

My Students at the Dawn of Twenty–First Century

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For eighteen fall semesters students have assembled in my classes. These students who have graced my life have gone on to serve in the pastoral ministry, both senior and associate, and the mission field. A few have earned doctorates and assumed teaching positions. These students have taught me a great deal and I want to reflect on some of that in the following paragraphs.

My students have come from three basic publics: traditional undergraduates, non-traditional undergraduates, and graduate students. The non-traditional undergraduates have largely been frustrated in their attempts to complete a degree. These students have families and some are single again. They are veterans, supervisors, and some are recently unemployed. Some have left the church and others have recently returned. Yet, the most obvious characteristic that these students share is the profound sense that they have never finished a college degree. The stories they tell will often touch the heart. Yet, they have so much going on in their life that completing a degree is nearly impossible. It is difficult to find time to read, reflect, and assimilate the material being presented. They often come to class with a functional relativism that has mostly been developed under the pressure of life. It is difficult to disabuse them of this faulty perspective because it seems to have served them amid the challenges of adult life. It is a joy to see these students begin to engage their functional relativism in the light of thinkers like Plato, Stanley Hauerwas, Rowan Williams, as well as a re-reading of the Bible.

Another force that influences these students is an uncritical pragmatism. They come to class with the tenacious conviction that what works or seems to work must be true. They have survived all the things that might have made others quit and at the very least they are know what works. From this it

is only a short journey to call what works true. This is what has frustrated them in the past, but they have not always asked the critical questions in light of a broader trajectory. The kind of education offered at Trevecca Nazarene University in its degree completion courses raises these questions. These students can intimidate faculty members under the relentless pressure of the immediate, but they can also expose one to the lives of people who have lived a good bit of life. On graduation day these students walk through the line with the biggest smile of all — "Now I am a college graduate"!

The bulk of my work has always been with those who are preparing for full-time ministry. Traditional undergraduate majors in religion and graduate students in religion share a great passion for compassionate ministry, evangelism, pastoral care, and preaching. They come predominately from Nazarene churches, youth camps, and Christian homes. They bring some of the same questions regarding relativism and pragmatism, but they give us hope for the future.

These students come to a book-centered program from a video culture. They have been conditioned by years of exposure to our television culture, video games, and visual images. The challenge is to convince these students that a North African who lived in the fifth century (Augustine) really has something to say to them. These students have been fed by the spirituality of Max Lucado and the hermeneutic of "The Prayer of Jabez." They are shaped by a commercial Christianity that often appeals to the "image" orientation of a video culture. Once again the challenge is to convince them that an eighteenth-century preacher (John Wesley) who traveled on horseback is still worth reading.

These students have to work too many hours. Living in the shadow of 9/11 has clearly affected the way my students see life and approach their studies. The presence of the laptop on campus has affected my students as well. Research can be done on the Internet and those bibliographic references appear more and more frequently in papers. The library can be accessed from their dorm room. My students read books written by men and women who work a long way from the Church of the

Nazarene. In other words, the world of my students has both become smaller and gotten much larger. This is the true challenge of ministerial education at the dawn of the twenty-first century. It is not possible for those who will soon graduate from our undergraduate or graduate programs to minister using only Nazarene, perhaps even Wesleyan sources. Yet, it is even more important than it was in my generation that our students be able to creatively and faithfully engage our time from a reflective Wesleyan-Holiness perspective. Our students read and they read some more and from this they write and re-write in the hope of understanding. And the point of this is not to be more informed, but more faithful to the gospel that Paul finds pride in (Romans 1: 16-17).

My students come to class with questions that many might find uncomfortable. They want to know what happened to the passion for social justice that was once central to Wesleyan-Holiness. They want to know more about the liturgy and the Christian calendar. My students want to challenge the materialism that often characterizes their experience with the church. These students want to know how to ask hard questions and still be faithful to the church. My students want to know what the church is going to do with the many women being called into ministry. There is a larger percentage of female students in my classes than in 1982 when I began teaching. They have similar passion for ministry and they share the skills necessary to accomplish ministry. My students are forced to carry a large debt into the ministry. Sometimes they wonder if they will be able to do the ministry they are training for if they choose to go to a Nazarene university and then Nazarene Theological Seminary. Yet, my students continue to the goal set before them in the faith that the God who called them will be faithful.

These are exciting days to be in theological education. Those who assemble in my classes are reasons for my hope. They ask questions and push class discussions into places that have a way of surprising me. Some of them return after graduation with still more questions. A few have become my teachers as they have taught me new things. After these eighteen years I have come to realize that my

students are in some ways an incarnation of my theology. Because I teach I get to see what the Christian faith looks like in the flesh and bones of students who lean into the twenty-first century. This is their hope and it is my promise at the dawn of this new century.

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