

It takes practice

by [David Dragseth](#) in the [July 26, 2003](#) issue

In my first call as a pastor, I inherited a confirmation program in which 25 teenagers would sit in a church basement with no windows for three hours weekly and silently fill out workbooks while a few church elders supervised them. After two years of this disciplined, disembodied study these future leaders of the church were confirmed. Halleluiah! But despite knowing how many Midianites Gideon smote at Moreh, most of these kids never found their way back to church. Brett Webb-Mitchell, a professor of Christian nurture at Duke Divinity School, helps us understand why.

Christian education, Webb-Mitchell argues, is not simply Sunday school, catechetical instruction or memorization. It is also made up of worship, prayer, healing services, ritualistic rubrics, potluck dinners, coffee and juice hours, social-justice activities and even administrative board meetings. For various reasons the church has grown too disembodied, too cognitive, too solely intellectual in its teaching.

In a long discourse on the history of philosophy, Webb-Mitchell outlines the systematic compartmentalization and individualization of our Christian lives. First Kant was to blame, then Descartes, then Freud. Educators like John Dewey also make the list. The net effect is that Christian education has been compartmentalized into "Sunday school," where the teaching is often lifeless, treating students like piggy banks that need to be filled. It nurtures neither relationships nor community. Webb-Mitchell quotes David James Duncan's novel *The Brothers K*: "After a hard week of real school, the last thing a person needs first thing on Sunday is some goody-goody mom or dad grilling them on the Sunday school lesson."

What is lost is the Christly gesture, a full enacting of the gospel in which we in all our words and deeds follow, imitate and participate in the Jesus life. The church is the body of Christ, and its members are meant to use their bodies in Christ's service. Webb-Mitchell proclaims James's injunction, "Be doers of the word and not just hearers." At the heart of this argument is the strong influence of the emphasis on "practices" brought to us by writers like Dorothy Bass. The Christian life is practiced, not simply believed. It is gestured.

Christly gestures define what it is to be the church. In our enacting of the Eucharist, baptism and hospitality we teach ourselves and one another how to be Christlike. Because gestures are complex, Webb-Mitchell draws on a wide range of subjects--from sociology to philosophy to church history--to describe them. He draws heavily on Paul's explication of the body of Christ, and he weaves in Aristotelian ethics as it has been transmitted to us through Thomas Aquinas and modern philosophers like Alasdair MacIntyre. Webb-Mitchell translates Aristotelian virtue ethics to the parish.

He is at his most effective in reminding us of the full activity of the gospel. A child learns the love of Christ as much by singing "Jesus Loves Me" as she does by memorizing the Apostles' Creed. Unfortunately, Webb-Mitchell's work is heavy on theory and short on story. If his critique of Christian education is that it is too cognitive, his own very cognitive work may not be what the church needs to redeem its approach to Christian education.

It is true that in the past the church has suffered from privileging the cognitive. But is the problem with today's church that it is too intellectual? Knowledge of Christian doctrine is essential for understanding the grace of God that allows us to exhibit Christly gestures. Yet forgiveness, judgment and sin take up little space in Webb-Mitchell's explanation. Since the church often enacts gestures that are far from Christly, it is absolutely necessary to know that we are judged and forgiven even when we fail. Yes, Christ is our model and our teacher. But when the church fails it needs Christ the savior and the graceful reminder that we are not simply learning to be the body of Christ, but are already members of it.