

Attentive to God: Thinking Theologically in Ministry

Charles M. Wood and Ellen Blue,

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This book, written by colleagues in theology and ministry at Perkins, brings a specific framework of theological education to the study of ministry through case studies. The framework stresses the cultivation of both “Vision and Discernment,” after the now classic written by Wood in the ‘80’s, which stresses the formation of a theological framework for the “big picture” of ministry, and the case-by-case judgment needed to bring a fitting theological insight to bear on each situation. The authors advocate a view of theology as the formation of a distinct *habitus* or “practical wisdom,” which is a “capacity and disposition to pay attention theologically,” especially to God’s work and the God-relatedness of all things. (p. 4).

The first three chapters extend Wood’s earlier argument in “Vision and Discernment.” Chapter one builds on H. Richard Niebuhr to develop a deeply relational understanding of the theological enterprise, which always involves God, self, and other, the latter redefined as “companion” or “neighbor” to stress the moral as well as spiritual nature of the self-neighbor relation. To build a vision of such God-relatedness between persons and their neighbors is the task of theology – a human vocation that pastors help others develop. In short, “all humans are meant to be theologians” – and shaping this vision is one of the church’s primary callings.

Chapter two speaks of theological “attentiveness” – to flesh out the title of the book. This is an embodied form of theological wisdom, more perceptual than investigative or interpretive. Yet learning or strengthening such attentiveness in theological education does require interpretive and analytic steps to take place. True to their Wesleyan heritage, the authors speak of their traditions “quadrilateral” of Scripture, traditions, reason, and experience as less an interpretive framework and more of a “quartet” of players in this practical theological attention. Above all, theological attentiveness has three necessary conditions, each of which is personal and embodied: an *authenticity* of being a genuine witness to Christ, a *truth-telling* through adequate study and backing in one’s testimony, and a *fittingness* of the right theological judgment for the right situation.

Chapters three and four lay out the relation of theological Attentiveness as both Vision and Discernment (or attentiveness) in theological education today. First, they affirm the broad agreement in TE that forming ministerial leadership requires a balanced focus on knowing, being, and doing in ministry work, and that such work should be done with “a sustained and serious immersion in Christian scripture” (p. 14). Then they differentiate between the “hedgehog” and the “fox” as two distinct forms of attentiveness (using Isaiah Berlin). The hedgehog relates everything to “a single vision” more or less coherent (Vision), and the fox “pursues many ends” often contradictory or connected only *de facto* (Discernment). Genuine theology – as attentiveness – requires an ongoing movement between the single vision and the situational judgment, both of which TE have to work on. One helpful scenario is a synopsis of philosopher John Wisdom’s view that in encountering a new situation, humans must engage a process of “connecting and disconnecting” (17) that first places the situation in a recognizable framework of interpretation, but if the phenomenon resists that framework, we have to distance our selves, and let another framework arise (or be discovered). IN sum, “this process of connecting, disconnecting, and reconnecting must go on indefinitely in a continuing dialectic” (17).

In the last part of the book, the authors make a case for applying the framework of theological attentiveness – as both vision and discernment – to case study pedagogies. The one novel emphasis, perhaps, is to build more existential reflection by the student in the case study process – obviating any claim to objectivity or analysis as the primary mode of learning. They invite students to engage the cases in the book with three questions in mind:

- A. What is going on in this situation (with “thick description” as the model)
- B. How is God involved in what is going on? (relating vision to discernment)
- C. What is a fitting response to what is going on? (ministerial praxis)

They offer an alternative triad of questions for students who need to be more personally engaged, or who write their own case:

- a) What is going on with you as you consider this case?
- b) How is God involved in what is going on with you in this process?
- c) How might you respond to what is going on with you?

The increased emphasis on personal judgment and/or reflection is evident most in B of the first triad, and the self-reflective focus of the entire second triad. The cases themselves are rich, nuanced, and both ecclesial and public in nature – a fine array of problem-oriented cases to use.

One challenge of the book is the model of practical theology they appeal to for case study work is not as current, or perhaps fitting with, the overall emphasis on attentiveness, habitus, and discernment in the first part of the book. They define practical theology largely in an application model as “that aspect of theological inquiry that attends particularly to the question of how the Christian witness is best realized in a given context.” (19). If they used a more current

definition, like the “reflection upon and strengthening of Christian practices in a given community” they might reshape the case study pedagogy in several ways.

First, they might put the “situational” questions (A and a) in a more ecclesial or communal context – even in one on one cases. Secondly, they might build God’s presence and activity into the very description of situation from the start, developing theological working categories of “secondary causes,” “Christ’s sociality” or “sacramental presence” (depending on one’s tradition) into the very “thick description” – not as an add on. And third, the self-reflection, especially in triad a,b,c would be more about pastoral “repertoires for action” rather than a spiritual or therapeutic inventory of how one is affected. It would invite pastors and other religious leaders to reflect on what aspect of their own knowledge and experience pool is “activated” or tapped here to initiative a Christian or clergy practice that is transformative or redemptive.