

CASTLES OF SAND OR HEAVEN ON EARTH: DISCIPLESHIP FOR THE 21ST CENTURY
Dean G. Blevins, NTS Induction Address November, 2005

Introduction

Dr. Benefiel, trustees, faculty and staff of Nazarene Theological Seminary, honored guests and friends. First of all, let me say it is an honor to return to NTS. This community provided a formative part of my call to ministry and to my life as a husband and father. My wife JoAnn and I met here as students, and my love for teaching was established as a ministry for my life. I also began to see the historical depth and global reach of the Church of the Nazarene while at seminary. NTS nourished my interest in both Christian Education and Wesleyan theology. At the same time, I began to see a broader, more diverse, church through my interactions with students and leadership from around the globe. Nazarene Theological Seminary served as a catalyst in my transformation from television news photographer to minister. The institution served as a means of grace during this important juncture of my life. To return here remains an honor, a privilege, and a responsibility.

Part of today's agenda is to provide you some idea of what I think should be important for Christian Education in the church. But before I begin this task I am struck that this event occurs during All Saints Day, a day where we are called to remember those historic figures in the church who engaged in faithful discipleship throughout the centuries. The day also reminds me of those who have quietly given of themselves to see me to this moment. Some are still living: family and friends, who have invested in my life; others have gone on to join the saints of the past in their procession with Jesus. I suspect this is true for most of us here today, so it is fitting we pause a moment to pray silently and remember those in our past who have brought us to this moment together.

Amen

The Task of Christian Education

Since 1967 Nazarene Theological Seminary has provided a degree program dedicated to Christian Education, to faithful discipleship. The task of discipleship has existed since Hebrew communities were gathered around their one true God, *Yahew*, fishermen were called followed Jesus, or apostles called persons to live out the presence of the Holy Spirit in the early church. Christian Education as a discipline, however, remains young by modern standards. Just two years ago the Religious Education Association celebrated its 100th year anniversary, commemorating a century of efforts began by Bible scholars, educators and social scientists to formalize a professional discipline dedicated to religious education. That title, religious education, once framed this degree. Later the more particular phrase "Christian" education was adopted. Here at NTS several "saints" have anchored the efforts of Christian education as a particular discipline. These men, with names like Harper, Tracy, Freeborn, Galloway, Robinson and Whitlock, sought to provide a comprehensive yet complementary educational ministry for the church. Many of them instilled this passion in my own life and I am proud to call them mentors, colleagues and friends. In former Christian Ed inaugural addresses several key tasks have emerged: the need to provide both theological framing and social science perspective to the task of discipleship, the need to attend to and respond creatively to personal challenges along the span of people's lives, the need to respect the task of Christian Education as a specific ministry in dialog with theological reflection, and the need to see Christian education within the holistic totality of the

Church in ministry. As I have read these previous messages I see their wisdom, and yet must ask what I can bring at this moment in history.

Today I offer a message anchored in the music you have heard in *Love's Divine All Love's Excelling* summarizing Wesley's vision of heaven come down and in the music you will hear later in the song *One Bread One Body*, which describes the global gathering of the church in the imagery of communion. Their aesthetic and imaginative visions frame this presentation. I believe John and Charles Wesley were guided by a vision of holiness of heart and life that suggested we could live on this earth as if heaven had come down to our midst, that Jesus' prayer "thy kingdom come, they will be done, on earth as it is in Heaven" was not an empty prayer (Blevins Fall 2005). I also believe Jesus' prayer remains a global prayer, one anchored in the belief that each church remains a representative of a global in-breaking of the kingdom of God (Blevins Fall 2004). It is true that each local congregation remains important as a symbol or what Wesley called an "emblem" of the church universal (Wesley 1975-2003 v. 3, p. 343); however, I believe we need to keep our vision on the global horizon to remind us that our provincial mindsets need a larger understanding of God's kingdom. This vision is particularly important less we lose sight of the potential transforming presence of Christ via the grace of the Father through the power of the Holy Spirit, for each person, each community, and each land.

To be frank, however, not all visions of Christian education are this optimistic, either in Wesley's day or our own. John Wesley and others of his day had a term for lack of faithful discipleship. They called such efforts "ropes of sand." The most famous use of this term we often hear attributed to George Whitefield is his observation of the discipleship of Wesley. Whitefield writes to Charles Wesley,

My brother Wesley acted wisely," he [Whitefield] observed with a mixture of sadness and envy. "The souls that were awakened under his ministry he joined in class and thus preserved the fruits of his labors. This I neglected and my people are a rope of sand. (Ayling 1979, p. 201)

John Wesley himself often used the same term to describe incomplete attempts. "Ropes of sand" referenced ministry efforts that resulted in nominal if not negligible Christianity (Wesley 1872/1986, v. 8, p 251; v. 13, p. 242)

Perhaps the term for our day might be "castles of sand." We have improved on the rope, at least insuring relative stability through programs and institutional structures. Often, however, these efforts have been sandcastles at best when it came to their effectiveness and faithfulness for the sake of discipleship. Some have been "blown away" by hurricane forces of catastrophe and pain. At other times the failure was not so dramatic, yet the castles gradually washed away under prevailing tides. Will that be said of our efforts? Will the generational efforts designed to compartmentalize children, youth and adults serve only as three upturned buckets of sand? We need to remain faithful so that we are celebrating Heaven on earth rather than build sandcastles. What tides of change will mark the 21st century and how will the curriculum of Christian Education make a difference here at NTS?

Before answering the issue of tides and curriculum, perhaps we should establish a methodology that will inform both. If we are to attend to John Wesley's vision perhaps it would be wise to also explore his methods of discipleship to provide a response to the challenges of this day. Wesley, and the tradition he both followed and embodied in the means of grace, provides a view of discipleship adept in helping us today.

The Means of Grace

The means of grace were Christian practices which Wesley identified as “outward signs, words, or actions, ordained of God, and appointed for this end—to be the *ordinary* channels whereby he conveys to men, preventing, justifying or sanctifying grace.” (Wesley 1975-2003, v.1: p. 381)

Wesley began to use the term early in his ministry during a controversy with Moravians. The phrase remained persistent in his writing and instructions to ministers to utilize various practices for Godly living (Blevins 1999, 2002). John provides one list of these practices in his 1765 Sermon “The Scripture Way of Salvation.” Wesley (1975/2003) writes the means of grace include,

First, all works of piety, such as public prayer, family prayer, and praying in our closet; receiving the Supper of the Lord; searching the Scriptures by hearing, reading, meditating; and using such a measure of fasting or abstinence as our bodily health allows.

Secondly, all works of mercy, whether they relate to the bodies or souls of men; such as feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, entertaining the stranger, visiting those that are in prison, or sick, or variously afflicted; such as the endeavoring to instruct the ignorant, to waken the stupid sinner, to quicken the lukewarm, to confirm the wavering, to comfort the feeble-minded, to succour the tempted, or contribute in any manner to the saving of souls from death. (v.2: p. 166)

The “Larger” Minutes of 1778 also show how Wesley incorporated the means of grace as a part of the regular examination of all lay ministers. (Wesley 1872/1986, v. 13, pp 299, 322-24). In this document, Wesley revealed a description of the means of grace that differs from the language of acts of mercy and piety. Wesley now used the categories of instituted and prudential means of grace. The instituted means (very similar to Wesley’s understanding of acts of piety) include Prayer (private, family and public), searching the Scriptures (by reading, meditating and hearing), the Lord’s Supper, Fasting and Christian Conference (v. 13: pp. 322-23). The prudential means, however, included contextual practices including particular rules, acts of holy living, acts of ministry and larger attitudes toward daily living listed under the headings of watching, denying ourselves, taking up our cross, and exercising the presence of God (v. 13: pp. 323-24).

Wesley remained certain about the effects that accompany the faithful practice of any means of grace. John wrote, “Never can you use these means but a blessing will ensue. And the more you use them, the more will you grow in grace” (Wesley 1872/1986, v. 13: p. 324). It is clear that Wesley valued and endorsed various Christian practices under the title, means of grace. However, for our gathering today, the means of grace provide a framework for exploring and organizing contemporary Christian education into a comprehensive approach for the 21st Century.

Three Educational Approaches

Wesley’s employ of the means of grace and his desire for a transformative holiness of heart and life, introduce the complementary discipleship approaches best described as “formation,” “discernment” and “transformation” summarize an authentic wesleyan Christian education for the 21st century. Wesley’s organization of the instituted and prudential means of grace, along with the acts of mercy, corresponds with these educational theories.

Formation as Christian Education

Wesley's understanding of the instituted means of grace suggests an approach to Christian Education best described as formation, where grace is mediated by intentional gathering of persons into a Christian culture through a series of established Christian practices. The instituted means of grace form a series of interdependent practices that, if practiced faithfully, Wesley assumed would result in experienced grace. Persons are formed and transformed as they participate in the total life of the faith community. By faithful (i.e. intentional) participation, persons are shaped into Christian character and transformed by their new identity.

Scholars note that formative practices occurred throughout the history of Christian communities, anchored within a given Christian narrative and influenced by the culture of practicing Christians (Engen 2004, 20-22). These practices intentionally invite persons into the Christian world often through various aspects of communal life including specific rites and rituals, language, architecture, time, as well as community living expectations such as polity, support, discipline and social interaction (Nelson 1967; Westerhoff 1987, 1992).

The instituted means of grace, as an approach to formation, suggest a repertoire of Christian mediating practices that collectively shape a Christian's understanding of God. The practices provide a way of responding to God's active presence by rehearsing a way of life that is Christian. The practices also provide an opportunity to connect faith with daily life (Bass and Dykstra 1997, pp. xiii, 6-11). Wesley himself encouraged an ongoing observance of the ordinances. The repetitive use of these practices could shape Christian character and provided continual transformation into holiness of heart and life. More importantly, Wesley's creation of various Christian communities provided an alternative form of living in an otherwise difficult world (Blevins Fall 2003/Spring 2004).

Wesley understood that the instituted means were part of the broader activity of the church. It is fair to assert that Wesley believed in the formative power of Christian community as a part of Christian Education. Ministers in the Wesleyan tradition would be wise to address their congregational context in developing their approach to Christian education. In our day Christians must live into a community that provides both home and heritage, formed through the various practices within the means of grace. All practices within the church, traditional or new, should be examined for their formative potential. This critical and creative exploration of church practices suggests an educational approach that compliments formative Christian education. This second form of discipleship, discernment, emerges through the prudential means of grace.

Discernment as Christian Education

The prudential means of grace include a large array of contextual practices that may also become means of grace for the practitioner. Community practices are not "generic," they remain weighted with theological and cultural implications (Engen 20-21). Discerning which practices are truly means of grace involves both a critical (or investigative) and a constructive (or imaginative) appreciation of God's ongoing activity.

Discernment, as a spiritual practice, has a long history within Christianity (McIntosh 2004) both as an individual and communal activity (Rogers 1997, pp.107-13). Wesley often engaged in practices of discernment both in shaping the devotion and discipline of the Methodist people (Blevins Fall 2002/ Spring 2003, pp. 88-92). Wesley also exercised discernment as a spiritual director to others (Tracy 1987, pp. 44-186) and encouraged accountability among Methodists

involved in Class and Band Meetings (Henderson 1997). Surveying the history of spiritual discernment, theologian Mark McIntosh notes discernment emerges first from faith grounded in a loving and trusting relationship with God. The process of discernment then moves to distinguishing between good and evil and later seeks to provide a kind of practical wisdom for living Christianly in this world. Discernment then proceeds to seek out the presence of God in this world and culminates with a kind of “wisdom” of the awareness of God in the fabric of our being.

Discernment includes a deep understanding of scripture and doctrine, as well as honest engagement with Christian conduct. Discernment engages not only through discrimination between options but also embraces an imaginative appreciation of the possibilities available for faithful living. Discernment, in this sense, includes critical and creative components. Critical thinking can be a difficult task. It takes courage to release one’s control of knowledge and trust the Holy Spirit to guide both ministers and parishioners in the pursuit of truth. This type of thinking begins by asking hard questions of the historical, cultural and psychological assumptions that influence Christian life and practice (Volf and Bass 2002). Self-reflection becomes a part of the critical process as well. Christians must also explore their own heritage and training. They must learn how to affirm the positive aspects of their history while becoming alert to poor influences and faulty assumptions. They must distinguish between their own “felt needs” (often desires) versus the real needs of their lives. Most of all they must become aware that thinking is an active process rather than a passive reception of knowledge.

However, ministers practicing discernment must include imagination and constructive thought to embrace Wesley’s openness to new practices and to the potential of grace through these practices. The creative power of the mind expresses itself through the life cycle, particularly with children, and may exhibit a different developmental framework focused more on aesthetic imagination than scientific reasoning (Gardner 1982, pp. 83-217). Theologically, creative discernment acknowledges the power of the Holy Spirit to empower new structures for the sake of conveying God’s free grace, so that the presence of Jesus Christ might be revealed in the most remarkable places and during the most mundane practices. Creative discernment is an interpretive practice of naming God at work in the world and also seeking the means to God’s gracious activity (Seymour et al. 1993)

Locating and practicing the prudential means of grace encourages an ongoing openness to contextual practices that might, for a time, reveal God’s grace. Identifying such practices remains the task of constructive discernment... but determining their validity requires critical assessment. Cultivating the capacity to discern God’s activity in new practices also helps the participant to appreciate God’s grace at work within the formative practices. Discernment increases the faithfulness of participants as they expectantly seek God’s transforming grace within transformative practices. Transformative practices, suggested by the works of mercy, encourage participants to become a means of grace as well as to use them.

Transformation as Christian Education

Works of mercy deserve particular consideration. Wesley confirmed his emphasis on works of mercy by his own discipleship practices to those on the margins (Blevins 1999, pp. 87-93, 114-18). As an educational approach, the purpose of transformation exists to heal and liberate persons, communities, society, and ultimately all of creation. Wesleyans seek to accomplish these goals through educationally transformative activities.

Education for the sake of transformation of persons and society retains a long history in Christian education (Seymour et al. 1984). Transformative discipleship includes service within the life of the church, efforts for peace and justice, service learning, and alternative Bible studies that explore real life situations in dynamic interplay with the Bible. Earlier movements have sought to engage the public in order to transform educationally and religiously. Contemporary attempts to transform social structures and the environment include liberative attempts, including Paulo Freire's educational process (Freire 1988, pp. 19, 75-118, M. E. Moore 1991, pp. 166-74). A number of Christian educators use this approach, even in youth ministry (Warrren 1994).

Similar transformation approaches surface in evangelical Christian education through mission efforts (Habermas and Issler 1992 pp. 50, 52-53) or evangelism efforts always tempered with aspects of compassion or humility (Root 2001, pp. 55-57). Educators often address ecological as well as individual needs for the sake of transformation (Habermas and Issler, p. 52).

Wesley's emphasized transforming social aspects in many of his educational efforts with children and adults (Marquardt 1992). His desire to transform others spiritually and materially coincides with a broad view of social transformation, including the transformation of all creation (Runyon 1998, p. 8).

The goal of Wesley's educational efforts, holiness of heart and life, may actually hold a clue for a Wesleyan understanding of transformative Christian education. Holiness of heart and life may be part of the process of education as well as the goal of education. Wesley understood that holiness of heart and life was an ongoing vision to be lived out each day. As persons sought to live a life of holiness they were changing the world around them as well as being changed by their own participation in the means of grace. In Wesley's ecology of transformation, the goal of holiness of heart and life never remains just for personal benefit; transformation should benefit the broader creation. Persons participating in the means of grace are invited to incarnate the very sacramental practices they themselves participate in. This is clear from Wesley's understanding of Christian Conference. The focus of this social embodiment was not only for the transformation of those within Methodism but also for the larger society. Stated another way, Methodists participated in the means of grace in order to become a means of grace to the broader society around themselves.

Three Approaches

The three approaches, formation, discernment and transformation provide a broad understanding of Wesleyan Christian Education through the means of grace. Obviously these approaches are interactive much like the particular practices in the means of grace that also work together. Collectively the approaches seek to form persons and communities into a new way of living and seeing the social order (a form of critical and constructive discernment mentioned earlier) in order to work toward transforming that order. Each of these approaches may not translate into specific classes as such, but their underlying assumptions inform the totality of a discipleship authentic to our Wesleyan heritage and global vision of living a life of holiness and love, of living life that reflects the prayer "on earth as it is in Heaven."

Contemporary Challenges

Hopefully these approaches not only provide a sense of direction but also suggest a means to respond to the three "tidal" forces that challenge the sandcastles of contemporary Christian

education: 1) A global shift of Christian movement, 2) a worldview shift within generational thinking, and 3) the presence of a consumer culture that seeks to overtake the church.

To begin, there is a movement of the Holy Spirit afoot south of us. When I say “south” I refer to the Southern hemisphere where Christianity is exploding in South America, Africa and the Asia Pacific region (Jenkins 2003). Whether through the Jesus Film or just faithful witness, the gospel continues to permeate those world regions. With the phenomenal growth there will come a peculiar challenge to disciple vast numbers of new Christians and prepare new leaders for ministry. We need to work creatively to secure the gains made for the gospel. NTS must assist in developing new models of education that will work in settings of cultural difference and rapid growth to insure these new members of formed into the body of Christ. To accomplish this we must be dialog partners with international efforts, collaborating to develop strategies of formation for the next generation of Christians.

Secondly there is a “culture shift” occurring in the Western Hemisphere that will challenge a generation of leaders who often thought of themselves as the cutting edge... but now represent the status quo. The “emergence” of a postmodern perspective, one attentive to the Kingdom of God but also responsive to culture, will also challenge traditional ways of “doing church” on our globe (Yaconelli 2003). Wise discernment must be used to identify and appropriate the new practices evolving from these churches and mission starts. Ministry will change, and patterns of discipleship may well represent the ancient church instead of the contemporary classroom. A practiced theology, not programming, may describe the next generation of discipleship.

Finally we will need to name and transform a church long dominated by consumer mentality. This mentality has divided the church along lines of personal taste and cultural accommodation. Children need to be restored to the adult community so that we, as adults, can learn from their imaginative capabilities and open expressions of the Kingdom of God (Beckwith 2004, Yust 2004). Youth will need more than entertainment and simplistic instruction to overcome a prevalent contemporary mentality that sociologist Christian Smith (2005) describes as “moral therapeutic deism.” Instead youth will need to find ways to actualize their faith as transformed and transforming agents of redemption (Dean 2004). Adults may have it hardest. The very generation who once claimed one cannot trust anyone over age thirty now find themselves facing retirement. Baby boomers, the most self-indulgent generation we have known in modern times, will have to learn how to relinquish their perspective and power so that church can be freed from meeting consumer demands and return to the missional task of transforming the world.

These challenges are just a few we face for a faithful discipleship in the 21st century. As director of the MACE program I see the need to provide two different options to address these issues. First the MACE will need to offer a ministerially sound program of leadership preparation that results in ordination for its participants. Incoming students, particularly those who received a call during or following their baccalaureate training, need to be able to enter a program that will guide them through academic requirements for ordination, providing them with a strong background for associate ministry so they may reflectively disciple those under their charge. As important as this formative training may be for some students, the MACE must also be specialized enough to allow other students, particularly those already prepared for ordination, room to develop unique skills and abilities for specific challenges. This demand means that the MACE must be versatile enough to allow students to fashion new and creative ministry strategies that push beyond traditional programming.

If the MACE can provide both formative ministerial training for some and specialized ministerial discernment for others, the degree will possess the type of curricular range and creativity to serve an expanding, emerging, transformed church. If this can be accomplished perhaps Christian education in the 21st century will resemble a form of faithful discipleship that will guide people into the means of grace so that they will also become a means of grace for the sake of Heaven on earth. May that be our prayer, and our commitment.

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