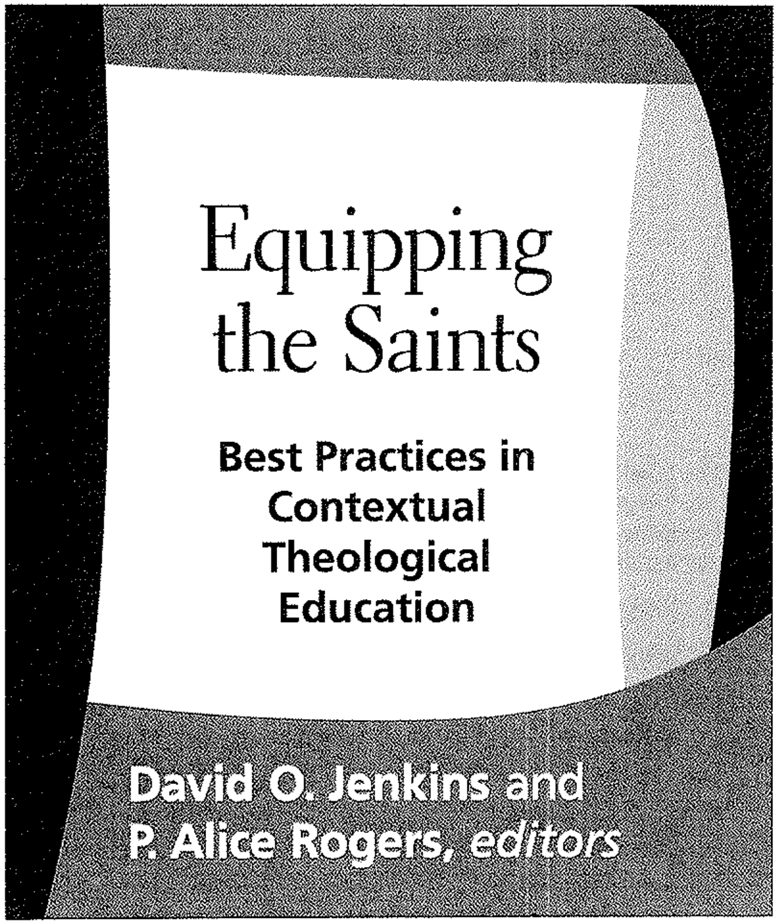

Equipping the Saints

Best Practices in Contextual Theological Education

David O. Jenkins and P. Alice Rogers, *editors*

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In the supervisory sessions there will be moments of vocational, theological, and personal insights. But there will also be moments of frustration, disappointment, and aggravation. All of these moments are important and worthy of intentional conversation.

As a supervisor, I have found it important to call upon God to strengthen, heal, direct, and support my leadership. I believe that as an intern supervisor, I should reflect a presence of servanthood and discipleship. I want my interns to depart each session with a sense of "putting on Christ," as St. Paul affirmed. I hope that they can say, "I can see it; therefore, I can do it. I am God's person." I want all of my interns to be able to say this about supervision: "I gained new insights about pastoring from every session."

Conclusion

As seen in the above reflections, the supervisory process helps bridge the gap between the classroom and the parish while supporting Trinity Lutheran's goal to integrate the traditional academic disciplines of biblical studies, theology, and church history with the daily realities of parish ministry. As students participate in the Integrative Groups, the Ministry-in-Context program and the internship year, we hope that the important task of integration enriches and deepens the ministry of each clergy candidate, as well as the church.

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How Not to Praise Your Intern

The Role of Observation in Ministerial Formation

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IN THE FIFTH CHAPTER of the book of Daniel, we hear the story of the court servant Daniel being summoned by King Belshazzar to decipher and interpret a mysterious writing that has appeared on the wall of the royal palace. Daniel is an exile from Judah who had been brought into the king's court by King Belshazzar's father, King Nebuchadnezzar. His reputation for having great wisdom precedes him. The mysterious inscription on the wall unnerves King Belshazzar because he lacks the ability to read it, let alone understand it. He has heard about Daniel's reputation, and his queen is urging him to solicit Daniel's help, but it wounds his pride to do so.

Perhaps because of his insecurity, or perhaps out of pride, King Belshazzar believes he must offer Daniel three rewards for interpreting the writing. "You shall be clothed in purple," he tells Daniel, "have a chain of gold around your neck, and rank third in the kingdom" (5:16, NRSV). Daniel rejects these tokens, saying: "Let your gifts be for yourself, or give your rewards to someone else! Nevertheless I will read the writing to the king and let him know the interpretation" (5:17). Daniel agrees to offer his skills, but he will do so for his own reasons and on his own terms. He rejects the bribery implied in the gifts of imperial power. The story concludes with Daniel interpreting the writing with ease. It turns out to be a withering indictment of King Belshazzar. That night the king is killed and a new king takes the throne.

It would have been easy for Daniel to give in to the seduction of power and prestige represented by being asked to assist the king. And yet by resisting reward, Daniel claims a measure of freedom from his enslavement by the royal court and its powers and principalities. This moment of individual achievement suggests a metaphor for resisting praise. Praise is one kind of reward that is all too easily bestowed and all too happily received.

There are many kinds of "rewards" we receive in life, often for doing what we would have done anyway, such as Daniel's interpretation. Think of Employee of the Month awards, class rankings, gifts for years of service at our jobs. Praise is one of these rewards. In recent years, I have mounted a small campaign at Yale Divinity School to encourage my supervisors not to praise their interns. I believe that praising people for attributes such as intelligence, natural ability, artistry, and so on, does not necessarily motivate them to do better and may even have negative consequences. While most of us accept the idea that we should not label people for their shortcomings — in theological terms we should hate the sin but not the sinner — many people still seem to insist upon labeling people for their giftedness. But why should this be? Why not "love not the gifted one but the giving itself"? I tell my supervisors *not* to tell their interns "You're the greatest preacher," or "You're a natural born pastor," but rather to talk about the actual act of the preaching or the pastoring instead.

I hasten to clarify the distinction between praise and feedback, as I am using these terms. Praise is simply a blanket statement of how good someone is, without explaining what in particular they are good at and what is good about it. Some call this "empty praise." It is a laudatory comment directed toward persons *qua* persons, that is, toward their attributes or qualities rather than their performance. "You're a math genius." "You're such a gifted singer." "You have a pastor's heart." "You've inherited your daddy's artistic gene."

Feedback, in contrast, is a statement about the nature of what someone did. It is directed not toward a person's attributes but toward their performance. So, for example: "I admire the work you did to get a ninety-eight on that math quiz." "Your singing makes me feel so serene." "I can tell that you brought comfort to that grieving family." "You use the most vivid colors in your paintings." Note that feedback can be just as positive and approving as praise; it just adds more detail and shifts the focus away from a person's identity and to the effort and engagement they put into their task.

I wish to underscore this last point. By differentiating between praise and feedback, I am not differentiating between positive and negative. It is not that praise consists of positive statements and feedback of negative ones, because feedback can be either positive or negative. Apparently, there are some educators who do not believe in positive statements of any kind. A student of mine told me that for the entire summer her Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) supervisor refused to say anything positive about her work, even when she specifically asked him for positive feedback. Instead, he apparently told her that she needed to develop her own internal sense of positive feelings about her work. Now he may be on to something, but I do not happen to subscribe to his educational philosophy. I have always believed people learn from their successes as well as their failures, so there is value in detailing the positive aspects of what someone has done.

In my one-person campaign to teach supervisors how not to praise their interns, I have come across several forms of resistance. After all, who doesn't like being praised? It feels good, and the idea that we can inspire people to higher levels of learning and achievement by praising them is an idea that dies hard. We tend to think, like King Belshazzar, that praise should naturally accompany our efforts to get people to do what we want them to do. We also think that if someone lacks the necessary confidence to perform better, our praise will supply it. Finally, we assume that without praise our students might not discover their gifts. I am doubtful of all of these claims (that praise inspires, motivates, and teaches). It is not at all clear to me that people would not work just as hard, perform just as highly, and know what they are good at, without our laudatory comments.

I have discovered, looking into the work on praise, that I am not alone in my hunches. Let me offer some of the research and theory illustrating that people work just as hard, perform just as highly, and know what they are good at, without praise. In fact, as it turns out, they often do even better.

Chief among the growing number of educators and scholars who have studied praise is social psychologist Carol Dweck, formerly of Columbia University and now at Stanford University. Dweck believes that success of many kinds — excelling in sports, succeeding in business, doing well in school — is ultimately aided not by boosting people's sense of their natural abilities or attributes, but rather by boosting their engagement in and passion for the task. When it comes to academic achievement, for example, a student is better off believing in their effort than believing in their intelligence.

Dweck's most famous studies involving four hundred students were conducted in fifth-grade classrooms in different regions of the United States. Her researchers gave students a set of nonverbal puzzles that were designed at only a moderate level of difficulty. They all did the puzzles and afterward, they all were told their scores. But, in addition, one group of students were told "You must be smart at this," while another group was told "You must have worked really hard." A third, control group received no additional comment beyond their score. All students were then offered a choice if there were time remaining at the end of the study: (1) to work on problems that were not too hard, so they would not get many wrong, or (2) to work on problems from which they would learn a lot, even if they would not appear so smart. Their choices were revealing: far more children who had been praised for their intelligence chose to work on the easy problems than children who had been praised for their effort. In fact, the data showed that 90 percent of the students who had been told "You must have worked really hard" asked to work on problems from which they would learn.

For the second trial, all students worked on puzzles designed at a seventh-grade difficulty level (two levels above their own). All of them predictably performed less well; this trial was in effect an artificially induced failure. It was designed to see to what students would attribute their failure. When observed and questioned during the test, students in the two groups responded quite differently. Those in the "intelligence" group got visibly distressed and said things like "I guess I wasn't as smart after all" while those in the "effort" group said things like "I guess I'm not working hard enough." These students did not appear discouraged and some even said it was their favorite test. Finally, all the students worked on a third set of problems, this one designed to be as easy as the first. Their scores resulted in a dramatic finding. Across six different versions of the same problem set, those children who had been praised for their effort improved their scores (on average, by 30 percent), while those who had been praised for their intelligence did worse than they had in the very beginning. (Recall that Trial 1 and Trial 3 were the same level of difficulty.) One word of praise actually lowered test scores.[1]

When interviewed later about her study, Carol Dweck said that she and her researchers had a hunch about the detrimental effect of praise, but even they were surprised that one simple comment would make such a difference. Since this study, Dweck has gone on to conduct a great deal more research into praise, on all sorts of people, and she has found that praise has a significant deleterious effect on success. As she explains: "Emphasizing effort gives a child a variable that they can control. They come to see themselves as in control of their success. Emphasizing natural intelligence takes it out of the child's control, and it provides no good recipe for responding to failure."[2]

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[1] Po Bronson, "How *Not* to Talk to Your Kids: The Inverse Power of Praise," *New York Magazine*, February 19, 2007, with additional reporting by Ashley Merryman. See also Claudia S. Mueller and Carol S. Dweck, "Praise for Intelligence Can Undermine Children's Motivation and Performance," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 75, no. 1 (1998): 33–52, and Carol S. Dweck, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* (New York: Random House, 2006), chapter 1.

[2] Bronson, "How *Not* to Talk to Your Kids," 27.

Dweck believes that what she found in these fifth-graders' experience of being tested is replicated in a pattern dividing all of us. Some of us have what she calls a "fixed mindset" with respect to our capacities. We believe that intelligence, athleticism, musical talent, and other attributes of ours are fixed and given, that we either come into this world possessing them or not, and there is little we can do to change that. Those of us who have such a mindset receive reinforcement in all the messages we receive from an early age telling us we are smart, talented, gifted, and so on. Some of us, on the other hand, believe that our capacity to excel can always be cultivated. Dweck calls this having a "growth mindset." According to the growth mindset, "everyone can change and grow through application and experience," and no one's potential can be known with certainty ahead of time.[3] The growth mindset is detectable in the passion some people have for persisting at their projects and pushing themselves to improve, even and especially when they are not doing particularly well.

A fixed mindset can be detrimental to those who have it because it indisposes them to failure. If I am told my whole life that I am gifted, for quite a while I might do just fine — in part because I will carefully choose activities that guarantee my success and prove my giftedness, just like the fifth-graders. But when the time comes that I fail at something — which is going to happen eventually — I will not be not only disappointed but defeated. I will be ill equipped to cope with my failure. After all, I attribute success and failure to my personhood, my very being. I will be less likely to chalk up my failure to a bad day during which I did not do my best, or to a mistaken strategy, or to prejudice or luck, the way my growth mindset friends will.

Our theological schools are competitive places where students are measuring themselves against each other and against deeply held ideas about who they are and what they are capable of. This includes field education internships. Whether they articulate it or not, many

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[3] Dweck, *Mindset*, 4. The growth mindset pertains, incidentally, even to mindsets, believing not that they are fixed but rather that a person can change from fixed to growth! (*Mindset*, 46).

of our ministry interns are surely asking themselves, "Will ministry come easily to me so that I do well at it?" "Will I be good at this and be a success?" and the close cousin to such questions, "Am I called to this?" (One of my supervisors reported that an intern once asked him directly, "Am I the best intern you've ever had?" a question really more poignant than amusing.) I have had several moments over the years, as many of us probably have, of discovering that a student feels unworthy and doubts her choice of ministerial study. My impulse is to rush in and heap on the praise! But if her supervisor or I respond to her insecurities this way, we may ironically be adding fuel to the fire.

What are some other ways we can respond? We return to the practice of feedback, which I have defined as detailed information tailored to the work an individual has performed.

In order to help wean supervisors from giving praise to providing feedback, I designed an instrument called the Observation Report. Adapted from a technique I learned in the training of student teachers, it requires a supervisor to pay close attention to the student while the student is engaged in practicing some ministry skill. It also invites students to request the specific form of feedback they desire, thus learning how to direct their own learning process. My hope was that the Observation Report would guide supervisor and student in the giving and receiving of concrete and specific assessment. My theory was that some supervisors praise their interns because they do not have or take the time to offer feedback. A universal blanket statement such as, "You're so great," makes up for that insufficiency.[4]

The Observation Report is completed in three parts. First, the interns write down what skill they are working on in the activity being observed, what their personal and professional goals are, what they want their supervisor to watch for, and what they are hoping to contribute to their site through this ministry. Then the supervisor watches the intern doing ministry. Finally, the supervisor addresses the intern's questions and adds any additional feedback that is especially pertinent but for which the intern may not have asked.

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[4] Bronson, "How *Not* to Talk to Your Kids," 83.

The first-year I assigned Observation Reports, in 2006–7, was trial.[5] The results prompted several reflections on the challenge of getting supervisors not to praise their interns.

First, I noticed a tendency that I call "collusion." Many interns, when asked to express their concerns, wrote about issues such as getting enough people to attend a program, adequately connecting with people, and so on. Supervisors responded by confirming the appropriateness of such concerns, as if to say, "Yes, ministry is just really hard sometimes." Then they praised the intern by saying things like, "You did really well given the circumstances and despite the pressures you were under." Does praise sometimes get used to cover anxiety on the part of praise-givers for the hard things they are asking their students to do? Indeed, upon reflection, one supervisor pointed out that praise may be a way for him to mask the anxiety of "the intern inside him"!

Second, few supervisors contained themselves to simply telling what they saw. Many tended to heap on adjectives, for example, "When I watched, I saw a mature, graceful, and devout person." "Marianne is a wonderful communicator — poised, clear, funny, and not afraid." "Shelly shows a natural gift for preaching — she wants to be in this role." I found it very common for supervisors to comment on how "natural" their interns seem at ministry. This sort of praise gets offered even and especially when interns have explicitly stated their discomfort or trepidation. Clearly, these interns do not yet attribute their positive performance to their "nature," yet supervisors seem eager to make this attribution, rather than attribute the intern's success to hard work or strategies of improvement. When supervisors do note improvement, they tend to make blanket statements such as "She's come a long way in her preaching" without saying what that way was or how the student came along it.

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[5] I had 69 student-supervisor pairs that year, and each pair was required to do 4 reports throughout the year, so they produced 276 reports in all.

Some supervisors could not help but express their personal satisfaction with their intern. For example, one supervisor wrote, "Sean has been a joy for me to work with. We are a real team, easily sharing the tasks to be accomplished. Being able to rely on Sean has meant I could worship at the service myself." Occasionally, supervisors directed their comments toward me rather than the intern, saying such things as, "Thank you for matching Joe with me. This match has evolved into something much greater than I expected." To me, comments like these suggest that praise is often an expression of two other things — pride and gratitude — both of which reflect more on the praise-giver than the praised.

Finally, it is clear that clergy may simply have a hard time refraining from praise. Supervisors were given the option of letting a lay member of the intern committee or some other church leader do an occasional report. Without exception, these individuals gave more forthright and detailed assessments that avoided praise-laden language. For example, "The message was quite clear to me; however, Chris does tend to rush a bit." And, "I saw people genuinely interested in her presentation. The room was quiet with almost all eyes on the podium, which doesn't always happen [in this mental health setting]." Lay members may generally be freer of the need to express how proud and grateful they are for the intern's performance — perhaps because they have less riding on the intern's success — and can just get on with the business of feedback. I encouraged this year's group of interns to seek out feedback from people other than their supervisors (lay committees are not required in the Yale Divinity School program).

In contrast, the supervisors, who were usually clergy, tended toward generalized and flattering language. Instructed simply to offer feedback, some could not help themselves. For example, when asked for further comments, one supervisor wrote, "I don't want my comments about delivery to take away from the fact that overall Anne is a good, solid preacher." It is as though, like Carol Dweck's fifth-graders, they feel a need to rank their intern against all other interns, as if by not producing a favorable comparison they were responding inadequately. Almost without exception, supervisors used the space for further comments not to add further information but rather to make some praiseworthy summary comment like "Aaron has the potential to become an extraordinary preacher!"

I cannot help but wonder whether clergy, in contrast to lay people, are on the whole more committed to the idea that ministers are born, not made. They may be personally invested in the idea that ministerial qualities are fixed and given, to be discovered rather than cultivated, while the laity appreciate the hard work and dedication that goes into the making of a minister. Could it be that clergy cling to a "fixed mindset" about the gifts and callings to ministry because feeling gifted rewards them for labor that has few other rewards? Let us continue to reflect on this and other questions about ministerial formation and praise.

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Constructive Congregational Feedback

Teaching Ministry Students and Congregations to Listen Well to One Another

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HONEST FEEDBACK from congregation members, delivered in a context of mutual learning and care, can be a significant key to growth in the practical skills and pastoral interactions of seminary ministry interns. Creating the environment for such conversations is both the hope and the challenge for the Teaching Placement Committees in the field education program at Claremont School of Theology.

Ministry interns are often subject to the same interactions with congregation members and other staff in their field education settings as any pastor. Listening carefully during those exchanges, being self-aware, being socially and contextually aware, while receiving feedback and deciding whether and how to apply it in practice, are critical skills for any minister.

The best Teaching Placement Committees in Claremont's program provide an opportunity for ministry interns to learn about the practice of ministry through the experience of congregation members and to learn about themselves as ministers in relation to a congregation. Skill-building goals in teaching, preaching, pastoral