

QUALITY THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION FROM A WESLEYAN PERSPECTIVE

David B. McEwan
(Dean, Nazarene Theological College, Australia)

Introduction

At the outset I would like to emphasize that this paper is a personal reflection on the topic rather than an academic research paper, and its primary goal is to provoke discussion rather than to provide answers. Partly this is a result of limited preparation time to do justice to the topic, but more importantly, I value the input of this forum to aid me in my own journey as an educator helping to prepare men and women for the work of the ministry within the Church of the Nazarene. I began my ministry as a pastor in 1975 and only moved to my present position as Academic Dean of NTC-Brisbane, in December 1997. My own experiences as a pastor and reflection over the past thirty years as a Christian are what give shape to my current role in ministerial education. The opportunity to present this paper has given me a chance to organize and share some of my growing convictions regarding the nature of quality theological education from a Wesleyan perspective.

The last few years have seen the beginnings of a tremendous change in the whole secular education process, and we in the church are not exempt from its impact. The rapid growth of the electronic media is altering the whole way we conceive of life and human relationships on our planet, and the education field is both shaping and being shaped by these developments. The Church, as ever, is faced with the decision to join the process wholeheartedly, with reservations,

or to hold out against it. The danger, as ever, is that we will decide on purely pragmatic reasons rather than on theological ones, with the pragmatism being driven by the latest “findings” from science, technology, biology, sociology and the behavioral sciences. Education, like the Christian ministry itself, is not exempted from the winds of change; neither of them exists in some pure, disinterested, ideal form that allows for value-free judgments to be made about the best way to accomplish their goals in the current environment.

For this reason our education must be driven by explicit theological commitments from within our own Wesleyan tradition, rather than being driven by the secular philosophies undergirding the latest educational practices. It is vital that we make our theology the primary lens through which we develop our educational programs, while still being open to the best practices developed in the secular field. This applies to such areas as our curriculum development and teaching methods, as well as the selection and training of both administration and faculty. We need to be clear about our own theological tradition and how that impacts the whole process of education, informing our understanding of the role of residential and extension programs, as well as the role of the local, district and general church. It appears that much modern ministerial education is not driven in its conception and operation primarily by our theological understanding. Our focus is often narrowly defined as producing competent practitioners as quickly as possible to meet the demand generated by the growth of the church. If we do not take the time to reflect theologically on this, we are in danger of assuming too much and analyzing too little. Are we clear what we mean by “competent”? Is it simply the ability to perform certain tasks for which the students were trained in a relatively stable situation? In defining a “practitioner,” are we focusing on doing over being, action over reflection, and techniques over relationship skills? In analyzing “demand,” do we understand this as the agenda set by our church, by the society or by the Lord of the Church?

There are a number of dangers inherent in much of the modern ministerial education process, especially as we are under pressure to prepare ministers very quickly to meet the demand created by the numerical growth of the church. A major danger is that of viewing education primarily as the communication of data necessary to meet ordination requirements. In theory, the church has addressed this issue (in our denominational *Sourcebook on Developmental Standards for Ordination*) and sought to avoid it by requiring preparation that covers not merely content, but also competency, character, and context. In practice, with the pressure to train ministers quickly and with a minimal campus-based residential component, it is much easier to teach and examine content, competency, and context than it is character. This is further exacerbated by tying together maximum input with minimum time (education only by extension and in an intensive mode). Education is then little more than providing the fledgling minister with a “toolkit” of methods and techniques that enables him or her to be deployed in the minimum period of time and with minimal disruption to congregational life.

An associated danger is believing that we have accomplished our task when the student can memorize and repeat the theological material given to satisfy the ordination process, rather than being able to think theologically in every area of life and ministry. Theology then becomes one subject among many, and it is not a very “practical” one at that; so we minimize the number of hours devoted to it and maximize the number of hours in the “ministry” field, which is far more practical and immediately useful. The “perceived benefits” of teaching the syllabus in discrete units taught in discrete time frames (intensives) in isolation to other units and time frames may override the “actual losses” of increased fragmentation and a lack of integration. The accompanying danger of increased specialization then tends to make matters worse, so that we even teach “spiritual formation” as a specialized unit divorced from the total preparation of the minister.

There is a danger of seeing formal ministerial education as tangential to the “real duties” of the minister. It is merely preparation for ordination, and once we have got that out of the way we can get on with “real ministry” (for which college never prepared us anyway!). In the process, it is easy to forget that it is perfectly possible to educate without ever inculcating loyalty to our tradition and its ethos. I would question whether this tradition can ever be effectively “taught”; rather, it is something that is “caught” by immersion in a faithful community that is aware of and exemplifies the 2000 years of its heritage. The Wesleyan tradition is surely as much an ethos as it is a formal theological system. Central to its self-understanding is the concern for holy living, both personally and corporately, influencing not merely the local church but the society in which it finds itself, and ultimately the whole of human life in all its dimensions. A minimalist approach to education requirements for ordination that is satisfied with a minimal exposure to an authentic Wesleyan community is surely shortsighted and counter-productive in the long run.

Key Theological Elements of the Wesleyan Tradition and Their Importance for Education

I would now like to propose several key theological understandings that I believe lie at the core of the Wesleyan tradition. They ought to shape our educational ministry and they should be at the center of our evaluations of educational process and methods suggested to us by secular society. A recent seminar by Dr. Al Truesdale given at our college has enriched my own reflections on this subject, and much of this material has been influenced by his input.

An Explicit Trinitarian Theology

Our theology is explicitly Trinitarian, though giving particular attention to the Person and Work of the Lord Jesus Christ. The doctrine of the Trinity is a needed corrective to much of Western

theology that has tended to overemphasize the “oneness” of God, leading to a popular understanding of God as an “individual” rather than as “persons-in-relationship.” This has obvious implications for our understanding of what it means to be created in the image of God; for much of Western thought has focused on the autonomous, thinking “self” as central to our understanding of the “person.” This has led to an unhealthy individualism at the expense of persons-in-relationship. We also need to be reminded that Christ is the Living Lord, who is always at work through the Spirit in the life of the Church and in the lives of the whole human race. Thus, there can never be a point of closure to the education process, for we must continuously respond to the fresh initiatives of Christ in His Church.

An Active God

We believe that God is always actively at work in our world, and in the lives of all persons. Our doctrine of prevenient grace assures us that the educational process is never simply a mental exercise that we have to accomplish merely by our own skills and abilities as teachers. Through the Holy Spirit, the Triune God is at work in, with, and under the whole education enterprise. This gives us confidence that God’s purposes will be fulfilled as we are obedient to him. We can afford to allow time to pass in the process, for God’s purposes are never achieved by only a short-term exposure to His Truth. We are committed to the Church Universal as a result of our theological convictions, and so our education is not characterized by a narrow sectarianism or provincialism.

A Life-long Journey for Students

Our attitude towards students is then one of inviting them to participate with us in a life-long journey of discovery, rather than seeking to force the pace to achieve an outcome measured

simply by the gaining of an academic award or meeting ordination requirements. The process of transformation is never at an end this side of glory. We have an optimism of grace, but a pessimism of nature; thus, we deal realistically with the impact of personal and structural sin on the transformation process in the lives of students and their community.

Sanctification as Transformation

Sanctification is not merely an internal spiritual reality, but a profound transformation of the whole person, impacting every relationship and the concrete realities of a physical existence on earth. The goal of the process is the recovery of the full purposes of God for his creation in all its dimensions.

People in Relationship

Persons are not simply “individuals” but also “beings-in-relationship.” Education must then be more than a private transaction between an individual and a teacher; it must also encompass a learning community, where we learn from and are shaped by that community. This helps to foster an holistic approach to education and not a piecemeal approach. The “community” is not to be thought of in narrow terms as simply a college campus-based group, for it involves the local church and the surrounding society, as well as any intentional group gathered for the purposes of education. Profound transformation can only occur as we meet with God in the lives of others, never as a private encounter with God alone.

Inclusive of All

As Wesleyans, we have an absolute commitment to the ministry of every person, and therefore, to the preparation of every person to the maximum of their potential in Christ. Education for ministry must be available for all at an appropriate level for all, and with the opportunity for all to progress from one level to another. We take seriously the implications of life in the Body of Christ, with the associated gifts and graces for service. Everyone in Christ has the graced capacity to be a faithful servant, and it is our responsibility to prepare every Christian for this calling.

A Distinctive Theological Method

We have a distinctive theological method, based on the primacy of Scripture, informed by reason, tradition and experience. This needs to be comprehensively understood at all levels of education, so that the student's own theologizing is in harmony with our tradition. Christian character and ministry are shaped through an integrated process of obtaining new information and reflection upon that in the context of mutual accountability.

A Recognized Call of God

We appreciate that the call of God to ministry involves both the person who receives the call and the church which examines the call. A crucial part of this examination process is the education experience of the student, involving the curriculum itself, the faculty, fellow-students and the local church community. A major role is played by the worshipping community to which students belong during their period of testing the call.

Pastors as Theologians

We are committed to the model of the pastor being the key theologian in the denomination. In Wesleyan thought, academic theology must always be practical theology, done by, in and for the community of God as it lives out its life in the world. In a very real sense, we do not have “specialist theologians,” but rather faithful Christians who have a special role in helping the whole Body of Christ to think and act in a thoroughly Christian way. In much of the modern debate over the roles and functions of pastors, their key importance as practical theologians is either ignored or dismissed to the margins. This is a major violation of our Wesleyan tradition.

Some Implications of our Theological Tradition for Educational Practice

The list of points given above is by no means exhaustive, but they give us a set of reference points from which we ought to take our bearings in seeking to define quality education. Therefore, quality theological education from a Wesleyan perspective must be:

Focused on Transformation and not merely Information

The apostle Paul reminds us that the goal of ministry (and of ministerial education therefore) is to “present everyone perfect in Christ” (Col 1:28). Conceptually, this speaks to us of the primacy of character and that the goal of our education process is the transformation of the person into the image of Christ, not merely to acquire knowledge via effective data transmission. We are persons and not merely “biological computers” needing to be programmed with the maximum amount of data in the minimum amount of time.

Focused on Character and not merely the Intellect

While we do not deny the importance of intellectual preparation, it is not to be the primary goal. To have a great intellect and a selfish character is a lesser position than to have a poorly developed intellect and a Christlike character. Human potential is to be seen in terms of our capacity for loving and holy service, rather than in our ability to perform outstanding intellectual feats. The early church saw a difference between *scientia* (the knowledge of temporal things) and *sapientia* (wisdom acquired in relationship to eternal things); the goal of Christian education was to be focused on the latter rather than the former.

Changing the Worldview and not merely the Beliefs and Behaviors

Simply defined, our worldview is how we understand the ultimate nature of reality and the framework we use for interpreting the meaning, purpose and values of life as a whole. We are not usually conscious of it until a confrontation arises from a significant dialogue or experience. All human learning seems to take place within the tension between what is pre-understood and what is presented for integration into, or transformation of, our existing worldview. This worldview has been formed in us socially long before we began a conscious evaluation of it. When our deepest convictions are confronted and called into question, we then have to decide whether we retain, revise or reject the conviction at issue. As Wesleyans, we consciously seek to guide this process of reflection by Scripture as it is informed by reason, tradition and experience. The Fathers of the Early Church were convinced that a thoroughly Christian worldview does not occur at the moment of conversion, but must be intentionally developed within the Christian community. It is only too possible for a person to change their beliefs and behaviors, without changing their worldview. Thus, they conform outwardly (for example, articulating our doctrines and keeping our general and special rules), while inwardly evaluating life from a pagan perspective. An education process that does not address human life at this deepest of levels is an inadequate one.

Holistic and not Fragmented

Our goal is the transformation of whole persons in all of their relationships and not merely various aspects of their person (spirit, mind) in some of their relationships (family, church). At our best, we have never settled for a purely intellectual and spiritual transformation of the people who neglected their emotional, physical and social life in the widest possible context. Wesleyans are incurable optimists regarding the sufficiency of the grace of God to effect real transformation in every dimension of creaturely existence.

Process-Oriented and not Crisis-Oriented

While we gladly confess that God can and does work instantaneous change in human beings; nevertheless, transformational depth and extension comes as a result of process and not merely crisis. The goal of theological education is not reached in a one-week seminar, a four-week intensive, a three-year Bachelor's degree, ordination or even a Ph.D. It is life-long learning, even though that will have stages of intense activity and stages of application and reflection.

“Nurtured” and not “Forced”

With modern technology, we have been able to “force” plant and animal development to enable us to have access to food products after a much shorter period of growth than previous generations of farmers were ever able to imagine. Being successful in applying technology in this area has made us equally confident that we can apply the same ideology to education. However, human beings and their relationships are much more complex than much of the modern scientific enterprise is willing to acknowledge. Life transformation is never the product

of haste and pressure in an artificial, constructed environment. The process of education bears more relationship to natural biological growth than it does to production line methods, to the wisdom of the pre-modern farmer than the science of the engineer. We must deal honestly with the dangerous attraction of “short-cuts,” quick fixes, and speeded-up processes to solve immediate problems at the expense of their long-term implications and consequences.

An Ethos to be Immersed in and not merely a Course of Study to Pass

In the process of education, some things are “caught” and not “taught.” Here we encounter the “mystery” of human learning that is not reducible to a system to be followed, with outcomes guaranteed if the process is followed accurately. There are real limitations in any formal learning system; profound personal and social change through human interaction is often beyond our ability as educators to explain, document, and then replicate. Some of the most profound changes occur in the casual encounters that are part of any community life. This is where we see the importance of “immersion” in a learning community that has itself captured the ethos of our tradition, so that students may be “infected” by it in many subtle and unconscious ways. This is not to deny the validity of short-term learning communities (through intensives, retreats, and workshops for example), but they ought not to be a total substitute for a more extended immersion period and for some form of repeated immersion. If we fail to do this, especially in areas of rapid numerical growth in the church, we are in danger of developing an independence that is ignorant of the richness and subtlety of our theological tradition and may result in its eventual loss.

Elements in Quality Theological Education from a Wesleyan Perspective

Having briefly considered the key theological elements of the Wesleyan tradition and some of the implications for education, we now turn to trying to define some of the elements involved in quality education from a Wesleyan perspective.

Quality Theological Education Involves a Living Model

Theological education in a Wesleyan mode can never be purely abstract or ideational, based only on the reading of texts, watching of video images or interacting with cyberspace. Just as Christianity is a life to be lived, so education is a process to be modeled, and this requires living teachers who in their own lives not only point to Christ and ministry but also model Christ and ministry. We take the incarnational principle with utmost seriousness and we substitute artificial electronic encounters for this at our peril.

Quality Theological Education Involves a Mentor

The role of the teacher is not simply to speak the words or point to the resources that instruct, but also to share the educational journey with the student. We take seriously the role of personal relationship in forming and shaping persons in Christlikeness. This means that we are as concerned for the being of our student as we are for the doing of our student in ministry. We also take seriously the “one another” passages of Scripture, as well as Wesley’s instruction to “watch over one another in love” in the General Rules of 1743.

Quality Theological Education Involves a Relational Method

We do not deny the importance of educational resources in books, videos, electronic databases, etc., but all of these on their own are fundamentally inadequate to produce transformation

understood from a theological standpoint. The modern conception of the person as an autonomous individual thinker was never a biblical model and is certainly under increasing suspicion in a postmodern environment. I believe that Trinitarian theology informs us that we are essentially “beings-in-community”; thus, relationship lies at the core of what it means to be human—both relationship with God and with my neighbor. If this is true, then human potential from a Christian perspective can never be reached by the isolated “self” being addressed by books and images, whether delivered conventionally or by cyberspace. Being human involves a “face-to-face” relationship, where physicality is an essential dimension. The biblical witness emphasizes the physicality of the Incarnation, for Jesus Christ did not come to us as an idea, a book, or an image (electronic or otherwise), but as a “flesh and blood” human being. An encounter with Jesus of Nazareth involved not merely hearing or seeing him, but also touching and smelling him! Theologically, can an electronic or cyberspace community ever replace a physical one? The fact that we have had to invent “emoticons” to express emotions in electronic communication simply underscores the limitations of such communities. It is very important that we do not confuse means and ends in the education process; computers, videos, Internet, e-mail, telephone/ videoconferencing, and even books are all means and not ends in themselves. Thus they can supplement and enrich the face-to-face physical encounter, but they cannot replace it.

Quality Theological Education Involves the Means of Grace

Personal and community transformation will not occur by purely spiritual or intellectual means. The final goal of transformation and the reality of human sinfulness requires the conscious adoption of the Wesleyan means of grace. Wesley saw these as essential to the whole process and believed the neglect of them was always detrimental. Holiness is a life in relationship that needs personal response, nurturing and care. It does not occur by the action of God on His own, nor is it simply a spontaneous occurrence in the life of the Christian. Christian formation can

only truly occur within a specific liturgical, communal and devotional context. In these settings, the means of grace are outward signs, words or actions ordained of God to be the ordinary channels through which He might convey to us grace for Christian living at every stage of life. They enable us to know both the presence of God (who empowers the means) and the nature of God (His character that provides the pattern for our lives). In this way we are encouraged and helped on our journey towards Christlikeness within the community of faith, which both forms and shapes us through such means as: Christian discipline and mutual accountability, prayer and fasting, watching, self-denial, taking up one's cross, love feasts, covenant services, the Eucharist, searching the Scriptures, tradition, prayers, and hymns. Students must not be told about these as academic curiosities, but must be immersed in them, so that they in turn can replicate the means in the communities of faith they will serve.

Quality Theological Education Involves Maturation

Quality theological education requires time, for we learn best when ideas have an opportunity to incubate and come to maturity in the person's life. Holistic education needs the student to be exposed to a wide variety of situations and relationships over the whole of life. There needs to be an unending cycle of information, action and reflection as the minister continues to serve the church. Life-long learning is, therefore, not an option but a vital necessity, with appropriate expectations for the stages of the journey and the degree of faith present.

Quality Theological Education Involves a Practical Dimension

The Wesleyan tradition has always believed that life is to be lived in the here and now, and that ministers are to be involved in actual service to the Lord in the place, time and situation of God's appointment. Theoretical knowledge is never sufficient, for students must always be enabled to

apply what is being learned in the classroom to the actual ministry situation they face. Competencies are to be demonstrated in real-life settings, not simply in classroom ones. This is why it is essential that we have an intentional program of induction into the realities of ministry through some form of supervised ministry experience as a requirement prior to ordination. This must then become a life-long process, for every “Paul” has his “Timothy,” who is in turn a “Paul” to another following on behind.

Conclusion

I believe that God raised up the Church of the Nazarene (as He raised up Methodism earlier) to serve the world in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ by bearing witness to holiness of heart and life, with all that this implies for every dimension of human existence. While we are gladly a part of the Church Universal, we also have our particular gifts and graces to exercise within this Church. If we fail to do so, then the Lord will raise up another to take our place. Therefore, in spite of all the trends away from denominational loyalty towards congregational independence and a sort of generic evangelical Christianity, we dare not abdicate our particular responsibilities. That means that we must actively foster our Wesleyan theological tradition and ethos, ensuring that it is passed on to new Nazarenes and to the next generation of Nazarenes. The role of quality theological education from a Wesleyan perspective in this process can hardly be understated!

All of the factors mentioned earlier in the paper must be borne in mind as we design the curriculum, select the teachers, and choose the delivery methods. In it all, we must not dissolve the individual-community tension in life-long learning and ministry. The educational process must involve: the residential colleges, extension centers, the local, district and general church, the local communities, as well as the individual teachers, pastors, and students in a permanent learning contract for the whole of life. The key is a system of life-long learning guided by a

distinctively Wesleyan theological perspective that is educationally dynamic, flexible, and responsive to “the present age,” while maintaining an unshakable commitment to our own church tradition and ethos.