

*For Life Abundant: Practical Theology, Theological Education, and Christian Ministry*. Edited by Dorothy C. Bass and Craig Dykstra. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008. 372 pages. \$26.00.

Against assumptions that a book about “practical theology” could *only* be concerned with issues of internal methodology and training for the tasks of ministry, *For Life Abundant* seeks a different path. Editors Dorothy C. Bass and Craig Dykstra focus instead on the “the wide range of readers whose work involves them in discerning and building up ways of life abundant” (4). Extending a conversation already in progress (see *Practicing Our Faith*<sup>1</sup> and *Practicing Theology*<sup>2</sup>), the authors of this volume continue the search for a way of life shaped by the narratives and practices of the church and lived for the good of the world. In this text, the conversation turns to a more specific engagement with those who form others to seek such a life: academic practical theologians, faculties and administrative leaders in theological education, pastors, and members of congregations.

While all of these groups seek life abundant, the authors of this volume are almost all academic practical theologians, and thus, the conversation inevitably tilts toward issues of methodology and pedagogy. Even so, the book’s strengths lie in the multi-faceted considerations of the relationship between teaching and the formation of pastoral wisdom. Many of the essays concern what the authors variously describe as the “interpretive” or “adaptive” work of ministry, or the formation of the “*phronesis*,” “imagination,” or “know-how” that pastors require to shape wise and faithful congregations. The essays address several key questions: How will such formation in pastoral *phronesis* take place in the seminary classroom? Before that, what sort of formation is required for those who teach? And since formation for ministry cannot be limited to the three years of the seminary program, how will this work be shared with the church over time?

The essays offer less a definitive set of answers and more a series of overlapping and, for the most part, complementary suggestions. The authors generally agree that in order to understand and describe this abundant life, and in order to shape pastors and communities that foster such a life, practical theology must become, in the words of Serene Jones, “a multi-disciplinary, intra-disciplined discipline” (209). The work of practical theology must be about the simultaneous transgressing of several borders, including those that divide the “four-fold” curriculum within the seminary, as well as those between disciplines of study in the wider university and particularly those between the seminary and the church.

Despite the clear case made for this “interdisciplinary” boundary crossing, I would press for more reflection and conversation. We can surely all agree with Thomas Long that more than a “thinned out” vocabulary will be necessary in the context of the university for our interdisciplinary journeys to remain theological (259-60). But I wonder if there is something of a potential dissonance at work in this volume, just to the extent that there may be more to say about *how* that is to be done. How will our reflections and conversations across boundaries and borders remain enduringly *theological*? John Witvliet raises this concern in his essay, “Teaching Worship as a Christian Practice.” Considering the teaching of worship, Witvliet remarks, “[O]ddly, the type of connection most in need of exploration (even resuscitation) is the connection of worship to God. It is remarkable that so many books and courses about worship say so little about God”(138). I wonder though whether this is truly *odd*, or rather a sign of a long tendency to employ theologically “thinned out” language in our intra- and interdisciplinary conversations, and consequently among pastors and churches.

An epistemological question follows: how will we know and speak of what a “way of life abundant” is? At times, authors connect this “way of life abundant” to the language of discipleship, but not exclusively so. Why not? Can our knowledge and expression of such a way of life be separable from our knowledge of the way of life called discipleship, shaped and sustained in the church? Can we have a conversation about the practices that nurture a way of life abundant excluding Christological speech or consideration of the mystery of the Triune God?

The desire among many authors to see practical theology work among different “publics” or to serve a way of life abundant for the good of the world is *not* misplaced however. Far from it. Avoiding any idealization of the church, we must take Ted Smith and David Daniels’s advice in their co-authored essay that we historically ground our reflections on practice. We must retain the inevitable tension between “the judgment and the glory” in the story of the church’s practices and acknowledge that a way of life abundant has been such for some, but often not for all. Particularly in that light, we turn again to nurturing hope in both the eventual fulfillment of God’s eschatological promises and the ongoing faithfulness of the church in the meantime. Indeed, the task of inhabiting that space between the “now” and the “not yet” calls for the continuing importance of theological reflection on both the practice *and* the performance of the church. How else will the church be wisely formed to discern among these renunciations and adhesions and linguistically

prepared to speak into the “messy” spaces between disciplines, between the seminary and the university, between the church and the world, with a voice that will be unmistakably *theological*?

Serene Jones rightly argues that systematic theology must receive the concern for embodied wisdom brought by practical theologians, but also that “the specialized practical insights of those who teach in the practical field must themselves be measured by the strong *theological* standards and norms that inspire our schools as a whole” (211). In his chapter on the formative practice of pilgrimage, Mikoski argues for a “Chalcedonian” vision of practical theology, holding to the “dialectical interaction between revelation and context” and seeking “to foster followers of Jesus Christ who participate in the life of the church for the sake of the transformation of the world in the direction of the Reign of the Triune God.” (350-1). This argument neither entirely answers the question of how to cross the boundaries between these realms, nor does it remove the palpable tensions that arise when we do cross them. But will it help to keep our conversations, descriptions, and prescriptions rooted in theology? Even more, will it form a clergy who can help the forgetful church find its voice and the words to speak?

Strikingly, the last chapter in this book is not entitled “Conclusions” or “Afterword.” Rather, it is pregnantly entitled “In Anticipation,” implying that there is always more to say. For those who care about the work of ministry and the training it requires, more wrestling, more prayer, and more conversation are required. For those seeking after life abundant, this book is a key place to start.

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1 Edited by Dorothy C. Bass (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1997).

2 Edited by Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002).