

A PERSONAL REFLECTION ON “WHAT IS WESLEYAN THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION”:  
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Firstly, let me express my appreciation to the organizers of the conference. I found the debates and challenging conversations embedded within a hospitable and gracious context. To my mind this reflected a Christlikeness that was profound. May God be praised!

The question, “What is Wesleyan theological education?” is daunting. Participants asked different questions of the various aspects of this theme presumably because of their own different contexts. When seemingly similar questions were asked, the questions still often revealed different perspectives. Each of the key words of this question, “Wesleyan”, “theological” and “education” appeared to be understood in a wide variety of ways, even from those of similar contexts. Hence, to establish common ground upon which to commence dialog was a challenge. It was amazing that any kind of common ground could be found to commence dialog within the time constraints and given the enormous variety of contexts of the participants. However, the process of using three papers co-authored by scholars from different parts of the world became a good starting point for dialog. While considerable diversity was evident between these papers there were areas of convergence. This provided a suitable ground upon which to commence the dialog.

All three papers expressed a practical theology that saw at the heart of Wesleyan theological education a passion for a living faith in God as expressed in Jesus Christ. The underlying assumption appeared to be that both theology and education were to be expressed in life and result in life transformation. As one participant said, Wesleyan education involved *field education, problem solving and service learning*. The practicality of this cannot be missed as an essential feature.

Another commonality was their identification of creative tensions that were understood as an essential nature in this kind of theological education. There appeared to be recognition that Wesleyan education was comfortable with tensions that both created debate and forced a historical trajectory of what was learned and even how education is understood. This is in distinction to a static and objective view. Detalo and Rotz spoke of the tension as *a constant tug of war* between conservative and liberal forces within the understanding of the Gospel. Price and Baldeon referred to the tension as between *earthly dust and heavenly imagination*, and Blevins

and Sierra spoke of the *dual tension ...holding together critical yet creative appropriation of knowledge leading to “truth” while faithfully participating in “vital” piety that leads to love.* This is to name but a few that were mentioned.

The question is whether such an approach expresses the essence of Wesleyan education or is it simply an expression of the changing theological education landscape in a broader sense. While Banks (1999), Carrol *et al* (1997), and Foster *et al* (2006) have explored the state and nature of clergy preparation as a specific instance of theological education, at least in the Western world, they express similar concepts of creative tension as the substance of transformative education. At this point our discussion appeared to work with the concept of current theological education rather than specifically with features of Wesleyan education.

However, the three papers describe the direction of the historical trajectory in Wesleyan theological education in terms of *spiritual formation, discernment and transformation* (Blevins & Sierra), *wisdom [as] holiness* (Price & Baldeon) and *pursuit of wisdom making people mature, professional and right with God and men* (Detalo & Rotz). Fresh articulation of this direction and an exploration of this particular trajectory may be a fruitful exercise. Perhaps this trajectory holds something of the essence of the distinctive Wesleyan approach to education as we reaffirm our commitment to living a life of holiness.

Another aspect that appears as an important feature of Wesleyan education is its inclusive nature. Blevins and Sierra particularly highlighted this through their emphasis on the model of education being described as *discipleship*. This encompasses children, youth and adult and there is historical precedence to illustrate this inclusivity in the ministry of John Wesley and his followers. Price and Baldeon emphasized the role of the *whole church* in this. Blevins and Sierra alluded to the comprehensive discipling system that was the genius of John Wesley. The genius was not only in the effectiveness of the system but in its inclusivity.

It can be argued that each of the elements expressed as Wesleyan in defining theological education are also found in the broader context of education and theology apart from the Wesleyan emphasis. Nevertheless Wesleyan theological education sits comfortably in this general milieu of theological and educational dialog which emphasises life transformation both individual and corporate. This in fact may be the point. Our Wesleyan theological understanding encourages the diversity and dialog. Our contribution as theologians and educators in the Wesleyan tradition to the conversation is by at least articulating a goal in the educational journey

(holy living) and providing a process (model of discipleship) for this dynamic conversation. The implications of this need much further elaboration and conversation. What does church life, our institutions of higher education, and our growth in faith look like as we take these contributions seriously?

My prayer is that we will continue to move the conversation along as we *appropriate knowledge leading to “truth” while faithfully participating in “vital” piety that leads to love.* These papers and the conference are significant steps in this direction. Thank you for allowing me to be part of the conversation with you.

*References cited:*

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Foster, Charles R. Dahill, Lisa E. Golemon, Lawrence A. Tolentino, Barbara Wang. *Educating Clergy: teaching practices and pastoral imagination.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006.