

DIDACHE: “GENERATIONS”  
Gary Sivewright and Jason Sivewright

***Question #1: What is your current role?***

*Gary Sivewright*

After serving 17 years as Chaplain/Vice-President for Campus Ministries at Mount Vernon Nazarene University and 12 years in Nazarene Youth International Ministries in Kansas City, I am now pastoring a small church in Apple Valley, Ohio, and speaking in churches through a ministry I founded, Family Face to Face, and speaking for HomeWord parenting seminars out of San Juan Capistrano, California.

*Jason Sivewright*

My current role is media coordinator for Barefoot Ministries, the youth ministry branch of the Nazarene Publishing House. This position is a brand new venture for us and was basically created in direct response to my idea that the language of today’s youth is, or revolves closely around, the many forms of media saturating our world.

This, of course, is not MY idea originally because many people in the field of youth ministry have discovered the same thing. But is an idea on which I have centered my ministry. What this has entailed in my year and a half of service here at Barefoot is the creation of video pieces to either supplement our current curriculum or stand alone as items to resource youth pastors.

***Question #2: Why did you choose this discipline?***

*Gary Sivewright*

First let me state that my discipline is Christian Education with a specific focus on youth ministry. I really did not know that going in. I think I was just following my heart and my head came much later. This I did know—I owed a lot to the church. Being the only child of a single mother, the church supplied much more to me than I would ever be able to repay. More than the Bible, men and women of the church taught me social graces, public speaking, athletic skills, choral music, party planning, dating etiquette, leadership dynamics, study habits, and most importantly, they showed me Jesus in flesh and bones. They were, for all intents and purposes, my family.

While working through all the vocational possibilities during my first two years of college, a religious education major was created and I jumped at the opportunity. I wish I could say that I heard a voice from heaven or saw handwriting on the wall, but I did not experience anything quite that dramatic. Instead there was this gnawing sense that I wanted to be as important in the life of some teen as those many adults, both youth pastors and laypeople, had been in my life. I have been doing some form of youth ministry ever since. Just as I graduated from college, Nazarene Theological Seminary created a degree in Religious Education so that seemed like the next natural step. Seventeen years later, George Peabody College, the education school for Vanderbilt, partnered with Scarritt Seminary in Nashville, TN to create a doctorate in Religious Education. Twelve of us were accepted into the program. Two years later Scarritt folded and the

program closed behind us. Vanderbilt kept its commitment to us and to this day there are twelve and only twelve with an Ed. D in Religious Education from Vanderbilt University.

*Jason Sivewright*

It sounds corny to say, but it is true. I did not really choose this discipline. It chose me. Or I should say that God chose me for it. I always have had a great interest in film. The way a moving visual image can create an atmosphere of emotion almost unparalleled by any other art form. It was through this and my interest in theatre that I found my equal passion for the written word. I received a degree in English from Mount Vernon Nazarene University where I spent most of my time wondering how God was planning on melding my passions and my experiences into a vocation that would keep me off the streets.

I thought I had found the answer in a LA film school geared towards Christians intending to infiltrate the film industry. This plan found its demise in a single form overlooked by myself and my advisor's postponement of my possible admission another year. To say the least, I was mortified. I was weeks from graduation without a clue as to what might come thereafter. I prayed.

A week later I received an email from my friend Brooklyn Lindsey. I had visited the church where she was a youth pastor during a mission trip and she was wondering if I would like to intern for the summer. I said yes without hesitation.

Now looking back I should have hesitated. Youth ministry is far too emotionally taxing a mission to accept haphazardly. That summer I poured my heart into teenagers for the first time and loved it. I found in those teenagers a genuine thirst for something bigger than themselves and that astonished me. I watched as the words of the Bible alone changed their hearts and affected their souls. We breathed in God together and it was a beautiful experience that changed me forever.

At the end of that summer I was still at a loss for what to do. A couple of years later I made a video proposal to Barefoot which resulted in my employment there and the venture in which I am currently involved. Within this job I have seen echoes of purpose for all of my passion and experience and have felt blessed (and sometimes cursed) by the opportunity to share my life in this way.

***Question #3: What key contributions does your discipline offer?***

*Gary Sivewright*

I have always felt that Christian educators are the modern-day Pharisees---those who are charged with taking the Word of God and breaking it down into livable bites for the people. What a great job! Especially if we do not mess it up. To be able to apply the Bible in every life situation is an incredible gift and a tremendous privilege. "Here's what the Word has to say about relationships..." ; "Here's what the Word has to say about making choices..." ; "Here's what the Word has to say about honesty..." And just like the Pharisees of Jesus' time, there is always the temptation to push programs more and the Word less. When we start being more concerned

about attendance and job security than relationships and Scriptural application we become more and more like the religious leaders that Jesus called hypocrites and pretenders.

*Jason Sivewright*

I understand that when dealing within the work of creative Christian media one is not just dealing with one slippery slope but many. I see my discipline as sort of like a walk along a tight rope. Any missed move or jiggle in concentration can be disastrous.

This is not unlike any other art form that labels itself, or is given the label, “Christian.” The most telling example of this is Christian music. I enjoy many Christian artists, but sometimes question the need for a distinction between “secular” and “Christian.” Are Christian artists just “holy” imitators of popular secular artists? What purpose does it serve? Whom does it serve?

All these questions and more play a part in every single video piece we create. One of my favorite authors is Donald Miller, and I watched an interview in which Miller was asked the primary purpose for his writing. His answer: entertainment.

I have adapted that same idea with the work that I do for Barefoot. With every piece I must ask myself, will this speak to teenagers? Will this grab their attention and speak their language? This is the purpose of my discipline—to provide for youth ministers a relevant and reliably creative library of media resources that speak the truth in a way that teens enjoy.

As I describe this, one might begin to see the tilts and totters of this proposition. If it is all about enjoyment and light on biblical principle then it is flawed. And visa versa. If it does not serve the youth minister and the youth equally it is flawed. If we are not constantly seeking to stay relevant artistically, biblically, and in the minds and hearts of youth then our way is lost.

When these questions are asked and our best is done to diligently check these areas then the resulting product is an invaluable tool for the church in helping reach the lost, the confused, and the seeking--those who may not be as open to the spoken or the written word as much as they are the art of visual media.

***Question #4: What is the future of your discipline?***

*Gary Sivewright*

BLEAK! My impression is that the Church, from denominational leadership down, has lost its sense of importance of the study and practice of God’s Word. Denominations cut back on staff, and local churches continue to hire youth program directors instead of actual ministers. Mark Yaconelli in his book *Contemplative Youth Ministry* writes about a friend that interviewed pastors from different denominations diverse in their racial, ethnic and theological backgrounds. When asked what kind of youth pastor they were looking for their answers were all the same: “a 20 something, attractive, guitar-playing, charismatic, youth-savvy, hip, hard-working, van-driving, free-spirited, denominationally-loyal, Jesus-loving, Bible-carrying, old-people-friendly, faith-filled, fiscally responsible, youth leader (preferably male with decorative facial hair and a mountain bike strapped to his car roof—or, if he’s unavailable, a spunky, to-die-for, fashion-conscious female who will cry once on youth Sundays and twice on summer mission trips).”

Yaconelli goes on to say that these pastors are like most every church he knows, praying for the coming of “the youth ministry messiah.” And I say, just like the Jews when the Messiah came, most churches will be bitterly disappointed when they find out that most youth pastors cannot decipher hip-hop lyrics any better than the parents. Churches will need to understand that there is more to youth ministry than keeping our kids busy. It will take a youth pastor along with a number of committed parents and laypeople to identify and listen to today’s generation of teenagers.

The future of Christian education generally, and youth ministry specifically, is the church allowing pastors and staff to create time for interaction concerning God’s Word. Some pastors do an excellent job of teaching the Word and providing ways for their message to be discussed in various venues. Too many, I’m afraid, have a tendency to throw out directives from the pulpit with no thought being given for follow-up or further teaching. A Christian education professor friend a few years back co-taught with a Theology professor a course introducing theology for ministers. Theory was immediately followed by practice. The idea was that no great theological thought is worth anything without knowing how to teach and apply the lesson. Proclamation and application go hand-in-hand. Forget whether it worked or not, the concept of a theologian and a Christian educator (who is also a theologian) working together should speak volumes to the Church.

The future of Christian education also depends on how the Church finds ways to minister to the entire family. Hopefully the day is over, or soon coming to an end, when age-level ministers plan programs without considering their impact on the family. I actually know of pastors who have preached on family togetherness, and yet if you looked at their church calendar, you would wonder how the family could spend any time together whatsoever. I know it sounds good to say we need to get back to the way they used to teach in the Old Testament, but I’m afraid we have given in to the cries of parents who have abdicated their teaching authority to the “trained professionals” of the Church instead of giving parents the encouragement and resources to enable them to be fellow journeyers with their sons and daughters.

*Jason Sivewright*

We live in the age of technology. Most of the media pieces we create are only available by download. This would have been unheard of just a few years ago. So, from a technological standpoint, with media we can only try to stay on top of the curve. The same goes for captivating the minds of the youth with the story of God and His people.

Young people today live in a reality where everything is a mere click away. This can be a great detriment to youth ministry or a great aid. For example we have a tracking assistant that is included with a subscription to the Barefoot Ministries site that makes it possible for the youth worker to be instantly in touch with every teenager in their ministry. Because of the internet teens are more aware of world needs than ever in history and the cool thing is that they care. And they are using this technology to make a difference.

The darker side of this is the growing number of teens falling into the trap of internet pornography or the dangers that come with social networking. When discussing changes we need

only remember that this is a growing trend, not a dying one. The World Wide Web only reflects the rest of a culture that is headed towards an “everything goes” mentality.

The important thing for people of my discipline—creative Christian media—is to continue in creating a voice amongst the shouting. It is imperative that as culture and technology change, so the church changes. Not in a way that is reactive and lacking in creativity, but in a way that pulls the best from these challenging tools never forgetting that our story is the best story. And that truth can be a beacon of light for young people amidst all the darkness.

I always hear that youth ministry is an ever changing field, but I disagree. The look may change, or the way it sounds, but the core is the same.

I was listening to my father speak in a chapel the other day and I watched the faces of the kids as he spoke. My dad has been telling different renditions of the same stories for years now. He manages to squeeze a new one in every once in a while, but as I watched the kids faces I realized that that doesn't matter. The reason why my father is so effective with youth is not because he's cool, or funny, or smart, or because his stories are fresh. It is because they listen to him speak, and they know he cares.

Whether it is creating a video lesson, preparing a sermon, writing a blog, or planning a Wednesday night worship session if the heart of youth ministry does not begin with genuine love for youth, and a genuine heart for showing them the face of God, then all is lost. This, no matter the format, will never change.

*Gary Sivewright*

I think there was a compliment in there somewhere. I think we all understand the importance of speaking with care and sincerity. I just do not want to overlook the value of telling stories. Everybody has them. It is important that they be told, and it is just as important that they be listened to. Dr. Daniel Taylor, who has written a number of books on storytelling, said in a seminar I attended, “Don't tell me just what you believe, but show me how you live by your story. To say you have no story or that it is not worth telling is an insult to God. The Bible is all about memory and when it wants you to remember it tells you a story.”

***Question #5: What do you see proves a challenge to Wesleyan Higher Education?***

*Gary Sivewright*

Relevancy. If I understand anything about this generation it seems that they are quick to bail on anything or anyone that is not relevant to them. Therefore if we proclaim a God or Gospel that does not fit into how they think things should be, then it has no relevancy in their lives. For example, I was doing a lesson on Hell. A young lady came to me and said “I wish you wouldn't talk about Hell around my friends. It makes them feel uncomfortable.” As the conversation went on, it occurred to me that she was convinced that God would not want her friends to feel uncomfortable and she was pretty sure that a loving God does not allow anyone to go to Hell. The more we talked I realized that this young lady, like many just like her, has created a God to fit her own theology. Even in the face of Scripture, her theology would not allow her to believe in a God who judges and condemns her friends. I think this is a challenge for Wesleyan Higher

Education to lovingly, yet straight forwardly, present the absolutes of the Gospel without compromise or apology.

*Jason Sivewright*

Relevancy is a huge issue. As I said before, every single video piece I create starts with the question of whether or not it meets teenagers where they are. If it does not then it is out of the question. I have seen with my own eyes teens watch and reject speakers, movies, songs, etc. within mere seconds when they get a sniff of irrelevancy.

To be honest, I have grown so tired of the term “relevant” that I almost hate the word now. And I do not think my hatred is misplaced. Because, in essence, what this means is just what my father was talking about—that somehow we have to change or disguise the gospel in order to make it “acceptable” to teens and I think that is false.

My friend Matt and I were planning a youth service and Matt had a crazy idea. Matt has never been at a loss for crazy ideas so I sat back and listened trying my best to look interested. His idea was that we do not plan anything.

Not that we do not prepare. We prepare by removing all the games in our youth room, all the televisions and anything that may cause distraction. We remove folding chairs, bean-bag chairs, and rugs...everything gone. Then we tell the kids to find a spot on the floor to sit and we read scripture...that’s it! Over and over we read the scripture verses that we had chosen. We did not modify it or explain it. We just read it, and the cool thing was that they got it. They really got it and I found that night that the Bible needs no help from us in making it “relevant.” Teens understand storms and they understand that Jesus can silence them, and that is just as relevant today as it was to the disciples in the boat.

I think the grander challenge lies in the intentions of Wesleyan Higher Education. If the intent of this path, for those who are called to it, is to gain knowledge and understanding that they will then offer as an instrument of righteousness to whatever end God deems necessary to the furthering of His kingdom then it is an invaluable tool to the church. Any deviation from this primary purpose and Wesleyan Higher Education is flawed.

I see too many of my friends deciding to travel the path of Christian education for, what seems to me to be, the wrong reasons. It is my belief that the church would find itself much better off when its leaders come from a variety of backgrounds both personal and educational. Maybe some studied law and some medicine. Some study philosophy and others psychology. Some live in the arts and others in architecture and design. Some may not have much education at all, but they embrace a deep love for people and understand God’s love for them.

To be honest I have to fight the thought in my heart that all Wesleyan Higher Education is years of study to prepare for something for which you can never be fully prepared. After being away from the church I interned with for a month I received the news that two sisters in my youth group had shared at a youth rally that they had been sexually abused by their father for years without ever telling anyone including each other. Their father was a reliable sponsor throughout my time at the church and one of the first to offer his time, his efforts, his house, his life to

anything we needed. He was convicted of twenty-one counts of child molestation and is still in prison today. There is no class, no ministerial technique, no words that could be shared that would shed light on this situation. But we could pray together, we could cry together, and we could tell those girls that Jesus loved them and so did we.

I believe that God calls people too many different kinds of ministry in many different situations. In some cases this path includes higher education but in some cases not. When Wesleyan Higher Education remains in its place not as an essential step, but a wonderful and useful tool that pairs itself closely with practical ministry and real life experience then it is at its best.

*Gary Sivewright*

I feel like I need to say for my colleagues in the teaching profession sometimes we feel like we have covered in class some of the difficult situations you mention. It kills us inside every time a student returns or sends a letter asking why they were not better prepared for the real life situations they face in ministry. It could be that they were not able to grasp the seriousness of the topic the day it was discussed in class (if they were in class), but it could also be that experience is sometimes the best teacher.

***Question #6: Where are you hopeful concerning Wesleyan Higher Education?***

*Gary Sivewright*

In a cynical and calloused world, Wesleyan Higher Education offers a refreshing view of faith learning because it offers learning with both heart, head and hand. When understood, classes mix the best of scholarship with service. Keeping an eye on compassion, every class is taught with somehow making a difference in the world. Every syllabus is written with service learning in mind. As long as there are learning institutions that believe and adhere to this type of education, there is hope for the Church.

*Jason Sivewright*

My friend Shawna, who is a bright seminarian, was telling me about a growing problem among the church that not many graduates are actually going on to be traditional church pastors. It seems that the trend is for graduates, during and after their studies, to be more interested in missions based ministries and after graduation are traveling to far off places to be with those facing water purification or shortage crises, AIDS epidemics, and other struggles in our world today. This filled me with hope. It is not that I feel good about the lack of traditional pastors, but when the teaching at these institutions of learning is sparking within students a feeling of desperation and purpose towards serving “the least of these” then it is truly close to the heart of God.

***Question #7: Final words for future “generations?”***

*Gary Sivewright*

At the risk of sounding really old here, I’d like to say “Don’t give up on the Church.” I understand the frustration of wondering how long it takes for new ideas to be accepted or for change to happen, but the denomination I know best has always come around. Mike Yaconelli, whose son I have already mentioned, was a speaker, writer and founder of Youth Specialties. I

had watched him from afar for years and seen him as a church cynic, critic and rebel. He was all that, but in his later years Mike was also a pastor, a pastor of a church, as he described it, “for people who hated church”. I joined Mike on a prayer retreat just a few months before he died and I saw him in his pastoral role. I think he always knew that there would always be a place for a shepherd, there would always be a place for the flock, and there would always be a need for an organized faith community. My cynical, critical, rebellious friend needed the church and the church needed him. You and I need the church and the church needs us.

*Jason Sivewright*

The church is the bride of Christ. No matter how much she may stray. I hear people my age discuss the church as if it can be “done right”. I am not sure what that means but closely related to this statement is always the feeling that the church has not fulfilled its role or has not lived up to expectations. I know this because I have felt this way myself. I have felt like turning away when I was hurt deeply by the church, but have come to understand that these thoughts are not only unproductive but stand in direct opposition to a system that Jesus believed in.

In every area of ministry that I have stumbled into I have stood by these words and it has blown me away. I do not know how theologically sound this is but here goes: PREPARE. Prepare like the Spirit will not move and then watch in awe as God blesses your preparation far beyond what you could ever hope or imagine.