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Book Review

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Abstract

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Those who have read David Anderson's earlier works will recognize that he has devoted his career to developing what might be referred to as a "theology of disability" or a "hermeneutic of special education" (p. 225). His book, *Toward a Theology of Special Education: Integrating Faith and Practice*, is a comprehensive treatise on what it means to approach the work of a special educator through an explicitly Christian worldview lens.

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Reviewer: Cathy E. Freytag, Houghton College; President, The International Christian Community for Teacher Education (ICCTE)

Those who have read David Anderson's earlier works will recognize that he has devoted his career to developing what might be referred to as a "theology of disability" or a "hermeneutic of special education" (p. 225). His book, *Toward a Theology of Special Education: Integrating Faith and Practice*, is a comprehensive treatise on what it means to approach the work of a special educator through an explicitly Christian worldview lens.

Anderson's purpose in authoring this book is to, "motivate individuals to evaluate their own walk with Christ, their reasons for choosing special education as a profession, how they see Scriptural truth relating to teaching, and how they can be salt and light while teaching in public or private schools" (p. 234). He further encourages the reader to become increasingly aware of his/her own worldview, particularly as it relates to educating students with disabilities, and to critique that worldview from a biblical perspective.

Additionally, Anderson makes the following assertion about the responsibilities of the Christian teacher educator: "Our role in the formation of Christian teachers includes challenging them to reflect deeply on their core values, their curriculum area, and society in light of biblical truth" (p. xvi). Thus, this book holds relevance for pre-service and in-service special education teachers, as well as teacher educators. I would argue that *any* Christian educator seeking to teach redemptively would benefit from reading this book.

From the onset, Anderson encourages the reader to think about what it means to "be" a special educator, from a Christian perspective, and not merely to carry out the actions of a well-trained special education teacher. In this sense, Anderson's views are not unlike those of Parker Palmer (2007) who asserts that teaching is not primarily about routines but relationship (see also Nouwen, 2003). In the early sections of the book (Introduction and

Chapters 1-4), Anderson challenges the reader to view special education as a "legitimate Christian ministry focusing on reconciliation and healing" (p. xvii), and proposes that the biblical qualities of "humility, grace, forgiveness, reconciliation, human worth, etc." (p. xviii) are central to what it means to approach special education Christianly. In Anderson's words, "special education is practical theology" (p. xx, and Chapter 3). While many educators are committed to issues of social justice and actions that will ensure equity in the classroom and in society, Anderson maintains that, for the Christian special educator, this call to justice has biblical roots (e.g. Micah 6:8) that go far beyond mere altruism or activism (p. 17). For the Christian special educator, the call to be agents of grace, healing, and reconciliation for persons with disabilities should be driving factors that lovingly compel us to do rightly and to seek justice on behalf of marginalized persons (cf. Isaiah 61:1-4; Luke 4:18-20). Our call is to be agents of *shalom* (Wolterstorff, 2004).

Anderson describes special education not as a profession but as a ministry because "its goal is to help students who are affected by disability to flourish as human beings" (p. 10). To guide students with disabilities – or any student – toward meaningful human flourishing, Anderson maintains that it is essential for the special educator to recognize and affirm each student as being made in the image of Christ (Genesis 1:26-28, 31; 2:7; Psalm 139: 13-16). Harmonious with this perspective was Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s (1986) view that recognizing the "sacredness of human personality" is a vital precursor to developing "beloved communities" (Hillis & Woolworth, 2008; Smith & Zepp, 1998) in which all members are valued for who they are, regardless of ability or disability, thus paving the way for *shalom* in both school and community.

To foster this kind of inclusive learning community, Anderson encourages Christian special educators to critically examine what motivates their practices in the classroom. For example, when might a behavioristic approach to a challenging classroom management situation be appropriate or inappropriate? Anderson calls educators to examine *why* they engage in particular practices not merely from a pedagogical standpoint but from a biblical perspective. How will certain actions in a given situation serve to value or devalue the worth of the student? Such questions should undergird the Christian special educator's thoughts, actions and interactions in the classroom at all times, Anderson maintains.

In chapters 5-10, Anderson takes a focused look at special education through a range of biblical perspectives. Some of the recurrent themes that are examined closely in these chapters include: reconciliation, interdependence, biblical hospitality, biblical justice, and spiritual formation. Readers who are familiar with Anderson's earlier writings will recognize these chapters from previously published journal articles. In my own practice, I have found the specific treatment of these individual topics to be helpful in aiding pre-service teachers as they seek to develop a personal "theology" of inclusive education. For example, Anderson's treatment of inclusion as interdependence challenges educators to avoid "helper-helpee" patterns that merely reinforces the ghettoization of included students in the general classroom. Instead, inclusive educators should recognize that every student has something to offer and that we can all learn from each other; not only can typically-achieving students benefit from what peers with disabilities bring to the classroom, the teacher can also learn and grow from these interactions as well (Romans 12:3-8; I Corinthians 12:12-26).

In the concluding chapter on Special Education as Spiritual Formation (Ch. 10), Anderson challenges both teacher educators and teacher candidates to consider how they might view their work in special education as a spiritual journey. He begins the chapter with this question: "Does the spiritual life of special education teachers grow and deepen in the midst of their work?" (p. 205). My short answer to this question is: yes. I would argue that any Christian in any teaching or serving profession can

experience personal spiritual growth as a result of intentional, insightful, reflective interactions with students or clients each day, and much of what Anderson proposes in this chapter resonates with me on a deep personal/spiritual level. But...

Some teacher educators (including me) might be perplexed about how to discuss and encourage the development of a "theology" of inclusive education with the pre-service teachers in their Christian teacher education programs who do not yet profess a personal faith of their own. While Anderson likely acknowledges that there are many well-meaning, noble, and (dare I say) effective special educators who do not profess a personal Christian faith, this book assumes a Christian readership. Citing Mullholland (2000), who asserted that "human life is, by its very nature, spiritual formation", Anderson acknowledges that everyone engages in some sort of spiritual formation, although not all who engage in this process do so intentionally or for the purpose of deepening their personal walk with Christ. For the Christian educator, this book (and Chapter 10, in particular) is a thoughtful, insightful discourse on how we can approach our work with deliberate, intentional care as seen through the lens of Scripture; however, skeptics, or readers who do not claim the Christian faith, might take exception to the spiritual stance Anderson espouses in this book.

While there are a few criticisms I might offer about Anderson's book – some readers might consider certain themes to be redundant (particularly readers familiar with Anderson's earlier writing), and others might hope for more elaborate, practical suggestions for translating this "theology" into praxis in concrete and specific ways (cf. Freytag, 2008) – overall, this is a valuable text that can foster meaningful conversations about a theology of inclusive/special education among pre-service teachers, their professors, and the community of Christian teacher educators. Christian teacher educators would do well to read and reflect on how Anderson's propositions might inform their own faith-integration, and Christian teacher education programs would benefit from incorporating Anderson's text into their curricula, perhaps in capstone courses as Anderson, himself, has suggested.

Anderson has made a valuable contribution to the scholarly literature on the integration of Christian faith in the context of special/inclusive education

classrooms and in Christian teacher education programs. Just as Palmer (1993) encourages educators to view their calling as a spiritual journey, readers of Anderson's text will benefit from a close examination of the spiritual and biblical themes that drew us into and sustain us in this profession.

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