culture – and in our neighborhoods – when we talk about the poor. Take note if the poor are spoken of with dignity or impersonally. Notice the pronouns (them, us, we, our, their, etc.). Converse with others about how our language in describing the poor might reveal underlying attitudes and assumptions.
- Make a list of the “invisibles” around you. Who are the people around us (which often includes the poor) who go mostly unnoticed in our society? Maybe this is the janitor at the school, the garbage collector, the cashier at the convenience store or the old lady we just passed on the sidewalk on the way to work. However, these individuals may be, consider whispering under your breath each time you interact with them, “I am looking at the image of God.” Furthermore, how might you befriend them, value them or hear their story? Could you add an extra 5 minutes to your commute in the morning in order to have space to truly see them? Could you go out of your way to thank them, to notice the hard work they are engaged in?

Questions:

- Who are the poor in your community? What are their names? What are their stories?
- Where have programs been helpful? Where might programs have kept us from interacting with the poor?
- How might being with and among the poor deepen our relationship with Christ and others? What might we learn from and with them?
- Are you doing ministry for the poor, to the poor or ministry with them? How might we truly know the answer?

PRACTICE 5

BEING WITH CHILDREN



“The stunning reality is that being with children is an encounter with the living Christ.”

Kids can be squirmy, wily and fidgety. They can be playful, passionate, honest. They are curious, full of wonder and curiosity. Jesus says that unless we become like children we have no part in the kingdom. He also said that whoever welcomes a child in his name actually welcomes him! What a word: welcome. Not tolerate, or invite to sit down and be quiet. But to welcome.

“The sacrament of being with children is a social sacrament that brings together the community in its witness with the child. This is what we have lost. This is what we must recover for the mission of God in the world.”

Because children are not yet jaded, they can often more easily be open to Christ’s presence. It should not surprise us, then, that children can lead adults in tending to the presence of Christ. What a beautiful thing that all of God’s children – adults and little ones – can seek God’s work in the world together.

Creative ideas:

- Consider inviting children to be more central to the life of Sunday morning gatherings in your church. Invite them to read the passage. Ask for their input on thoughts, questions or feedback on the passage itself to assist you in the teaching/preaching. Ask them to draw pictures that can be shared with the congregation. Invite them forward to sing with the worship team up front.

Questions:

- What might children teach us about God and His Kingdom that adults simply cannot?
- What attribute of children do you desire to grow into as an adult?
- How might children be honored, affirmed, highlighted and welcomed in your local faith community? What might that look like?

PRACTICE 6

THE FIVEFOLD GIFTING



Ephesians chapter four highlights the five giftings God gives to the church for equipping and building up for maturity: apostles, prophets, evangelist, pastors and teachers (vv. 8-12). Very briefly, apostles are spiritual starters, kingdom pioneers. Prophets are truth tellers and challengers to join God's way more faithfully. Evangelists are clarity-bringers who extend invitations to people to join God's great good news. Pastors are soul gardeners and shepherds, extending God's love with a posture of healing. Teachers are truth-illuminators, communicating God's Story to others in order to help people see God in their personal and communal stories.

When these five giftings work together in unity, putting the best expressions of those gifts forward, God's presence is evidenced in community. This is not hierarchical leadership, but one built on collaboration and healthy submission to God and each other. We don't muster up these gifts; they are graciously handed out by our loving Father.

"Nowhere is the fivefold ministry needed more than in our neighborhoods."

Creative ideas:

- Read the definitions in Fitch's *7 Practices* book and prayerfully discern with others in community what you may be – and what others may be. Use this time to affirm gifts, experiences, stories and situations where those gifts stewarded well.

Questions:

- How might all of God's people – live into their God-given expressions, help a local congregation tend to Christ's presence more and then be sent out into mission throughout the week?
- Have you see congregations or groups of God's people who understand their fivefold giftings and steward them well for fruitful ministry? If so, how did they go about doing that?
- How might everyone participating in their giftings help to think less hierarchically and more communally and submissively when it comes to leadership.

PRACTICE 7

KINGDOM PRAYER

“Prayer is the opposite of striving and anxiousness. Therefore, in everything we are to resist striving and instead present ourselves before God in prayer.”

We know that prayer is important. But prayer is hard. Why? Because we long for control. And yet prayer is the opposite of control. It is a voluntary act of giving up control in our lives and in the world in order to acknowledge this is God’s world in which he is free to work and act. Kingdom prayer is the foundation for all the other practices. It gathers us into Christ’s presence and it creates the space with which we ask God and His kingdom to come “on earth as it is in heaven.” Together we bow before the King.



When we pray for God’s kingdom to come – and we live in hope-filled expectation of it, we can begin the work of responding to and joining in with what God is doing.

The Table cannot truly be practiced alone. It opens space for God to work between and among a group of people. And as we learn to be present to Him among us here on Sunday, we can be present to Him at work in all the tables of our lives as we eat the rest of the week.

“Prayer is the profound act of giving up control of a situation, turning it over to the reign of God. Only after we have entered this space can we ask for things. Prayer opens space for his kingdom and for us to participate in his kingdom. This is kingdom prayer.”

Creative ideas:

- Set the alarm on your phone to ring at 9am, noon and 3pm. Commit to slowly, thoughtfully and reverently pray the Lord's Prayer by yourself or (if appropriate) with others.
- As you begin prayer with others ask aloud, "Where might we seek – and find – God's presence in this time of prayer together this day?" Start with this simple prayer: "Be present among us, Lord, and surprise us."

Questions:

- How might we move from primarily praying "laundry list prayers" to kingdom-centered, kingdom-submitted prayers?
- Where and how might we grow to relinquish control as we pray?
- Who might we invite to join us (maybe a smaller grouping of people of 3-5 people) to participate in kingdom prayer?
- If we were to enter into a regular posture and practice of kingdom prayer, how might that shape how we view God? The world? The church? Ourselves?

CONCLUSION

Learning about the way of Jesus and entering into the way of Jesus are two different things. The way we enter into the way of Jesus is to submit to the King and seek and receive the Kingdom. Seeking and receiving begin to happen when we open ourselves up and engage in practices of faithfulness in order to give God more access to our lives. We hope this e-book – with its images, summaries, questions and suggested creative ideas – have stirred the kingdom imagination within you and provided you with training wheels as you learn to ride the 7 practices as outlined in David Fitch's book.

Should you want to explore these 7 practices in greater depth log onto **www.sevenpractices.org** for more information.