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Reviewing *Forming Ministers or Training Leaders? An Exploration of Practice in Theological Colleges*

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Forming Ministers or Training Leaders? An Exploration of Practice in Theological Colleges. By Anthony Clarke. Eugene, OR: Resource Publications, 2021. 208 pp. ISBN 13: 978-1-7252-6351-2 (PAPERBACK) \$22

In this treatise—*Forming Ministers or Training Leaders? An Exploration of Practice in Theological Colleges*—Anthony Clarke presents an excellent exploration of the education and training of seminary students preparing for a future as pastors and preparing for ministry in the United Kingdom. In the preface, Clarke articulates the context of this work as moving toward change, involving denomination reviews, restructuring the university, obtaining government funding, and broadening change in theological education. He considers the great benefits of teaching, theology, and a ministerial context offering an opportunity to reflect on one’s own experience and practice of ministry (p. ix).

In the first chapter, “Practice and the Pastoral Imagination,” Clarke asks the question “What should be done now?” His primary purpose of this book is to educate Baptist ministers in the UK, such as dealing with the daily tasks woven as deep questions about self-understanding, theology, and ministry, out of which practice emerges, and practice continues to shape one’s developing theological understanding (p. 2). As Clarke states it, the aim is to bring together two areas: the practice of ministry and the practice of preparation that takes place in the training of ministers. The word “practice” becomes an important word in this book, which is centered around the work of Alasdair MacIntyre, whose influence has encouraged the art of “exploring practice” and “pastoral imagination.” Practice describes a coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which activity is realized (p. 7). Imagination describes a minister’s overall approach to pastoral practice as it develops over time (p. 11).

In chapter 2, “The Practice of Ministry,” Clarke asks, “What should be done—now, today, first?” This is the place, he says, where most of us should begin and respond to the challenge that shapes our

context and our underlying role as ministers. He explores how this evolving, contested practice of ministry among British Baptists has been understood by exploring the representative voice set out in Baptist documents and expressed in a range of contemporary Baptist authors. The approaches presented are a dialectical model, a leadership challenge, a sacramental turn, and in the end, the author asks whether pastors are ministers or leaders (p. 38).

Chapter 3, “The Practice of Preparation,” raises the question, “What should I do?” This answer suggests that the way any minister responds to this challenge will be shaped not only contextually but also by a particular minister’s underlying understanding of the role of ministry.

Chapter 4 continues in “Exploring Practice and the Pastoral Imagination,” reviewing empirical research beginning with an existential question about what a new minister might begin to do in ministry, (i.e., about the practice of ministry). He suggests that ministry may be seen as a structured and cooperative practice that persists over time and provides something of a habitus within the research. He sets out the research methods and choices used in discerning the espoused and operant voices within the different institutions and in further refining the representative voice of the Baptist Union (p. 83).

In Chapter 5, “Discerning a Pastoral Imagination,” Clarke explores the practice of preparation by investigating the espoused theologies of four participating Baptist colleges: Northern Baptist College, Spurgeon’s College, Bristol Baptist College, and South Wales Baptist College. Clarke sets out to explore what the Baptist colleges seek to inculcate in their students in order to convey pastoral imagination. Evidence of the development of shared understanding and description of the practice of preparation as one of formation is evidenced by the language itself in the way the preparation process is understood and explained (p. 94).

Interestingly, in chapter 6, also titled “Discerning a Pastoral Imagination,” the author considers important findings among non-Baptist institutions. The question set for exploration is whether a particular combination of practices and elements of a pastoral imagination could be considered distinctly Baptist. This chapter summarizes the pastoral imagination discerned in five non-Baptist

colleges and courses by setting out first their espoused theologies—based on document analysis and interviews—and then their operant theologies—based on the curriculum and patterns of worship (p. 109).

Chapter 7, “Towards a Theology of Formation for Baptists,” presents a theology of ministerial formation where he argues that both the language and broader paradigm of formation are appropriate and helpful ways to understand this whole practice and should be intentionally embraced (p. 133). The research set out in chapters 5 and 6 reveal similarities and differences between the five Baptist colleges themselves and between the Baptist colleges collectively and a sample of non-Baptist institutions. A theology of ministerial formation should respond to these similarities and differences. Therefore, what the author offers is not a Baptist theology of ministerial formation (as if entirely distinct) but a theology of ministerial formation for Baptists (p. 134). He argues for a theology of the practice of preparation for Baptists, understood as ministerial formation, which would be structured, cooperative and creative, and firmly rooted in the trinitarian doctrine of God. To do this, Clarke offers six interweaving emphases:

- a theological emphasis (formation as participation),
- an ecclesial emphasis (formation as discipleship),
- a biblical emphasis (formation as covenant),
- a missional emphasis (formation as hospitality),
- a pedagogical emphasis (formation as integration),
- a personal emphasis (formation as growth in virtue) (p. 135).

Chapter 8, “Towards a Pastoral Imagination,” delves into the context that proposes an espoused pastoral imagination, building on the research already mentioned and offering three words expressing the ideal of a pastoral imagination: reflective, collaborative, and hospitable. A pastoral imagination that is reflective (and reflexive) may be considered to focus on the way a minister as a disciple relates to him- or herself before God (p. 157). A collaborative focus relates to how a

minister, as a disciple, relates to others, especially in the church, before God (p. 160). A hospitable focus might describe how a minister relates to the wider world before God (p. 162).

In chapter 9, “Towards a Renewed Practice of Ministry,” Clarke revisits how ministry and ministerial formation is practiced. He reiterates that the central theme of his initial research—and so this book—is the practice of theological colleges in preparing men and women for ministry. However, it seems appropriate as something of an afterword to offer the beginnings of an answer to this structuring question (p. 175).

Forming Ministers or Training Leaders has an appendix that addresses Core Questions in Empirical Interviews (p. 185), but it is expressly Baptist. Though unique to Baptist ministers, this instrument could be modified for any institution in formation and practice. I believe this writing by Clarke can challenge, as it does this reader, to reconsider what can be seen as an important context of formation for ministry and preparation. In many respects, this book can be considered instructive both in a freestanding and in a universal sense. It is an ideal resource for Baptist institutions and those of other denominations. In most theological institutions, the terminology of formation in ministry practice and imagination is universal. The book includes salient content well outside the boundaries of any specific denomination or institution. In many ways, Clarke unearths both implicit and explicit insights for teaching pastoral practice and expanding pastoral imagination in any institution or setting.

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