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Christly gestures: learning to be members of the body of Christ

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Christly Gestures

Brett P. Webb-Mitchell

Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003

254 pages \$ Softcover

Every so often, one encounters a text which is a real path breaker, simultaneously visionary and practical, traditionally foundational and creatively current and focused. To me, *Christly Gestures* is such a constructive and engaging gem! Integrating insights from and building on foundations already laid in educational ministries by educators like Paulo Freire, Thomas Groome, Michael Warren, Parker Palmer, John Westerhoff, Chuck Foster, Maria Harris plus others, Webb-Mitchell identifies and explores his central thesis which is that “the church is education.” Says the author: “the church in its entirety is a school of Christian discipleship, a place and a people created and called by God, infused with the Holy Spirit, where we are to learn Christ, to follow Christ, and to be more like Christ in our daily lives.” (1-2)

Webb-Mitchell notes that: “Being members of Christ’s body, we are each called to perform the gospel, literally the Good News, with what I would like to call Christly gestures. Performing gestures of faith in Christ’s name is to follow, imitate, and participate in the ‘Jesus-life,’ in which every one of our words and deeds is an action of our bodies, hearts, and minds, as we are infused by the power of the Holy Spirit to love one another as we love and serve God in Christ. When our lives are shaped according to God’s will and Christ’s way in the body of Christ, then our gestures may be instruments of God’s gift of grace through faith, which is to incarnate Christ in our very lives.” (2)

Many Christian educators, both within the Roman Catholic Church and Protestant churches, have debated the nature, the direction, the place and the practices of Christian education, struggling with the tensions between the “schooling-instructional paradigm” and the ecclesial model which sees the church in its entirety involved in the formative processes of becoming Christian disciples. Webb-Mitchell, in the writing of this book, is identifying and adding his voice to these important conversations. He speaks of the contents of the book as being in the style of Luther’s *Tischreden*, an “open table discussion of what is wrong with Christian education.”

(11) He also pursues pointed questions like: “First, what is the purpose of educating Christians today? Second, where is that education to be found in the life of a congregation or parish? Third, simply, how do we education today?” (11)

“In this book” claims the author, “I want specifically to expand the focus from the individual learner, whether student or teacher, to an ecclesial – or body of Christ – consciousness, to move from thinking about ‘myself,’ alone in relationship to God, to an understanding that each one of us can and must do something for the rest of the community of Christ’s body.” (15) “Christian formation begins and ends with being part of a culture – the church – which teaches a person to be a Christian.” (20)

The book is divided into three parts. Part I is basically a reframing of the Christian education context from being only Sunday School classes and/or programs to regarding the church as a whole being the context for Christian education. A detailed and pointed exegesis of Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12, exploring in particular how it is that the body of Christ is simultaneously the context and the means for learning Christ and living in Christ and for Christ living in and through each and all of us. “One goal of the body of believers in our congregations should be to aid others in discovering, naming, and growing into their gift.” (59) Part II focusses on the gestures of the body of Christ. “Because we are part of the body of Christ – physically, intellectually, and spiritually – we are called to perform certain gestures that embody the gospel in our daily lives.” (23) (Compare Galatians 2:20 – “I live now, not I, but Christ lives in me.”) “Because of each gesture’s origin, gestures both have a story and embody a story; the gestures share that story with others, passing it down to the next generation of Christians.” (91) Christly gestures are quite context-dependent. Part III concentrates on the unique teaching of Christly gestures in the context of Christ’s body; the author refers to this process as “a pilgrim catechesis.” “By pilgrimage catechesis I mean the following: on a Christian pilgrimage, one is a member of a community of pilgrims in which we learn and teach others the intricate relationship that embraces us in being known by God in Christ.” (166)

Christly Gestures constitutes a holistic engagement of the gospel, of Good News, within and through the body of Christ – the entirety of the church is Christian education – the entirety of the body of Christ, inclusive of the home and the congregation, *is* Christian education.

This is not a manual for revising current practices of Christian education. Presented here is a praxis-based fresh vision for church education which is biblically based in a particular way, context-dependent, holistic, inter-generational, and above all, presented as experientially gospel-oriented. The subtitle of the book is *Learning To Be Members of the Body of Christ*. We are partners on the journey – encouraging and mentoring one another on the life-long pilgrimage.

Webb-Mitchell's excellent and helpful contributions to exploring how to embrace and embody Christian education as an ever-deepening faith experience congregationally are well worth considering, embracing and embodying in context. This is a text which needs to be read and digested by Christian educators, including seminarians, faculty, pastors, Directors of Christian Education, Sunday School teachers, Christian Education Committees – laity in congregations and parishes who are interested in learning together the sharing of hospitable Christly gestures.

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