

## Teaching the Faith, Forming the Faithful

*Reviewed by Pastor Rob Guenther*

***Teaching the Faith, Forming the Faithful: A Biblical Vision for Education in the Church, by Gary A. Parrett and S. Steve Kang, Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009. 461 pages.***

*Dr. Gary Parrett is professor of educational ministries and worship and chair of the Division of Ministry of the Church at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. He is a co-author of A Many Colored Kingdom. Dr. S. Steve Kang is professor of educational ministries and director of Christian education at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. He has also taught at Wheaton College in Wheaton, IL. He is the author of Unveiling the Socioculturally Constructed Multivoiced Self, co-author of A Many Colored Kingdom, and is co-editor of Growing Healthy Asian American Churches.*

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Parrett and Kang divide their book into four parts, each asking a question about teaching in the Church: Why? What? Who? How?

Part one asks, "Why do we teach? What is our purpose?" And the answer given was thoroughly Christocentric. "A boy once made the request, 'Grandpa, tell me a story, and put me in it.' That's exactly what God has done. He's told the most beautiful story (a true story) and put us in it." We teach that we might better know God's work for us in Christ and be built up in the faith to better live for him in thanks. Though the authors sometimes used confusing terminology (switching back and forth between Gospel in the broad and narrow sense without warning, for example), they seemed to have a strong, biblical understanding of justification and sanctification. The end result is not just changed behavior, but changed hearts which will be evidenced by the changed lives that follow. It was refreshing to see this understanding from evangelical authors.

Part two asks, "What do we teach? What is the content?" The authors wrestled with questions like, "What must be included in the basics?" (We might ask, "What do I include in the BIC?") and "What are the primary doctrines? What will be supplementary?" or "What is the best approach? Traditional Sunday School (Bible Class)? Small-group studies? Weekend seminars?" But they did say that the heart of the content must be God's glorious gospel and its implications. In the glorious gospel, they highlighted the doctrine of justification in the Reformation *solus*. In the implications, they encouraged sanctification and lives full of gratitude serving God and each other.

In part three Parrett and Kang ask, "Who does the teaching?" and "Who do we teach?" They remind their readers that God places responsibility to teach the faith falls first to fathers and mothers, then to pastors and teachers, but ultimately to all Christians. That being said, they list qualifications they would seek in what we might call public ministers who teach on behalf of the congregation. They strongly suggest that we shouldn't just seek any warm body who is willing to be our Sunday School and small group teachers, but only those who are trained and equipped and who have the right attitudes. They spend a chapter evaluating secular theories of education and another encouraging that Christian education always takes place within community.

Finally, in part four, the authors ask, "How do we teach?" And the answer given: "Meet them where they are; help them go where they need to go." They suggest we start with a vision of the end, a view of mature Christians as God describes it, and ask how we can get to that end. Our goal is not just the transfer of information, but the changing of lives by the Gospel. They explain each phrase of their lengthy definition of good teaching:

"to come alongside another, in the power of the Spirit, and in the company of the faithful, to seek an encounter together with the Truth: taking aim, to perceive it more clearly, consider it more critically, embrace it more passionately, obey it more faithfully, and embody it with greater integrity."

In this last section they also offer suggestions on how best to teach children (who are not the *future* of the church, but *are* the church), how worship and education work together through Scripture-soaked liturgy, and offer a plan for leading people from "seeker" (with a great Biblical understanding that God is really the one seeking the lost, not vice versa) to mature member, from interest to baptism, to BIC, to growth in faith, to active ministry within a local congregation.

Overall, it was encouraging to hear that we in the Wisconsin Synod seem to be carrying out our mission to teach the Good News well as we maintain catechism classes, Bible information classes, adult Bible study and Sunday school; all practices the authors encourage. Though not exactly in so many words, the book did also offer a great reminder to keep our teaching Christocentric with a clear distinction between Law and Gospel. It is also a good reminder to distinguish between justification and sanctification, remembering that the latter will always flow from the former.

*[Editor's Note: With this review, the reader will also find a link to a running commentary and book summary that Pr. Guenther wrote while reviewing this book. Due to the nature of the running commentary, it is not a polished review, but the thoughts and notes of a brother in ministry who thoughtfully engaged the material. We felt that this running commentary would be beneficial for the reader who would like to dig deeper into this particular resource, hence it's inclusion with this review.]*