Theology Matters

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Theology as a Way of Life

by Adam Neder

Today we hear a lot about the need for students to feel safe in our classrooms. This makes a certain amount of sense. If students experience a class as demeaning, if they aren't confident their questions, experiences, and ideas are being taken seriously, if they decide a teacher doesn't particularly care about them as human beings, or if they sense they're being coerced or manipulated, they probably aren't going to learn much. Few of us open ourselves to people we think are hostile or indifferent to us. But it's also true that if students feel only affirmed in our classes, if our classes never disturb, unsettle, or expose them, if they never find themselves fighting for their lives, then they probably aren't going to learn much in that kind of environment either.

This is especially true when teaching Christianity. The atmosphere of our classes ought to cohere as much as possible with the reality we are attempting to describe. And since Christian theology occurs as an encounter with the living God, a confrontation that tears us away from patterns of life that obscure or contradict the truth, at least something of the spirit of that struggle ought to be reflected in our classrooms. If Isaiah's response is paradigmatic of every serious confrontation with God —"Woe is me"—and if it is impossible to "withdraw more or less unscathed from the shock that makes one a theologian," then the last thing teachers ought to do is shelter students from the life-giving trauma of this encounter.[1]

In an utterly non-coercive way—in a way that respects students' freedom, affords them space to explore the mysteries of the faith, encourages them to draw their own conclusions, and eschews every kind of manipulation and indoctrination—we have to make clear to students that the subject matter of Christian theology demands a decision, and it demands a decision now. Notice, the subject matter demands a decision—not the teacher! "*The Word* cries out for belief, for acceptance in recognition, trust, and obedience."[2] Careful description, probing interrogation, incisive criticism, and broad cataloging of options play an important role when Christianity is taught well, but we mislead students unless we clarify that Jesus Christ, *as the New Testament describes him*, is someone whose life demands a personal response. As Karl Barth puts it: "Any theology which would not even consider the necessity to respond to God personally could only be false theology."[3] Søren Kierkegaard expresses this point in a vivid analogy:

> We all know what it is to play at war, that it is to *simulate* as convincingly as possible everything that happens in war: the troops line up, they take the field, everyone looks serious but also full of courage and enthusiasm, the orderlies dash back and forth fearlessly, the officers' voices are heard, the signals, the battle cries, the musket volleys, the thunder of cannon … everything, everything just as in war; only one thing is lacking—the dangers. So it is with playing at Christianity—it is to simulate the Christian

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> proclamation in such a way that everything, everything, everything is included as convincingly as possible, but one thing is omitted—the dangers. In the proclamation as it is in the New Testament, the whole emphasis falls on the personal—this accounts for the dangers; when we play at Christianity, the thing to do (but carefully, convincingly) is to draw attention away from the personal—so the dangers are also absent.[4]

And yet, despite appearances, when you're standing in front of a group of students, you cannot reliably discern if the battle you see taking place in front of you is real. Because what looks and feels like a real fight might actually be a pseudo struggle, when nothing is at stake and nothing important is happening, and what appears to be a lull in the action, a minor skirmish, or even a truce, may in fact be lethal combat for a student. You just can't tell. Teachers are incapable of measuring and assessing the work God is (or is not) doing in the classroom.[5] And strangely enough, one of the easiest ways to misread the situation is to be misled when students tell you how much they enjoy your classes. To be sure, if students hate your classes, it's probably your fault, and your teaching needs to change. But if students like your classes, if they are attentive and engaged, if you get almost exclusively positive feedback in your course evaluations, and if students routinely praise your teaching, it's nearly impossible not to draw the conclusion that your teaching is successful. And yet if students enjoy your classes, it may mean nothing more than that they enjoy your classes. The lasting effect may run no deeper than that. But then, so what? Can you think of anything more inane than a Christian theologian who things his or her classes are successful just because everyone likes them and no one feels uncomfortable?

And the same thing is true from the opposite side. Students are easily tricked into thinking a class worked just because they enjoyed it. I've taught whole courses on Christology where I've said all sorts of things except the one thing students most need to hear. Yet they came to class and enjoyed the experience. They read the books, wrote the papers, and never noticed that I neglected to raise the question that Jesus himself continually asks each one of us: "Okay fine, but who do *you* say that I am?" Still, at the end of the semester, most of them gave five stars and wrote encouraging notes in the comment boxes. But what they should have done, and maybe what they would have done if they had realized what was happening, is criticize me for engineering a class that was perfectly safe for them and, I now realize, even safer for me.

Of course, if you could pick your problems, this is the one you'd pick. Because while a useless class can pulse with energy and tension, we all know that ineffective classes can also become soul-wearingly boring for students. We care about the material and expect students to care too. Nevertheless, many of them remain uninterested, and we can't figure out why. At our worst, we become frustrated and curmudgeonly and start complaining about how incurious students are these days, and how they're not serious enough, and how they're distracted by trivia and technology, and how we wish they were smarter, and whatever else we feel like complaining about. But there's usually a much simpler reason why we bore them. We bore them because we're boring.

And very often, even when students are mildly interested, what we teach them remains detached and sealed in some ethereal and abstract theologico-academic realm that hovers above them, without making meaningful contact with the daily rhythms and concerns of their lives. They struggle to see what difference our courses make for ordinary life and ministry. And the really unforgiveable thing is how little time we spend helping them imagine these connections. Maybe we even have some convoluted rationale for why doing so is not our responsibility. We operate as though training students to trace the repercussions of the material into their lives is ancillary to our important work—if we think it is part of our work at all. But in addition to describing and examining theological ideas, a fully Christian approach to teaching Christian theology will involve helping students perceive some of the concrete implications of the material, and thus help them live less divided lives.

Maybe it's like this. If you were in the mood to listen, I could tell you all about the underlying and evolving tactical philosophy that animates the way FC Barcelona plays soccer: their eccentric approach to time and space, the way players interchange positions, how they defend while possessing the ball, and so on. And you might find what I had to say interesting, even intellectually exciting in its own way. But no matter how fascinating you found the ideas, it would never occur to you that any of it pertained to you personally, and it would never occur to me to talk to you as if it did. But now imagine you're Andres Iniesta, and you've been at the club since you were a boy, and you're on the training ground before an important match, and the manager is explaining the team's tactics. In that case, you would hear everything differently. The tactical philosophy would acquire new meaning, since you would listen as an insider rather than an outsider, as someone responsible for responding to it rather than merely thinking about it. Similarly, if the reality of God's reconciling love for the world in Christ teaches us anything about our students, anything at all, it teaches us that they are always already insiders to God's grace. Each one of them is at every moment personally addressed by God in Christ. God continually calls them not merely to listen but to act—not merely to reflect on the truth but to become truthful. Indeed,

recognition of the truth (who they are in Christ) is inseparable from responsiveness to the truth (becoming who they are in Christ), and helping students perceive this—or perceive it more clearly—is a distinguishing feature of all good teaching.

"Nicodemus Was Dreaming"

The Gospels could hardly be clearer that one cannot know Jesus from a safe distance. Consider, for example, his conversation with Nicodemus. Nicodemus was impressed by Jesus. He could see that Jesus was "a teacher who has come from God" (John 3:2). Moved by Jesus's wisdom and power, Nicodemus wanted to have "a cautious, judicious, tolerant, religious conversation—as from one bank of a stream to another."[6] If there has ever been a sincere religious seeker, it was Nicodemus. He had "real questions, earnest burning questions," and he was perceptive enough to recognize that Jesus could answer them.[7] In fact, Nicodemus's earnestness is precisely what makes Jesus's response to him so shocking. Rather than entering into respectful dialogue with Nicodemus, Jesus immediately launched an attack: "No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above" (John 3:3). With that one assertion, "all the cards were struck from Nicodemus's hand. All his chartered positions were unrolled before the battle began. He finds himself face to face with something new and incomprehensible, something he cannot fathom."[8] Stunned and confused, Nicodemus mumbled a question about the meaning of old people being born, and when Jesus confounded him with the further claim that to enter the kingdom of God one has to be born of water and the Spirit, he weakly muttered, "How can these things be?" (John 3:9). To which Jesus ironically replied, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things!" (John 3:10). And just like that, "Nicodemus was check-mated by three moves."[9]

Notice what's happening here. Nicodemus wanted to engage Jesus in serious religious discussion—the kind of careful and sincere dialogue that takes place between two generous and informed conversation partners exchanging opinions with each other. But Nicodemus managed only a single confident sentence before Jesus overwhelmed and silenced him. "Nicodemus must have felt as if suddenly a flashing sword was swung over him while he sat there with harmless and friendly intent."[10] And as readers, we find ourselves disoriented right along with him. What did Nicodemus do to receive such rough treatment? Why would Jesus attack someone seeking earnest conversation? Was it really necessary to speak to Nicodemus so sharply and abrasively?

The longer you ponder these questions, the clearer the answers become. Jesus wanted Nicodemus to see the truth, but he could tell that "Nicodemus was dreaming."[11] He recognized that Nicodemus had no idea who he was talking to and did not perceive how dangerous discussing God really is. So to open his eyes, Jesus needed to shatter Nicodemus's illusions. To heal him, Jesus had to wound him. Or to change the metaphor, "Jesus saw Nicodemus standing, as it were, under a roof that kept him from looking toward heaven. He could not show him heaven at all, as long as he was under the roof, even though he would have taken endless pains to do so. Therefore he did the only thing that he could do. He tried from the first to take him away from the roof and lead him under the open heavens, to place him upon wholly new ground."[12] Seen in this light, what initially appears as an unnecessary assault turns out to be an act of divine kindness. Jesus's apparent refusal to listen to Nicodemus is in fact an event of profound empathy. Jesus understood Nicodemus better than Nicodemus understood himself. Nicodemus was oblivious to what was really happening. He thought he was seeking Jesus, but the reader perceives (and perhaps Nicodemus eventually did too) that Jesus was seeking Nicodemus—seeking, that is, to awaken Nicodemus to reality. Had Jesus allowed Nicodemus to converse with him from a safe distance, converse with him on Nicodemus's own terms, Nicodemus's illusions would only have been reinforced. Thus Jesus needed to give him "a sharp jolt."[13]

We see this kind of encounter throughout the Gospels. Conversations with Jesus rarely unfold according to plan. Jesus continually shocks and astonishes people, rattles their cages, upends their expectations, eludes their traps, and zeroes in on their deepest motivations. This makes for exhilarating reading, but the more you reflect on it, the more unsettling it becomes. As you watch Jesus stride through the narrative, you begin to realize that being near him requires courage. It dawns on you that if you are afraid of the truth, afraid of being exposed, you better keep your distance. And even when you do manage to screw up the courage to move closer to Jesus, to open yourself to him earnestly and sincerely, you never know what will happen next. Jesus is beyond predicting. To be clear, God's love for us in Christ is absolutely secure and dependable, and knowing this is essential for teaching and studying Christian theology well. Without this confidence, theological inquiry would be an exercise in anxiety. As Kierkegaard saw so clearly, "love gives unbounded courage"—exactly the kind of courage that theological study requires.[14] But the constancy of divine love does not manifest itself in a stable, cozy relationship. In fact, just the opposite. According to the New Testament, following Jesus is as precarious as it is unpredictable. In a sermon ostensibly about Jeremiah, but expressing his own agonizing experience of discipleship, Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes,

> O Lord, you have enticed me, and I was enticed. I had no idea what was coming when you seized me—and now I cannot get away from you anymore; you have

> carried me off as your booty. You tie us to your victory chariot and pull us along behind you. … How could we know that your love hurts so much; that your grace is so stern? … You have bound me to you for better or worse. God, why are you so terrifyingly near to us? … God, why are you so close to us? Not to be able to get away from God is the constant disquieting thing in the life of every Christian. If once you let God into your life, if you once allow yourself to be enticed by God, you will never get away again—as a child never gets away from its mother, as a man never gets away from the woman whom he loves. [15]

This passage is arresting not because Bonhoeffer is describing an uncommon experience but because he gives voice to what it feels like to attach yourself to a God who is completely beyond your control. Bonhoeffer is describing an experience that many Christians have but few manage to express with such honesty and eloquence—namely, that following Jesus hurts, and that becoming his disciple means "entering into endless insecurity."[16] One of the most striking features of the Gospels is how they make no attempt to hide any of this. Anyone who reads the New Testament and who attempts to follow Jesus according to the pattern of life described there knows that when Jesus enters the comfortable living room of your life, he throws the furniture around.[17] He leads you to places you don't want to go. He lays waste to the fortresses you construct to protect yourself against his love. "To believe in Jesus is the most hazardous of all hazards,"[18] Barth writes, and Kierkegaard agrees: "In the New Testament, Christianity is the deepest wound that can be inflicted upon a person. It is calculated to collide on the most terrifying scale with everything."[19]

The Opposite of Good Teaching

Before moving on, allow me to clarify the blindingly obvious. I am describing the Christian life, the risks and perils inherent in following Jesus. I am emphatically not recommending that teachers assume an analogously disruptive role in the classroom. To misunderstand this point would inevitably lead to misery for teacher and student alike. Consider, for example, a teacher who makes it his personal mission to unsettle and attack the supposedly naïve and benighted faith of his students. Convinced of the superiority of his wisdom and the righteousness of his cause, he seeks to dismantle and destroy untutored devotion wherever he encounters it. Such a person is as confused as he is contemptible. Instead of teaching, it would be better if he tied a stone around his neck and throw himself into the sea (Luke 17:2). Teaching Christianity is an act of love. Teachers are called to help students perceive and respond to the truth, not to threaten, provoke, or scandalize them. That almost goes without saying. And yet it should be similarly obvious, at least to anyone who has read the New Testament, that to describe Christianity responsibly requires honesty about what knowing God and following Christ are really like.

Divine Presence

Given the sheer quantity of disruptive and disorienting encounters people have with Jesus is the New Testament, I doubt many teachers would explicitly argue against the harrowing descriptions of discipleship we find in Kierkegaard, Barth, and Bonhoeffer. The greater temptation is to minimize or ignore this dimension of Christian existence. When we make this mistake, we do so in countless ways and for reasons too numerous to list or explore here, but one form of this error seems especially common and insidious: we tend to talk about God as if he is not present. Few things are harder than remembering that God is alive and active in our classrooms, few things easier than teaching as if he is not. Imagine you and I are having a conversation about someone. Whatever we happen to be saying about that person, no matter how positive or negative our comments happen to be, the conversation will shift if that person suddenly walks into the room. Her presence with us will change the atmosphere of our discussion. We will stop talking one way and start talking another way. The same is true about God. If we think he is present in our classrooms, that will affect how we talk about him, and if we don't think he is present (or forget that he is), that will too. In other words, we instruct students not only by *what* we say about God but also by *how* we speak about him.

This leads us back to the themes of the previous chapter. If our way of talking about God leaves students unaware of the threat he poses to our lives, perhaps that is because we no longer perceive the threat he poses to our lives. This is an abiding occupational hazard of everyone who teaches Christian theology. As we become more professionally competent, more familiar with the history of theology, more assured in our knowledge and clear about our commitments, we easily assume an air of knowingness, attitude of self-assured security that exudes confidence and control. As we become comfortable in our role as experts on the topic of God, professionals with theological answers at our fingertips, this attitude manifests itself in our teaching, and students are instructed by it. The clarity of Kierkegaard's perception of this point is invaluable.

> In general there are two decisive errors with respect to Christianity. First, Christianity is not a doctrine but an existence-communication. This is the source of all the nuisances of orthodoxy, its quarrels about one thing and another, while existence remains totally unchanged, so that people quarrel about what is Christian just as they do about what is Platonic philosophy and the like. … Second, consequently

> (because Christianity is not a doctrine) in relation to it, it is not a matter of indifference who presents it, as with a doctrine, provided only that he (objectively) says the right thing.—No, Christ appointed not assistant professors—but followers. If Christianity, precisely because it is not a doctrine, does not reduplicate itself in the person who presents it, then what he is presenting is not Christianity. For Christianity is an existence-communication and can only be presented—by existing. Fundamentally, to exist in it is of course to express it in existence, etc.—it is to reduplicate.[20]

For all his emphasis on the freedom of God's self-communication, the frailty of and fallibility of God's human witnesses, the non-contingency of the truth upon those called to articulate it, and the abiding sinfulness and self-deception of even the holiest among us, Barth, dogmatic theologian par excellence, agreed with Kierkegaard that Christianity cannot be reduced to doctrines about God and that Christian existence conditions the plausibility of Christian speech.[21] And if they are right, then either our teaching—including who we are, the ways we speak about God, and the atmosphere we cultivate in our classes—will suggest God's urgent uncontrollable presence with us, his "terrifying nearness" as Bonhoeffer put it, or our teaching will mislead students. There are no exceptions to this rule.

Safety

But this kind of teaching is way easier said than done—not only because attending to the presence of God and losing the illusion of control require, more spiritual discipline and maturity than most of us possess, and not even because such teaching is an expression of the orientation of one's whole life rather than a pedagogical technique one can master, but also because many students do not want this kind of teaching. Some do—or at least they welcome it when they encounter it—but many students enter our classes seeking various forms of safety, security, and control. They want a teacher who will offer them sanctuary from the various threats inherent to Christian existence, someone who will alleviate the difficulty by reducing some of the risks associated with believing in God. This desire takes many forms, but two seem especially common.

The first is a search for the security of theological certainty. Whether confused by the chaos of contemporary life, caught in patterns of doubt, threatened by the existence of intelligent unbelievers, unnerved by the complexity and diversity of the church's own history of theological reflection, or for countless other reasons, many students seek refuge in a teacher who will tell them what to think. They want an expert who will provide them with definitive theological solutions, someone who will tie up the loose ends and alleviate the various pressures they are experiencing. The last thing these students want is a teacher who requires them to make their own theological decisions—a teacher through whom they come to realize that Christianity is even more demanding than they realized.

For other students, the desire for security takes the mirror-opposite form. Rather than unreservedly committing themselves to a single teacher or tradition, they embrace the safety of ceaseless uncertainty. For these students, theological education becomes a process of endless deliberation. Forever reading, thinking, and talking, they never get around to making decisions. Theological reflection and conversation become substitutes for theological commitment. Protected by the fact that there is always more to learn, another angle to consider, a new position to evaluate, these students retreat into a state of permanently suspended judgment in which they are "always being instructed and can never arrive at a knowledge of the truth" (2 Tim. 3:7). While superficially different, these two outlooks share a common unwillingness to embrace the risks associated with Christian existence.

To the second group of students, those stuck in the cycle of endless deliberation, Kierkegaard make the telling observation that delay is itself a decision: "A person indeed *must* choose—God is not mocked. Thus it is truly the case that if a person avoids choosing, this is the same as the blasphemy of choosing the world."[22] Since rational deliberation is open-ended, there will always be reasons—often very good reasons—to postpone making a definite theological commitment. But permanent postponement is indistinguishable from unbelief. Moreover, no amount of additional contemplation will lead these students out of the cycle of perpetual analysis. For that to happen, something else is required.

> If someone wanted to be [Christ's] followers, [Christ's] approach, as seen in the Gospel, was different from lecturing. To such a person he said something like this: Venture a decisive act; then we can begin. What does this mean? It means that one does not become a Christian by hearing something about Christianity, by reading something about it, by thinking about it, or, while Christ was living, by seeing him once in a while or by going and staring at him all day long. No, a setting (a situation) is required—venture a decisive act; the proof does not precede but follows, is in and with the imitation that follows Christ. [23]

As he so often does, Bonhoeffer agrees with Kierkegaard here: "You see, there are always reasons not to do something; the question is whether you do it in spite of them. If you only want to do things that have every reason in their favor, you'll end up never doing anything, or else it won't be necessary any longer, since

others will have taken over for you. Yet every real deed is one that no one else can do, only you yourself."[24]

The first group of students, those seeking to submit to an authoritative teacher, demonstrate an analogous unwillingness to step into the fray. Rather than engaging in the struggle of real theological education, these students expect their teachers to do the hard work for them.[25] And yet, since secondhand knowledge of God is impossible, since God is always known in the context of a living relationship that never passes over into human control, since theological knowledge cannot be reduced to pieces of intellectual data that teachers accumulate, organize, and dispense, teachers are incapable of offering these students what they want. We cannot give them what we do not possess. Real theological education is a process of continual confrontation with God. To receive it, students have to fight for it themselves. The most teachers can do is participate in this apprenticeship alongside them.

> Is truth such that in relation to it one may suppose that a person can appropriate it summarily with the help of another? Summarily, that is, without willing oneself to be developed in like manner, to be tried, to battle, to suffer as did the one who acquired the truth for him? Is it not just as impossible as to sleep or dream oneself into the truth, is it not just as impossible summarily to appropriate it, however wide awake one is? Or if one is wide awake, is it not merely an illusion if one does not understand or refuses to understand that in relation to the truth there is no abridgment that leaves out the acquiring of it, and that in relation to acquiring of it from generation to generation there is no essential abridgment, so that every generation and everyone in the generation must essentially begin from the beginning?[26]

Students unwilling to enter *and remain* in this struggle can obviously read and understand Scripture and Christian theology, but true knowledge of God involves the whole person, not merely the intellect. In Kierkegaard's unforgettable formulation, "The truth is a trap: you cannot get hold of it without getting caught; you cannot get hold of the truth in such a way that you catch it, but only in such a way that it catches you."[27] Thus the rhythm of revelation is continual renewal. The God whom Christian theology seek to know "again and again discloses himself anew and must be discovered anew."[28] Rather than becoming the believer's permanent possession, knowledge of God is "constantly being acquired."[29] Barth draws the inevitable conclusion that follows from this line of reasoning—an inference that I suspect will sound odd to many people who sign up for Christian theology classes: "We cannot, therefore, define Christians simply as those who are awake while the rest sleep, but more cautiously as those who wake up in the sense that they are awakened a first time and then again and again. … They are, in fact, those who constantly stand in need of reawakening and who depend upon the fact that they are continually reawakened. They are those who, it is to be hoped, continually awake up."[30]

The Price of Real Education

Throughout this chapter I have stressed that real knowledge of God happens for only those students willing to embrace the risks it involves. If I am right about that, then theological education is not something teachers can give students, nor is it something students can buy. What students pay for is entrance into a context in which they *might* be educated, and that happens only for those courageous, assiduous, and vulnerable enough to enter the perilous process of continual reawakening that Barth describes. But real education is as demanding for teachers as it is for students. Responsible teaching requires honesty.

It requires teachers to clarify the dangers inherent in Christian existence and to cultivate classroom environments that suggest those difficulties. But the costs associated with such teaching are rapidly increasing. As educational institutions compete for students like businesses compete for customers, as university campuses are transformed into "retirement spreads for the young," as student evaluations factor heavily in assessment and promotion decisions, and as the very idea of liberal education rapidly loses ground to utilitarian strategies for career training, teachers face extraordinary pressure to pander to students and downplay the requirements of serious education.[31] And what is true in academia is likewise true in the church. Pastors and teachers are pressed on all sides to make "everything as convenient, as comfortable and as inexpensive as possible."[32] The pressure to sell Christianity at discount prices is intense, and Christian leaders who refuse to adjust to these conditions create very real problems for themselves. I would not presume to advise anyone negotiating these challenges, nor do I claim to have navigated them well myself. I have made numerous concessions along the way and do not claim to be an example of truly courageous teaching. I have never reached the end of a semester and been pleased with my performance. Not once. I consider myself guilty of what Kierkegaard called "playing at Christianity and making a fool of God."[33] The most I can say for myself is that I am trying to learn to teach courses that cohere more closely with the reality I am attempting to describe. And since I see no reason to hope that abstract and undemanding courses will faithfully communicate the about knowing God and following Christ, I plan to keep trying.

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[1] Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction*, trans. Grover Foley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), 116.
[2] Barth, *Evangelical Theology*, 37. Emphasis added.
[3] Barth, *Evangelical Theology*, 165.
[4] Søren Kierkegaard, *The Moment and Late Writings*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 433.
[5] Despite the prevailing methodological assumptions that govern American education today, many important elements of education cannot be measured or assessed, and in the case of Christian theology, that is true about the most important elements.
[6] Karl Barth and Eduard Thurneysen, "Jesus and Nicodemus," in *Come Holy Spirit: Sermons*, trans. George W. Richards, Elmer G. Homrighausen, and Karl J. Ernst (New York: Round Table Press, 1933), 102.
[7] Barth and Thurneysen, "Jesus and Nicodemus," 105.
[8] Barth and Thurneysen, "Jesus and Nicodemus," 102–103, rev.
[9] Barth and Thurneysen, "Jesus and Nicodemus," 103. Cf. Mike Tyson's Rule: "Everybody has a plan until they get punched in the mouth."
[10] Barth and Thurneysen, "Jesus and Nicodemus," 107.
[11] Barth and Thurneysen, "Jesus and Nicodemus," 109.
[12] Barth and Thurneysen, "Jesus and Nicodemus," 109.
[13] Barth and Thurneysen, "Jesus and Nicodemus," 109.
[14] Søren Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 65.
[15] *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works* [Hereafter cited *DBW*] vol. 13, *London: 1933–1935*, ed. Keith W. Clements, trans. Isabel Best (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 351–352.
[16] *DBW*, vol. 4, *Discipleship*, ed. Geoffrey B Kelly and John D. Godsey, trans. Barbara Green and Reinhard Krauss (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 62.
[17] Stealing Flannery O'Connor's imagery. See her comment: "I distrust folks who have ugly things to say about Karl Barth. I like old Barth. He throws the furniture around" (quoted in Ralph C. Wood, *Flannery O'Connor and the Christ-Haunted South* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004], 100).
[18] Karl Barth, The Epistle to the Romans, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 99.
[19] *Kierkegaard's Journals and* Notebooks (Hereafter cited *KJN*], ed. Niels Jørgen Cappelørn, et al, vol. 9, *Journals NB26–NB30* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 313.
[20] *KJN,* ed. Niels Jørgen Cappelørn, et al, vol. 5, *Journals NB6–10* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011). 39.
[21] See Barth's comment, "It is good and right to point to the significance of the individual personality of the instructor. In the last analysis, it is the case that the mystery of instruction and of research lies in the person" (Karl Barth, *Barth in Conversation*, ed. Eberhard Busch, trans. The Translation Fellows of the Center for Barth Studies Princeton Theological Seminary, vol. 1, 1959–1962 [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2017], 67).
[22] Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, 207.
[23] Søren Kierkegaard, *For Self-Examination* and *Judge For Yourself*!, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 191.
[24] *DBW*, vol. 8, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. John W. de Gruchy, trans. Isabel Best (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009, 425).
[25] As Kierkegaard once observed, "There are many people who arrive at answers in life just like schoolboys; they cheat their teacher by copying the answer out of the arithmetic book without having worked the problem out themselves" *KJN* 2:75.
[26] Søren Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 202–203.
[27] *DBW*, vol. 8, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 425.
[28] Barth, *Evangelical Theology*, 6.
[29] Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, 14.
[30] Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/2:555.
[31] Mark Edmundson, *Why Teach? In Defense of a Real Education* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), ix.
[32] Kierkegaard, *Moment*, 109.
[33] Kierkegaard, *Moment*, 168, rev.

Humility as a Reformed Value

By Robert A. Bryant

What does humility have to do with teaching the Bible? Much. The Bible, after all, is a highly intertextual work whose literary, historical, and theological breadth, depth, and points of view are unparalleled. Moreover, the Bible's central focus is the question of God, which runs like a red thread through all biblical scriptures.[1] Yet, the Bible does not say everything about the history and cultures it covers or about God and human existence. Such acknowledgements alone ought to inspire humility and deter one from making claims about the text and God beyond the text's boundaries and mysteries. Additionally, a prominent characteristic of God and his people in the Bible, especially God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ, is humility. Beyond the scriptures, too, humility is central in the church's theology and vital to the Christian faith. Humility, then, ought to be a concern for anyone who teaches the Bible. Still, what does the Bible have to say about humility, how relevant is it for the life of faithfulness, and how may it impact the teaching of the Bible?

To begin with, humility is a persistent theme in the Bible, and an examination of its meaning in the Old and New Testaments will aid our consideration of humility's

role in the Christian life and for teaching. The great emphasis on humility in the Christian faith is rooted in ancient Israel's life. Over against the backdrop of ancient Egypt's hierarchical culture, Israel's longstanding status as slaves at the bottom of that stratified society guaranteed its everlasting rejection of proud, arrogant, dominating powers (Exod 1:11; Deut 26:6). Even more, Israel's faith that God delivered them from the afflictions of their oppressive captors speaks of God's goodness and his own opposition to social systems centered on power, wealth, and social distinctions that alienate and oppress (Isa 2:12; Jer 50:31; Amos 6:8). The God of Israel brings down the proud and delivers the humble (cf. 1 Sam 2:7; 2 Sam 22:28).

In the Old Testament, humility pertains almost entirely to being in a state of lowliness, poverty, or affliction (עני, ענוה, צנע). In such a state, the humble recognize their limitations and put their trust in God. It is this reliance upon God which is most determinative of humility. Of course, sometimes God humbles a person (Exod 10:3) or a nation (Deut 8:2, 16) in order that people will know that they do not live by bread alone but by the grace of God. In Deuteronomy, we see also that God's choice of Israel is cause for humility, for God's choice to bless all of the families of the earth (Gen 12:3) is not based not on any human abilities or achievements of Israel but solely upon God's love, covenants, and desire for life to flourish (Deut 7:7–8).

There is no place for pride and arrogance among God's faithful, as the prophets of Israel make clear. As Jeremiah puts it summarily, "Thus says the Lord: 'Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, let not the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches; but let him who glories glory in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord who practice steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth; for in these things I delight,' says the Lord" (9:23–24; cf. 12:15; Isa 3:14–15; Amos 2:6–7; 5:21–24; etc.). Humility is a hallmark of ancient Israel's sense of faithfulness, exemplified chiefly by Moses (Num 12:3), is set on par with righteousness (Zeph 2:3; 3:12–13), and is established as one of the three most important requirements of God (Mic 6:8). Israel's Messianic tradition also celebrates humility as a chief characteristic of God's Messiah and messianic people (Isa 41:8–9; 42:1–7; 53:10–12). The wisdom tradition sees humility as foundational for all knowing (Prov 1:7), and the Psalms connect humility with a reverent awe of God and a dedication to his ways (Pss 22:26; 25:4–10; 147:6).

In the New Testament, humility may pertain to one's low status or condition but is now overwhelmingly a way of describing a central Christian virtue, namely the Christlike way of relating to God and neighbor, ways that are akin to gentleness, patience, meekness, and caring for others (ταπεινός, πραΰς, and their related words). As a celebrated virtue, we find it in prominent descriptions of distinctive Christian attributes, often in reference to Jesus. In Paul's appeal to the Corinthian Christians to be imitators of the ways of Christ, he exhorts them to live "with love in a spirit of gentleness" (1 Cor 4:17–21), which is the way of Christ (2 Cor 10:1). In the famous Christ Hymn of Philippians, Paul stresses that Christ is the model for faithfulness, and this means in part that Christians "do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than [them]selves" (2:3, ταπεινοφροσύνη). Further, God's own radical humility is displayed in Christ's humbling himself and being obedient to God's way of loving others, even to the point of death on a cross (Phil 2:8). Jesus did not count equality with God as something to exploit (2:6).

The humility of God is evident in the Gospels, too. The Sermon on the Mount, for example, opens with a catalogue of distinguishing traits of God's kingdom people that includes humility (Matt 5:5), and the Messiah is recognizable in his humility (Matt 21:5; cf. Isa 62:11; Zech 9:9). Perhaps most famously, Jesus said, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (Matt 11:28–29). Jesus' followers took the example of Jesus' humility to heart and held that humility should govern all their relations (1 Pet 3:8; 5:5–6; Col 3:12). Moreover, "God opposes the proud, and gives grace to the humble" (Jas 4:6; 1 Pet 4:5; Isa 57:15; Prov 3:34).

Humility is central in the teachings of Jesus. For example, the fourth major discourse of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel (Matt 18:1–35) focuses on humility and begins when the disciples ask Jesus the most startling question: Who will enjoy the highest status in the kingdom of heaven? (18:1).[2] In light of Jesus' instructions thus far in Matthew's Gospel, their question shows their incomprehension of Jesus' earlier instructions on God's way of humble self-giving for others (cf. 5:5; 6:43–46; 7:1–5; 9:9–13; 10:17–23; 34–42). It is an entirely understandable question, though. Seeking honor was typical of the first century Greco-Roman social setting in which the question was asked and still is today. But Jesus, the humble teacher of righteousness in Matthew, addresses their misguided self-interest and emphasizes that there is no place for elevations or diminishments of status among his followers. Rather, Jesus teaches the disciples that the members of God's community will embody the humble servant status of the child (18:2–5). Children may have low social capital, but they are of great value to the "Father in heaven" (v. 10). Humility, not arrogance or domination, will be the community's standard. This

means that its members will relate to one another with other-regarding humility. It also speaks of the kind of rule God exercises and desires. Thus, Jesus continues to teach about humility by telling stories that highlight several of its essential attributes in relations with others and the kinds of leadership related to it, such as caring for everyone (18:10–14), listening to one another (18:15–20), and forgiving each other (18:21–35). The followers of Jesus—the church—will abide together as a grace-filled, other-regarding, just community marked by Jesus' own presence.[3]

The Old and New Testaments locate humility in loving (*agape*) relations with God and neighbor. Absent in the scriptural view of humility is self-importance or self-righteousness. Present is freedom from pretentiousness and freedom for tranquil service of God and neighbor (ἡσύχιος; 1 Pet 3:4 and Rom 12:16). Humility in the Bible is the outcome of encounters with a loving, just, and gracious God. From the earliest declarations of faith in the God who delivered Israel from captivity (Exod 15:11), to prophetic celebrations of God's counsel and wisdom (Isa 28:29), to God's incarnation in Jesus Christ (Heb 1:2–3), to the Bible's final anticipation of Christ's return (Rev 1:17–18; 22:20–21), the scriptures identify humility as a defining characteristic of God and his people. Moreover, Jesus embodies God's way of serving humbly, and the Spirit of Christ at work in the faithful empowers them to serve humbly, too (Gal 5:22–23; 1 Cor 13:4–6; Eph 4:2).[4] In short, the biblical scriptures stress humility as a defining attribute of God and his people. For Christians, the cross of Jesus Christ marks the path of loving humble service for others (cf. Mark 10:45; Matt 23:12; 1 Cor 1:18–2:2; 2 Cor 11:7; 1 Pet 5:5).

Not surprisingly, the biblical association between faith, humility, and serving others resonates throughout the church's history and theology. Such a survey is beyond the scope of this study, but a few representative theologians—such as Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Karl Barth—can help us assess further the centrality of humility to Christian faithfulness and its relevance for teaching.

Humility for Martin Luther cannot be overemphasized. In fact, Luther's theology might be summarized as a theology of humility, especially in so far as one's confession of sin and utter reliance on God are the grounds for justification and sanctification. Faith begins and persists with humility, and both grow as trust in ourselves wains. As Luther sees it, Christians "remain servants who know their place" before God and do not exalt themselves.[5] As servants of the Lord, though, humility can never be self-abasement, servitude, or self-abuse of any kind, because the self is also a creation of God and worthy of love (Mark 12:31). Rather, for the Christian, faithful humility is foremost the consequence of being in Christ, is manifested out of Christ's love, and reflects Christ's own loving humility. It rests in the believer's complete trust in God, never in any accomplishment.[6] Moreover, only in faithful humility through the Holy Spirit may the scriptures be read in a way that becomes life-giving. It is faithfulness, through the working of the Holy Spirit in the believer, that produces good works, but in no way do they make one righteous. Rather, the good works of humbly serving others are the natural outcomes of faithfulness working through love (Gal 5:6).

We find a similar emphasis in the theology of the John Calvin who—with Luther and others before them, like Augustine and Chrysostom—views humility as an essential trait of Christian faithfulness. Humility "gives God alone the honor"[7] and is the practice of "laying aside the disease of self-love and ambition by which he is blinded and thinks more highly of himself than he ought [cf. Gal 6:3]."[8] For Calvin, humility is a spiritual gift bound to the gift of love (*agape*) which enables the faithful to see more truthfully themselves, other people, the world, and God's self-revelation and will. Calvin also rejoices that a Christian is always a student in the Lord's school, learning from the Holy Spirit the ways of God, God's world, and God's way of humble loving service to all.[9]

Karl Barth encapsulates the scriptures and prior church history when he describes the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ as "the revelation of the divine humility."[10] God's inconceivable degree of humility revealed in the incarnation calls people to humbly confess sin and embrace God's grace through faith. Humility is a key means through which God moves for the purposes of faithfulness and blessing.[11] Indeed, when it comes to knowing anything about God, humility is what drives the believer "into the saving unrest (grounded in a final rest) of a continual inquiry concerning God, namely, God in His revelation."[12] Humility, then, is also a constant characteristic of anyone who is on the journey of faith. Furthermore, the faithful see by humility "the fact that we are on the way; that therefore any goal that is attained becomes the point of departure for a new journey on this way on which the revelation of God and its veracity are always future to us."[13] As others have stressed before him and since, Karl Barth is captivated by God's self-revelation of divine humility in Jesus Christ who gave himself freely and totally for the salvation of the world and is God's way of being human.

By no means a comprehensive sampling of their works or of the church's theological heritage, these three theologians illustrate the relevance of humility for faithfulness. They also articulate the dangers of self-interest and the potential for humility's corruption. As a teaching mentor of mine often said, "Show me a humble

person, and I'll show you a person who is proud of it." What he meant is that egoism is so insidious that it can deceive, corrupt, and masquerade as humility (Col 2:18–19, 23). Self-centeredness can pretend righteousness or love, too, and distort any other good gift from God. By contrast, the Bible and the Church's tradition view faithful humility as inherently other-centered—attentive to both God and neighbor—and it is generously self-giving in the manner of Jesus Christ in its dedication to serve the needs of others.

Already, then, before we turn to the relevance of this biblical and theological background for teaching the Bible, a few general observations are in order. First, Jesus is God's revelation of divine humility. Second, faithful humility stems from awe of God and a trusting reliance upon God who loves us and who has given and continues giving himself for us. Third, humility expresses itself as a disposition of love toward God and neighbor. Fourth, humility is a celebrated virtue and distinctive trait of Jesus' followers, individually and together as the Church. Fifth, the way of Jesus is "the way of the cross" for others. Finally, humility is liberating for the humble servant and empowering for the recipient of grace, for it is rooted in trust of God who alone is savior. Now in light of all of this, let us turn to humility's significance for teaching the Bible.

It should come as no surprise that humility plays vital roles for Christians who teach, especially those who teach the Bible. Like a seed planted in a garden and nurtured to produce fruit, tending to the seed of humility can enhance the teaching and learning experience and foster the growth of teacher and student alike.

To begin with, we should be clear about the term teaching. One way to measure teaching is by the simple rule: teaching occurs when students learn. Teaching does not necessarily occur when we teachers go through the motions of engaging a subject matter by lecturing, questioning, exploring, illuminating, connecting, relating, or applying material on our own. If our students learn through these and similar processes, however, then we are teaching. But how much they may gain and how many of our students we are teaching is difficult to measure. What is clear is that where there is no learning there is no teaching. Teaching cannot be only about the teacher.

We should be clear also about the nature of teaching itself. Teaching and learning are a dynamic reciprocal process. Moreover, as with all communication, what is delivered may not be what is received. In other words, teaching and learning may be incomplete and the lesson learned may not be what was intended—it may be less or more. Something different may emerge in the relationally dynamic reciprocal process of teaching and learning. For teachers and students alike, the acts of learning and teaching are constantly interchanging.[14] With these points in mind, let us consider some particular roles of humility in the compassionate work of teaching (Mark 6:34).

Teaching, like humility, is an inherently relational, other-regarding, expression of care for others. While humility and teaching are not necessarily Christian, the humble Christian teacher will naturally express humility in every facet of the teaching enterprise. In the arena of teaching, this means that humility will inform the teacher's sense of self, both personally and vocationally. Humility will also shape how the teacher views students, the subject matter, pedagogical approaches, and desired student learning outcomes. Humility will affect how teachers conduct themselves, too, both with their students and colleagues. Indeed, regardless of teaching methods, humility will help the teacher engage students as a leader who is expanding his or her own knowledge of the subject matter, increasing the knowledge of the students, improving skills in teaching, fostering growth in Christian experience, and enhancing appreciation and wonder of life.

Humility plays a vital role in the formation of a faithful effective teacher. It is here that the seeds of humility are sown for the fruit that humility bears. Again, humility begins with the question of God, but it also abides there in awe and wonder (1 Cor 13:12; Phil 2:12; Rom 11:33). It grows with the nourishment of grace (Rom 3:24; 5:1–8; Gal 5:23). From faith, then, humility enables the teacher to view life as a journey in the contexts of God, neighbor, and creation. Consequently, teacher and student alike are deemed children of God on journeys of life and relations with God. Both have more to know about the world and nurturing life, relations, and the common good. Both have more to learn about God and his ways. With humble faith comes, also, an assurance of God's caring presence and hope in his redemptive power, even in teaching's most trying experiences. So, too, comes the view of teaching as a Christian vocation by which God's gifts are used with thanksgiving to God for the benefit of others. Furthermore, humility prompts the teacher to acknowledge that age, knowledge, and experience are not pre-requisites for knowing or representing God faithfully (Jer 1:6–7; Matt 18:3). And since humility is related to truthfulness, it provides a steady bearing toward honesty in the teacher's relations with God, the self, the subject matter, the students, and among colleagues. The humble teacher, for example, recognizes the limitations of his or her understanding—especially views of God, inconvenient facts, and unknowns. So, also, one is free to wonder and question, and one is also free from idolizing the subject matter and knowledge of it. Knowing and teaching cannot be ends in themselves. Moreover, humility helps teachers to not

inflate what they know, impose their beliefs, abuse their authority, over- and under-value their students, ignore their students' challenges, and not care about best practices. Humility may even free teachers from counting the cost of serving. In many ways, humility bears directly upon a teacher's life and teaching.

Humility plays a vital role, also, in the teacher's engagement with the subject matter. As the writer of Proverbs knew, humility before God is a prerequisite for knowledge and wisdom (1:7), and there is always more to learn and wonder about in any subject. Humility prompts the teacher to engage the known and the unknown. The Bible, for instance, is a collection of books (*biblia*) written for different purposes by different authors for different communities of different cultures, languages, places, and times. Its compositional history stretches well over a thousand years. Not surprisingly, the Bible offers different perspectives on many things, even within particular books, and it does not everywhere agree with itself. Its linguistic, literary, historical, and theological dimensions are complex and extensive. And what about the other writings of ancient Israel and the early Church that are not included in the Bible and which may also inform one's understanding of the Bible? Then there is the ever-challenging question of how any of the biblical scriptures are the Word of God. Even where Christians call the Bible inspired, not all of it is equally inspiring. For many people, the Bible is believed to be only a human word. There is also the problem of ethical discrepancies, such as "Bible believing Christians" who "vote the Bible" to support racism, bigotry, greed, fascism, and many other uncaring and selfish behaviors. Yet, from the same Bible, some Christians show that self-willed ways are not the way of Jesus Christ and of which Jesus speaks in passages like Matthew 25:31–46.

Humility plays a key role not only in a teacher's learning but also in matters of biblical interpretation. For example, consider 2 Tim 3:16. What scripture is the author speaking about since there is no New Testament yet? And are the "sacred writings" of v. 15 the same as the "scripture" cited in v. 16? And what is one to make of what any responsible translation of the Greek text of v. 16 should show that "all scripture being inspired by God (literally "God-breathed") is also" useful? What else is in view here for promoting faithfulness? Similarly, how is one to take account of texts like: two very different creation stories; divine commandments to destroy whole nations; Jesus cursing whole cities; declarations like the psalmist declaring "happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rocks" (Ps 137:8–9); or discrepancies between one demoniac or two (Matt 8:28 or Luke 8:27); or the Last Supper on a Wednesday night (John 13:1f; 18:28) or Thursday (Mark 14:12f; etc.); and so on? Clearly, there is more to knowing the Bible than knowing its words alone or employing parts of it to support whatever ends one desires. There is also a long history of the interpretation of biblical texts, and there are perspectives from the Church's doctrinal positions based on biblical texts. Simply put, humility enables the interpreter to deal with the Bible that we have in all of its complexities and problems, to pay attention to all of a text's related contexts. Humility empowers the teacher to wonder and explore ever further the intricate relations among the Bible's literature, history, and theology and their effects upon human relations.

Humility plays a key role in learning about one's students, too. It enables the teacher to view the student as a whole person, a child of God, and it fosters concern for knowing students and the characteristics of their stages of life. What are their ways of being and knowing? What are their fears, hopes, questions, assumptions, prejudices, joys, sorrows, cognitive strengths and weaknesses, and purposes for attending? What will help or hinder their engagement with the subject matter, their participation in class, their relations with others, and their understanding of the subject matter and its relevance for their lives? The more a teacher understands each student as an individual and all the students collectively as a class, the more effective the teacher may become in the art of teaching so that learning occurs.

Humility nourishes relations with students. Humble teaching not only strives to elicit wonder, challenge presuppositions, broaden perspectives, and even move the will toward charitable thoughts and actions, but it also influences the kind of relations students and teachers will have. The other-regarding nature of humility helps teachers be attentive to their students in ways that convey caring, honesty, trustworthiness, and fairness. Of course, teacher-student relations must remain within appropriate bounds, but humility fosters good relations which aids learning. Indeed, educational research shows a strong correlation between positive student-teacher relationships and student learning improvements. A positive teacher-student relationship is also a predictor of both the teacher's and student's experiences of joy in teaching and learning.[15] Few things help us learn and grow as much as the awareness that we are cared for and understood.

Humility also helps teachers persist in the work of improving their teaching. In humility, teachers see that there is always room to improve their art. This is important, because a student's learning depends not only on a teacher's mastery of the subject but also on a teacher's mastery of teaching skills. There are many methods of teaching to know and utilize, such as the lecture, discussion, question and answer, individual and

group project, assignment and paper, research project, presentation, visual and audible experience, artistic, dramatic, poetic, reader's theater, meditative, craft, and others. It would be unlikely for a teacher to be equally adept in every teaching approach, and a teacher gifted in the use of a single method can employ it to great effect. Yet an ability to employ various teaching approaches will extend the teacher's reach to more students and situations, because students do not all learn in a single way.

Humility aids pedagogy in other ways, too. For instance, humility can free the teacher from being overly-organized and inflexible with a teaching plan, unable to adjust to the unfolding teaching situation. The ability to adapt wisely, both in preparation and instruction, hinges upon a teacher's ready skills and good judgment, but it also depends on the teacher's other-regarding attentiveness. Furthermore, student needs and abilities vary and change. The subject matter, teaching environment, and desired learning outcomes also impact which teaching skills and approaches will be more effective than others in varying circumstances. The goal, of course, is to help students to become more knowledgeable, critically-minded, morally sensitive, and generous of spirit, even to become more committed to contribute faithfully to the world community.[16] In short, the faithful other-regarding teacher who pursues knowledge and cares about students will also be attentive to pedagogy.

Humility serves teaching the Bible further through its capacity to enhance Christian experience for students and teachers. Teachers play a critical role in shaping the community (*koinonia*) of students they serve. The question is, "How?" Certainly, if teaching is to be dynamic, the teacher's relation with the subject (the Bible, God, etc.) cannot be static. When a teacher's own growth ceases, teaching effectiveness soon follows. Stated positively, teachers who find their subject matter personally relevant and students interesting are more likely to keep learning and help their students grow, not only in relation to the subject matter and ways of learning anything but also in relation to themselves, others, the world, and God. Additionally, students should be able to witness Christian character traits in their teacher. Traits such as love (*agape*), grace, honesty, fairness, trustworthiness, humility, courteousness, and others should all be evident. The presence or absence of good character will impact not only the student's understanding of the Christian faith and life but will impact also their own experiences of that faith and life.

In the teaching and learning of the Bible, teacher and student alike are challenged to mature in understanding and faithfulness. Teaching the Bible provides opportunities to reflect critically on what the Bible says about God and human relations as well as on the history, meaning, and experience of the Christian faith and life. Such work is an essential dimension of teaching the Bible. Here, though, teachers must exercise humble care as they consider their approach and manner of addressing such questions (Jas 3:1). Will the teacher impose his or her perspectives of faith and faithfulness upon students? Or will the teacher accept that she or he is also on a journey and does not know everything about God and God's ways? How will the teacher regard the Church's interpretive history of biblical scriptures and essential tenets of the faith? How will the teacher address misunderstandings, misrepresentations, and falsifications? Will the study be an inquiry that produces understanding and wonder? Will it be a litmus test for acceptance? The biblical example of the hyper-religious Saul becoming Paul the apostle of grace offers a stark reminder that people who think they are the most right can often do great wrong (cf. Gal 1:12–16; Acts 7:58; Phil 3:4–7; 1 Cor 12:3). This is especially relevant for teaching the Bible if, like Paul, the teacher is claiming to advance God's ways but is actually misrepresenting and opposing God's way. Belief effects actions for good or harm. Thus, in teaching the Bible and enhancing Christian experience, exercising humility to encourage loving conduct is at least as important as learning what the biblical scriptures say about God (cf. Matt 22:37–40).

Finally, humility serves teaching the Bible by prompting a growing sense of sacred wonder in God, God's Word, and God's World. In many ways, teaching and learning in a course have finite boundaries, but effective teaching continues to foster learning well beyond the boundaries of the classroom. Humility is important here because at the core of humility, as with effective teaching, is a sense of wonder, and wonder propels learning. A sense of wonder prompts teachers and students to consider other points of view and the unknown. For the community of faith, the primary aim of Christian education should be to cultivate a sense of wonder about God, ourselves, others, and the world God made.[17] Indeed, as William Brown puts it, "if there is one central testimony about God throughout the Bible, it is this: *God is encountered in wonder*."[18] Everywhere in the scriptures we encounter expressions of faithful wonder and awe in God's revelations, from the ancient Israelites' earliest testimonies of his delivering hand (Exod 15:11), characterizations of his wonders by the psalmist (77:14), and declarations of his counsel and wisdom (Isa 28:29) to the crowds wondering about Jesus' miraculous acts and the absolute wonder of God's new creation power displayed through the risen crucified Jesus Christ. A teacher's example and guidance in a humble wondering about God, the world, and what it means to love God and neighbor gets right to the core of the Bible itself.

In teaching the Bible, humility plays a vital role, and teachers of the Bible would do well to exercise faithful humility in every aspect of their teaching. Whether it be

in their own personal development, their ongoing study of the Bible, their relations with students and colleagues, their teaching arts, their engagements with Christian experience, or their ongoing wonder about God, humility nurtures growth and relations. Why? Because humility is other-regarding. It is helpful in critical thinking and the acquisition of knowledge. It empowers honest engagement with the texts and the contexts of the Bible that we have. It helps the interpreter to hear texts rather than impose meaning upon them and ignore any difficulties, challenges, and contradictions that exist. Humility also enables the teacher to be attentive to the Church's interpretive traditions through the ages and to hold faith and reason together in dialogue with one another so that any interpretation of the Bible will be characterized by a spirit of humility. Perhaps most importantly, humility enables the Bible teacher to engage students as they are, to awaken their curiosity, and to help them develop their own relationship with and understanding of God.[19]

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[1] Peter Müller, *Gott und die Bibel* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer GmbH, 2015), 11.
[2] In the Gospels, only Matthew 16:18 and 18:17 use the Greek word *ekklesia*, *assembly*, which is translated as "church" throughout Acts and the epistles. Here the relation between humility and the church is explicit.
[3] Peter Müller, *Matthäus: Lesen und Deuten* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008), 62; Robert A. Bryant, *The Gospel of Matthew: God With Us* (Pittsburgh: Kerygma, 2006), 84–86.
[4] Robert A. Bryant, *First Corinthians: One in Christ* (Pittsburgh: Kerygma, 2010), 31–44, 109–115; *The Risen Crucified Christ in Galatians* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001), 143-189.
[5] Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, 1483–1546, Vol. 23, Eds. Helmut T. Lehmann, Hilton C. Oswald, and Jaroslav Pelikan (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1955), 295.
[6] Ibid., 351.
[7] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), II.ii.8, 265–266.
[8] Ibid., II.ii.11, 268–270.
[9] Ibid., I.ii.2, 41–42.
[10] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics, IV/ 2*, eds. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1958), 42.
[11] Ibid., 43.
[12] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics, II/1*:214.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Kenneth E. Eble, *The Craft of Teaching: A Guide to Mastering the Professor's Art*, 2d. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1988), 9.
[15] Sarah D. Sparks, "Why Teacher-Student Relationships Matter: New Findings Shed Light on Best Approaches," in *Education Week*, Vol. 38, Issue 25, March 12, 2019.
[16] Richard R. Osmer, *Teaching for Faith: A Guide for Teachers of Adult Classes* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992). See, also, Peter Müller, *Schlüssel zur Bibel: Eine Einführung in die Bibeldidaktik* (Stuttgart: Calwer, 2009); *Gott und die Bibel* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 2015); "*Verstehst Du Auch, Was Du Liest?*": *Lesen und Verstehen im Neuen Testament* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1994).
[17] William P. Brown, *Sacred Sense: Discovering the Wonder of God's Word and World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 2.
[18] Ibid. See also Peter Müller, *Gott und die Bibel*, 11–12; 222–225.
[19] This essay is offered with thanksgiving and in honor of Professor Doctor Peter Müller and Professor Doctor Anita Müller-Friese, who embody the art of faithful teaching in all humility, for their profound service to both the academy and the church. Their friendship and collegiality over the years have deeply enriched my life and work. I am deeply indebted, as well, to Professor Doctor Connie Colwell, who also embodies the ways of humble teaching, for her collegiality and friendship.

John Owen and the Beatific Vision

by Suzanne McDonald

When was the last time you thought about the beatific vision? Have you *ever* thought about the beatific vision?!

Let's be honest, this hasn't exactly been a prominent topic for Protestant theologians or pastors down the centuries. Reflection on the beatific vision has found its home mostly within Roman Catholic theology. On a traditional Roman Catholic understanding, the beatific vision is the culmination of our salvation, when the redeemed will be able to contemplate the Triune God in an unmediated way, and so will be brought into perfect union and communion with God.

I suspect that for many of us, the idea of reflecting on the beatific vision might seem like a classic example of being so heavenly minded that we are of no earthly use. What's more, the traditional understanding might seem like a highly abstract and over-intellectualized concept of eternal life. It can sound rather like we are simply going to be heavenly brains on sticks for all eternity, or

contemplative souls without bodies. These days, many are rightly putting some serious question marks beside an all-but-disembodied idea of life in "heaven," and recovering a more scripturally robust account of eternal life in our glorified resurrection bodies in the transformed physicality of the new creation. This leads us to a far more embodied, dynamic, and active way of thinking about eternal life which seems to leave little place for the concept of the beatific vision as it is traditionally understood. The risk with this, though, is that we can place ourselves and our activities so much at the center of how we envision eternal life that we end up losing sight of God himself.

Within the historic Reformed tradition there is a strand of thinking that takes a somewhat different approach. It offers a more strongly scriptural and Christ-centered understanding of the beatific vision, which helps us to see how much Christ's divinity and humanity matter not only for our salvation and our life now, but for all eternity. It also shows how the beatific vision will involve our glorified resurrection bodies as well as our minds. And it helps us to make some clearer connections between the beatific vision in glory and our ordinary life of discipleship now.

One of the foremost amongst those who take this route is the 17th century Reformed theologian and pastor, John Owen. Perhaps you have come across Owen because of his staunch defense of a "Calvinist" understanding of election, or as someone who explores how we can experience communion with each person of the Trinity. He was also a tenacious defender of classical Christology in the face of a growing tendency in his time either to deny the divinity of Christ outright or to disregard it as irrelevant. He does this most fully in his doctrinal treatise, *Christologia* (1679), and also, in a more pastoral and contemplative way, in his *Meditations and Discourses on the Glory of Christ* (1684). This was the last book he prepared for publication, and we have an account of how a friend brought him some page-proofs from the printer on what turned out to be the day of his death. On seeing them, Owen is said to have responded: "O Brother Payne! The long wished-for day is come at last, in which I shall see that glory in another manner than I have ever done or was capable of doing in this world."

For Owen, beholding the glory of Christ has a very specific meaning. It signifies acknowledging the fullness of his person, divine and human, and what that means for his saving work, along with the implications of his two natures for the whole Christian life now and through eternity. *Meditations and Discourses on the Glory of Christ* encourages all believers to devote themselves to contemplating this understanding of the glory of Christ by faith now, in anticipation of beholding him in the fullness of his glory by sight in the beatific vision.

This means that for Owen the beatific vision is not simply going to be our intellectual apprehension of the being of the Triune God. Picking up on 2 Corinthians 3:18 and 4:4–6, he asserts that we will behold the glory of God *in the face of Jesus Christ.* We will see him in his glorified ascended humanity with our glorified resurrection eyes, just as our glorified minds will finally be able to grasp as much as it is possible for us to apprehend of his divinity as well as his humanity. It is as we behold the person of Christ in glory that we will come to fullest knowledge of and union and communion with him, and through him, the Triune God. Just as Jesus Christ is the mediator of our knowledge of God, our worship of God, and our communion with God in this life, so he will be the mediator of all of these things through all eternity.

In the meanwhile, beholding the glory of Christ by faith here and now matters enormously. Again with 2 Cor. 3:18 and 4:6 very much in mind, Owen is adamant that this is the primary means used by the Holy Spirit for our sanctification, and so for maturing us in our discipleship. Meditating on the glory of Christ now is therefore never simply about "heavenly musings," detached from earthly reality. It is as we behold the glory of Christ that we are transformed by the Spirit more and more into his likeness, until the full sight of Christ in the beatific vision will mean our full and final transformation and glorification.

Here, then, we have an account of the beatific vision that is rigorously scriptural and Christ-focused, that enables us to see the centrality of beholding the glory of Christ in his two natures now and through all eternity, and that shows us how, by the Spirit, beholding the glory of Christ by faith enables us to live more fully for Christ in this life, until that time when we will indeed see him face to face and know as we are known.[1]

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[1] This article is based on my essays, "Beholding the Glory of God in the Face of Jesus Christ: John Owen and the 'Reforming' of the Beatific Vision" in Kelly M. Kapic and Mark Jones, eds., *Ashgate Research Companion to John Owen's Theology* (Ashgate: Surrey, 2012), 141–158); "Contemplating Jesus in John Owen's 'Meditations and Discourses on the Glory of Christ'" in *Primer*, Issue 12, "In The Flesh: Understanding and celebrating the person of Christ (The Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches/Oak Hill College: London, 2021), 56–67; and a similarly titled forthcoming essay in the online magazine, *Credo*.

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Tom Bergler is Professor of Christian Thought and Practice at Huntington University where he has taught Bible, theology and ministry courses for twenty-one years. He is the author of *The Juvenilization of American Christianity* which won an award from *Christianity Today* and of *From Here to Maturity: Overcoming the Juvenilization of American Christianity*. Before his academic career he worked for seven years with University Christian Outreach, an ecumenical student ministry. He continues to serve UCO by mentoring staff workers and teaching at their annual Campus Outreach Academy.

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Adam Neder is the Bruner-Welch Professor of Theology at Whitworth University. He is the author of *Theology As a Way of Life: On Teaching and Learning the Christian Faith* and *Participation in Christ: An Entry Into Karl Barth's* Church Dogmatics. He is currently editing a book for Baylor University Press in which many of the world's best theologians and biblical scholars offer theological reflections on the art of teaching theology. Professor Neder teaches a wide range of popular courses and has been voted most influential professor by a number of Whitworth senior classes.

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