

## “Teaching and Learning that Impact Life and Ministry”

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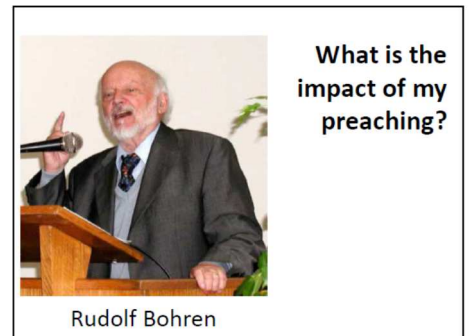
Point of departure for this presentation is a very simple argument: Impact requires power! Power requires empowerment! Ergo: How do we empower our students?

Two examples:

(1) Consider preaching as one aspect of ministerial practice. I’m a preacher – as many of you are, and I have been preaching for about 40 years and teaching homiletics for more than 30 years. More than ever I ask myself: What has been the impact of my preaching? And beyond that: What is the impact of my homiletics courses? And finally: What is the impact of the preaching of my students?

I’m often troubled by what Rudolf Bohren wrote more than 60 years ago:<sup>1</sup>

Sunday is like that. You preach to some dead souls, leave the pulpit, the moment passes, Tabitha doesn’t open her eyes, Tabitha remains dead. There was thunder in the pulpit, but no lightning struck. There was an explosion but no visible damage. Perhaps you were firing blanks. There was smoke, but the flames were stifled. No one is set ablaze.



This is the way Bohren addressed Swiss reformed pastors in a fervent speech with the title “The Word and the Power” in 1952.

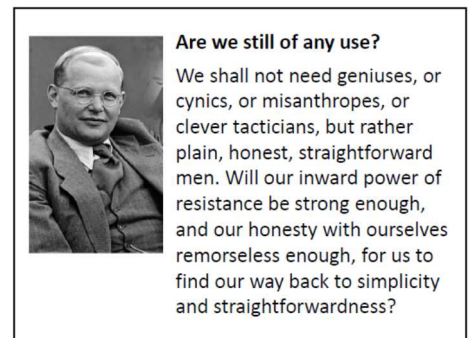
Bohren speaks about impact – or more precisely about lacking impact– and he makes it very clear in his speech: We prepare our sermons carefully and professionally but impact is something WE cannot produce. This is why Bohren in his large volume on *Homiletics* pleads for the centrality of Pneumatology in homiletics.

With Bohren I ask: What is the impact of my preaching.

(2) Let us turn to a second example: Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The impact of his life is unquestioned – in his lifetime and through his legacy until today.

In 1943, ten years after the Nazi-regime took over power in Germany, he wrote his famous text “After Ten Years: A Reckoning made at the New Year 1943”. His reflections end with a section entitled “Are we still of any use?” He concludes:<sup>2</sup>

We have been silent witnesses of evil deeds: we have been drenched by many storms; we have learnt the arts of equivocation and pretence; experience has made us suspicious of others and kept us from being truthful and open; intolerable conflicts have worn us down and even made us cynical. Are we still of any use? We shall not need geniuses, or cynics, or misanthropes, or clever tacticians, but rather plain, honest, straightforward men. Will our inward power of resistance be strong enough, and our



<sup>1</sup>Rudolf Bohren, *Preaching and Community*, 17.

<sup>2</sup> English translation from [http://www.dialoginternational.com/dialog\\_international/2012/12/bonhoeffer-after-ten-years.html](http://www.dialoginternational.com/dialog_international/2012/12/bonhoeffer-after-ten-years.html).

honesty with ourselves remorseless enough, for us to find our way back to simplicity and straightforwardness?

Bonhoeffer does not ask for knowledge, skills or competences – he asks for character. Such persons will make the difference – they will have impact.

My question is: What is the secret behind the tremendous impact of one single person's life? For the moment I leave that questions unanswered and will return to Bonhoeffer later.

Bohren's question and Bonhoeffer's life indicate that 'impact' is an ambivalent concept. Of course, we all know that knowledge and competences, strategic planning and human labour are required. At the same time, we also know that human efforts do not have the capacity to create spiritual outcome and kingdom impact.

In theological terms: We hold to fact that there is no *synergism* when it comes to salvation, but we are God's *synergoi* (co-workers), when it comes to the development of churches and the advancement of His kingdom.

This means that we work professionally as theologians and educators, striving for best practices in every area, while at the same time knowing that the growth of God's reign is a mystery beyond all professional excellence.



This leads me to the following argument:

(1) The desired impact of our educational efforts is the advancement of God's Kingdom, the creation of a new humanity, the development of human flourishing in the sense of the Biblical *shalom*– of course all of these in hope, with an eschatological reservation. And as we strive for excellence and improve our educational efforts, we know that ultimately God's kingdom and the creation of a new humanity cannot be achieved by human effort but only through the power of God's word and spirit.

(2) Therefore, I ask: Who is qualified to labour in such a way for the advancement of God's kingdom, the creation of a new humanity and the development of human flourishing that the power of the word and the spirit can be at work through and beyond his or her human efforts? To put it in educational terms: What competences are required from our graduates so that their lives and ministries have a kingdom impact?

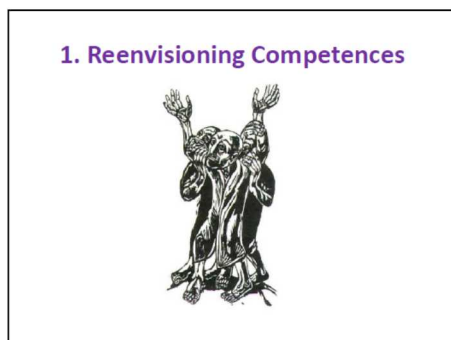
(3) This finally leads to my central question: In which ways need the lives of our students' be impacted through the teaching/learning processes so that they become the kind of people who are qualified to contribute to God's kingdom.

Questions for reflection and discussion:

	What is the empowerment behind the impact, Bohren is looking for?
	What is the empowerment behind the character, Bonhoeffer is looking for?

I will now focus on this third aspect by proposing four areas, which – in my view - need fundamental rethinking in many theological schools.

## 1. Reenvisioning Competences



In recent developments in education, ‘competence-orientation’ has become the key factor to determine the quality of education. Driven by the OECD and its PISA-process (Programme for International Student Assessment) competences have become the decisive factor for the assessment of achievements at the end of compulsory schooling world-wide (OECD 2005). The so-called DeSeCo (Definition and Selection of Competencies) provide the normative definitions and standards for the competence-based assessment of educational achievements.

In Europe, the Bologna process has taken this to the level of higher education. The Dublin Descriptors and other quality standards for the European Higher Education Area spell out student learning outcomes in the form of competences.

I assume all of us have learned to write competence-oriented learning outcomes and to align the entire teaching/learning process accordingly (cf. Biggs & Tang, *Teaching for Quality Learning at University*).

Competence-orientation has become a commonplace also in theological education. I even teach a course for doctoral students on “Competence-oriented theological education”.

In this particular course, I not only teach the principles and methods of competence-oriented education, I also reflect critically on the whole concept of competences.

Educationally it must be recognized that the concept of competences is part of the economy-driven agenda of education introduced by the OECD and the Bologna process in Europe. I cannot expand on the severe and often appropriate critique of this entire enterprise.

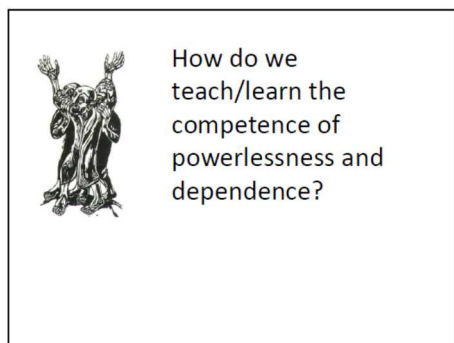
What concerns me at this point is the theological critique. Competences focus on human capabilities. Already the standard phrase “At the end of this course the student is able to...” makes it clear: the notion of ‘competence’ refers to what someone is able and capable to *do*. The popular version is “yes, I can”. This may be appropriate in secular education but it is certainly misleading in theological education.

Yes – there are many things in church and mission ministries that can be performed and adequate training is definitely needed. But we all know that what ultimately creates faith, builds the church and advances God’s kingdom is beyond all our competences. The ultimate agents of conversion, church growth and kingdom transformation are not well-trained, competent and skilful human beings but God alone.

Looking at competences theologically, let me suggest that we need to introduce the *competence of powerlessness and dependence*. This is not part of the secular economy-driven educational agenda but must be part of our agenda.

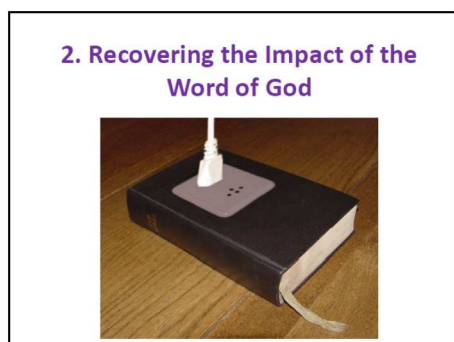
While I was presenting this section, you may have looked at the piece of art by Walter Habdank on the screen. The artist portrays Moses, the great and strong leader of Israel during the battle against the Amalekites (Ex 17). What are the competences you observe? Is this the type of strong and efficient leader we want to produce in our theological schools? His competences are not knowledge, skills and human potential. His strengths which make him a role model for Christian leaders are his powerlessness and his dependence on God. These are the kind of competences I am talking about. These are the kind of competences we need to incorporate into our curricula.

Questions for reflection and discussion:



Here is one answer:

## 2. Recovering the Impact of the Word of God



Evangelical theological schools value the Bible as the word of God. Many bold confessional statements give witness to this emphasis. In a good number of institutions faculty and even students have to sign statements on the authority of Scripture.

Nonetheless, I observe a severe crisis of Biblical teaching and learning in evangelical theological institutions. The deficit has a *quantitative* and a *qualitative* side – the last one being more severe than the first one.

The *quantitative crisis* can be observed when it comes to the shortening of degrees or the revision of curricula.

Some years ago, I talked to a dean-colleague of an American denominational seminary. We chatted about the joys and sorrows of being a dean. He mentioned the upcoming accreditation visit and the revision of curricula they are currently working on. I asked: “What is the most burdening issue for you in this process?” He looked at me and said: “The territorial defensive battles between the Biblical scholars and the practical theologians.” And he added. “The outcome is clear: Less Bible courses, reduced language requirements and more courses in various aspects of ministerial practice.”

I know this is a hot potato and can easily initiate lengthy discussions on the usefulness of Hebrew, Greek and Bible courses. I only want to comment on one observation: The way some schools deal with the languages and the foundational Biblical courses speaks volumes. In many cases, these courses are treated as some sort of preliminary, extra-curricular or even optional content “stuff” which easily can be neglected. It is obviously not considered as essential for program learning outcomes. There does not seem to be much faith in the power of the word of God in view of the future impact of the graduates.

Such behaviour is a strong message at the level of the hidden and the null curriculum (cf. Shaw).

This leads me to the *qualitative crisis*. I fear that there is a serious theological problem behind these developments. It is the shift from faith in the power of the word of God to faith in human skills and competences. In many cases, the decrease of Biblical teaching runs parallel to the increase of teaching in social sciences and skills at all levels of Christian ministries.

The results of this shift are alarming: We leave our graduates with psychological, sociological and rhetorical skills suggesting that they should trust these competences as they move into many areas of Christian service. If we do this we betray our students. Social sciences are very useful servants in

kingdom ministries but they cannot produce the mystery of kingdom-impact. We betray our students if we make them rely on their psychological, sociological and rhetorical performance. We put a burden on their shoulders, which they cannot carry. Frustration, disappointment, burnout and dropout are the price.

We need to rediscover the word of God as the essential source of power throughout the curriculum. How can this happen?

Let me step back: Something very irritating happened to evangelical Biblical scholarship. While we defended a high view of Scripture against modernist critical investigation of the Bible, we became ourselves very modern in our dealing with the Bible.

This is a big topic and I refer only to three aspects:

(1) First, in our apologetic defence of the historicity of the Biblical account and the validity of orthodox doctrine, we often reduced the Bible to a book, which contains God-inspired factual truth-statements. But the Bible is more.

(2) Second, in doing so, we turned the Bible into an object of our analysis and interpretation, and we have developed tools and methods to control proper interpretation (hermeneutics). Sometimes we have adopted the methods of Biblical scholarship of the day, sometimes we have suggested alternative evangelical approaches. But in any case: We are the subjects of investigation. The Bible is the object. Of course, a highly valued, God-inspired, even inerrant text. But nonetheless, we travel on the road of modern hermeneutics where the interpreter is the subject controlling the process of understanding by appropriate exegetical methods and hermeneutical principles. This entire approach does not do justice to the Bible as the word of.

(3) Third and finally, we have deduced from the inerrant Biblical text propositional doctrinal statements, which contain the everlasting truths of the Christian faith. Once such propositional truth is defined, the Bible itself moves to the background. Why should the average student be bothered by the often strange and complicated material of the Bible? All the important claims of the Christian faith are available in confessions and propositional statements. At best, the Bible serves a source of additional support for the already defined truths.

I know this is a very short sketch that neglects many nuances. But do you see the argument?

Helmut Thielicke, in his famous lectures for young theologians,<sup>3</sup> puts the finger on the critical point:

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<sup>3</sup>A Little Exercise for Young Theologians. Translated by Charles L. Taylor. Foreword by Martin E. Marty. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1962.

The man who studies theology, and especially he who studies dogmatics, might watch carefully whether he increasingly does not think in the third rather than in the second person. You know what I mean by that. This transition from one to the other level of thought, from a personal relationship with God to a merely technical reference, usually is exactly synchronized with the moment that I no longer can read the word of Holy Scripture as a word to me, but only as the object of exegetical endeavors. This is the first step towards the worst and most widespread ministers' disease. For the minister frequently can hardly expound a text as a letter which has been written to him, but he reads the text under the impulse of the question, How would it be used in a sermon?

I have been a minister myself and say this also to myself. We might remember that Anselm begins his demonstration of God in his *Prologue* with a prayer, and that his dogmatics were therefore prayed dogmatics. This extraordinary fact would be understood altogether wrongly if seen as only an edifying preamble and therefore a sign of a special kind of piety. Anselm is here looking for nothing else than the expression of something that theologically is strongly relevant: a theological thought can breathe only in the atmosphere of dialogue with God.\*

Essentially, theological method is characterized by the fact that it takes into account that God has spoken, and that now what God has spoken is to be understood and answered. But it can only be understood when I

(1) recognize that what has been said is directed to *me*, and

(2) become involved in formulating a reply. Only out of this dialogue is the theological method comprehensible (Galatians 4:9). Consider that the first time someone spoke of God in the third person and therefore no longer with God but about God was that very moment when the question resounded, "Did God really say?" (cf. Genesis 3:1). This fact ought to make us think.

In contrast with this, the crucified Jesus, out of the uttermost darkness of abandonment by God, does not speak to men, does not complain *about* this God who has abandoned Him. He speaks *to* Him at this very moment — in the second person. He addresses Him as *My God* and even expresses His complaint in a word of God, so that as it were the circuit between Him and the Father is complete. This observation, too, should make us think.

Thielicke in his time and context was referring to the "history-of-religions school" of Biblical interpretation, where the Bible is no longer "speech about God" but "speech about speech about God" (some of you may remember Miroslav Volf's presentation at the ICETE conference 12 years ago).

Evangelicals did not follow the route of the "history-of-religions school" but I fear that we suffer of the same disease: The shift from the second to the third person. The shift from the Bible as the word of God who addresses me and expects a personal response, to the Bible as a source of infallible truth statements which can be extracted and put into proper doctrinal statements. This is a tremendous loss.

Thielicke concludes:

But if this is so, that is, if the weal and woe even of theological thought depends decisively upon the atmosphere of the "second person" and upon the fact that essentially dogmatic theology is a theology which is prayed (Wilhelm Stählin's language), then this naturally once more makes a claim upon our life as Christians. Whoever ceases to be a man of the spirit automatically furthers a false theology, even if in thought it is pure, orthodox and basically Lutheran. But in that case death lurks in the kettle.

This must have consequences for the way we understand and teach theology.

Questions for reflection and discussion:



How do you create this 'atmosphere of the second person' so that your students encounter the living God?

### 3. Recovering Theology as Proclamation

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I refer to another Swiss theologian, Johannes Heinrich Schmid. After several years of service in Angola in the 1950s he became Professor of Systematic Theology at the state University of Bern. He was one of the founders of the Swiss Association of Evangelical Theologians. In his lectures, he argued that theology in its essence is proclamation. Some of his lectures are published in the book *Theologie sei Verkündigung* (Theology must be proclamation).

His point is grounded in the Biblical understanding of the "word" (hebr. *dabar*), and he argues that this must have consequences for the way we understand, teach and learn theology. If Christian theology is in accord with the Bible as its foundational text, not only in terms of content, but also in terms of form (the speech-act), then Christian theology is essentially proclamatory.

This has at least three dimensions:

(1) First, if we deal with the Bible, we encounter the powerful word of the creator:

*And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light (Gen 1:3).*

It is the word of God that brings forth salvation:

*As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it (Is 55:10-11).*

And when it comes to the appropriation of personal salvation and the transformation of character and behaviour, we cannot depend on the performance of preachers and educators but ultimately on the *dynamis* of the word of God:

*But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the **Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work (2Tim 3:14-17).***

This means that the ultimate power which impacts the world toward salvation is neither the skill-based performance of our graduates nor a clean propositional theology, it is the living word of God revealed in scripture.

(2) Second, this must have consequences for the way we teach the Bible in theological education. If the Bible is not only a word *about* God, but the word *of* God, not just truth *about* God, but the living God himself speaking to us, then we must overcome the way Descartes has separated *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, the investigating subject and the investigated object (cf. Hempelmann, *Wie wir denken können*).

This Cartesian world-view has influenced not only liberal but also evangelical Biblical studies: The Bible becomes an object, an ancient text – of course, as we claim, fully inspired by God, and this text now is the object of our investigation and interpretation. The entire project called “hermeneutics” is an attempt to understand the text in terms of inter-human communication (Schmid, *Theologie*, 142).

But if we believe that God is speaking to us in the Bible then things are turned upside-down: God is the subject and we are the objects. While we are investigating *his* word, he is investigating *us*. While we are trying to “know” him, we are “known” by him (1Cor 13:12; cf. Hempelmann, *Denken*, chapter III Hermeneutik).

To put it in Buber’s terms: While it is, on the one hand, an I-it relation – a human being investigating a human text – it has to become an I-Thou encounter between a human being and his/her creator.

(3) This leads to the third dimension: If this is true, then all theology must be relational. If the Bible is not just information and explanation, but always address – proclamation, exhortation, invitation... - then theology congruent with its main source must be expressed in the same speech-act. This is what Heinrich Schmid means by “theology must be proclamation”. It has to go beyond knowledge. It calls for a response. It holds accountable.

This means that it is not sufficient to distinguish between descriptive and normative propositions in our theology. If our theology wants to do justice to the Bible it will make proclamatory statements.

This leaves us with a tremendous challenge in Biblical teaching in theological education: If the living word of God is the ultimate power which will impact the world, then we must introduce our students to a life which is based on the I-Thou encounter with the living word of God. And this cannot be delegated to spiritual formation. This must be the music of all courses throughout the curriculum.

“The atmosphere of the ,second person“ – to use Thielicke’s phrase again – must penetrate the teaching/learning process in all courses.

If we fail to do this we leave our graduates well equipped with skills and competences but ultimately powerless in view of kingdom-impact.

I now come back to Bonhoeffer. I don’t have to spend much time expanding on the impact of his life – into our present days and probably into the future. But I want to point to at least one of the roots of this impact. It becomes evident in his letter to his brother-in-law Rüdiger Schuster of April 8, 1936.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 14: Theological Education at Finkenwalde: 1935-1937. H. Gaylon Barker and Mark S. Brocker, English editors; Douglas W. Stott, trans. Fortress Press, 2013, 167.



Let me first admit quite simply: I believe that the Bible alone is the answer to all our questions, and that we merely need ask perpetually and with a bit of humility in order to get the answer from it. One cannot simply *read* the Bible like other books. One must be prepared genuinely to query it. Only thus does it reveal itself. Only if we are really expecting an ultimate answer from it will it give us that answer. The reason is that God is speaking to us in the Bible. And one cannot simply reflect on God on one's own; one must ask God. Only if we seek God will God answer. Of course, one can *also* read the Bible just as one does any other book, for example, from the perspective of textual criticism, etc. There can be no objections to such reading. It merely is not the use that genuinely discloses the essence of the Bible; it discloses merely its surface. Just as you grasp the words of someone dear to you not by first<sup>[7]</sup> analyzing them but merely by accepting them, and just as they may then resonate in your ears for days, simply as the words of this particular person whom we love, and just as in these words the person who spoke them is increasingly disclosed to us the more we "ponder it in our heart" as Mary did,<sup>[8]</sup> so also should we deal with the word of the Bible. Only if we finally dare to come to the Bible assuming that the one speaking to us here really is the God who loves us and has no intention of abandoning us with our questions will we come to rejoice in the Bible.


Can you somehow understand from this perspective that I do not wish to surrender the Bible as this alien word of God in any point and instead will ask with all my powers what God is trying to say to us here? Every other place outside the Bible has become too uncertain for me. There I am always afraid of encountering merely my own divine *Doppelgänger*. Can you then somehow also understand that I am more willing to engage in a *sacrificium intellectus*<sup>[13]</sup>—precisely in these things, and only in these things, that is, in view of the true God!? And anyway, who does not engage in such *sacrificium intellectus* at one point or other??—that is, that I am willing to grant that this or that passage of Scripture cannot yet be understood, though with the certainty that one day this passage will indeed be revealed as God's own word, and that I would prefer to take this position rather than to say at my own discretion: This is divine, while that is human!?

And now I really would also like to say to you personally, that since having learned to read the Bible in this way—and it has not been at all that long—it becomes more miraculous to me each day. I read it each morning and evening, often during the day as well, and every day I focus on a text I have chosen for the entire week, trying to immerse myself in it entirely that I may truly hear it. I now know that I could no longer really live properly without this. And I certainly could not believe properly. And increasingly more riddles are becoming clear to me each day; we still seem to cling wholly to the surface of things. When I saw some medieval art in Hildesheim recently, I realized how much better people understood the Bible at that time. And that our forbears in their faith struggles did not have or want anything other than the Bible, and that through the Bible they were able to become independent and stable for a genuine life in faith. That gets you to thinking. It would, I think, be quite superficial to maintain that things have completely changed since then. Human beings and their tribulations have certainly remained the same. And the Bible answers them today no less than at that time. Perhaps this is a rather primitive consideration. But you cannot imagine what a joyous thing it is when one finds one's way back to these primitive things after losing one's way along the false paths of so many theologies. And I do believe that in matters of faith we are always consistently primitive.

I am deeply convinced that this is the competence – if we want to use the term at all – that our students need to catch as they study at our schools. It is this type of acquaintance with the living word of God which will put them in relation to the ultimate source of kingdom-impact.

Of course this leaves us with another question: How can this be achieved in formal teaching/learning processes? Scripture itself gives us some clues.

Questions for reflection and discussion:




How does the proclamatory dimension of theology occur in your teaching?

On the right side of the page, there is Arabic text: "في كل وقت من اوقاتنا نحن نعلم اننا نعيش في عالمنا هذا ونحن نعلم اننا نعيش في عالمنا هذا ونحن نعلم اننا نعيش في عالمنا هذا"

#### 4. Recovering *paracletic* Teaching/Learning Processes

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What I call “*paracletic* teaching/learning” processes is based on the Emmaus narrative in Luke 24:13-35. Of course the term *parakletos* does not appear in this text but the very matter is certainly there.

This narrative has become the main source of inspiration for my work as a theological educator.

Some of you certainly know that Thomas Groome, a North American catholic religious educator, has developed a substantial theory of religious education based on the

Emmaus narrative. I have learned a lot from his publications although I do not follow all his arguments and ideas.

The process of education is described here as a walk on the road of learning. One could almost speak of *the* method of studying theology. The word method (Greek *methodos*, a compound of *meta* and *hodos*) contains the word *hodos* – way or road.

The notion of a journey or a course is also at the centre of our technical term curriculum. In this sense the journey to Emmaus is a curriculum – maybe even a model curriculum for Christian and theological education.

I think that this journey of learning at the end of Luke’s gospel is of paradigmatic importance for all levels of Christian education.<sup>5</sup>

Let’s look at it:

“... *two of them were going, talking with each other about everything that had happened...*”

The journey starts with two learners, walking together, talking to each other about their life-story. The process of education begins in everyday life, things that happen and things that happen to us. Our daily experiences do not have to be swept away to be able to concentrate on theoretical

<sup>5</sup> Texts from the first centuries A.D. exist which develop a liturgy for church services along the lines of this passage: Nösser, Stephan & Reglin, Esther 2001. *Wir feiern Gottesdienst. Entwurf einer freikirchlichen Liturgik*. Wuppertal: Brockhaus.

education. Quite the opposite: talking about and bringing to the surface personal life situations is the basis for the ongoing process of learning. Learners narrate their stories. This is the first phase of the curriculum.

Education starts with perception. Open your eyes! Perceive life. Perception flourishes when there is opportunity to articulate what is being perceived. And for this, it needs somebody who listens.

Learners need peers with whom they can talk about life. Fellowship is an indispensable part of the educational process.

We notice something else: the road these two are walking leads (for now) away from the context of their experiences. Reflecting on experiences often requires distancing ourselves from the place of the experience.

Theological education that makes students competent enables them to perceive the world and their life-contexts, and to articulate what they experience and observe. To do that, it will often require a certain distance from the context of ministry.

Now the teacher comes alongside:

*“What are you discussing together as you walk along?”*

The teacher is not coming in dominantly as the all-knowing, as someone who now says: Dear people, I have the answers. Listen to me. Open your notebooks and write down the lecture that I give.

Quite the opposite, he comes alongside, even incognito, and walks the road of learning with the learners. In Biblical language he acts as a *parakletos*. Someone who comes along, who walks with me in my journey of learning. This is the appropriate metaphor for our task as teachers.

First of all the teacher asks questions. The process of learning is being deepened through inquiring further. Asking the right questions helps to perceive and reflect our own experiences and struggles. What happened exactly? Tell me again? And what did you think – and feel? Is there something confusing about it? Did you not describe that quite differently just a second ago? Asking these kinds of questions deepens experiences, creates relationship and trust, and moves us along on the road of learning.

Which leads us to a third phase...

*“...but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel...”*

Here the process of learning comes to a first important climax: the teacher's questions have brought those who learn to the point where they realize the discrepancy between their theory about life and their life experiences. We had hoped ... but the reality of life obviously is different.

We all have theories about life which we construct over time from the things we learn and the things we experience. Our theories about life help us to interpret what we experience. So we develop theories about life that have been tried and tested to interpret life and to better cope with it.

However, learning does not only mean to add new pieces of knowledge, but rather to re-learn. This fact is often not easy to accept for the learner. New struggles or new pieces in the theory create an imbalance within me (Piaget). They create a discrepancy between reality and theory. I am forced to newly reflect or even readjust my theories about life. “I had thought that ... but now I have experienced this and that...” - it's a phrase we all know. To recognize this is pivotal for any educational process.

Up until now, the learners have told their “little” story. The story of their lives, their time, their context. Theological education has to enable students to tell their “little” stories. This is possible if students learn to articulate their experiences, if we talk to each other, if we ask... and finally recognize the discrepancies, tensions and irritations.

Then, the learners are ready for the next phase:

... and beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself ...

Now, the Bible comes into play. The lecture starts, so to speak. And this lecture is about seeing the “little” story, which has been explored and recounted before, in the light of the “big” story.

But note: the learners did not lack Bible knowledge *per se*. They did indeed have a theological foundation. But their theology was challenged by the events. Equipped with their theology they were not able to understand the meaning of this unexpected event, Jesus' death. according to their theology, this was not how the messianic mission should have ended.

Bible knowledge alone is no longer sufficient – what is needed is hermeneutics. This is exactly the term used here (24:27 *dihermeneuo*). Looking closer at it, it is a reciprocal effect. Reading the already-known Bible guided by the *paracletic* teacher makes a new interpretation of the events possible. And conversely, these events facilitate a new understanding of well-known texts. Some passages make sense only now - in light of what happened. And now, through the new reading of scripture as a whole, light is shed on the events.

Theological education that enables us to interpret our little stories in the light of God's big story makes us competent.

But as we know: This is not the end of the journey:

... then their eyes were opened and they recognized him ...

What happens here is a mystery. Hospitality. Table fellowship. Breaking the bread... almost exactly the same words which Jesus used at the recent Passover meal! What is happening here?

From a strictly pedagogical point of view we see that in addition to the interactions of two students in a one-on-one learning partnership, the direct interaction between a teacher and two students, as well as an up-front lecture, a fourth type of social interaction is introduced: informal fellowship over a meal together. Its importance in the process of learning is undisputed. Any one of us could talk about the deep significance of informal communion between those who learn and those who teach.

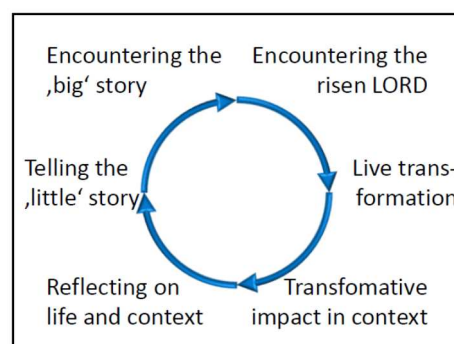
But we see even more happening here. The table fellowship, the guest breaks the bread and then mysteriously disappears, all of these are hints that in the process of learning something happens which cannot be explained by mere rationality and the psychology of learning. What is being said and done reminds us of the mystery of worship, and of experiences brought forth by the Holy Spirit. Here the promised *Parakletos* is at work... and the learners realize:

“... were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road ...”

This process of learning lights-up the hearts of the learners. Ultimately, it is the encounter with the Risen One that starts the fire. The previous elements of teaching and learning are not useless or redundant. Talking on the road, asking questions and reflecting on the events, the lecture, all of this is now viewed in retrospect and in light of this encounter with the Risen One...

We can draw a simple conclusion: theological education has to start a fire – and more than a fire of theological enthusiasm, rather a fire enkindled by the encounter with the risen Christ. And immediately we have to add that this cannot be done through human processes – let alone through academic work.

The latter I state explicitly, because the way modern science views the world is limited by what is logically thinkable and what is empirically explorable. Within these boundaries, science achieves great things and we make use of its potential. The mystery of



transcendental experiences however, is suspicious to science. Science cannot help us with these ultimate things – the encounter with the risen Lord. But that's where we have to go and where we want to go if people should be ready for ministry that impacts the world.

This leaves us, as those who teach and as theological educational institutions, powerless, and sometimes also helpless. The final and decisive matter that students should come to know cannot be brought about by what we can rationally, scientifically or pedagogically do. It is beyond academic and methodical feasibility. It is a mystery. So teachers and students alike come before God empty-handed and we can simply pray: Lord Jesus, meet us as those who teach and those who learn in a way that permeates and surpasses all theology, all training of skills, all studying, learning and teaching.

Miroslav Volf once said: “We theologians are either like Moses, ascending the mount Horeb to meet God, or we are no theologians at all.”<sup>6</sup> In the light of the New Testament we could add: We theologians have met the risen Lord and our hearts are set on fire by Him – or we are not really ready for impacting the world.

The narrative closes with the phrase:

*... they got up and returned at once ... and told what had happened on the way ...*

We don't have to talk a lot about the impact of this Emmaus journey. The history of Christianity from the first century on to the present time witnesses to the fact that those who encountered the risen Lord have changed the world. Proper theological knowledge and ministerial skills have helped a lot, but there is an impact-generating power that transcends all knowledge and every skill. If students have not “learned” to touch this power all our educational efforts are in vain.


Back to Bonhoeffer and his probing question “Are we still of any use?” I'm deeply convinced that we find the secret behind the impact of his life in his deep rootedness in the Bible as the living word of God.

In his letter to his brother-in-law he concludes:

Hence all that remains is the decision whether to trust the word of the Bible, whether to allow it to sustain us as does no other word in life or death. And I believe that we will genuinely become happy and at peace only after making this decision.

Is there anything I could add?

Questions for reflection and discussion:



How do you walk the 'transformative cycle' with your students?

Last editing December 2<sup>nd</sup> 2015/Bernhard Ott

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<sup>6</sup>Paper presented at the ICETE Consultation for Theological Educators, 18 August 2003, High Wycombe, UK, published in: *Evangelical Review of Theology* 29/3, 2005, 197-207 (also available at [www.icete-edu.org](http://www.icete-edu.org)).