

CHRISTLIKE CHARACTER IN CHRISTIAN HIGHER EDUCATION¹

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Introduction

The intent of this presentation on Christlike character is not to be exhaustive or inclusive of the topic, but to begin a conversation on the first institutional outcome for Northwest Nazarene University. The first institutional outcome is Christlike Character. It is defined as, *“NNU students will grow toward Christlikeness: demonstrating ethical behavior, loving and respecting others, offering grace as they have received it, building up the community of Christ, and representing Christ to the world.”*

There are a wide range of expectations and definitions of Christlike character. Some include very simple explanations of “being like Jesus” while styling a new WWJD bracelet. However, historically the church has vacillated in its attempts to define and foster Christlike character. Some of us grew up in the church during a time in which Christian character was equated with ethical behaviors through legalistic rules and regulations. These external markers did not always result in Christlike character. Others of us have grown up in a church context that placed a strong emphasis on displaying acts of piety or mercy. Still others have been taught that Christlike character is somehow instantaneously given through conversion or a sanctification experience. Certainly all of these approaches have points of validity, but each in them falls short of developing a holistic view of Christlike character.

The intent of this presentation is to raise some questions and provide some possible answers regarding the issue of Christlike character in Christian higher education.

First, what is Christlike character and how is it developed?

For centuries the ultimate goal of education in Western civilization was the formation of students' character. Students were taught languages, philosophy, literature, music, and mathematics to increase their wisdom and judgment and to enable them to serve in society. Education was to engender virtue, and the morality of students was the constant concern of most teachers from ancient Greece through the first hundred-plus years of the United States. However, in recent years some universities have moved away from the focus of molding and shaping students' character. These universities have embraced the recent belief that the goal of higher education is to specialize in areas that credential students to get a job and earn money...preferably lots of money. NNU's continual commitment to character formation connects us with the long tradition of educational practices that focus on a liberal arts philosophy of education.

Character formation has become a primary area of emphasis in public schools, local communities, and in higher education. Programs focusing on character traits such as The International Association of Character Cities (IACC), a nonprofit service organizations providing support for leaders committed to reinforcing 49 positive character traits in their communities.

Character formation is the development of moral thinking patterns, speaking, and acting--a habit or practice. These character traits can be shaped through practice and the development of consistent habits. Such traits include compassion, honesty, patience, thankfulness, trust, humility, and love. For example, a student that has the character quality of “tardiness,” which

¹ Paper was presented at Northwest Nazarene Universities' faculty retreat in September 2003. Christlike character is one of the four institutional outcomes for the University.

many of our students have perfected can be taught to develop habits of "punctuality." Character formation is the process whereby a person develops certain practices or virtues. Aristotle stated that moral virtues resulted from human choices. He argues that virtues aren't something we are born with, but are developed through our choices. Virtues must be modeled and learned in order to become practices or dispositions of our character.

So, one primary aspects of character formation is helping students develop consistent patterns of moral virtues. William Bennett's book, *The Book of Virtues* lists self-discipline, compassion, responsibility, friendship, work, courage, perseverance, honesty, loyalty and faith as virtues that need to be developed in children. When Abraham Lincoln was asked about character he stated, "*Character is like a tree and reputation is like its shadow. The shadow is what we think of it; the tree is the real thing.*"

Second, what are the differences between character formation in public schools and local communities with Christlike character at NNU?

It is evident that character and moral virtues are shaped and formed in public schools, families, and communities, but what are the primary differences of developing Christlike character at NNU? What makes education in a Wesleyan Christian Liberal Arts University different?

Christian formation is different because we recognize that certain qualities of character can only be developed through God's grace and work in our lives. It is the act of grace that comes before and during the process of spiritual formation. As Wesleyan's, we acknowledge that a divine-human synergy is at work in forming and transforming us into the image of Christ. It is the act of God's grace that makes us into new creatures and transforms our disposition and motives. As Wesleyan's, we affirm that the primary purpose of Christian education is that we partner with God in the restoration of the image of God in each person. As God works in the context of community, the primary goal is restoring us to the divine nature of righteousness and true holiness.

What makes NNU different is that we acknowledge that God is active in the process of transforming the dispositions and motives of our hearts to reflect the mind of Christ Jesus. Certainly our students can learn and develop aspects of their character, and they should, but it is the Spirit of God working in their lives that transforms their hearts and minds into Christlike character. The radical optimism of Wesleyan Spirituality is possible because of the energizing and dynamic presence of the Holy Spirit in the life of the person who is being transformed into a life of holiness.

What is Christlike character?

Certainly we can look at the life of Jesus as an example of the kind of characteristics we hope to foster in our students.

Jesus' life exemplified a life of obedience to God. Jesus on many occasions was moved with great compassion by the spiritual and social needs of society. Accepting those who were the outcasts of society marked Jesus' life--- a tax collector, an adulterous woman, and a Samaritan are examples. Jesus modeled a life of service and humility. Jesus patiently modeled his life before a ragtag group of disciples that never truly got it until Jesus was gone, which should be reassuring for us. Certainly these characteristics are representative of the kind of characteristics we hope are being developed in the lives of our students.

Henry Nouwen states that, "*The knowing of Jesus' heart is knowledge of the heart. And when we live in that knowledge, we cannot do other than bring healing, reconciliation, new life and hope wherever we go.*" *In the Name of Jesus*, p. 27.

The Bible gives descriptive language as to the nature of Godly and Christlike character.

For our purposes this morning, let me provide three broad Biblical frameworks that represent Christlike character:

1. **Love:** The very heart and essence of the Bible is built around the great commandment, *“Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your strength, with all your mind; and love your neighbor as yourself.”* Certainly Christlike character entails placing God as central to one's life and a direct expression of this relationship is complete devotion to God and love for one's neighbor. Our theology of holiness is a theology of love. Jesus modeled a life of compassion and love during his life and ministry.
2. **Holiness:** Both the Old & New Testament gives witness to the importance of living a life marked by holy living. The Israelites were to be a people that exemplified the very character of God. Jesus exemplified a holy life by his example and witness. Wesley's view of holiness reminds us that relational holiness includes both personal and social holiness.
3. **Life of the Spirit:** The example of Christlike character is represented in the work of the Spirit in our lives. Paul identifies the Fruits of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-26 as an objective basis to measure Christlike character....love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Third, what spiritual practices foster Christ-like character in our students?

As we participate in what Wesley calls the “means of grace”, we receive and experience God's grace in our lives. To live out this “motive of love” one must engage in spiritual practices, so that God's gracious love can do its work in each of us. If John Wesley was here, we might ask him the question: “How can we experience the presence of God and grow in grace in an ongoing way?” He would point us to his “General Rules,” that he defined for the earliest Methodist societies. He'd say: 1) Do No Harm and Avoid Evil, 2) Do Good of Every Possible Sort to All People; and 3) Attend to all the “Works of Piety” and “Works of Mercy.” These works of piety and mercy are patterns of living exemplified in the gospel accounts of Jesus' life.

Wesley believed that participation in the “means of grace” allows us to receive grace that provides spiritual nurture for our hearts. These practices include: prayer, searching the Scriptures, the Lord's Supper (Eucharist), fasting, Christian conferencing (small groups), and engaging in acts of mercy. Each of these provides avenues by which we receive God's grace in our lives. Certainly as our students participate in these practices in chapel, bible studies, prayer in classrooms, and service ministry they are given opportunities to receive grace and to develop spiritual practices and habits.

*Fourth, what are our expectations for students?
And what aspects of Christlike characters do we hope to develop?*

Recently there has been an increased interest among Christian educators concerning spiritual growth and maturity. This has resulted in research on spiritual maturity, theories of spiritual development, and instruments designed to measure spiritual progress. Perhaps one of the most influential works is James Fowler's faith development theory and Lawrence Kohlberg's moral development theory.

When developing Christlike character in students it is important to recognize their level of faith and moral development. Many of our students come to us from Christian backgrounds and have experienced faith at an early age. However, during their journey at NNU many of them go through a process of reevaluating their faith. Fowler's stages of faith help us at this point. Fowler states that adolescents are in the synthetic-conventional stage of faith development. Students at this stage base their faith in God on what their family, church, or a group has modeled for them. Their faith formation is often synthetic in that it changes; based on the

group they are associated with. It is at this stage of faith formation that students are in the process of reassessing their commitment to Christ and often experience “a crisis” of faith. This crisis of faith is necessary for them to develop belief in God and to make faith their own. As educators, it is our role is to be a guide in the process of development and to recognize that what they are experiencing is a natural process towards the development of Christlike character.

The same is true when it comes to morality. Many of our student’s morality is based on “how it affects me,” or “if you scratch my back I’ll scratch yours.” The family or community has shaped their morality on matters of what is right and wrong and many of them have not internalized these moral principles as their own. This is why many college students resort to immoral behavior because for the first time they are away from family or church and have not internalized moral values. As we think about Christlike character in our students we need to be helping them develop morals that will guide them throughout life.

Fifth, what is our role as faculty and staff in the process of fostering Christlike character in students?

Parker Palmer’s book, *The Courage to Teach*, states, “that we teach out of who we are”. Palmer reminds us that we focus much of our attention on the content we teach and the methodologies that we use, but forget that the most important aspect of teaching is that we are reflecting who we are to our students.

What makes teaching and serving at NNU different is that as we are reflections of Christlike character to our students. We model before our students our areas of discipline, but more importantly we provide a living example of God’s grace to them. Our personal spiritual formation becomes important in modeling Christlike practices and habits before our students. In Wesley’s process of “procuring teachers” for his school in Kingswood he required that teachers be people “who feared the Lord” and who exemplified a strong Christian witness.

As Wesleyans, we recognize that our role as teachers is to guide students into all truth. As a teacher I am continually challenged to think about what kinds of exercises or practices fosters spiritual formation. I am always challenged to provide a holistic approach to teaching that includes aspects that foster the “being” aspect of the student. This can include journaling, reading scripture, working together in groups, and building relationships, being involved in acts of service to others. For example, George Lyons encourages students to donate blood for extra credit as a means of service. The relational component of teaching becomes one of the most important aspects of our pedagogical practices in fostering Christlike character. What we do outside the classroom and campus is as important as what we do in the classroom.

Finally, what role does the NNU community have in shaping and forming Christlike character in students?

The NNU community is a microcosm of the broader Christian Church. Our community provides a place where we can provide support and empathy. It is a place where we trust and respect each other for the gifts and graces God has given. We are a redemptive community that offers grace, tolerance, and acceptance to each other and to our students. Love should be the primary Christlike attribute that embodies our community.

John Westerhoff III, a religious educator argues that Christian formation takes place primarily through worship. He states that it is through the liturgical practices of the church that lives are formed and shaped into Christlikeness. Certainly spiritual formation takes place through our chapels, bible studies, mission trips, and personal modeling. But we may want to consider that one of the limitations of NNU is that we are a faith-based community, not a faith community, or a local church. What I am arguing is that even though we provide avenues for students to experience God’s grace in their lives, that as a community we must acknowledge our limitations at this point. Student’s Christian formation is not complete without being involved in a local worshipping community, learning and experiencing God’s grace. My mentor

Ted Ward states, "The Christian College or university can participate in a helping way, but dare not allow he/she to usurp the responsibilities of the church."

Second, certainly there is clear evidence that students' lives are being formed in Christlike character, but perhaps we need to consider developing more systematic approaches of spiritual accountability. Since we have Christlike character as an institutional outcome, how are we going to measure the spiritual progress and development of our students objectively? I am not suggesting that we go back to Wesley's strict approach to group formation, but we may want to provide avenues that foster the development of spiritual disciplines. I think a class in Spiritual Formation should be one of our general education requirements if we are to take this outcome seriously.

Let me close by providing a personal example of the importance of Christlike character at NNU. One of the primary reasons I am here is because of my education at Asbury College. Like many of our NNU students I came to Asbury with a deep desire to serve and please God. During my time at Asbury I was challenged to think and live differently by Godly professors who exemplified Christ in their academic disciplines as well as in their daily lives. They allowed me to go through the questions and struggles of my faith as I encountered the truths of scripture and theology. They modeled for me the spiritual disciplines, and exposed me to the rich heritage of our Wesleyan tradition through participation in chapel services and Bible studies. It is my hope that just as Asbury College exemplified Christ to me, that now as a teacher I can do the same for my students. That NNU be a place where students recognize that Christlike character is more than an institutional outcome but is at the very essence and heart of who we are!

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