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BOOK REVIEW

THEOLOGY AS A WAY OF LIFE. ON TEACHING AND LEARNING THE CHRISTIAN FAITH

Neder, A. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019) 158 pp. ISBN: 978-0-8010-9866-6 (R403)

Dynamite comes in small packages! Do not be deceived by the seemingly small and simple format of this book. Although I read it in one go on a flight from Frankfurt to New York, it stayed with me, and continues to move me as a fellow student of theology being a way of life. I want to join the chorus of nine strong voices on the back cover and in front proclaiming “simply superb”, and congratulate and thank Adam Neder for writing a jewel of a little book. In fact, at the beginning of the academic year, I returned to the University of the Free State in Bloemfontein where I lecture, and prescribed Neder’s book as the text for our first semester collegial Faculty Academic Discussion group (to which all lecturers at the Faculty are invited). After our first collegial discussion on the introduction and first chapter of the book, I began to comprehend not only more of why Neder had to write this book, but also its value and significance for us and the future of our institution and the communities of teaching and learning to which we belong. It is crucial to hear his well-spotted introductory words in this regard:

Everyone persuades people to believe things that are not true. Every teacher’s life somehow contradicts the subject

matter. At some point, every teacher leads students away from God. ... [Thus] The core theological claim of this book is that Jesus Christ establishes the truth of human identity in his life, death, and resurrection. We are who we are because Jesus is who he is (pp. 3, 6).

Neder's contemplative concern in this big little book is indeed, from the outset, unto something significant. He diagnoses the critical question as follows: "When so much theological education happens in classrooms, why haven't theologians written persuasively about what goes on there?" (p. 2). What thus initially began as a paper for the annual Karl Barth Conference at Princeton Theological Seminary 2012 on Karl Barth's book *Evangelical theology*, based on his lectures in the United States of America in 1962, evolved over time to illuminate the task of teaching Christian theology (p. 1). Neder is, of course, well acquainted and schooled in Barth's theology, as he is well-known for his crafting of *Participation in Christ – An entry in Karl Barth's church dogmatics* (Louisville, KY: WJK, 2009). However, in this work, we encounter not only the presence of Barth's voice in Neder's refinement for teaching and learning theology, but also other teachers such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Søren Kierkegaard. Thinking along with these great thinkers of the church, Neder personally engages them to tell us what he has learned from them and how they have informed his own theological reflections on teaching Christian theology (p. 7). Neder's style is of note:

Teaching theology is a serious matter, and I am trying to make a serious argument, but adopting a more abstract, technical, and impersonal tone of voice, or writing in more conventional academic prose, wouldn't make what I say any more true or persuasive. It would only make it boring (pp. 10-11).

In an exciting, vibrant, personally engaged style of writing, Neder contemplates the following five significant keywords, in five separate chapters, for what it means to teach and learn Christian theology today, namely "Identity", "Knowledge", "Ethos", "Danger" and "Conversation".

What ties these five keywords together is perhaps best explained by the title of the book, *Theology as a way of life*. Teaching and learning the Christian faith neither start nor end in either the theological classroom, or even worse with a gifted teacher being the centre of attraction. A bigger reality makes all of these mere possibilities, namely "Jesus Christ [who] is the key that unlocks the mystery of human nature" (p. 17). The tone of God's actuality that precedes all possibility is set right at the start (and kept throughout) in the vivid sound of "reconciliation is a reality that establishes the possibility of subjective response" (p. 23). Teaching Christian theology is thus not even supplemented by us, as we are also called to constantly become who we are in Christ through

his Spirit. In this regard, Neder has numerous thick formulations that are worth quoting at length, such as for instance:

To be clear, our identity in Christ is stable and unchanging, but the existential shape of life together with him is not. (p. 28);

“God’s grace is not opposed to working but to earning and to self-reliance.” (p. 30);

If the truth is not something a teacher possesses, the truth is not something a teacher dispenses – no matter how gifted one happens to be. God alone reveals God. (p. 32);

“No matter the context, the effectiveness of our teaching depends ultimately on the movement of the Spirit of God.” (p. 34), and “Thus progress in the art of teaching Christianity necessarily includes progress in the art of prayer.” (p. 36).

Following from the above where “the reality of reconciliation” and “prayer” frame our understanding of identity as such, it should not surprise us that Neder, in the second chapter, emphasises that there is a “difference between knowing theology and knowing God” (p. 39). In this instance, the significance and meaning of *theology as a way of life* is perhaps at its sharpest, with again numerous loaded insights such as

A detached and purely objective knowledge of God, even if it were possible, would be incomplete. The truth is known only when it takes up residence in a person’s life, when it begins to express itself in and through that person. (p. 40);

But one cannot simultaneously know God while refusing to offer oneself to God. To suggest is to misunderstand who God is, or what it means to know God, or both. (pp. 43-44),

and

The moment we begin to operate as quasi-omniscient gurus, experts with the solution to every problem, we exchange teaching for propaganda, instruction for demagoguery, the Word of God for our words about God. God does not call us to offer definitive counsel to our students, ... Nor does God instruct us to deposit definitive theological formulations into their minds. ... We are responsible for thinking with our students, not for them. To do otherwise is to confuse education with indoctrination. (p. 52).

The mark of a good teacher in theology is whether s/he is first and foremost a student, prior to becoming a teacher not only of theology as a way of life, but also of Him who is the way, the truth and the life itself.

The third chapter on “ethos” deals especially with “vanity” as a menacing threat to *theology as a way of life*. In the previous chapter, Neder already referred to Kierkegaard’s famous observation that

if a lark wants to fart like an elephant, it will end up bursting. And, in the same way, scholarly theology will also burst because instead of being what it is – a modest triviality – it wants to be the supreme form of wisdom. (p. 42).

Such vanity often manifests in our

excessive concern for our reputations; a morbid craving for praise; a narcissistic pretentiousness combined with insecurity; a relentless desire to outdo our colleagues and to broadcast our accomplishments; a loveless envy when others succeed; and a gloomy anxiety about our legacies (p. 65).

Such vanity is, of course, a living contradiction of our identity in Christ. Too often, theologians “confuse zealous pursuit of the truth with zealous pursuit of their own glory” (p. 68). This kind of absurdity, being a living contradiction of who we truly are, is indeed emphatic and radical in its exposure of any hidden doctrine to which we continue to adhere:

In the classroom, we are never *not* teaching. Everything we say and do (and do not do) communicates something to students. An unguarded and revealing casual aside can falsify an entire lecture, indeed an entire semester. (p. 73).

As dogmatics and ethics belong to one another, so too ethos is an integral part of our knowledge and identity in Christ. Captivated by our subject matter, the witness of Christian teaching continues to surprise and disrupt, because, as Neder aptly puts it, “[i]f you teach the Christian faith and that does not unsettle you, you are not thinking straight” (p. 77).

A significant chorus of truth in *theology as a way of life* is, of course, that “danger” and “risk” will always play an integral part in our schooling. Already in the second chapter on knowledge, we read:

We cannot think about Jesus from a safe distance any more than we follow from a safe distance. And while attaching ourselves to him is dangerous, so too is seeking safety in the crowd, or in timeless formulas, or in a teacher who does our thinking for us. (p. 53).

In the fourth chapter on “danger”, Neder develops this insight further when he speaks out against the idea that

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 (pp. 90-91).

Commenting on Nicodemus' story, we read:

Had Jesus allowed Nicodemus to converse with him from a safe distance, converse with him on Nicodemus' own terms, Nicodemus' illusion would only have been reinforced. (p. 96).

Captivated by the living presence of God in our classrooms (and lives), “we instruct students not only by *what* we say about God but also by *how* we speak about him” (p. 101). In the end, it all boils down to the fact that “secondhand knowledge of God is impossible” (p. 107), and thus we exist and live by “[r]eal theological education [which] is a process of continual confrontation with God” (p. 108). *Theology as a way of life* thus reveals two kinds of dangers within theological education, namely the deadly danger of being arrived or stuck in false securities, and the living danger of being constantly encountered by the Triune God.

Lastly, *theology as a way of life* inevitably lives from the voice of God's Word who continues to create and sustain conversation within and among us. “God is talkative, and our communion with him is conversational” (p. 113). As we are schooled and formed in the long process of listening, hearing and obeying Christ's voice, we know that we cannot live as followers of the Way without being in a deep conversation with Him and the *kairos* within which we find ourselves. Ultimately, “teaching Christian theology is largely a matter of training students to have good theological conversations” (p. 118). Along with various helpful distinctions such as knowing the difference and bond between “the primary and secondary conversations” (pp. 118-131), and elaborating on the guidelines practicalities of “cultivating classroom conversations” (pp. 131-142), Neder concludes with the idea that, although we live by and from the theological conversation, we never arrive nor become stuck within the conversation as an end in itself:

Its purpose is to help students encounter the truth, discover their lives in Christ, and follow him into the world he loves. (p. 143).

In sum, I might have read this work initially in one go on a flight between continents high above the clouds, but it is hoped that, with this review, *Theology as a way of live* deserves to be read again, slowly, in deep conversations, trying to do nothing other than thinking about the way of the Word within our lives. Theology matters, especially in the classroom, because theology *is* a way of life. Highly recommended!