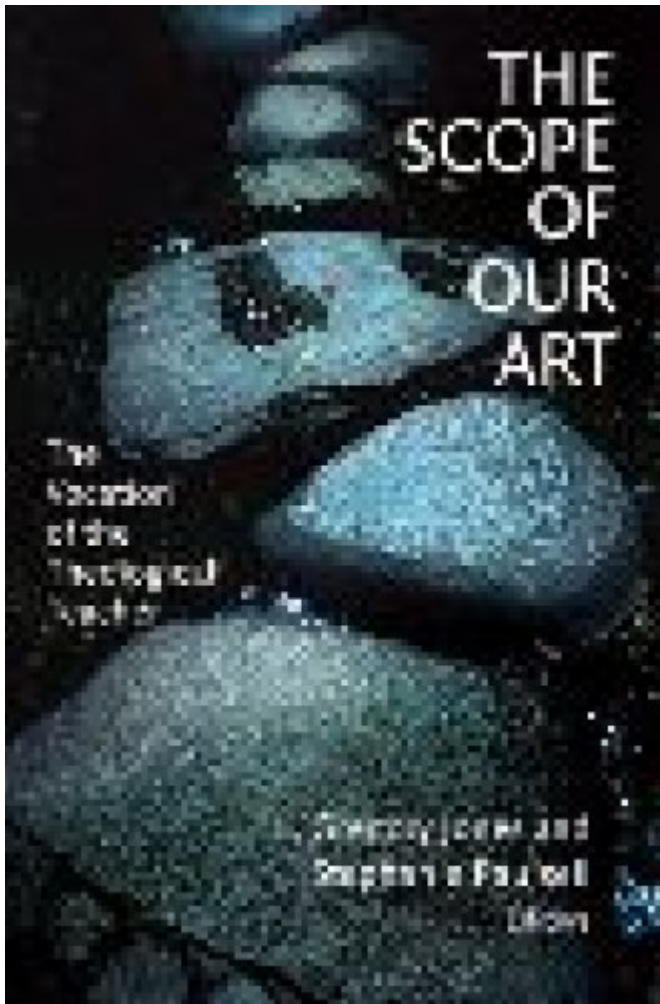


The teaching life

By [Gabriel Fackre](#) in the [February 13, 2002](#) issue

In Review



The Scope of Our Art: The Vocation of the Theological Teacher

L. Gregory Jones and Stephanie Paulsell, eds.
Eerdmans

What is the vocation of the theological teacher? The “Cambridge Platform” written by New England Puritans in 1648 says, “The office of . . . teacher is to attend to

doctrine and therein to administer a word of knowledge . . . given by Christ for the perfection of the saints, and edifying of his body.” Comparable descriptions can be found in classic statements from other Christian traditions. If *The Scope of Our Art* is indicative, we’ve come a long way since then: no such systematic definition is readily available today.

The Lilly Foundation funded a gathering of a cross-section of theological teachers and administrators from seminaries, university divinity schools and colleges—Protestant and Catholic, mainline and evangelical, well-known schools and those in the outback—to explore the subject. The editors acknowledge that the attempt to articulate a shared meaning of the “office” appeared unrealizable and an autobiographical turn was taken. “Rather than producing a systematic definition of ‘vocation,’ we decided to draw upon our diverse perspectives in a way that did not smooth out the differences among them.” The volume is a “conversation,” not a credo. For all that, it is a conversation worth overhearing by all who teach, in whatever capacity, in the church.

Animating the project are concerns about the “commodification” of teaching, the “maceration” of teachers by institutional tasks, the pressure of performance according to guild standards, and the disdain of intellectual work by the culture. All these factors erode the graces of “desk,” “classroom” and “school,” the categories by which the book is organized.

The question of “how” is focal throughout, dealt with often in personal narrative. W. Clark Gilpin ponders how doctoral education can respond to Emerson’s counsel to forswear the privatized career of a “mere thinker” for one that “breathes and lives on public and illustrious thoughts.” Stephanie Paulsell, moved by the 14th-century Carthusian nun Marguerite d’Oingt’s practice of writing as a spiritual discipline, offers guidance on how daily writing can encourage the “audacity and humility” necessary for one’s craft. Paul Griffiths turns to reading as a spiritual discipline, with an illuminating threefold typology of reading—reading can be for technical mastery (“academic”), for the catalysis of pleasure (“Proustian”), or for that which “contributes to the reader’s wisdom and that permits advance toward divine wisdom” (“Victorine,” from Hugh of St. Victor).

Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, reflecting on a formative 1959 article in this journal, Joseph Sittler’s “The Maceration of the Minister,” considers her own struggle, representative of women faculty who have family as well as academic

responsibilities, and argues for a kind of contemplation that lives redemptively with, rather than retreats from, “disruption, interruption and confusion.” Rosemary Skinner Keller tells how her teaching has been enriched by a “vocational kinship with Georgia Harkness,” pioneer woman theologian, drawing on what she has done in her winsome biography of Harkness. Susan Simonaitis reminds us of the power possessed by the teacher, how it can be abused or exercised responsibly by attention to the student “other” according to a paradigm of teaching as “conversation.”

Paul Waddell describes his collision with the “intellectual and moral relativism” of today’s undergraduates, who display loneliness, depression and indifference to “the God who fashioned them.” He urges us to view teaching as a “ministry of hope.” Lois Malcolm takes up her seminary’s rethinking of its role in terms of an “apostolate,” distinct from the confessionalist “abbey” and cognitive “academy” models, exploring how the best of the latter two can be brought together in an institution that is also aware of its social context and oriented toward mission. Michael Battle is clear about what a theological teacher in a divinity school is: one “whose work is to articulate God’s presence on behalf of the Christian community . . . so that we may help equip pastors and teachers for ministry,” and he goes into “how to know God in our midst” through a communal practice of “apophatic. . . ceaseless prayer.”

Claire Mathews McGuinnis gives autobiographical evidence of how the monastic Rule of St. Benedict can provide stability and depth in the midst of the distractions and “quotidian tasks” of teaching so as to “find and be found by God.” Frederick Norris, drawing on the record of Gregory of Nazianzus in the Cappadocian “hinterland,” speaks for the richness and possibilities of teaching in schools in the “outback.” Leanne Van Dyk explores as an institutional model her seminary’s decision to orient its teaching to “the newly emerging missionary encounter of the gospel in the cultures of North America.” Gordon Smith, reflecting on his experience as an administrator, makes a case for the importance of a school discerning its own corporate vocation. A refrain in the essays is the importance of “attention” in teaching and learning (Simone Weil’s rumination on the topic is regularly cited).

L. Gregory Jones identifies a cluster of questions on the minds of the contributors:

How does one understand a vocation to theological scholarship in the midst of competing loyalties to family and children, to church and other communities, to the institution where one teaches, to the guild, and to

one's own internal rhythms of work, rest, and playfulness? How does one sustain a vocation when I am blocked by political dynamics from securing a teaching job in order to exercise that vocation? How should one understand the seasons of a vocation, including especially the potential cost that sacrifice may be required at precisely the time one most needs to discover a sense of fulfillment? . . . How should one understand and live out a vocation that requires sacrifice if one inhabits a community, or an institution, that is unwilling to acknowledge any flexibility, much less sacrifice, in the ways it deals with its employees?

Enriched by the diverse proposals on how theological teaching might be done better, I put this book down still wondering about the “what” of the matter. Just what is a theological teacher today? What are the distinctives of this vocation? Could not all of the helpful counsel in this volume apply to any Christian teacher with a sense of calling in any subject in any venue? Indeed, much of the wisdom here can benefit every teacher, with or without faith commitments. But the title and subtitle point to the vocational particularity of “the theological teacher.” Is there an alternative to, or a contemporary reformulation of, the Cambridge Platform and its classical counterparts? Hints appear here and there about this “what,” but they are largely undeveloped.

Suppose an attempt were made to exegete Gregory of Nazianzus's bold assertion on which the title draws: “The scope of our art is to provide the soul with wings, to rescue it from the world and give it to God, and to watch over that which is in His image.” For Gregory, *skopos* referred to the aim of theological teaching, rather than “scope” as a range of views on how it might best be executed. My guess is that, for all of their caveats, the Cambridge Congregationalists might recognize their own teachers in the Nazianzus formulation. What would such a scope entail today?

Picking up some of the clues, we can say this: theological teaching is loving God with the mind by communally stewarding the story of God so that souls may take wing in the world. Such a description presumes academic rigor and loving care of the Christian lore (not conventional catechesis) and the corporate nurture of the soul as well as the mind—for life in the world, not out of it. Couldn't that Christian-specific *skopos* be pursued in any of the settings represented here—seminaries, university divinity schools and secular colleges? An addition would be in order for a theological teacher in a school-of-the-church: “for the preparation of church leaders.” Some research done by this reviewer on systematics departments suggests that this is, in

fact, the perspective in many seminaries and divinity schools.

If we don't deal creatively with the what as well as the how, a price will be paid. The nature of that price is suggested by a parallel volume, *Theological Education in the Evangelical Tradition*, edited by D. G. Hart and R. Albert Mohler (Baker, 1996), a history and interpretation of counterinstitutions born out of restiveness with mainline theological teaching. The country's first free-standing seminary, Andover, arose in 1807 out of disenchantment with Harvard concerning the "what" of the matter. Today's thriving evangelical seminaries, in turn, grew out of challenges to the mainlining of Andover and its heirs. And now, signs of new ventures—such as congregation-based teaching and related counterinstitutional forms—are questioning both oldline and evangelical teaching habitats.

The importance of knowing who we are and what we are doing in our Christian calling as teachers is surely reinforced by September 11, 2001. The aim of our art is different than the pedagogy of the madrasas, the schools created by the Taliban. Strengthened by the wisdom in this work, we need to keep pressing the question: Christianly speaking, just what is "the office of the teacher"?