



Those Who Can, Teach: Teaching as a Christian Vocation

Porter, Stanley E., ed.
Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2013

Book Review

Tags: doctoral students | teacher training | vocation

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Date Reviewed: January 9, 2015

Most doctoral programs recognize the need to provide pedagogical training for their students, and yet, as Stanley Porter notes, rigorous and well-coordinated pedagogical formation is often still lacking (2). *Those Who Can, Teach* addresses many of the challenges faced by new teachers – particularly, though not exclusively, in seminaries and theological schools. Originating from two colloquies held at McMaster Divinity College, this is a rich volume filled with useful advice, concrete and practical examples, and compelling accounts of what theological education can be.

The essays cover a wide range of topics, from developing a teaching philosophy to designing a lesson plan to teaching introductory Hebrew. As with most edited volumes, the distinctiveness of each author's voice is heard without any attempt to offer a uniform message – and this is to the benefit to the book. Since the authors all teach at McMaster, the essays reflect the institution's holistic emphasis on cognitive, formative, and practical learning goals.

The book is especially strong in three areas. First, many of the essays offer helpful discussions about how to design courses and effective learning experiences. Chapters 2 through 7 consider course and lesson plan design from different angles and specializations. The best of the group is Lee Beach's chapter, "Sculpting a Lesson." This essay addresses many of the most frequent pitfalls for new (and not so new!) teachers and provides clear, practical advice for structuring an effective and manageable class session. Although the chapters on teaching Greek and Hebrew from Lois K. Fuller Dow and Paul Evans are obviously more narrowly focused, they offer not only useful accounts of how to teach introductory language courses, but also exemplary models of how to design courses with the vocational aspirations of one's students in mind.

The second strength of the volume is its concern for teachers. This concern runs through almost every essay, but it is the central topic of the concluding essays. As the subtitle of the book suggests, teaching here is seen as a *vocation*, as a task undertaken in response to God's gracious love and for the sake of the Kingdom. The essays from Wendy Porter, Gordon Heath, and Phil Zylla propose strong visions for what conceiving of teaching as a vocation might look like, but in ways that open up a fruitful space of self-reflection for the reader.

The third strength builds on the second: although *Those Who Can, Teach* covers topics applicable to almost anyone teaching theology or religion, it would be particularly beneficial to those who are teaching or who plan to teach in the setting of a seminary or theological school. The holistic emphasis throughout the volume on "Knowing," "Being," and "Doing" is essential for those who train future pastors and ministers in the church. Most of the example courses and materials in appendices are from courses designed with this audience in mind.

I do have two reservations worth mentioning. First, several of the essays tend to over-emphasize the need to attend to different learning styles. The jury is still out on this, but recent research has questioned how decisive such differences are for student learning – even if adopting diverse instructional methods remains important. Second, in the opening essay Stanley Porter, after working through a number of teaching philosophies, ultimately strongly favors the model of the teacher as "colleague or collaborator" for almost any context (30-31). This choice is certainly defensible, but the essay fails to mention the risks of adopting this model for new (and younger) teachers (students may not immediately assume their expertise and competence). Many of the later essays prefer the model of the teacher as the creator of an effective learning environment (29, 58, 108, 181), which in my judgment offers a lower-risk and effective starting point for newer teachers.

Obviously not all the essays in a book like this will be equally relevant to all readers. Overall, I would highly recommend this book to anyone who trains doctoral students in teaching – particularly doctoral students who may go on to teach in a seminary context. Individual essays would be very effective for teaching workshops for doctoral students as well.

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