

THEOLOGY
AS A
WAY OF LIFE

**ON TEACHING AND LEARNING
THE CHRISTIAN FAITH**

ADAM NEDER

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Baker Academic

a division of Baker Publishing Group

Grand Rapids, Michigan

Adam Neder, Theology as a Way of Life

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INTRODUCTION

This book began as a paper for the annual Karl Barth conference at Princeton Theological Seminary in 2012. The theme of the conference was Barth's book *Evangelical Theology*, which contains the lectures he gave during his only visit to the United States.¹ As I was thinking about what I might say, I began to notice that Barth's reflections on the task of writing Christian theology could be slightly adjusted to illuminate the task of teaching Christian theology.² Having spent the previous decade struggling to formulate a compelling theological and spiritual understanding of teaching, this came as a welcome relief. As a young professor I knew I needed guidance, but my

1. Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction*, trans. Grover Foley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963).

2. The paper was published as "The Sun Behind the Clouds?: Some Barthian Thoughts about Teaching Christian Theology," in *Karl Barth and the Making of "Evangelical Theology": A Fifty-Year Perspective*, ed. Clifford B. Anderson and Bruce L. McCormack (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 222–35.

search for books that could help me think seriously about teaching Christian theology proved far more difficult than I had imagined, which seemed strange to me. When so much theological education happens in classrooms, why haven't theologians written persuasively about what goes on there? Shouldn't we have numerous good books about teaching theology? We have good books about education and teaching in general, about Christian liberal arts education, and about the history of theological education, but none written by a contemporary theologian about the art of teaching Christian theology. Yet without a compelling *theological* vision of what it means to teach Christian theology well, and without a clear awareness of its unique challenges and temptations, our instruction will be out of joint with the subject matter, and valuable opportunities will be wasted.

Eventually I decided that if no one else was going to write the book, then I would. Not because I think I am an especially good teacher. Anyone who claims to have mastered the art of teaching Christianity is a fool. No one possesses the necessary knowledge, wisdom, eloquence, or imagination. Only the self-deceived arrive at the end of a semester thinking a course went as well as it could have gone. Anyone who doesn't find

it strange that he or she should be the one to stand in front of a group of people and talk about God is either deluded or hasn't thought very deeply about what is happening. No one has the power to make God present. 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.

I didn't write this book because I think I am an exception to any of this. Whatever authority I possess is merely the result of trying to think carefully about the difference Jesus Christ makes for theological education. If he is truly God and truly human, if he reveals God to us and us to ourselves, if "through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things" (Col. 1:20), then how should that influence the way we think about teaching the Christian faith? How do we develop a specifically Christian approach to teaching Christian theology? This book is the result of years of struggling with this question, however unsatisfactorily.

Please don't think this is false humility. I have been a professor at Whitworth University for the past sixteen years. Most of my students think I am a good teacher. I know that because they tell me so and because they write sweet things in their course evaluations. But

with every year that passes I become more acutely aware of my weaknesses, more in touch with the ways I fail them. My guess is that many teachers feel this way. We know we're not up to the challenge, and so we wonder, *Okay, well now what?* We've been given an impossible task. We want students to know God—not merely to know about God, but to know God personally. We want them to engage with Scripture, doctrine, art, history, philosophy, and plenty of other things, but knowledge of those things is not our ultimate goal—or at least it shouldn't be. In the midst of all this, we hope our classrooms become places where students encounter the living God—places where they become contemporaneous with Christ, to use Søren Kierkegaard's way of speaking. Theology is not for the sake of theology but for the sake of life. As Kierkegaard put it, "The truth, if it is there, is a being, a *life*"—indeed, the truth is known only "when it becomes a life in me."³ The goal of theological study is not merely to understand but "to exist in what one understands," and that kind of knowledge is not something teachers can engineer in their

3. Søren Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 206.

students, nor can students realize it on their own.⁴ It depends ultimately on God himself.⁵ But if teachers are incapable of accomplishing our most basic task, of achieving our most important goal, shouldn't that shape the way we teach? And if so, how?

Much recent thinking conceives Christian education as largely a process of socialization in which students are habituated into the Christian life through repetitive practices that lead to virtue. The approach is broadly Augustinian and has numerous strengths. James K. A. Smith is its most influential proponent.⁶ Smith argues that most Christian education suffers from a faulty anthropology that sees human beings as essentially thinking creatures whose minds need to be filled with information that adds up to a Christian worldview. Against this view, Smith argues that human beings are “oriented primarily by desire; by what we love,”

4. Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 274.

5. Our language is inadequate. Since God is not male, I am sympathetic to the claim that referring to God with masculine pronouns can be misleading. That is a valid concern. However, I have not been persuaded that the available alternatives are less misleading.

6. See James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), and *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2016).

and therefore that Christian education is primarily about formation rather than information.⁷ Christian education aims to reeducate desire through the cultivation of habit-forming practices that orient students' precognitive assumptions about the world toward the kingdom of God.

There is much to agree with and appreciate in Smith's work, and our goals overlap significantly, but readers familiar with Smith's books will find themselves in a different atmosphere here. 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. That is an objective fact that is true about everyone—a reality acknowledged and enacted by individuals as the Holy Spirit awakens and empowers them to discover and embrace their lives in Christ, to become who they already are in him. I introduce this position in the first chapter, and the rest of the book unfolds from there. Smith's thesis that we are shaped by our habitual "liturgies" seems clearly correct to me, and it is true that in a certain sense we are what we love. But in the soil of Smith's more traditional anthropology, becoming

7. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 25.

who we are means something different than it does to someone operating with the kind of christological anthropology that animates my work, and this leads to important differences in our respective approaches. I don't intend this as a criticism, and I don't think Smith will receive it as one, since we develop our anthropologies from such obviously different starting points. We need more people engaged in the kind of work Smith is doing, and I certainly have no desire to criticize him. In fact, I think our approaches mutually enrich each other's in helpful ways.

Readers will quickly recognize how indebted I am to the work of Søren Kierkegaard, Karl Barth, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. But I would like to be clear from the outset that this book is not about those great thinkers. While they have taught me more than anyone else about teaching theology, and while I draw on them extensively throughout the book, my primary goal is not to describe their thought. Instead, I am trying to think along with them—to let what I have learned from them inform my own reflections about teaching Christian theology. And to readers suspicious of these writers, I ask for patience and a willingness to suspend judgment. Good conversations do not require agreement on first principles, and readers with different

theological commitments, especially from those in the first chapter, may nevertheless find themselves sympathetic to much of what they encounter here.

It is important to understand that this book is not a collection of practical tips about how to create a syllabus, structure a class, write an exam, grade a paper, or the like. Every teacher needs to know how to do these things, but we already have plenty of good books on these subjects. As far as practical suggestions, the concluding chapter on conversation offers the most concrete guidance. In fact, this is not even a book about what to teach or how to teach it. Whatever one's ecclesial tradition, I assume that everyone who teaches Christian theology agrees that it involves the communication of the content, grammar, history, and significance of Christian doctrine. Beyond that, every teacher will have his or her own reasons for what material to include and what style to adopt, and these will be influenced by a number of factors, including one's social and institutional location, the specific needs of one's students, and one's own knowledge, capacities, and theological commitments. Teaching theology is an art, and art cannot be standardized.

While I teach undergraduate and graduate classes in historical and systematic theology at a Christian

university, the framework offered here is broad enough to include anyone who teaches the Christian faith in any context, including and especially in local congregations. I hope the book will be as useful to pastors, Christian educators, and informal study group leaders as it will be to university and seminary professors. While I rarely draw connections to congregational ministry, these connections are always just beneath the surface and not difficult to imagine. And with only slight adjustments, most of what I say about teaching Christian theology applies to teaching any theological discipline, whether in formal or informal contexts. The future of teaching Christian theology in this country is obviously not in universities. Most universities have long since ceased to offer classes in Christian doctrine taught by Christian theologians in distinctly Christian ways. The number of universities in America where it is possible to take classes in Christian theology from a professor who openly confesses belief in the truth of God's self-revelation in Christ, and who attempts to teach in a way that is faithful to that reality, is smaller than perhaps many Christians realize.

The lack of such institutions largely explains why so many excellent theologians have no prospect of a tenure-track university position. Anecdotally, when the

Whitworth theology department opens a search for a new faculty position, we receive hundreds of applications from scholars around the world, most of whom are qualified, and many of whom would do well here, but we hire only one of them, and the job market remains flooded. Meanwhile, the church sinks deeper into its educational crisis, one where most Christians have trouble articulating even the most basic Christian doctrines, and where they receive very little if any training to think creatively about the difference Christian theology makes for navigating ordinary life. And this at a time when Christians in the Western world are encountering more persuasive counter-narratives about the meaning of human existence than they have for a very long time.

I suppose I should also say something about the style of this book. By speaking informally and addressing teachers personally, I have broken with some of the standard conventions of academic theological writing. But then why would one want to adhere to them anyway? It's hard to imagine anyone outside our discipline wanting to write like we write. 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.

A number of friends—too many to list—have read previous drafts of this book and offered valuable suggestions. They know who they are, and I hope they know how much I appreciate their help. I am especially grateful to my editor, David Nelson, who attended the conference in Princeton and encouraged me to write this book. In my position as the Bruner-Welch Professor of Theology at Whitworth, I receive unusually generous support, and I am thankful for that too.

Before moving on, I'd like to say a word about the two people to whom this book is dedicated. In the fall semester of my sophomore year at Covenant College, I took a class in philosophical theology from Reginald McLelland, who introduced me to a way of thinking about the Christian faith that was unlike anything I had previously encountered. The class changed the whole course of my life. One afternoon late in the semester, I remember thinking, *If I somehow manage to do for two or three people what Dr. McLelland has done for me, that would be a good career. I'd take that.* That was twenty-six years ago, and my gratitude and affection for him have only increased since. I often wonder about this.

Why do we love our best theology teachers so much? Why are we so thankful for them? Why do we have such strong loyalty, respect, and affection for people like St. Augustine, C. S. Lewis, and Reg McLelland? It must be at least partially because we've had to suffer under so many bad teachers—people whose lectures, sermons, essays, and books confuse us more than they enlighten us, teachers with a perverse knack for making the Christian faith seem tedious and pointless. I suspect many readers of this book know what it feels like to care deeply about being a Christian—to know you're not very good at it and to long for someone to take you by the hand and show you a better way. You understand what it's like to be almost desperate for insight. But then your teachers teach . . . and nothing happens. Or worse than nothing—you feel more confused and discouraged than you did before they started teaching. But if you somehow manage to find a teacher who casts light rather than darkness, someone who ushers you into “the strange new world within the Bible”⁸ and the deep mysteries of the Christian faith, someone who helps you see yourself and everything else in the light

8. This well-known phrase is a wonderful mistranslation of the title of Karl Barth's 1917 essay “The New World in the Bible,” which can be found in *The Word of God and Theology*, trans. Amy Marga (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 15–30.

of Christ, you know that few things in life are better than a good teacher. And being McLelland's student has certainly been one of the best parts of my life.

When I arrived in Princeton in the summer of 1996, I had never heard of Bruce McCormack. By the time I left in 2003, I owed more to him professionally than to anyone else. Bruce's clarity of thought and expression, his disciplined and expansive theological imagination, and his prodigious Barth scholarship are exemplary in the field. But more than anything else, Bruce showed me that good teachers give their students freedom. They offer students space to make up their own minds, to find their own ways forward. Aware of their fallibility, the limitations of their perspective, and the difference between their knowledge of God and God's knowledge of himself, good teachers don't seek to reproduce themselves in students. Of course they want to be persuasive, and Bruce certainly is, but they never coerce students or require them to conform to their views. Their goal is not to create loyal soldiers who repeat and defend the master, but to train students to listen to God's Word, discover their own voices, and respond to Jesus Christ's call in their own ways. Of all the things that Bruce has taught me about teaching Christian theology, I appreciate that the most.