

MISSIONAL ADVANCE AND EFFECTIVENESS OF THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

(Reaction to the paper by Rubén Fernández)

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I would like to thank Ruben for his excellent paper in relation to theological education and the missional advance. We live in an important time for the mission of the Church of the Nazarene, due to the variety of cultures and contexts that we call “Latin America”. Today, as never before in our history, we need theological education that expresses our identity as Christians, Wesleyans, of holiness and specifically as Nazarenes.

A recently published book in English, written by Mark R. Quanstrom, *A Century of Holiness Theology*, shows the development of our theology during the past 100 years of history, how the church has placed emphasis on different aspects of holiness and also how we have had differences and at times strong discussions in relation to topics such as eradication, the baptism of the Holy Spirit, etc. The most interesting thing about this book is although there were differences of opinion, we have given emphasis on those essential points we have in common more than our differences. What we have always maintained in common is the radical optimism of holiness that the Scriptures teach.

The first one hundred years of the Church of the Nazarene have been marked by a theology and a Biblical perspective, however with a world view very distinct from the Church of the Nazarene of today and the one in the next 25 years. Without doubt, the Church of the Nazarene of the future will take a form very different from the past 100 years. The questions that we must ask ourselves are, what is the common identity that we have in whatever part of the world? How can we pass this identity to the next generation of Nazarenes? If we do not clearly answer these questions, the Church of the Nazarene, even though it might exist in name, will no longer exist in a few years.

As Wesleyans we believe in God’s prevenient grace which begins working in the lives of people before having the experience of conversion, we need an intentional manner in which we educate the Nazarene people. All education that we do is theological education. We need a Sunday school that uses Wesleyan materials and that has teachers who can clearly express what we believe. Sunday school begins with the youngest children and includes older adults. The lack of an adequate Sunday school for adults has resulted in many of them having a theological vacuum and hunger for solid teaching.

Our discipleship programs are programs of theological education that teach how to live the Christian life from a holiness perspective. We clearly teach new converts that they can be free from the slavery of sin.

Our worship services are times of theological teaching. In the songs, testimonies, Bible lessons, sacraments, we proclaim our doctrine of holiness and proclaim God’s grace! Although

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we share much with other sister denominations, there needs to be something distinct in our worship and in our proclamation of the Word.

I am in agreement with Ruben, when he says in his paper: “The local church is the place where we can train all of God’s people”, but I would add, not only are we training, but that at the same time we are teaching, given that it would not be correct to only give the tools without teaching how to use them and why use them.

In many things I am in harmony with the perspective of my brother. I am in agreement that theological education is for the all of God’s people. I agree that theological education is the function of the entire church. In contrast to the emphasis that Ruben gives that the local church has to fulfill the role of theological education, I would like to reaffirm the predominant role of the seminaries to prepare persons who have been called to dedicate their lives to the ministry as their primary vocation.

As I have said, we have many ways to do theological education in the church. Some programs of the church are for all of the church, others are for specific groups. Women’s ministries, for example, have as their purpose and function to minister specifically to women. The purpose is not to marginalize men; however it has as its function a specific emphasis on women. If a man wants to attend an activity of this ministry, I am sure that he will not be prevented from participating and he will benefit. However, the group maintains its emphasis on women.

The fact that theological education in an activity of the entire church signifies that the seminaries have a part but not all of the responsibility for theological education. Seminaries have the purpose to be a theological resource for the church and to prepare people vocationally for the ministry. As the example of women’s ministry shows, it is not prohibited that anyone who wants to take a class at the Seminary or in one of its extensions can do so. Without doubt, any member of the churches can benefit from these classes. The focus and emphasis, however, needs to be the preparation of pastors, missionaries, educators, and others who are preparing for a vocation of ministry. If the seminaries and extension centers change their main objective, the result will be a group of lay people and professionals with pastoral preparation, a positive side of the argument. The danger, however, is that the church leaves theological preparation to the seminary and the seminaries could lose their emphasis on the pastoral call from God.

With all the resources that we have in Latin America today, my proposal is that we prepare pastors and leaders to be persons that guide their congregations in worshipping God in all we do. What we need in our day are local churches that teach and practice our Wesleyan heritage in all of our activities. This emphasis will place the responsibility of theological education in the hands of our entire Nazarene people.