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Practical Theology for the Classroom: Forward in Faithful Education: Themes and Values for Teaching, Learning, and Leading

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Foreword

WHEN I THINK OF faithful teachers, I think of Mrs. Regan. Mrs. Regan was my fourth-grade teacher, and for some reason we didn't hit it off very well. I don't remember much of what happened in class that year, but I do remember that as I was leaving class on the last day of school, I turned to her as she was standing in the doorway and said, "Mrs. Regan, I didn't like this class and I don't like you!" I didn't think much about that mean-spirited comment until I found out that Mrs. Regan had been moved to the fifth grade. Yikes! When I came to class on the first day, Mrs. Regan asked me if I remembered saying anything to her as I left her fourth-grade classroom last spring. I said, "no," mainly because I didn't know what else to say. She smiled at me and said, "I don't remember either." What a gift of grace she gave to me that day.

She told my mother years later that she was determined to make a connection with me so she asked me if I would be her "Science Assistant," an assignment consisting of helping to set up and tear down science experiments and clean the blackboards after school. We talked about how much fun science was, and as I look back, it was at that time that learning became fun for me. Every time I teach research methods to graduate students I think of Mrs. Regan. And every time I remain gracious in the midst of meanness and ingratitude, I thank Mrs. Regan.

I think of Mrs. Matson, my high school literature teacher. She was a wonderful teacher—so full of passion for literature, for her students, and for life. She invited three of us, all athletes, to go sailing with her one Saturday, and we jumped at the chance. While sailing on Lake Michigan, she looked me square in the eye and told me that she thought I was smarter than I let on, and it wasn't a bad thing to like school as well as sports. In fact, she admired folk who were passionate about all aspects of their lives. "It could be," she said, "that you are just as gifted as a thinker as you are an athlete. Why hide your gifts? You try to be your best you can be on the basketball court; why not be your best in my classroom, too?" It was a watershed moment

for me. She let me know that it was cool to be good in school. She gave me courage to step beyond the social constraints and peer pressures to do my best in every class, to enjoy learning, and to show it. She didn't want me to let the opinions of my peers define my beliefs and behaviors. Every time I speak to athletes on campus, guess what I tell them.

I think of Dr. Bell, my college psychology professor. When I think of his classes, all I remember is love. He loved to teach, he loved psychology, he loved his wife, he loved his family, he loved the university, he loved having us over to his house, he loved to meet with us in his office, he loved it when we did well on our quizzes, and he loved us—even when we didn't do so well. And we loved him! I majored in psychology because of Dr. Bell. That kind of passion, authenticity, and acceptance are contagious. He taught his students much more than just psychology—how to be a good marriage partner, how to love your family, how to love learning, how to express your feelings, how to pray and how to love your neighbor. He modeled for me what it meant to be a Christian, and to this day, he remains a mentor—even though I haven't talked to him in more than thirty years.

And I think of Dr. Sharp, my favorite teacher and doctoral advisor. He was extremely demanding, and about half way through my first semester of doctoral work, he asked me to stop by his office for a chat. He was holding one of my papers, and he asked me if that paper represented my best work. Well, I told him, it was probably not my absolute best work, but it was pretty good—especially considering that I was working full time while going to school, I wasn't getting a lot of sleep, I was traveling quite a bit, and I was teaching a large young adult Sunday School class at my church. He looked at me, smiled, and said, "I don't want you to submit anything to me but your very best work—ever. You show respect to me when you do that and you show respect for yourself, too. One of the highest acts of worship is to make your desk an altar—and that requires intellectual excellence. You are not called to be a mediocre thinker or writer." Wow! From that day on, he received nothing but my best work, and the same was true for all my professors. Now as a university provost, I often have the privilege to speak to honor society inductees and scholarship recipients. I always tell them about Dr. Sharp, and the call to honor God with your mind.

From my teachers, I certainly learned the lessons of the day, but I learned so much more. I learned about grace, humility, honesty, hospitality, the call to excellence, and love. Beyond the lessons of the day, these were life lessons—matters of spirit and faith. In *Faithful Education*, you will read

about matters of spirit and faith, how teachers build bridges that students walk across. Two important tasks for students are to bridge culture and faith and to bridge faith and knowledge. Students need to think carefully about how they are shaped by their culture and how they practice their faith, and exactly what their faith has to say to the prevailing culture. If students are to understand how to live as a faithful presence in their culture, they will need role models and mentors. You will find good examples in this book.

And students need guidance and support if they are to think carefully about their faith and learning, and how to learn faithfully. Deep Christian faith and a rigorous pursuit of knowledge are not only compatible; they are inseparable. Students need teachers who will help them see and understand that Christian faith and knowledge are never at odds. Rather, like two sides of the same coin, they are supportive and complementary. They are equally necessary. Faith without knowledge is full of passion, but lacks substance and depth—difficult to sustain for a lifetime. Knowledge without faith is ultimately dangerous—lacking a reliable guidance system for the intellectual journey. I trust that the chapters of this book will provide readers with guidance and encouragement for the great task of teaching, shaping, and sending.

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