

Excerpts from:

Servant Teaching

Practices for Renewing Christian Higher Education

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Foreword by

Perry L. Glanzer

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"This is a terrific book—wonderful wisdom, integrated theory and praxis, honesty with transparency, captivating stories, and reflective teaching insights. A must-read for new and veteran professors."
—**Dr. Tim Detwiler**, provost, Kuyper College

Chapter 1: Fill Your Heart with Gratitude

I begin each class session by telling students that I am glad to see them. I end every session by thanking them for coming. A student asked me why. I replied, “Because every time you come to class I am honored and blessed.” “Wow,” he said, “I never thought of it that way.” Neither had I until I gained a deeper understanding of my calling as a servant teacher.

The most important virtue for servant teaching is gratitude. When our hearts are bathed in gratitude, we see our students and our work as wonderful gifts. We build immunity to the cynical, critical attitudes that can infect academe.

I think gratitude is the missing first chapter in books on Christian pedagogy. Before we practice our instructional skills, we need to prepare our hearts. We tend to take our work for granted. Instead of seeing it as a gift from God, we might view it as a burden imposed upon us. Our work becomes more of a duty than a gift, and more of a routine than an adventure.

Let’s give thanks to God for opening the door for us to serve. Let’s also thank our Lord for our students, the institution that employs us, our time and energy, our abilities, the staffs that serve us, the teachers and authors and mentors who helped us earn our academic degrees, the colleagues who support and encourage us, and even the freedom to make mistakes.

Let’s add the bigger picture—the grace that saves and sustains us. We inherit the very love of God. We are God’s children, called to instruct those who are grafted into the same covenantal love. The more deeply we know that we are unconditionally loved, the more deeply we can love our students.¹ “We love,” John says, “because He first loved us” (1 John 4:19).

When we lose the joy of salvation, we can become joyless teachers. And our students sense this; the ways we present ourselves to them verbally and nonverbally can suggest that we are simply going through the motions of teaching, just like they might be going through the motions of learning. We need practices to help us continually renew our hearts in the light of every good gift from God.

I thank God for another day of life as soon as I wake up. I ask God to make me a blessing to others that day. Otherwise, my thoughts turn to the chores and stresses of the coming hours; my prayers become petitions without doxologies.

I associate the campus entrance sign with God’s goodness. As I enter each day, I remind myself that all the buildings, instruction, and learning are gifts from God. I am there as God’s guest, called and equipped. When I see the campus sign, it lifts my heart in preparation for service.

I created a gratitude board in my home office. On a corkboard I post encouraging notes from others, Scripture, photographs, thoughts, hymns, ticket stubs, and other mementos that

remind me of God's abundant blessings. One photo shows me at the grave of my alcoholic father, forgiving him for abuse; overcoming my resentment toward him is an amazing gift from God. I take naps on the sofa below the gratitude board, savoring items on the board as I drift off to sleep.

I placed my gratitude board on the wall where I see it each time I leave my home office. No matter what I am doing in the office on a given day, I want to be reminded when I depart that God is in charge and has blessed my life. Finally, the gratitude board serves as a kind of benediction, reminding me when I leave the room to go forth to love and serve the Lord.

You and I are beloved recipients of many gifts. The more we recognize this, the more inclined we will be to offer our lives gratefully in the service of our students. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153) wrote, "The more surely you know yourself loved, the easier you will find it to love in return."² Gratitude is our way of saying "yes" to God, to ward off what Søren Kierkegaard calls the "sickness" of ingratitude.³

Gratitude nurtures servant teaching. There is no secret formula. Our thankfulness just needs to be wholehearted. The apostle Paul says, "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!" (Phil. 4:4). If our attitude toward our Redeemer lacks thankfulness, then our attitude toward our students will as well. The psalmist asks, "How shall I return to the Lord for all his goodness to me?" (Ps. 116:12) We respond by praising God for every good gift, including the opportunity to be servant teachers.

Reflection

What practices help you to be a grateful servant teacher—and what items would you put on your gratitude board?

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"Wow! This personal, practical, and engaging book from a master teacher is the encouragement every professor needs for these challenging times."

—**Dr. Elizabeth McLaughlin**, professor, Bethel University (IN)

"I. LOVE. THIS. BOOK! Dr. Schultze's practical insights, gained from decades of success (and failure) in his efforts to serve students, help all of us in Christian higher education to follow our calling more intentionally."

—**Dr. Karl Payton**, associate vice president—accreditation & quality assurance, LeTourneau University

"Reading this book is like having that wise, older teaching mentor that faculty rarely have. . . . It should be required reading for every person in charge of faculty development and a required book for all young Christian professors." [from the foreword]

—**Dr. Perry L. Glanzer**, professor of educational foundations; editor-in-chief, *Christian Scholar's Review*; resident scholar, Baylor Institute for Studies of Religion, Baylor University

Chapter 3: Begin Again

Decades ago, I was burned out. It was only weeks before a planned semester sabbatical that I'd been looking forward to. I had become disappointed in my university, my colleagues, and myself. I was deeply discouraged. I wondered why I was working so hard for students and a school that didn't seem to appreciate my efforts.

I didn't realize it at the time, but I was experiencing the arc of professional disenchantment. As Christian psychiatrist Paul Tournier puts it, we "began full of enthusiasm, treating [our] work as a fascinating adventure. And then gradually, imperceptibly, as a result of disappointments, through the deadening effect of routine, even without . . . realizing why, it became a burden, just a duty to be performed, a habit, a prison rather than an adventure."⁴ My burden included anxiety and depression. Previously excited to be a Christian professor, I found myself caught in a downward spiral.

I also sensed that I was disappointing my students. I felt shame, especially when I read my course evaluations; in my overly sensitive emotional state, even just a handful of negative comments wounded me.

My semester off became a time of rest and reflection as well as study. I needed to put my life back together. I sought a psychiatrist and therapist. My new psychiatrist mentioned that most of his clients in higher education had been going through similar despondency. Knowing that I was not alone, and with professional help, I found extra courage to begin again.

During my much-needed sabbatical, I noted three things that have helped me considerably in subsequent years.

First, I realized that each year, semester, course, and class session is a time to begin again. We servant teachers can reflect on how we have done in the past and what we might do differently in the future. We can thank God for every good gain and recommit ourselves to moving ahead with greater faith, skill, and virtue. In this sense, the recurring rhythms of the academic calendar can be great blessings—almost like the church year with its opportunities for self-examination, recommitment, and renewal.

Second, I discovered that I was being too hard on myself. I was seeking earthly perfection rather than realistic excellence, thereby repeatedly disappointing myself in spite of my successes with particular students and courses. Bernard of Clairvaux said that biblical "perfection" actually "consists in doing common and everyday things in an uncommon manner, and not in doing great things, nor in doing many things."⁵

I realized that my disappointment would strike even before the start of each semester. I love sitting down with a cup of coffee and a blank pad of paper to begin planning a new course,

from the topics to readings, and from lecture-discussions to projects and papers. As the semester approaches, however, my enthusiasm wanes. I feel the pressure of time, such as a semester or quarter with a limited number of class meetings or online discussion posts. I review possible textbooks and become discouraged because so many are both uninspiring and expensive. Some of the great ideas I had for student assignments suddenly seem like enormous grading burdens. To return to the biblical garden metaphor from chapter 2, I wonder how much student land I can actually till for the kingdom. I begin getting discouraged before I even begin again!

Third, I concluded that I need one or two colleagues with whom I can be fully transparent about the ups and downs of my servant teaching. In other words, I need the stability of love and acceptance amid the highs and lows of the academy. I am lost if I don't have the kind of professional community that transcends the arc of professional disenchantment. My church community is essential, but I also need faithful, loving colleagues who care about me.

We can mistakenly impose upon ourselves unrealistic expectations flowing from our genuine desire to love God and our students. But every time we begin again, we have the wonderful opportunity to pursue excellence within our means, with plenty of compassion toward ourselves.

The longer I am a servant teacher, the better I am at fending off the arc of professional disenchantment by beginning each initiative—every year, term, and class meeting—with realistic expectations. Then I have the emotional-spiritual as well as professional resources to do common and everyday things in an uncommon manner, God helping me.

Reflection

Where do you find yourself along the arc of professional disenchantment—and how might you begin again?

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"This book is practical, pithy, faith-infused, and rooted in long classroom experience and genuine empathy for students. It offers a conversation about your classroom from which you will emerge with fresh food for thought and a wealth of practical suggestions."

—**Dr. David I. Smith**, director, Kuyers Institute for Christian Teaching and Learning, Calvin University

Dr. Quentin Schultze taught in Christian higher education for 33 years before retiring as an emeritus professor of communication at Calvin University, where he received the Presidential Award for Exemplary Teaching. He has written many books and articles and led teaching workshops and webinars across North America. Along the way he conducted program reviews for Christian universities, helping them develop pedagogical strategies tuned to their own curricula and theological traditions. He also piloted new teaching strategies while serving as an online and residential professor for various Christian universities and seminaries. Access additional book-related resources and sign up for his email list at his website (quentinschultze.com).

Chapter 21: Evaluate Yourself

Faculty who score well on end-of-term student course evaluations believe that such instruments are valid and helpful. Those teachers who score poorly generally do not. Moreover, many of my students dislike filling out such evaluations; they don't provide a lot of specific, written feedback.

I struggled to assess the benefits of such evaluations. By the time I received the results I was usually well into planning and sometimes even teaching the next term. The gap seemed to work against timely personal growth. Also, the questions seemed too generic to be immediately helpful for me and my specific courses.

So I decided to take a bold step forward into the scary land of student evaluation. I would be proactive, not reactive; timely, not delayed. Finally, I would make self-assessment an ongoing process rather than a single, end-of-term practice.

I commend the following practice to you. Please try it, adapting it as needed. You might never have to worry about end-of-term evaluations again.

Beginning at the completion of the second week of a term, with about four minutes left in class, I distribute blank index cards and ask students for "quick feedback." I say something like this: "I am grateful for the chance to teach all of you this term, and I know we can do even better if you give me some honest feedback. Please don't write your names on the cards. Just jot down short responses to these four questions (which I write on the board as well): First, what is going well in the course? Second, what is not going so well? Third, what can I (the teacher) do better? Fourth, what can you (the student) do better?"

The first time you do this you'll be amazed. Suddenly you'll be listening to students in a new, servant-oriented way. You'll hear from students' hearts how they are experiencing your teaching and the course overall. And you'll realize that you have time to address their responses before end-of-term regrets. At the same time, you'll discover what God is already accomplishing through you.

I place a chair near the classroom door for the students to put their completed cards on, blank side up. I immediately go to the hallway (to maintain student privacy in the classroom as they complete their cards). I collect the cards once the last student has left the classroom.

I review the cards that day. One by one, slowly. I ask God to be with me since I might discover comments that bruise my ego. There are also some wonderful, affirming comments. God is good! Then I look for themes across the cards. What am I doing that my students appreciate? I need to do even more of that. What am I doing that is causing student frustration? A typical comment when I started doing this was, "Can you make it clear what we are supposed to know?" Another: "Why do you let the same students talk all the time?" Yet another: "I don't

like the readings. Boring. How do they relate to your lectures, anyway?” This is a classic: “Dump the pop quizzes.”

Students say revealing things about what they can do better: “Keep up with readings.” “More sleep.” “Take better notes.”

I report my findings at the next class. I summarize the cards and read a few comments—positive and negative. Then I explain how I will be addressing the comments—what I can do better. For instance, the student responses led me to write pop quizzes that include questions which will be on the next exam (see chapter 11). I might suggest that students who indicated a particular problem should see me: “If you indicated that taking notes on my lectures is difficult, please contact me so I can help.”

Sometimes the cards reveal that students as a whole disagree about what I am doing well and poorly—usually the latter. In this case, at the next class, instead of giving a report I ask for three volunteers (or I appoint them) to review the cards and give a report at the next class with their own, group suggestions. This is a terrific learning exercise for the class overall as well as for the particular student reviewers. And it creates a stronger sense of students’ responsibility for their own learning. Of course, I have the final word. But students have spoken and we all have listened.

Normally, I repeat this process about four times each term. By the last one, hardly any instructor-related problems are identified. Most importantly, I really don’t need the end-of-course student evaluations to try to figure out retrospectively how students reacted specifically to me and my course. I already know far more than those evaluations could tell me. I gently remind students to work on their own weaknesses as well.

Reflection

How might you listen regularly to students in order to become a better servant teacher—and what do you think you would hear?

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¹ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Inner Voice of Love: A Journey through Anguish to Freedom* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 65.

² Bernard of Clairvaux, *Selected Works*, ed. and trans. G. R. Evans (New York: Paulist, 1987), 179.

³ Kierkegaard, *Provocations*, 378. He added, “Christ has desired only one kind of gratitude: the praise that comes from the transformed individual.” *Provocations*, 410.

⁴ Paul Tournier, *The Adventure of Living*, trans. Edwin Hudson (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 58.

⁵ Quoted in Paul Tournier, *The Person Reborn*, trans. Edwin Hudson (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 87.