

“A PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION
FOR THE CHURCH OF THE NAZARENE – 1952”
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Introduction

“A Philosophy of Education” presents a snap shot of how theology and Christian education were conceived by the Church of the Nazarene during the mid-twentieth century. The statement “it is imperative that all departments within our schools adjust and articulate their teaching with the accepted doctrine of the Church of the Nazarene and its adopted philosophy of education” is at the very least interesting. The most intriguing phrases are “adjust and articulate” and “accepted doctrine and philosophy of education.” These phrases assume a much more narrow set of parameters for doctrine and education than could exist in our global context today. It is also interesting that the statement adds, “The schools . . . are not to consider their task as narrowly sectarian.” While these two sets of statements originate in the 1952 they clearly reflect a creative tension that exists with the Church of the Nazarene and its educational mission. The same tension is true in the first part of the twenty-first century as well. While our cultural context has changed our mandate to locate ourselves in the tradition and to do so in conversation with culture remains the same.

Voices in the Conversation

A careful reading of the 1952 statement brings one face-to-face with the manner in which the philosophical currents of the twentieth-century located themselves in the Church of the Nazarene. For example, “philosophy of life” finds its origin in a nineteenth-century rejection of the philosophy to Kant and German Idealism. Philosophy of life is associated with Henri Bergson and Wilhelm Dilthey, both of whom have some influence with Classical Protestant Liberalism. The hints of “vitalism” can be traced in this statement as well. The careful distinction between the physical and the spiritual are clearly more European than Christian. The 1952 statement expresses itself by asserting foundational principles and ethics. The attempt to locate a Christian metaphysics and Christian epistemology is tempered by the fact that “Christian” must mean more than an adjective can in this description. The idea of a “Christian Philosophy” is rooted in the idea that theology must build upon the philosophical frameworks it inherits from Greece, Berlin, and Paris. This assumption must be challenged in our time.

The shadow of Borden Parker Bowne and Edgar S. Brightman loom large in the 1952 statement. The influence of personalism, even Bostonian Personalism, in the theological traditions of the Church of the Nazarene is evident. In fact, a number of important theologians in the Church earned doctoral degrees at Boston University which was the epicenter of Bostonian Personalism. The emphasis in the 1952 statement on the personal and upon personality is difficult to miss in the statement. The attempt to describe our educational objective as “Christ-centered” and “personality-centered” implies something about how one is to view the individual. Here the rhythms of existentialism and free will should be noted as well. The talk about developing personality suggests a separation of the person and personality that should be challenged in our time. The persistent separation of social and personal in the 1952 statement raises several other questions as well. A person is best understood in community as the Trinitarian understanding of God suggests and image like body of Christ and temple of the Holy Spirit suggest. Segmenting of person from social would be easily challenged in our time.

Extensions for the Conversation

The 1952 statement provides a basis upon which to have further conversations with those involved in the educational ministry of the Church of the Nazarene, especially at our colleges, universities, and seminaries. One might wonder if the whole idea of a philosophy of education is appropriate in our time. Perhaps, a theology of education would allow a much more explicit connection to the faith. Clearly, this is the direction the 1952 statement intends to travel, but framing our work as theological would more adequately express the convictions that education must be an expression of faith. If this were to happen, it might be possible to think of the creeds less as a deductive mechanism than a grammar for the educational enterprise. In fact, understanding the doctrines of the Church of the Nazarene as a language for genuine theological discourse would make them less about expectation than the natural occurrence of education.

The 1952 statement develops foundational principles which in our time might be better understood as convictions. The emphasis upon foundations often turns theology and Christian education into a deductive process. In fact, some of this is evident in the 1952 statement where expressions like Absolute Good, Objective Study, and Truth are understood as publically demonstrable. This understanding would be less evident in the twenty-first century, but the conviction that a Christian education is informed and guided by a rock solid faith must be articulated. The educational work of the Church of the Nazarene must be understood as theocentric and christonormative, but the fact that it is first and foremost a faith affirmation is essential.

Another conversation might take a more ecclesial direction than is immediately evident in the 1952 statement. The statement mentions the church, but immediately reduces it to doctrines. The 1989 addition to the *Manual* (Article XI) brings ecclesial framing into sharper focus in the educational enterprise. Article XI also suggests a richer understanding of the relationship between the personal and social aspects of human life. Clearly, understanding what it means to think and live together in Christian community presents a rich discourse in our colleges, universities, and seminaries. An ecclesial frame would be less likely to place the church and the academy in opposition. For example, evangelism is not something that the church or university does, rather evangelism is something that the church or university is at the very core. This would mean that relationship between the church and the university is more organic and less oppositional.

The proposition of Christian education in the Church of the Nazarene is complex and for that reason requires creativity. A statement regarding the Convictions and Pedagogies of Nazarene Higher Education should include a deep confidence in the gospel to form Christian character. A statement would look to the Church in order to provide a grammar for faithful discourse. Perhaps, a less philosophical (Greece, Berlin, and Paris) approach and more thoroughgoing theological and ecclesial path would be defined. A greater sense that it is not education and evangelism, but education as evangelism would be part of a contemporary statement on education. Perhaps, a contemporary conversation about Nazarene Higher Education will include a sense that it will be the colleges, universities, and seminaries who will lead the Church of the Nazarene forward into the turbulent, but opportunity-laden days of the twentieth-first century.