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## Academic Life: Hospitality, Ethics, and Spirituality (Book Review)

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**John B. Bennett**

*Academic Life: Hospitality, Ethics, and Spirituality*

Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock 2008 (2003) pb 202pp \$26.00

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A decade ago, a mentor remarked that if I was entering the world of higher education, I would need to grasp how politics functioned within such a setting. As a graduate student, I forgot he was an experienced college president, dismissed his counsel, and suggested that diplomacy might be a better skill to acquire. He smiled and let experience teach me. I have learned that politics are a major part of higher education. In *Academic Life*, John Bennett provides an intriguing critique of American higher education and its power culture. He describes it as a mix of self-promotion and self-preservation. He unpacks the culture of fear that sometimes inhabits an academic community, but most encouragingly, he provides a paradigm with a strategy on how to move away from these adversarial relationships.

He observes that territorialism, self-promotion, and insecurity characterize many college and university communities. This is my eleventh year working at a faith-based institution; contrary to conventional wisdom, these observations fit within this culture. Speaking with colleagues at both faith- and non-faith-based colleges, I have found that politics, fear, and territorialism exist on their campuses as well. Administrators hold information and fear losing control and power; faculty members debate and verbally destroy upstart neophytes; support staff keep their heads down in tough economic times in hope of keeping their jobs; students try to navigate unfamiliar territory.

The cycle of self-protection and self-promotion permeates academia. Bennett calls these and their related variants *insistent individualism*. He identifies that this individualism is contrary to the notions of a community, the academic *collegium*, and a committed group of scholars. A better model is what Bennett calls *relational individualism*. This is individualism that acknowledges its own strengths and aptitudes but is committed to understanding, empathizing, and connecting with those around us. There is no fear in these relationships, and such individualism has the internal confidence that makes the need to promote oneself unnecessary.

This relational individualism pursues links with others, seeks the common good, and desires to deepen the scholarly community. The strategy Bennett puts forward is called *hospitality*. This notion has no relationship to the modern notion of entertaining or the hospitality industry. Bennett's hospitality involves bringing both the strange and the familiar into one's world. It involves extending and receiving kindness and is devoid of arrogance. While knowing there may be risks, hospitality is brave and confident enough to pursue new relationships. Further, it involves true discourse, communication, and conversation. This hospitality sees that the potential value of interaction far outweighs the potential risk. Bennett suggests that hospitality is a profound and necessary scholarly virtue.

He suggests that the means for pursuing an academic variety of hospitality can be found in the metaphor of the *conversation*. The hospitable scholars are those who draw others into discourse, desire to learn from others, suspend their own

expertise, and learn and interact with others. They do not abandon their beliefs and convictions; they suspend them in order to hospitably interact with others. Conversation is metaphorically at the foundation of hospitality.

Bennett's intended audience is American higher education in general and faculty and academic administrators in particular. However, it has importance for all areas of the global academic community. This volume has many levels of significance, especially for educators (formal and informal) who seek after Jesus. The book is not intended exclusively for Christians; Bennett's vision is for both secular and faith-based higher education.

The book is provocative in a prophetic manner: it describes and provides a vision for what *should be*. It is simply an appeal for hospitality, discourse, and grace. It seeks a true hospitality in which a university or college is able to seek (as a friend states) to *lift the human spirit*.

Bennett's vision of hospitality within the academy reflects the biblical notions of grace and mercy in a profound and startling way. One cannot ignore this image. It demands pondering, reflecting, and acknowledging. It has many implications for how higher education chooses to go about its daily business. It has meaning for the classroom, residence hall, and chapel. While Bennett refrains from making many biblical references, it does not take too much of a leap for the reader to think that the author has some understanding of the grace of Jesus. I am unsure if Bennett is a follower of Jesus, but I believe he could be listed under the category of "friend of God." *Soli Deo Gloria*.

*David M. Johnstone*