

A GENERATIONS CONVERSATION
George Lyons and Kara Lyons-Pardue

Question #1 *What is your current role?*

George Lyons

I have been a professor of New Testament for thirty-two years. My last 18 years have been at Northwest Nazarene University. For the past decade I have also had the overload responsibility of managing the Wesley Center Online website (<http://wesley.nnu.edu>). For the past four years I have also served as a General Editor for the New Beacon Bible Commentary with oversight of the New Testament volumes.

Kara Lyons-Pardue

I am working on my dissertation at Princeton Theological Seminary. During my studies, I have had the privilege of serving as a teaching fellow in several Bible courses. Currently, I assist my dissertation advisor in two classes, The Parables of Jesus and The Biblical and Shakespearean Visions. I also get to teach Sunday school to twenty ninth-graders along with my husband and three other members of our local church.

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

George Lyons

Education was not a part of my family tradition. But my parents always urged me to get all the education I could so I would not end up with the dead-end jobs they were obliged to have. My home church led me to expect a sense of divine calling that never materialized for me. Voices in the dark and handwriting on the wall were never part of my experience. A remarkable second grade teacher (Mrs. Larson) and an outstanding high school teacher (Mr. Pryn) probably explain why I wanted to be a teacher. My fascination with science led me to major in chemistry in college. Despite good grades, I hated the labs and could not imagine spending the rest of my life doing this kind of work. But I loved my required Freshman Bible and Sophomore Theology classes at my regional Nazarene college—Olivet. This and my success at teen Bible-quizzing in high school (compensation for total incompetence in sports) probably led me to thinking about teaching Bible, particularly New Testament, in a liberal arts Christian college setting. So I changed majors and the rest is history.

Kara Lyons-Pardue

My inclusion in this series “Generations” is a big clue to my interest in the field of biblical literature. My father is a New Testament scholar. Initially, this “family business” was one to which I was either too resistant or too oblivious to pursue. I had always known I wanted to be a teacher, just as all of my role models—my parents, Sunday school teachers, and public school teachers—were. The grade levels and subjects I planned to teach grew and changed along with my interests: from kindergarten to art, then from German language to English literature. In college, religion and philosophy classes brought out my joy for learning and passion to excel. While my dad’s New Testament classes were among my favorites, it took moving to seminary and gaining a little distance to finally acknowledge that path.

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

George Lyons

The normative authority of the Bible for Christian faith and practice makes its study foundational for the rest of the theological disciplines. Wesleyan primitivism inevitably leads us to our historical roots as the people of God, to the story preserved in the Bible.

Kara Lyons-Pardue

Christian Scripture, for better or worse, is arguably the most influential set of writings in world history. That fact alone makes it worthwhile reading for educated persons. Reading and interpreting the Bible as faithful followers of Christ, however, is a matter of devotion and continual responsibility in the life of faith seeking understanding. The New Testament is misunderstood and manipulated by Christians and non-Christians alike, making the task of truthfully interpreting biblical texts a vital one. The ever-expanding field of study and our ever-changing world context make the exegetical task a lively one.

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

George Lyons

When I began my academic studies of the New Testament, the historical critical approach was at its zenith. My appreciation for it led me to be held in suspicion by some in the Church during my years in seminary and doctoral studies. But it was during these years that voices within the discipline began calling attention to the bankruptcy of a method that had contributed largely irrelevant, if not counterproductive, antiquarian trivia to the church. My Wesleyan sensibilities never allowed me to be content with historical study as an end in itself. The guild of biblical scholarship underwent a sea-change during my years as teacher, as literary and reader-centered interests came to dominate the landscape. As a result, I found myself something of a “dinosaur” (according to my former students who are now colleagues), defending the continuing importance of familiarity with the world behind the text. So I suppose I have made a career of deflecting attacks from those on my right and left who failed to appreciate my attempt to find middle ground between the extremes.

Kara Lyons-Pardue

One of the “sea-changes” to which my father refers above is manifest in popular culture as “postmodernism” or “relativism.” While many Christian voices decry the cultural shift to relativism as dangerous for the authority of Scripture, it has brought increased freedom to biblical interpreters within the academic discipline. No longer is reading with investment as a person of faith tantamount to an unscientific bias. Each reader’s lens and context constructs her reality, but reading Scripture through the eyes of faith can no longer be lampooned as naïve. To my view, it is indisputable that our context makes a difference to our readings of texts. I read Scripture as a believer in the God to whom I believe Scripture testifies, which grounds the very reasons I turn to the Bible to ask questions of life, faith, and the Church.

The scholarly discipline of New Testament Studies is no longer widely accepted as a matter of mere academic curiosity. Justifiably or not, many in the guild have foretold the discipline’s death. For the church, however, biblical studies cannot become passé or irrelevant.

As I see it, believing scholars are just the sort whose ongoing engagement with sacred texts, whether technical, theoretical, or theological, is still in demand.

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

George Lyons

During my years as a teacher I have witnessed an exponential growth in biblical illiteracy. Most of my students continue to come from church homes. But, with the exception of some Bible quizzers, it is safe to assume that they know next to nothing about the Bible. They have discussed relationships and relevant hot-button issues in their youth groups, but have almost no biblical resources to address them. As a rule, their youth pastors and pastors have given lip-service to biblical sermons, but have generally taken a text only to depart from it. So my students come taking for granted increasingly higher claims about the inerrancy of the Bible, but with almost no awareness of what the Bible actually says or how it says it. As a result, I find myself a part of a Church that is becoming increasingly fundamentalist in theory but increasingly removed from the message of the Bible in practice.

Kara Lyons-Pardue

I, too, am appalled at the biblical illiteracy of many of my elders, peers, and students. This is broader than a simple Nazarene problem. I wonder what cultural, artistic, ethical, and faith heritage is lost in the simple ignorance of the biblical story. I blame, partially, the way in which our pastors and laity have been educated to view Scripture: as a treasury of isolated truths for the plucking. One need not undertake the difficult task of entering the biblical world or tracing God's interaction with God's people from Abraham to Paul, when quoting a single verse serves a checkmate in a moral debate.

George Lyons

Maybe it is just the cynicism that comes with becoming a sexagenarian. Maybe it is just a matter of perception. Maybe it is a reality. But as I see it, far too many traditional-aged American students seem to take a college education as an entitlement. This has made it increasingly necessary to sell them on the importance of theological education. Or maybe it's just harder for us sexagenarians to do the "song and dance" needed to persuade them of its importance than when we were thirty years younger.

Kara Lyons-Pardue

My dad and I are both white, middle class North Americans. I wonder whether the places in our world where the gospel message is bringing in believers and causing a growth in churches might have a different story to tell in terms of biblical literacy and the potential for higher education in biblical studies.

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

George Lyons

It has been my privilege to teach at Nazarene colleges, Bible schools, and theological colleges in numerous international settings during sabbaticals and school vacations—in Australia, Thailand, China, Germany, Bulgaria, Portugal, and the United Kingdom. In recent years I have also taught

a lot of older students from all over the world in my online masters' classes. Most students from outside the United States and adult learners seem to appreciate what a privilege it is to get an advanced theological education.

Kara Lyons-Pardue

I am hopeful that we who are teachers (or almost-teachers) might learn from the growing in world areas where people have, formerly, only been “recipients” of Western education. I am hopeful to learn from my fellow women ministers who have the much more difficult task of leading congregations.

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

George Lyons

When I did my doctoral studies at Emory University they had lower admission standards than they do today. I am not sure I would have been admitted if today's standards had been in force. Nevertheless, I am convinced that my students are far better prepared by the time they graduate than I was when I was their age. This is, in part, because they had better teachers than I did. If my students who are now teaching or will teach do their jobs, their students will have far better than they did. So it is; and so it should be.

Kara Lyons-Pardue

See you in class.