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Reviewing Called to Teach: Excellence, Commitment, and Community in Christian Higher Education

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Called to Teach: Excellence, Commitment, and Community in Christian Higher Education. By Christopher J. Richmann and J. Lenore Wright, eds. Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2020. 236 pp. ISBN 978-1-5326-8318-3 (softcover) \$29

This collection of essays is written by various faculty members from different disciplines at Baylor University in Waco, Texas. It is the result of a 10th anniversary symposium of the Academy for Teaching and Learning (ATL) held at Baylor in the latter part of 2018.

In the introduction, editors J. Lenore Wright and Christopher J. Richmann briefly discuss the terms “calling” and “vocation,” providing theological comment that focuses the office of the professor toward the purpose of serving one’s neighbor—the student. Their invitation to the contributors of this volume is framed in the belief that “the call to teach (like any calling) is shaped by excellence, commitment, and community” (p. xiii). Furthermore, Wright and Richman provide a historical backdrop of Baylor’s 40-year resolve “not to take teaching for granted” (p. xiii). This resolve and practical intentionality culminated in the establishment of the Academy for Teaching and Learning at Baylor University in 2008.

Part 1: Excellence (six essays)

In the first essay, “Baylor’s Intellectual Heritage,” Robert Baird shares his own story and journey as an undergraduate philosophy student at Baylor, giving the reader a glimpse into his perception and experience of the rigorous intellectual tradition of this Christian university. Throughout his essay, Baird makes it clear that students—especially students of faith commitments—must be taught by instructors to engage the critical aspects of the mind with precision and

courage, neither giving in to the anxiety of doubt and uncertainty nor to the pessimism that can easily overtake students engaged in academic criticism. In the second essay, “An Inquiry-Based Approach to Teaching Space Weather to Non-Science Majors,” Trey Cade shares his joy in teaching the fascinating subject of space weather. Most pertinent to his essay is how he was able, through storytelling, to take this very complex information and present it to a wider student audience, many of whom do not have a background in the sciences. In the third essay, “Observing a Master Teacher,” A. Alexander Beaujean presents data he collected through a case study of a master teacher, one Roger E. Kirk. He concludes by encouraging instructors to learn from other master teachers in their departments and disciplines.

The fourth essay, “Responding to Bad Questions and Poor Answers” by Andy E. Arterbury, contends that teachers ought to be sensitive and aware of negative classroom behavior, address it, and turn what was meant for evil into the good of the student. The author encourages instructors to be creative in responding in these moments, while always keeping the student’s honor at the forefront of one’s intentions in addressing issues like these in the classroom. In the fifth essay, “The Outrageous Idea of the Christian Teacher,” Perry L. Glanzer and Nathan F. Alleman address two important questions regarding Christian identity and teaching: (1) How does being a Christian change one’s teaching? and (2) How should it? This article is very helpful and erudite, and I suggest it is significant in its findings. For the sake of brevity and for this review, suffice it to say that Glanzer and Alleman discovered a holistic approach to Christian identity and its influence upon teaching. This approach seeks proper integration of Christian practices and norms into the classroom, but also that which is first the result of Christian identity: the Christian formation of the instructor and teacher. The sixth essay, “...Lovin’ the Skin I’m in: The Need for ‘Stories’ via Young Adult Literature in the Secondary English Classroom” by Mona M. Choucair, shows how teenagers and young adults engage deeply with narratives and stories when those stories are relevant to them. She contends that digital media, diversity, multicultural literature, graphic novels, and digital storytelling are all relevant means of capturing the minds of a younger, storytelling generation.

Part 2: Commitment (five essays)

In the seventh essay, “Training Future Philosophy Teachers: Using a Plato Graduate Seminar as Professional Development,” Anne-Marie Schultz demonstrates how she integrates pedagogical methods into the learning objectives of her Plato seminar. Instead of focusing only on the research interests of graduate students, Schultz suggests that instructors should appeal to their teaching interests as well. Thus, as students reflect upon their own experience as graduate students in a seminar moment, they are able to garner “pedagogically oriented strategies” (p. 98) for their professional future in teaching. In the eighth essay, “Our Future Faculty as Stewards of the Academy,” T. Laine Scales considers the “preparation of doctoral students for university teaching and academic life” (p. 74) with an emphasis upon stewardship. Scales suggests that in challenging doctoral students toward a stewardship of teaching (she lists six tasks of stewardship), doctoral education will find new hope for relevancy and existence in the university.

In the ninth essay, “Called to Teach the Psalms,” William Bellinger and Rebecca Poe Hays focus their emphasis upon the study and reading of the Psalter. They demonstrate how student engagement with an ancient text—even ancient poetry—allows those ancient authors to “become part of our community” (p. 112), causing their world to “intersect” with our own. Furthermore, Poe Hays suggests that the study of the Psalms is “an ideal context” (p. 117) showing students how to love God with all of their minds as well as with their hearts.

In the tenth essay, “Why Study Music?,” Laurel E. Zeiss demonstrates, through her discipline of music, the importance of teaching and studying the arts and the communal significance that such study has for her students. She masterfully presents many reasons why studying the arts is essential for community, theology, and cultural significance. In the eleventh essay, “Nurturing Spiritual Intelligence,” Burt Burleson advocates for the development of spiritual intelligence in our classrooms. His call for the development of maturity on this level in students through classroom instruction is profoundly important, as is more fully shown in his essay.

Part 3: Community (five essays)

In the twelfth essay, “The Teaching Vocation as Sharing Life: Reflections from a Faculty-in-Residence,” Candi K. Cann juxtaposes academic time with liturgical time, showing how similar they are to one another. She rightly encourages instructors and teachers to consider the prominent role that academic time plays in the communal journey of the student through the educational system and process. The thirteenth essay, “Embracing Diversity through Cultural Humility” by Elizabeth Palacios, argues for sensitivity to the need for inclusivity in the classroom, both at the level of course experience and of course development. Celebrating differences within the classroom means that an instructor and teacher can reform learning objectives to be more inclusive through pedagogical practices centered upon the diversity of the student and instructor population in every way.

In the fourteenth essay, “Of Fireflies, Skeletons, and the Abbot’s Pew: Ineffable Distinctives within the Teaching Tradition at Baylor,” Elizabeth Vardaman shares with her readers about her 40-year career at Baylor, bringing forth deep wisdom from her experiences and her reflections on what it means to be a student and a professor. She argues that faculty should take seriously the task of guiding students toward the “light” that is “pulsing and aligning their skills, interests, aptitudes, values, and joys,” while at the same time acknowledging the pain, difficulty, and, sometimes, the need for correction that is in the world.

The fifteenth essay, “Teacher Authority and the Student-Teacher Relationship: Searching for the Golden Mean” by Byron Newberry, discusses the need to carefully consider teacher authority. He intuitively divides this authority into three categories: formal authority (administrative); expert authority (subject expertise); and referent authority (authenticity in student-teacher relationships). In the sixteenth and final essay, “Integrating Christian Faith and Social Work Practice: Students Views of the Journey,” Jon Singletary, Helen Wilson Harris, T. Laine Scales, and Dennis Myers share student views on the “integration of faith and social work practices” (p. 187). This essay is rightly placed at the end of this book, for it is relevant to all Christian teachers who seek faith integration in their respective disciplines and in their classrooms.

In the epilogue, D. Thomas Hanks brings this whole collection of essays to an edifying closure. He challenges the reader to simply list what is seen as the two most important elements gleaned from the essays. The first element I see as instructive is the way that each contributor voiced—either explicitly or implicitly—that they are still very much a student in one way or another. The second instructive element concerns the way in which these essays continually reach for a transcendent ideal, one in which knowledge begins with the fear of the Lord (Prov. 1:7). Truly, the contributors have repeatedly demonstrated that the vocation of teaching is a call to serve the Master Teacher. I highly recommend this text, and as a young scholar and teacher, I will return to it often for guidance and wisdom

REFERENCES

Richmann, Christopher J., & Wright, J. Lenore, (Eds.). (2020). *Called to teach: Excellence, commitment, and community in Christian higher education*. Pickwick.

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