

MILDRED WYNKOOP --TEACHER EXTRAORDINAIRE

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Introduction

Some people seem destined to be trailblazers. Lewis and Clark, Clara Barton and Martin Luther King, Jr., to name a few, were trailblazers living on new paths. Another trailblazer to be added to that list was Dr. Mildred Bangs Wynkoop. She was a trailblazer and rebel in her own right. Her path was a path of many firsts: first woman as President of the Wesleyan Theological Society; first woman Religion Professor at a Nazarene university; first woman Religion Department Chair at a Nazarene university; first woman Dean of the Japanese Nazarene Seminary; and one of the first influential theologians in the Wesleyan Holiness Movement. She described herself as a trailblazer at heart. “I think best when I am fighting for my convictions even out there where the personal support is weak. I guess I’m a frontier at heart” (Wynkoop, personal correspondence, File #2223-14). She later identified herself as a boundary pusher. “There are several places to stand in the church from the absolute center out to the growing edge. I find myself happier in the pioneer area” (Wynkoop, personal notes, File #1427-4). This pioneering spirit appeared throughout all of areas of her life, even at the intersection of her educational philosophy and her theological beliefs.

Wynkoop’s earliest recollection as a small child was sitting on the front row of Seattle Church of the Nazarene listening to preachers. She sat on the front row eagerly watching and absorbing everything that went on. She was inexplicitly drawn to the fellowship of believers and the many preachers who graced the pulpits at that time. She desperately wanted the preachers to explain to her and help her understand what they were preaching. It was then and there she prayed, “Dear God, why doesn’t the preacher say things so I can understand them? When I get big Lord, if I am a preacher, I’ll explain things to people” (Wynkoop, personal history, p.1, File #1427-3). From this point, she felt a sense of calling on her life. “The sense of a call was always present in my mind. There had never been a blinding flash of light or a supernatural voice but only a deep conviction that God had called me into His service” (Wynkoop, personal history, p.1, File #1427-3). The call to explain things to people guided her decisions and actions her entire life.

Her first foray into teaching came while she was a pastor trying to revitalize her ministry. While Wynkoop and her husband, Ralph, were pastoring a small church in Brentwood, Oregon, she sensed a sort of “burnedoutness” and began to seek a radical renewal of herself. “In a hungry search for a life of deeper meaning, I slipped over to a little Baptist seminary within a few blocks of the Nazarene church we pastored and timidly inquired about the possibility of sitting in a few days on the class in Greek” (Wynkoop, personal history, p.1, file # 1427-3). She convinced them to let her sit in on the class for no credit and came to class five weeks into the semester... and she flourished. She was totally captivated by the riches of the biblical God opened to her in the Greek language.

At the same time, Western Evangelical Seminary was in its second year of existence. “I had no idea of going back to school, but wherever I could get some Greek to open the Biblical depth to me drew me like a magnet” Wynkoop stated. (Wynkoop, personal history, p.2, file #1427-3). She enrolled a week after classes began and it was discovered that some of the students had not taken Greek in college. The dean asked her to instruct them in the Greek language. She called them the Greekless. She found her niche. The pastor with a teaching heart

found her calling. From there, she finished her Master of Divinity at Western Evangelical and a Master of Science in Education and a Doctorate of Theology at Northern Baptist Theological Seminary in Chicago. She was fifty years old and finally starting her teaching career. Just as she enjoyed, her own teaching methodology and philosophy would have her on the outskirts of traditional education. Her view of education was somewhat unique and boundary pushing for the 1950's- 60's.

Wynkoop's Educational Philosophy

Wynkoop's educational philosophy grounded in her view of educational practice. For Wynkoop, education was a journey of discovery and experience. Teaching never described an activity of rote learning and memorization. Education defined a process of molding a student to see outside of him or herself to the world around them. "The essence of education is to develop the powers of discrimination and taste. The more properly one is able to evaluate all the experiences and facts of life and choose the most suitable, the more highly educated he is" (Wynkoop, August 1939, p. 10). Thus, for Wynkoop, the main purpose of education included maturation of the student, not in terms of age, but in terms of ideas and world views.

For Wynkoop, ignorance and maturity appeared as opposite extremes. These two terms relate to a student's self and how that self relates to the world. Ignorance or immaturity represented the "self" as the center of life, much like the ego-centric world of a two-year-old. Maturity or being educated envisioned the "self" as other focused, world focused, and idea focused. Education then, describes an enlarging of the self to include other views and voices. This vision explained why Wynkoop encouraged questions, differing opinions, and debate in her classrooms. Ultimately, Wynkoop felt education should be holistic in nature. Education serves as a process of putting the pieces of information together to form a view of the world outside of the self.

The purpose and process of education could be illustrated by the experience of "looking through the lens of a fine telescope. When young and necessarily ignorant, expanding life looks bewildering, complex, confused, out-of-focus. Various parts of the vision stand discretely from other parts. There may be two or more distinct pictures, similar in outline, but unrelated to each other. As we adjust the lens properly, the who view gradually comes into focus, clear and unified. The view has depth and beauty and meaning" (Wynkoop, April 1963, p. 24). Education then describes the creating and designing of a holistic view of the world. Unity and wholeness in life and thought reflects Wynkoop's goal in the classroom. The main action of a teacher then seeks to guide students into maturity in all areas of their life; spiritually, intellectually, morally, and socially.

This wholistic view of education cultivated a new vision of the content to be taught. Information was the teacher's tool to help the student progress from ignorance to maturity. Wynkoop believed all distinct academic disciplines have their own set of values, beliefs, and their own foundation information that must be taught to each student, for them to develop a holistic view of the world. It was up to the teacher to understand and teach those basic values and information issues. But the teacher's role also demonstrated to the student how each academic discipline overlaps with other disciplines. "The teacher's moral responsibility is first, to know his field and [to have] enough general knowledge to put his 'field' in a proper perspective to the whole of life, and secondly to competently select the truly important things out of the field and to show how these things bring truth into focus and third to break up the

important things into digestible chunks for the student to chew on, and help him chew the tough bites” (Wynkoop, April 1963, p. 32). The teacher served as the expert of his or her field, so students could ask questions and experiment with ideas, and served as a facilitator with an interdisciplinary view of academic disciplines as students grow their wholistic view of the world.

With her view of education embracing a unifying force, holistically bringing together the parts of the student with the information being presented, it was only natural that Wynkoop envisioned the education and curricular structure of educational institutions to be interdisciplinary in nature. She illustrated this approach as she developed the curricular structure of the Japan Christian Junior College and the Japanese Theological Seminary while she was the Dean. To divide information into distinct fields or subjects negated the goal of education as a unifying activity. Wynkoop believed there was an “inter-relationship of truth at the deeper level. Each department in the Seminary is but a door into the same general subject--life. Each subject finds itself treading on the toes of every other subject” (Wynkoop, November 1961, p. 6). This view of education was not accepted by those who wanted to maintain a clear distinction between academic departments, but Wynkoop truly believed each department should find itself intermeshed with other departments. She believed for students to mature into an educated person, they had to see the correlation between subjects and departments.

The teaching methodology practiced and advocated by Wynkoop further illustrates her holistic view of education. First, the teaching method of education must serve and support the purpose of unifying the entire curriculum into an integrated whole. Each lesson, assignment, lecture, and course must contribute something to every other course at the institution and help the student see the “big picture” of education. Secondly, fundamental courses must lay a foundation for the following classes. The teacher must understand how their field of study fits into a general base of information. Thirdly, the method must take into consideration the personality growth of the student. The new studies of psychology and personality coming out of societal research of the 50’s-60’s fascinated Wynkoop. “The newer understanding of human personality has made profound changes in teaching methods. Personality is not a blank page upon which the teacher inscribes knowledge. The self is not a passive, empty vessel into which one pours information. Personality is rather a dynamic self which must be awakened and made curious about the things it ought to know and hungry enough for it to begin to stretch its capacities out to lay hold on it” (Wynkoop, April 1963, p. 33). Finally, a teaching methodology must include a practical approach to the subjects. This was a very important point for Wynkoop. Teachers must make their disciplines and methodologies practical to the student. In doing so, the teacher will awaken that dynamic personality willing to be engaged in scholarly pursuit. This will bring the student into full participation of the goal of education--to bring all of life into clear, meaningful focus and foster the development of maturity.

Wynkoop’s teaching methodology then shaped her activity and persona in the classroom. Wynkoop felt she had a particular role to play in the classroom. Often it was the “gadfly” of Socrates fame. She arranged the lessons for each class around a particular question or provocative statement. These questions provided the road to the true topic of discussion. She defended her educational methodology in a handout given to students in a course at the Nazarene Theological Seminary in Kansas City. “My teaching philosophy is not to dispense answers before the question is clear. To locate a question properly is about 90% of the learning procedure. And there is no neat way to do that. Every time I started to dispense answers half of the class began to wave its arms skyward. That was when a question nerve was touched and that

was good” (Wynkoop, May 1980, p.1). This teaching methodology achieved its purpose. It made students think, argue, debate, and examine the issue at hand. Anger and bitterness were not part of the discussion though. She used her calm and gentle voice to guide the students to the place she wanted them to be.

Her educational philosophy brought into question not only the traditional teaching methodologies of her day, but also the traditional view of a student as a passive, memorizing robot who can only reiterate what was just told to them. Wynkoop learned how to think critically and deeply from conversations with her father early in life and she expected her students to do the same with conversations with her. In her classroom, knowledge was the ability to use the information being presented to discern and clarify and think critically and deeply about preconceived ideas. Knowledge described the activity of enlarging a view of the world. For Wynkoop, knowledge was a verb, not a noun. The ability to provide comparison and contrast, clarification and denunciation of ideas, made students knowledgeable. Students were to use the information presented in class to inform themselves and create a vision of the world outside of themselves. This changing of ideas is difficult for some. “Students who come to places of learning are ignorant (limited opportunity), narrow minded (limited interests), shallow minded (limited information), and prejudiced (limited understanding). They are afraid of new ideas because new ideas threaten their premature and immature security. They ‘know it all’ because they are terrified by the unknown” (Wynkoop, April 1963, p. 33).

It would seem Wynkoop possessed a dim view of the students, but she did not. She saw potential in each one of her students. She hoped that in engaging students in open debate of ideas, the students would then begin to question and clarify their own beliefs. She wanted students to struggle with information, question what was being said, and to align or change their own ideas according to the information being presented. “I would rather have a student who pesters me with questions until I’m glad when the bell rings than to try to arouse from his lethargy one who doesn’t know that there are problems and would be afraid to admit their existence if he met one” (Wynkoop, April 1963, p. 32).

This expectation of student involvement in the learning culture of the classroom proved hard for some. The process required much from the teacher and the student. Her classroom incorporated a daily struggle to confront students with ideas not yet understood in order to help them develop into critically thinking persons. Wynkoop wanted each student to approach the classroom fully aware they would have to question, clarify, examine, and maybe change their own ideas in comparison to the ideas being presented in class. The process helped the student develop a holistic view of the world and their place in that world. To enable the student to achieve this, Wynkoop expected students to be adaptable to new ideas. “We will have a measure of adaptability, the capacity to criticize ourselves, patience, emotional stability curiosity and grace. The weather will be bumpy.... Without this adaptability the class will be in trouble.” She contended her subject was “not a new theology, but a study of the terms and concepts finding the original intent of them” (Wynkoop, class notes, files #1439-15). “Original intent” of a topic was very important to Wynkoop. She stressed the importance of reading and researching in primary texts. It was in the primary texts she felt the original intent of the author could be understood. It was in the examination of original intent the chunk of truth could be found. Whether it was interpretation of the Bible or Wesley’s theology, back to the original text was the cry of Wynkoop in her teaching methodology.

Besides adaptability, Wynkoop required her students to come to class with an open mind. She believed the teacher, as the expert in the field, understands what the student should learn and that the learning process is a journey of discovery for both the student and the teacher. The journey for the teacher and the student is to “realize our interdependence and maintain our distinctiveness--in the love of God and enlarge the view of narrow minded and to give the student world side sympathies--a big heart” (Wynkoop, file #2227-23). She expected the student to be open to what she had to say and to where she would lead in an open and relational dialogue together. Process and relational were two very important words and experiences for Wynkoop in her classroom. She taught and modeled that education is a process from immaturity to maturity and always done in a relationship with others.

Wynkoop's Theological Framework

Echoes of Wynkoop's educational philosophy appear in her theological framework. Just as Wynkoop believed love and holiness represented two sides of the same coin, Wynkoop's educational philosophy melds into her theological perspective of Wesley. Many important beliefs and philosophical precepts found in Wynkoop's educational philosophy can also be seen in her interpretation of Wesley's theology. It could be said that, for Wynkoop, education and theology represented two sides of the same coin.

Original intent proved very important to Wynkoop in understanding and teaching theological principles in a practical way. That is why she remained so passionate about her studies in Greek and Hebrew. She felt returning to the original text yielded incredible insight into the intent of the authors. Reading and studying biblical texts in the original languages opened new worlds on thought and perspective to Wynkoop. She took this same perspective when it came to understanding John Wesley's theology. Instead of trying to understand Wesley's theology in comparison to other theologians of his time and current biblical scholars, Wynkoop went to the original text. Instead of being reactive in nature and trying to use Wesley's teachings to correct the perceived errors of other theologians Wynkoop took a different approach. Her studies led her to examine Wesley in a more proactive and new way. Her theological development flowed from her own interpretation of Wesley as she studied his writings, not reacting on ideas from other theologians. While examining Wesley's theology she saw things, ideas, and concepts differently than those around her. She believed her interpretation of Wesley's teachings were calling the church back to its Wesleyan roots.

Wynkoop's educational philosophy centered on the unifying aspect of learning. Information, knowledge, ideas, concepts, educational experiences when taken all together helped a student weave a unifying or holistic picture of the world and ultimately the truth in the world. Wynkoop also sees a unifying aspect of Wesley's theology. She believed Wesley's theology proposed a holistic and unifying purpose for a relationship with God. Wynkoop believed that some interpretations of Wesley's theology, during her time, had strayed too far left or too far right of its initial message and she felt her mission was to “restore a Wesley Wesleyanism [for] today” (Wynkoop, Spring 1979, p. 3). Some interpretations included perspectives described as Calvinism-Wesleyanism, Lutheran-Wesleyanism, Social-Gospel Wesleyanism and so on. Each of these perspectives took one or two aspects of Wesley's theology and encapsulated all of Wesley's theology into that one aspect. Some highlighted Wesley's doctrine of sanctification. Some perspectives highlighted his call for social action. Wynkoop saw a danger in this splintering of Wesley's theology. Wynkoop believed the greatness of Wesley's theology was discovered when his ideas were taken as a whole, not in parts. With this in mind, Wynkoop

interpreted Wesley's unifying theological concept as "holiness equals love". Holiness, or a becoming like God, is loving. First loving God with a whole heart and then man in like terms. Love, Wynkoop believed, was the catalyst for all of Wesley's theology. "When holiness and love are put together, the analogy of the two sides of the coin would be closer to the truth. Neither side can be both sides at the same time. Sides are not equated, but the obverse side is as essential to its existence as the face. Love is the essential inner character of holiness, and holiness does not exist apart from love. That is how close they are, and in a certain sense they can be said to be the same thing" (Wynkoop, 1972, p. 24). Because Wynkoop saw love as the vehicle for holiness; the beginning and the end in Wesley's theology, love is what defines the Wesley's theological perspective Wynkoop taught. Love is found in personal relationships, is a process, dynamic and growing and it draws all part of life together in a unified unit. Love according to Wynkoop, is where Wesley begins his distinct theological perspective and where he ends it in practical life. The title of Wynkoop's seminal work, *A Theology of Love* makes sense when Wynkoop's perspective of the importance of a holistic and unifying theme is considered. Wynkoop believed her mission was to interpret his theology in a new, holistic way to give the "big picture" of his theology and for Wynkoop, that was looking at the world through the lens of love to God and to man.

Education needed to be practical for students to engage and take notice of the topics to be discussed. This is why Wynkoop centered lessons around current topics, and questions about current problems and concerns. That is how Wynkoop also interpreted Wesley's theology. Wynkoop believed Wesley was a practical theologian. Wesley tried to bridge the gap between theology of the Church and real, practical everyday life. She reasoned if Wesley's theology solved many social problems of his day, his theology could solve problems created by modernity [and post-modernity], the rise of technology, the splintering of the social fabric of life and the changing family dynamics. Wynkoop believed theology was not developed in a vacuum, but altered and changed by the prevailing philosophical debates of the current time period. For her, theology had to be practical. She envisioned Wesley's theology as the starting point for investigation and discovery and was not afraid to question, probe and research Wesley's ideas. She modeled and compelled her students to do the same thing.

Wynkoop was a life-long learner. She believed as a teacher she joined together with the students in a journey of learning each time they stepped into a classroom. Education, for her was a process, that continued every day. She also saw Wesley's holiness theology as a process of developing a relationship with God and with others. According to Wynkoop, once a relationship with God is established it needed to be nourished, tended to, cared for, and looked after on a daily, even moment to moment basis. But that could be said to be the same for learning also. This process perspective of education and holiness is rooted in her entire sanctification experience.

In the late 30's and early 40's several shifts in society and within the culture of the Church of the Nazarene caused Wynkoop to question her call. The changing role of women in ministry and the rise of fundamentalism affected her greatly causing bitterness and disillusionment to take root. She knew she needed to do something, to get rid of her anger and bitterness.

One day in a desperate hour of spiritual need, when I saw that the service I rendered to God was spoiled by my own bitter selfishness, the Holy Spirit led me patiently down into the deepest recess of my personality to show me my own unyielded heart. It was not a

pretty sight. I tried to run away and cover the ugliness with the old self-righteous excuses but I could not get away. I did not pray for sanctification, nor a blessing. I prayed to be made conformable to God's will at the deepest level of personality. The answer to that prayer was wrapped up in a decision of obedience and a commitment to God that cut across my self-will like a knife. The cross, my cross, so long despised and rejected was presented to me again. I took it deliberately with full conscious awareness of what I did. The whole transaction was a revolution in more integrity to which every previous step in grace had been a preparation. (Wynkoop, personal history, p.5, File #1427-3)

Wynkoop would later describe this experience as an experience in a process of depth. She did not experience a different type of salvation and grace but the same as her first invitation to join God in His mission, but a deeper experience of that same grace. This perspective of life, learning, and even salvation as a process can be seen throughout her life.

Conclusion

Which came first, Wynkoop's educational philosophy or her theological perspective? Which one affects the other? Wynkoop would tell us that it is all one of the same. Her theological perspective enriched her educational philosophy, and her educational philosophy deepened her theological perspective. Wynkoop's legacy can still be seen today. She revitalized the call for scholarship within the Church of the Nazarene. Wynkoop understood scholarship and growth go hand in hand; something she pushed all her students to understand. Secondly, her interpretation of Wesley's theology pointed the way for a "whole Wesleyan" view. Thirdly, she encouraged open debate of theological ideas. In doing so, she allowed her students to question the already preconceived "Nazarene" theological ideas. Finally, Wynkoop transformed the world for all future women students and theologians. For Wynkoop, gender was not an issue. She felt all students, male and female, were called to "do theology."

"Doing theology" was what Wynkoop wanted to do as a child sitting on the front pew of her much beloved church and it was what she devoted her life to do. The theological and educational scene within the Church of the Nazarene will be forever changed because Wynkoop "did theology."

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