

RESPONSE TO GORDON SMITH'S
"FORMATION FOR MINISTRY IN A SECULAR AGE"

Susan Carole

I appreciate this paper's incisive treatment of the challenges and opportunities facing the church in the post-Christian world. Gordon Smith has courageously uncovered the realities of our situation, as well as our unique opportunity--to identify new avenues of influence, and to educate our leaders accordingly. In other words, he calls us to make capital of marginalization. His argument for attentiveness to particular elements of scripture and tradition is compelling. The call to interiority is itself in harmony with the prophetic life. I appreciate his suggestion of balanced emphasis on the sacramental, evangelical and Pentecostal, so appealing to the Wesleyan spirit. It seems to me, from my standpoint as theologian, educator and pastor in the margins, that in addition to drawing on the prophetic witness, the narrative of the New Testament church might be instructive. For while the exilic context offers practical wisdom for faithful existence, the New Testament offers insight into the church's identity and mission. This paper shows that it is vital for us to be overt and explicit in affirming the church's identity and mission in the formation of leaders.

Dr. Smith points to the prophetic witness as a source of wisdom, emphasizing that the people of God in exile then, share commonalities with the people of God in exile now. He suggests three avenues of action: seek the flourishing of the city, pursue socio-economic justice and live in awareness of the presence of God. But the underlying question, which I think is critical in the formation of leaders is this – who are the people in exile, and why are we engaged in these three avenues of action? The New Testament provides the *who* and *why* for the *what* – the rationale for the pursuit of *shalom*. I do not mean to suggest that we are not attentive to identity and mission, but rather, that these are usually implicit. A church in exile needs to explicitly affirm its identity and mission for several reasons. A strong connection between *who*, *why* and *what* would foster the church's health and success. Strong awareness of our identity in Christ would abrogate the sense of isolation associated with exile. Constant remembering of the presence and action of the Holy Spirit in and through the church's fellowship and labor would strengthen and motivate the church in coping with opposition and persecution. Moreover, remembering identity and mission not as an innovation to respond to the current situation, but as enduring truth grounded in the apostles as well as the prophets is the source of perseverance.

Explicit connection between identity and mission on the one hand, and the pursuit of *shalom* on the other, would circumvent reductionism. This would allow us to engage in social justice not as an end in itself, but for the sake of Christ, with the certitude that those we serve are best served when our labor draws them to Christ. In other words, we are ensuring that our endeavor would not collapse into charitable activity, community development and social reform when we function within the New Testament framework of identity and mission. When Israel was instructed to celebrate the Passover, an important element of the ritual was to make room for the question '*why are we doing this.*' Likewise, we need to prepare our leaders to raise and answer the question – *why are we doing this?* For, exilic existence requires that we live in continual awareness of the power of the Gospel to restore and elevate humanity, that we remain fully persuaded that *shalom* is in the Name of Jesus alone, so that we safe-guard praxis from devolving into yet another human endeavor, from forgetting our God-given edge, the Holy Spirit.

What are implications for formation? Without seeking to rewrite curriculum today, I only suggest that we could include a dimension of biblical theology to courses in practical theology, and a practical dimension in courses in biblical and systematic theology. It is the case that is already being implemented. But it would serve us well to make this marriage of conceptual and practical our *modus operandi* in curriculum development. Curriculum could also include *apologia* to cultured despisers. The persecuted New Testament church boldly proclaimed Jesus Christ. How do we say who Jesus is in this secular age? This question can be explored in a course on post-Christian apologetics, in which study of the pre-Constantine documents can be instructive, as Dr. Smith suggests. Even as we train for relevance in the post-Christian world, we must also train for knowing and communicating distinctiveness. When Arius said *there was a then when the Son was not*, the church used available language and concepts to distinguish orthodoxy from Arianism. The final product was the doctrine of the triune God. Likewise, formation for this age needs to put contemporary concepts to use in sharply defining who Jesus is, and who we become in Him.

Formation that connects *who* and *why* to *what* may also fruitfully engage our Wesleyan roots in a new key. First, the Wesleyan tradition affirms God's prevenient action in the world as well as God's ongoing salvific work in restoring persons to the *imago dei*. Exploration of what God has already done, and is doing in this regard would help us develop a spirit of discernment and give us insight into choosing our battles. Where is the Holy Spirit at work, and what is He doing? One part of our curriculum can be developed to train leaders in spiritual discernment. Second, the Wesleyan spirit is catholic. For Wesley,

Every wise man ...will allow others the same liberty of thinking which he desires they should allow him; and will no more insist on their embracing his opinions, than he would have them to insist on his embracing theirs. He bears with those who differ from him, and only asks him with whom he desires to unite in love that single question, "Is thy heart right, as my heart is with thy heart"¹

We can train leaders in developing a catholic spirit, to seek out ministry partners in other traditions who might also be aware of the signs of the times, and have recognized the need for sharper focus on the church's common denominator – the proclamation of Jesus Christ so that all may know Him. And, a not unimportant, practical aspect of exilic existence is the need for fellowship. I am reminded of our brief time in West Africa, many years ago. In the Côte d'Ivoire, we were only five Nazarene missionaries. A sense of isolation compelled us seek fellowship with believers of other traditions. We pushed past our denominational lines and retrieved our genuine bond in Christ. The church in exile is much like this. Curriculum needs to include the idea of a catholic spirit to help our leaders develop the mind-set and skills for fellowship and collaboration that transcend denominational lines.

Finally, a few brief remarks as a pastor in the margins. First, pursuit of socio-economic justice requires practical training in community development, and relationship building. Second, comfort and hope are only real when preached in the context of the gospel, and social responsibility is only sustainable when it is the outcome of holiness, grounded in the fellowship of the Father and the Son by the Spirit. Third, while we recognize that cultured despisers abound in the secular age, we are hopeful. In the margins, we are not alone. In the margins are other

marginalized groups, who have ceased to trust political systems and social institutions. This is the field white with harvest.

¹Wesley, Catholic Spirit, Sermon 39. <http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-sermons-of-john-wesley-1872-edition/sermon-39-catholic-spirit>