

**Fighting Like Girls:
Feminist Theological Reflections on Girlhood Faith and Congregational Conflict**

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Introduction

The word on the street is that if you want to see a good fight, you should either go to your local middle- or high school, or go to church. Across the US, middle and high school administrators report that not only is physical fighting in school on the rise, but an unprecedented number of those involved in such fights are girls. The degree of violence in the fights also seems to be accelerating. In January of this year, an internet video was posted on YouTube showing a fight between two middle school girls, while various young people and an adult looked on as another adult apparently filmed the fight. The two adults who watched the fight have since been charged with felony counts of cruelty to a juvenile. But educators say girl fighting is rising at an alarming rate, with some attributing as many as 80% of violent fights in school to girls. One psychologist, Dr. Jennifer Hartstein, had this to say about the video fighting incident:

"Boys always fought physically. Girls fought with social aggression, with slander and making rumors and all that stuff, and now it's going this extra step. And girls are mean and they fight dirty. It's hard to watch."

But apparently lots of other people don't find it so hard to watch: the YouTube video got about 8 million hits, and there are countless internet sites entirely devoted to videos of teen girls fighting.

You know the church- side of the fight story all too well, but let me tell you a version of it just in case you haven't been paying attention over the last several years. A small congregation in Virginia finds itself in a difficult conversation about recent developments in its denomination that welcome the full participation of gay and

lesbian clergy in the church's ordained ministry. As people begin to hear about the positions being taken by other church members, a conversation that previously would have been conducted through face-to-face, or at least, voice to voice interactions, now takes the form of emails which can send out a comment made by one person to the entire church—and the wide world beyond this congregation—in a matter of seconds—without ever having to deal with the person who made the comment, or their relationship to the one who sent it. Meanwhile, factions form and boundaries harden, and identity becomes narrowed to the issues or sides of the conflict alone. In a different technological context, persons who were contending against one another's viewpoints would have had an in-person encounter in which they would experience the other's flushing face and increasing rate of respiration, make eye contact and view changes in facial expression or stance--and the other sensory aspects of an embodied encounter with another person with whom there was a conflict.

In the current context of Internet technology, the communication of opposing positions and viewpoints takes place, but without the experience of the body. Detached from the need to deal with a concrete other and his or her embodied reactions to one's own position, it becomes easy for this disembodied conflict to become just another spectacle in the continual production of novel experiences available for consumption by those who may not even have much of a stake in the issues under contention. Thus when the local news media pick up the story, excited by the prospect of a fight breaking out among people who reportedly aren't supposed to fight with each other, the story appears in visual and print news to a theologically ill-informed news consuming public alongside various "secular" fights without nuance. And because of the time-space

compression of postmodern communications media, a small local church conflict may now take a role in reshaping global church relations, spurred on in part by what cultural theorist Henry Jenkins terms the “participatory culture” generated by internet blogs, twitters, and emails through which people expect to have a participatory voice and role in all sorts of matters in ways in ways that that tend to flatten authority structures.

In describing the convergence of postmodern cultural forms with contemporary context of church fights, I am not voicing a secret Luddite anti-technology perspective, nor am I engaging in nostalgia for the face to face boxing matches of some distant “good old days” in church conflict. What I am doing, instead, is noticing that technology plays a significant role in reshaping practices of conflict in congregations and the wider church, creating a situation that calls for normative judgments to be made in conscious theological reflection on practices of conflict.

Church fights and girl fights: What do they have in common? During 2009, I have spent a fair amount of time with congregations who are fighting, both as part of my presbytery’s Committee on Ministry, which among other things works with churches in conflict, and also as a researcher. Supported by a grant from the Louisville Institute, I spent 2009 conducting ethnographic research—congregational studies—with three congregations in conflict with their own denominations over sexuality issues.

Sometime in the middle of this year of research, it struck me that what I was seeing in the congregations actually was not all that different than certain developments at work in the conflict situations of many adolescent girls—both involve a convergence of certain postmodern cultural forms with current context in which meanings of “church” and “girlhood” contested

1. Spectacle—newsworthy because “not supposed to fight”; excitement of outsiders watching, titillation/thrill of fight in absence of ethical recognition or relationship to other. Eroticization: “mean girls” “girl on girl fighting” ; also church
2. Time-space compression of globalization—what used to be local, interpersonal, transitory is now global and perpetual via internet communication and continual looping replay

3. Identity based conflicts: models available for addressing conflict in congregations largely drawn from business environment or legal contexts in which mediate is process involving identification of needs and interests of the parties, who the negotiate their way to a settlement based on identifying common interests and concerns. Conflicts within families (e.g. Mo-da) and between congregations and their “parent” denomination are identity based conflicts—what’s at stake is who we are; these matters are not subject to interest based mediation; identity conflicts require different interventions. In my research at least, both the girls and the congregations are in conflict with “family of origin”—studying congregational conflict with own denom, and adolescent girls renegotiating relationships with families. Right now, there are not many models for addressing identity based conflicts outside of capitulation or schism.

Feminist practical theological question: Any clues from situations of adolescent girls that can help with congregations in conflict? Assumption: girls have something to teach, wisdom to offer. Principles:

- A. Feminist reversal—fighting like a girl as an insult, operates by virtue of ; claim it here as a resource for understanding and engaging conflict
- B. Positioning this question within PT: everyday lives of adolescent girls as resources for constructing theology, reflecting theologically on conflict. 2 areas of inquiry: mo-da relationships, and depictions of adolescent girls in film

Mothers and Daughters

Surely there are few more intense relationships than that between adolescent girls and their mothers. The girls in my research affirm this relationship as deeply significant though very much in transition during their teen years.

Earlier generations of research with adolescent girls stressed this time in girls lives as one of necessary psychological separation from their mothers in order to grow up. These theorists tended to frame conflict in the mother-daughter relationship as necessary to effect this separation and to exit the danger of engulfment. After Carol Gilligan’s challenge of metatheories purporting to offer universal explanations while being based on research with males alone, feminist social scientists began to rethink these ideas of mother daughter relationships with their inherently anti-maternal, anti-woman biases, challenging the idea that separation is necessary for growth.

And yet, as I talked with girls about their relationships with their mothers, many of them began by narrating the most recent story of conflict—as with Nadine who said,

My mom? Well, we're close. Except we fight all the time—on my way here, we had a big fight in the car—always about something stupid, like what I'm wearing or how much my phone bill was this month. That's what it was about in the car on the way here. I get so mad. Yeah, we're really close. It's just that we fight...I know she does it because she cares. She cares how I present myself. She wants me to be okay. If she's arguing with me, then at least I know I matter to her."

Nadine's comments illustrate a pattern I found across many of my interviews with girls, that I came to call "Connected thru conflict": researchers have long noted that the period of early adolescence appears to be a time of accelerated conflict for mothers and daughters, and that girls experience more conflict with their mothers than do boys with either parent. As I listened to girls narrate these conflict stories, what I heard was not singularly about ending and loss, but about the dynamics of transition in relationships that required them to be renegotiated from the mother-child dynamics to new, re-tooled configurations in light of a girl's move toward young adulthood. In this vein, it becomes possible to understand the changing emotional dynamics in mother-daughter relationships in terms of a daughter's establishing autonomy within the relationship instead of being about separating herself from the relationship. Conflict gives the adolescent girl a means of actively differentiating her emerging selfhood from the person of her mother, while still staying connected. [If time, Rona, p. 88].

Mothers might be glad to know that many of the girls who were my partners in the interviews I conducted mentioned their mothers as primary examples of what it means to be a good woman; they spoke of their mothers with admiration. They also appreciated, valued and sought them out as theological conversation partners. For some, however, conflicts arose as girls tried to talk with their mothers about religion. The problem for some of the girls came not when

there was a difference between mother and daughter, but when the differences arose and the mothers backed away from engaging the conversation—or daughters felt they had to back away— for fear of putting the relationship at risk. [If time, Rona/Indonesia. p. 90]

Research on conflict in adolescents' relationships with their parents points to early adolescence as the time of most intense conflict, which then tapers off toward the later teen years. One factor in this tapering effect may be related to the gradual solidifying of boundaries of differences between mother and daughter that have come to constitute the self-in-representation. Another factor is the ability of older teen girls to have a larger perspective on parental actions and motivations than is possible in the earlier years of adolescence, as older girls grant their mothers more interiority and develop new capacities for empathy toward their mothers. As one African American girl, Raquel put it: As far as my mother goes, she's sort of like a friend to me. But you now, every once in a while she does little things that really get to me, pluck my nerves and drive me crazy. But still, you know, even when I get angry with her, I realize that I love her...we have a close relationship. We still do things together...I try to spend time with her, along with my friends. Because you know, sometimes when your friend's not there, your mother's still gonna be there for you."

It may be that mother-daughter conflict can facilitate a girl's religious life just as it appears to play a beneficial role in her identity development. The ability to move from judgment and critique to compassionate understanding represents a significant spiritual transformation in a girl's life. And it happens, at least in part, because of her mother's simple willingness to stay connected to her daughter through conflict. Girls want to know that their mothers' commitment to them overrides disagreements and conflicting positions in a debate. What Terri Apter's studies of mother-daughter relationships show—a finding echoed in the work of feminist psychologists,

is that far too often mothers retreat from conflicts, disagreements, and hard discussion with their daughters, depriving girls of the opportunity to experience maternal commitment that goes beyond simple agreement and shared perspectives.

Adolescent Girls in Media Imagery

What is an adolescent girl today? On the one hand, girls entering adolescence today arrive there at a time when significant gains have been made toward removing the constraints that previous generations of girls faced: middle and high school girls can enjoy a number of sports teams as participants; the number of girls entering colleges has surpassed the number of boys; and girls find role models and mentors in women at nearly every level of political, academic, and business life today. At the same time, however, even as more girls are educated in math, science, and theology, the ongoing perception of these fields as male fields (and the structuring of work settings for persons in math, science, theology, etc. in ways that do not support women's needs and preferences) means that women are still more likely to work for large companies –and churches--than to head them (the presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church in the US notwithstanding).

But an interesting new emphasis has been emerging over the past decade in relation to notions of girlhood. Specifically, media depictions of girls from films to news reports, give amplified attention to girls in conflict with women and other girls, fostering a perspective that it is inherent in women's development or in the meaning of being a girl for girls to be competitive, backbiting, and constantly fighting each other. On the one hand, film depictions of women pitted against one another in the competition for romance are not new. What is receiving a renewed emphasis in this contemporary, post feminist, post title IX context in which women can supposedly have and be anything, are films featuring girl fighting as a spectacle for

entertainment in which the girls are 12 and 13 years old. You can probably think of myriad examples of mainstream Hollywood films in which the plot centers around girls in conflict with girls for status, esteem, and the attentions of males: *High School Musical*, *Mean Girls*, and various Disney animations come immediately to mind. Then there are television shows such as *Zoey 101*, in which preteen girls attending a previously all-male boarding school constantly fight with and undermine one another. A perhaps lesser known independent film, *Thirteen*, tells the story of Tracy's transition from a girlhood in which she did well in school, had a nice group of friends and got along well with her mother, to an adolescence in which the only way she knew how to negotiate her desire for status and popularity was through emulation of popular but troubled Evie, a path that quickly leads her into drug use, self-mutilation, and conflict with her mother. It is painful to watch, in part because the depiction of even the "good friend" group is premised on the construction of girls as gossipy and backstabbing. [show clip]

The issue is not simply that conflict is viewed as pervasive in the lives of girls. The issue, as I find in my own research with girls and in the work of other researchers such as Lyn Mikel Brown, is that "girl fighting" –girls relating to other girls and women primarily through conflict and competition--comes through these media images as a natural and necessary feature of being female, offered as spectacle for the entertainment of viewers, absent a critical analysis of the power arrangements expressed in unchallenged acceptance of such activity. Technology in the form of market driven entertainment media reshapes practice as it bathes all of us, including young women, in image after image of "girl fighting" as entertainment, constructing struggles between girls as a natural and necessary aspect of being female, and undermining the connections and relationships that can foster young women's thriving. In this example, the proliferation of images establishes a particular politic of conflict—girl fighting—as "normal and

necessary”—inviting us to “misrecognize” the way such practices function in the lives of girls, while rendering invisible those images of girls fighting against systems and structures that oppress them or boys who relate to them in dehumanizing ways.

That is precisely where the church can stand with young women and support them in the formation of alternative identities to the media driven identities I’ve been describing. Providing a counter-narrative to the claim that girls are naturally and necessarily in a state of constant competition and conflict with other girls, the church can be an alternative space where solidarity and connection are normative, and where conflict, when it does take place, can be directed toward constructive ends that support the flourishing of girls.

Misrecognition and Church Conflict as a Practice

In the same way that girls’ practices often embody multiple (and even contradictory) meanings, some of which are misrecognized by girls themselves and by outsiders trying to understand their practices, so too can church conflict involve these aspects of many-sidedness and misrecognition. Specifically, what may be misrecognized in practices of conflict among Christians, amidst the anxieties these practices produce and the legitimate concerns about minimizing conflict’s destructive aspects, is that *such practices also bear within them the potential for transformation*. Consider the example of the civil rights movement in the US, in which sometimes bitter and even deadly forms of social conflict opened the way for more justice laws and the transformation of race relations in this country, the fruits of which continue to unfold in the present. Until recently, much of the literature on conflict came out of the fields of international studies (focused on addressing conflict between nations through diplomacy) or organizational management and leadership studies, where the emphasis concerned “managing” or “resolving” conflict. These genres situated conflict as a wholly negative phenomenon to be

avoided if possible and “fixed” or quickly resolved if necessary. Such assessments of conflict’s problematic and undesirable aspects contain a realistic account of the damage that happens to people and institutions when conflict breaks out.

Without downplaying the real harm that happens in conflict situations, however, recent work by persons in the field of conflict and peace studies shift the ways of talking about conflict engagement from “management” and “resolution” to “transformation.” Conflict transformation is based on the idea that contention often develops in relation to larger, below the surface sources and causes related to human differences. Conflict which erupts can occasion the much needed address of these bigger, underlying sources of tension which can lead to necessary social transformation. The struggle against apartheid in South Africa and the Civil Rights movement in the US are prime examples of conflict in the service of transforming the structuring of power relations and social positionings among groups of different races/ethnicities. Such a view of conflict’s transformative possibilities situate it in the position of “systematically extending the ends and goods of which they are a part.” To speak of the *practice* of conflict in this transformative vein, then, becomes an assertion that in some instances the activities and patterns of engagement through which human groups (such as churches) contend against each other—though in themselves undesirable activities—may nevertheless be both expressive and constitutive of that which is desirable and good as a way of life.

As far as I know, no one in the “practices” conversation has been discussing conflict as a Christian practice (which may mean that I am on thin ice in making such a proposal). There are a number of scholars and practitioners writing about church conflict, generally as an anomaly or barrier to faithful practice. And yet, faithful contentiousness, ironically, may be one of the most characteristic and constitutive marks of the church, as matters of faith move people to stake a

claim in relation to that which they consider “of Ultimate Concern” to use Tillich’s expression. Please do not misunderstand: I am not suggesting that peace seeking and the desire for harmony in congregations ought not be sought as a normative state of affairs in churches. What I am suggesting, however, is that under certain circumstances, conflict might also be a faithful Christian practice. Conflict of various kinds has characterized Christian communities since their beginnings, as attested to in Paul’s Corinthian correspondence; in the Pastoral Epistles, and across the history of the church. These struggles, both in their content and how they take place, do not simply express preexisting meanings of Christian theology; these conflicts participate in constituting the church as church: witness the Council of Nicaea, at which some Christians contended against others over the meaning of claims about Christ’s full divinity and humanity. The way Christians go about contending with one another over their differences embodies Christian theology every bit as much as the way they care for the poor and feed the hungry and offer a cup of cold water to one who thirsts. It is in situations of everyday practice in which people experience some kind of tension or problem that calls forth reflection that the specifically Christian theological shape of a practice comes to the foreground.

The social philosopher Albert Borgmann, writing on the effects of technology on human life, names the kinds of practices discussed here, and lifted up by MacIntyre, Bass, Dykstra, and others, “focal practices.” A focal practice involves one in the cultivation of a set of skills and capacities; it brings one into social interactions with others in ways that cultivate community; because it is not primarily instrumental, efficiency is less a core value than grace-filled living. Focal things and the practices related to them stand in contrast to what Borgmann terms

“a technological device” in which the efficient end—e.g., food to consume-- is primary. In such instances one may “provide the good without the practice (for example, food served as a microwave meal rather than prepared ‘from scratch’) and the character of the good itself changes—it becomes a mere commodity” (Gaillardetz, 23) “For focal things and practices invite us to abandon a largely instrumental view of our world and its inhabitants in favor of an attitude of ‘communion’ that draws us into attentive, respectful engagement with the larger world.... What is required is conscious reflection on one’s life with a view toward identifying and cultivating vital vocal practices...After all, our principal difficulty is not technology itself but our inability to differentiate between the central life practices that we wish to preserve because they bring meaning and grace, and those spheres of life for which efficiency and cost-benefit analysis properly ought to reign.” (Gaillardetz, 26)

What Makes a Practice ‘Christian’?

--Many of you are probably familiar with that “practices” conversation, much of which has been based on the work of philosopher Alistair MacIntyre and drawn into theological work by Dorothy Bass and Craig Dykstra. What is a practice? Philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre’s definition of practice, though complex, is used by many contemporary thinkers toward delineating what among the range of human activities constitutes a practice, with its references to “coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which

the goods internal to that form of activity are realized.” MacIntyre notes that practices include standards of excellence” and that the very act of participating in a practice “systematically extends” the goods involved therein. Dorothy Bass and Craig Dykstra helpfully re-frame MacIntyre’s notion of practice for Christians: “Christian practices are things Christian people do together over time in response to and in the light of God’s active presence for the life of the world.” (POF p. 5) Not simply a synonym for action, this term refers to a particular category of human activity: Practices are actions engaged in over time by a community; they are oriented toward furthering a notion of “the good”; they contain within them standards of excellence. “Practices are those shared activities that address fundamental human needs and that, woven together, form a way of life.” (POF, p. xi). Examples of Christian practices include stewardship, Sabbath keeping, hospitality, and prayer.

The claim Bass, Dykstra, and others in the “practice conversation” make is that “when we see some of our ordinary activities as Christian practices, we come to perceive how our daily lives are all tangled up with the things that God is doing in the world.” By this understanding, they foreground the constructive, person-forming power of practices: certainly we as agents shape the practices through which we embody our faith. But just as importantly, practices also shape us.

Can Conflict Be a Practice?

An interesting gap in the “practices” conversation currently going on among theologians is the absence of attention to what is unarguably one of the most common aspects of church life from the days of the New Testament church until now: conflict. Is conflict a practice? Going by MacIntyre’s definition of a practice, and taking conflict at face value, it would appear not—

particularly at the point of “extending goods”, conflict—the experience of persons contending against one another—appears almost as a kind of “anti-practice.”

And surely most clergy and congregations, aware of the destructive and harmful potential of church conflict, go to great lengths to avoid allowing conflict to surface. When it does occur, those charged with oversight for the health and upbuilding of the church often go to great lengths to see that conflict is pushed back into a manageable container and not allowed to bubble up into manifest signs of disturbance. Most of the “practices conversation” in theology focuses on *desirable* activities: patterns of action that draw persons into participation because something of the good they entail is experienced in a positive way in the activity of the practice itself. Given the general aversion to conflict among so many people, not to mention its anxiety producing processes and often negative effects, can conflict rightly be considered a practice?

What I want to suggest, from my research with congregations in conflict, but also out of many years of research with adolescent girls, is that our ways of contending against and struggling with one another are every bit as much a practice—potentially even a Christian practice—as are the more positively desirable and more obviously “religious” activities named as Christian practices by the current discourse in church and academy on the subject. This perspective on conflict, which understands it as a practice on par with other practices such as hospitality, healing, or stewardship of the earth, requires a slight adjustment in the conceptualization of practices, but even more so, in how conflict itself is conceptualized. For that, I want to recall the situations of conflict in the relationships between adolescent girls and their mothers: there, conflict happens in the service of growth and transformation. It takes place within commitments of solidarity in the relationship, commitments of such substantiality that the relationship is not continually put at risk by differences and disagreements

St. Johns as an example of conflict as Xn practice:

Prayer for bishop; refusal to demonize opposition;

liturgy and education as central;

engage the media proactively rather than allowing cooptation/spectacle.

“Gracious Encounter” and sense of humor

Bringing the same commitments to practice of conflict that inform other faith practices—

[Can go to end if no time]

The discourse among theologians and church leaders on Christian practices has led to a fruitful examination of such basic Christian practices as prayer, hospitality, how we use our time and our financial resources, caring for the body, dying well. Practices express a way of life; they also give shape to a way of life, or constitute it. So, for example, when we engage in practices of hospitality, we are not simply expressing our beliefs (elsewhere derived) about the good of being hospitable. Engaging in these practices over time forms and shapes us into hospitable people. Such perspectives have significantly shifted understandings of Christian education—formation—from models understanding education as the downloading of information from teachers into the minds of students, to that of an apprenticeship in the practices that together constitute an identity we recognize and claim as Christian. Put differently, guided participation in practices of faith forms persons and communities into their identities as Christian. Held together, the various practices in which we engage as Christians—feeding the hungry, offering hope to those in despair, comforting the bereaved, supporting the weak, honoring those whom the world would hold in contempt, singing psalms of praise to God—through these and other practices of faith,

Christians express their beliefs even as the patterns of engaging in these practices shape them into a people recognizable as Christians.

Drawing on social scientists like Bourdieu makes apparent that the practices by which faithful people shape a way of life are far more fluid and open than some of the present theological discourse on practices would have us imagine. In this assessment, I join theologian Kathryn Tanner, who asserts that there is a great deal of continuity between human practices in general and what theologians call Christian practice. She maintains that theologians often try to sum up what Christianity (or a particular Christian community) is all about or they try to construct norms for general Christian subscription. But in the everyday lives of Christians, she says, “More often than not, Christian practices are instead quite open-ended, in the sense of being rather undefined in their exact ideational dimensions and in the sense of being always in the process of re-formation in response to new circumstances... Christian practices seem to be constituted in great part by a slippery give-and-take with non-Christian practices—eating, meeting, greeting—done differently, born again, to unpredictable effect.”

With these words, Tanner expresses an important claim about practice: there is no one-to-one, linear correspondence between a given idea and a particular behavior. And the meanings attributed to any given pattern of activity named Christian practice are likely to be accrued “after the fact.” Put differently, Christian did not participate in the Eucharist with all of its intensity of theological meanings, and then suddenly begin to eat. Christians have been eating food all along. But when, in the action of Jesus with his disciples, ordinary human eating and drinking became imbued with new meaning, all subsequent eating and drinking in Christ could come to be seen through the lens of this theological reflection on the (human) practice of eating. Or, Christian practices are not so much a separate category of activity as they are ordinary human activities

rendered different in meanings: as Tanner puts it, Christians take ordinary human practices and “make them weird”—or as liturgical theologians say, “ordinary things for holy purposes.”

What is unsettling to me and some other practical theologians in the “practices conversation” is the potential for a focus on practices to become a wooden setting aside of certain activities as exclusively Christian practices, as if under all circumstances they invariably performed that meaning, e.g., speaking a cheerful greeting could be marked as Christian while swearing would be the mark of an infidel. Again Tanner is helpful: “Christian practices cannot be understood in abstraction from their tension-filled relations with the practices of the wider society in which Christians live. Like those of most subcultures, Christian practices are bifocal in nature, involving constant processes of negotiation with, and critical revision of, the practices of the wider society.” It is precisely at that point that theological reflection on practices becomes crucial: circumstances “make ambiguities and inconsistencies explicit ;they thereby turn these very features of Christian practice into problems requiring explicit, reflective solution.”

Church conflict is just such a circumstance, drawing into question a taken-for-granted notion of what it means to be church—They’ll know we are Christians by our love—and requiring “theological reflection about what the church is doing and why and how it relates to the other things the church says and does and believes.” What Tanner suggests here, and I with her, is the idea that in our everyday experiences, our practices go along in a fairly fluid and unexamined way, until we bump up against some kind of problem or issue that causes us to stop and reflect and give meaning –initially in the form of hindsight—to what we do as Christians. This reflective experience in relation to practice has the effect of deepening the intentionality with which we engage in that practice, which leads us to “thoughtful reconsideration and reconstruction” of the practice. Within the broader grammar of Christian faith we who have been

formed in its practices know how to improvise in the face of changing circumstances even as we reflect on and construct the meanings of the practices in which we are engaged.

From this perspective, practices of conflict engaged in by Christians may appear identical to how other people fight with one another—until the moment that Christians engage in theological investigation of their own conflict practices, both discovering and making meaning of these activities in relation to central claims of faith which then in turn have effects on the subsequent content and process of contention. Problematically, however, because these practices—even as Christian practices—are enacted by human beings living under conditions of sin, practices of conflict are also implicated frequently in doing damage to persons and communities, including the church.

*****The normative role of practical theological work comes here: it is not sufficient to simply describe and analyze human situations such as those involving conflict practices: also needed is strategic action toward transformation of such situations in light of God’s deep desire for all to share in divine grace and abundant life. Three such norms come to mind, drawn from the ways girls describe conflicts in their relationships with their mothers, and in contrast to girl-fighting in the media as spectacle:

- (1) Fighting like a girl means sticking with it even though it is difficult, and whenever possible working to renegotiate the relationship rather than separating: from the God who stays in faithful covenant relationship with God’s people emerges a norm focused on defending, preserving and re-negotiating relationships in the face of conflict. Perhaps a particularly telling example of this norm at work in a conflicted congregation concerns how congregations care for and attend to their oldest members, whose relationships and

institutional loyalties may be differently situated in relation to conflict processes than are younger members in the throes of the fight.

- (2) Fighting like a girl means discerning the times when something is at stake that is worth fighting for---and when that is not the case. Girls know that all fighting is potentially wounding; they know that it involves vulnerability for everyone involved; there is no room for gloating by anyone at the end of the fight.
- (3) Fighting like a girl requires girls and the church to be alert to the ways their conflicts can be used and co-opted for the entertainment pleasure of those who have no attachment, no ethnic of care or responsibility to the ones involved in the fight, but merely find pleasure in the spectacle.

When all is said and done, girls and churches alike are up against fierce odds: confused and conflict weary people leave congregations and denominations, and some leave the faith altogether; girls give in to pressures to act like girls by engaging in patterns of conflict with other girls. And yet, many churches and many girls persist in believing, engaging in a way of life composed of practices that interact with belief expressively and constitutively. In closing, let me simply innumerate what I consider to be a few of the implications of this discussion of conflict and Christian practice

- (1) Christians across the ages have held their faith contentiously, believing that some things matter enough to fight about. When conflict constitutes a focal practice among Christians, oriented toward the search for meanings that are grace-filled, and practiced in ways respectful of persons in their differences, with due humility, and with care for the vulnerability of such engagements, the notion of *conflict as a practice* entered into by Christians becomes imaginable. In such situations, conflict need not be seen as an

opposition to or challenge to faith but becomes a practice through which Christian meanings are embodied/expressed and shaped. The practical agenda at this point needs to be the development of ways of going about conflicts that minimize harm while opening the possibility for transformation.

- (2) The constitutive power of practices takes place in part in relation to people's capacity to construct a world view—formed in actions, metaphors, images, symbols, and narratives—through which persons interpret the whole of their experience. the improvisational character of practices suggests that people continually reinterpret meanings and reformulate practices because of changing circumstances, in relation to Christian theological meanings. Leadership in such circumstances entails, at least in part, the capacity to evoke an eschatological imagination, a world view in which the reign of God draws near and the whole of life (difficult and otherwise) participates in the life of God.