

**Book Review** by John Littleton

**Mark Chater, *Jesus Christ, Learning Teacher: Where Theology and Pedagogy Meet* (London: SCM Press, 2020). Pages: 201. Cost: \$40.46.**

*Jesus Christ, Learning Teacher* is the book the Christian Church had to have in the first quarter of the twenty-first century.

Mark Chater conducts a conversation between the critical historical inquiry approach of contemporary biblical studies and the planning mind and educational practice of contemporary teachers, to discern the learning and teaching mind of Jesus. The “vision of the learning Christ” (183) is at the heart of this adventurous and brave book; well-crafted and challenging. The author is a scholar and a practising teacher who has “an eye for Jesus’ teaching mind” (103) as disclosed in the four canonical Gospels.

The first part of the book is introductory and explores the relationship between education and theology, particularly the relationship between Christology and pedagogy. Without the development of contemporary biblical studies and the modern educational theory and practice of pedagogy and andragogy this discourse between the theologian and the educator could not have been written. The disciplines of “theology about the person and work of Christ, called Christology, and the theory about teaching and learning” (20), referred to as pedagogy, are in respectful dialogue. When applied to Jesus the term pedagogy includes “both his acts of teaching and the ways in which he thought about his teaching” (21).

The author poses questions. “Good teachers are also learning; in what sense can we see Jesus as a learning teacher? Can the Son of God be a learner?” (xix) The two natures of Jesus, expressed in Christology as fully human and fully divine, come into the conversation. Fully divine might suggest that the divine man knew everything, full of divine knowledge from an early age; an authoritative and all-knowing teacher, rather than a learning teacher like other human teachers.

In this work a learning teacher’s lens re-examines the Gospel texts and the figure of Jesus as teacher to reveal the fully human Christ, to propose a process for “the educationalization of theology” and to introduce the discipline of “pedagogical theology” (186-192). As the author notes “Jesus the teacher is an example to all teachers. This is not because of some inevitable and mechanistic law arising from the fact that he is Lord, but because of his pedagogical characteristics, aspects of his incarnate status as a human being” (191).

Chater is clear about the questions pedagogy asks. “How are we breaking down the knowledge? What do we expect learners to do?” (32). A teacher plans, explains, questions, scans the faces of the learners, checks understanding, sequences the steps of understanding, develops curriculum, identifies the barriers to learning, works collegially and modifies practice as is necessary in differing circumstances and after noticing learners’ positive or negative reactions (12, 28). The author comments that the way to bring the learning teacher Jesus to light “is to use our imagination to enter the internal logic of some Gospel encounters, placing them alongside our own professional experiences” (141).

The reader glimpses a piece of evidence about Jesus’ learning, teaching and planning mind in the short chapter ten where the author examines and reflects on a critical incident reported in the Gospels, Mark 4:30 and Luke 13:18. In a moment of methodological introspection Jesus

considered his own teaching method and how to improve the clarity of his message. As a passionate teacher of the Kingdom of God Jesus asked, “How shall we picture the kingdom of God, or by what parable shall we present it?” (110). Christologically, although he is Lord, here is evidence that Jesus, the fully human one, like other teachers, pondered on how best to communicate his content.

Part Two, named “Learning teacher” includes seven short chapters. In each chapter the author capably explores biblical narratives which shed light on Jesus the teacher: his conversation with Thomas; his encounter with two disciples on the way to Emmaus; his appearance in the garden to Mary Magdalene; encounters in significant learning environments (Temple, Synagogue, outdoor venues – by a fig tree, in a vineyard, the sowing of seeds in a field). In chapter eleven “We approach John as the teacher speaking in old age about his own teacher” (121). Chater explores St John’s memory of Jesus, his teacher; how Jesus made sense to the disciples as they made progress in their understanding of him.

Part Three develops three key themes using “a Christian pedagogical imagination”: an educational Christ, a sacramental understanding of teaching, and a consideration of the Trinity as a mutual learning community – dynamic, discursive and loving. Chater writes “If Jesus is a learning teacher, and if his humanity is that of a lifelong learner” (168) there are implications for Christian belief and for understanding the church as a teaching and learning community.

The Postscript, proposals and concluding sections draw attention to the discipline of pedagogical theology, “the theory and practice of fearless learning for Christian growth” (186-188). This discipline changes the way we do theology by educationalizing theology and releasing the Christian pedagogical imagination. After outlining a “new pedagogical portrait of Jesus,” Chater presents proposals on pastoral practice for “a church where learning matters” (188-190). These proposals are based on critical theology and a love of learning with “the learning Christ who accompanies us” on the journey (190). So many exciting possibilities for ministry practice are available in this easy-to-read book; a treasure trove of wisdom.

The book is dedicated “to the memory of Professor John Hull 1935-2015, wise teacher, generous mentor, compassionate friend”. Inspired by the work of his mentor John Hull,<sup>1</sup> Mark Chater, in this seminal work, makes a major contribution to the considerable literature on Jesus as Teacher. *Jesus Christ, Learning Teacher: Where Theology and Pedagogy Meet* is a publication, worthy of being made available through Parish, Public, School, Theological and University Libraries for serious readers on the topic.

Chater has made a strong case to support his contention that those involved in education and theology need to work together in the discourse on Christology and Jesus Christ, learning teacher (20-30). He wrote in chapter three “that the demarcation of expertise between theologians and educators needs to move. It needs to become a dance of equal partners” (21). The Christian Church will be hearing more from pedagogical theologians.

John Littleton, October 2021

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<sup>1</sup> John M. Hull. *What Prevents Christian Adults from Learning?* (London: SCM Press, 1985); John M. Hull. *Towards the Prophetic Church: A Study of Christian Mission* (London: SCM Press, 2014). Dr John Hull was an Australian who lived and worked as an educator and theologian in UK for most of his life.

