

EDUCATION AS A MISSIONAL TOOL: THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR THE PARTICIPATION OF THE CHURCH OF THE NAZARENE IN GOD'S MISSION

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Introduction

Christian history shows that education is not just a transfer of knowledge but the very expression of the *missio Dei*, God's mission. Since the first communities, teaching the truth of the gospel has been at the heart of the church (just as Jesus himself made himself a "master" with his disciples). On the theological level, God is a God "sent": the Father sends the Son, the Son sends the Spirit, and the Spirit sends the Church. As a result, the mission "proceeds from the very nature of the triune God."¹ Christian education participates in this dynamic: it reveals the living God ("sending"), who communicates his wisdom to reform hearts and minds. Thus, teaching is not only about imparting religious information, but about embodying the promised salvation. For example, from the perspective of the incarnation, God encounters humanity in material realities (the Son made flesh) to restore it; likewise, every act of teaching is the bearer of the divine Word, incarnate in the life of the teacher and the learner.²

Christian education is, therefore, a space where the truth of God becomes alive, "incarnated" in the educational relationship. This vision of education as a missional work leads to a rethinking of its theological and ecclesiological foundations. What does it mean to form in the name of the triune God? How does each lesson participate in God's redemptive work? What is the place of this formation in the holy vocation of the Church of the Nazarene? Through this article, we explore these questions. We will first see that mission "flows from God" (*missio Dei*) and embodies his Trinitarian nature, then how education is integrated into this divine mission, before considering the educational vocation proper to the Church of the Nazarene and drawing from it a theology of contemporary missional education.

God's Mission: The Theological Foundation of the Church's Action

The Missio Dei: God on Mission in the World

The concept of *missio Dei* affirms that mission is first and foremost the work of God himself. Rather than being a human initiative, mission finds its source and meaning in the Trinitarian life of God.³ At the great missionary conferences of the twentieth century (notably Willingen in 1952), this truth was emphasized: "Mission proceeds from God and is deeply rooted in the three persons of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit."⁴ In other words, God the Father

¹ Baik, Chung-Hyun, and Sinwoong Kim, "*Missio Dei*." *St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology*, edited by Brendan N. Wolfe et al., University of St Andrews, 2024.
<https://www.saet.ac.uk/Christianity/MissioDei> (Accessed November 25, 2025).

² Becky Hunsberger, "What Does the Incarnation Have to Do with Teaching?" *TeachBeyond*, 27 mars 2019. <https://teachbeyond.org/article/what-does-the-incarnation-have-to-do-with-teaching> (Consulté le 26 Novembre 2025).

³ Baik and Kim, "*Missio Dei*."

⁴ Ibid.

“sends” the Son into the world, the Son “sends” the Spirit, and together they send the church on mission. As David Bosch noted, it is a question of integrating mission “in the context of the doctrine of the Trinity, not of ecclesiology.”⁵ Thus, the living God is “the God sent,” and the divine mission can only be understood from the communal intimacy of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. As John Stott writes, “Mission stems first and foremost from the nature of God himself, not from the Church: the living God of the Bible is the God sent.”⁶ For Stott, this Trinitarian understanding implies that “the primary mission is that of God,” because it is he “who sent his prophets, his Son, his Spirit.”⁷ This perspective thus reorients the gaze: mission is not born of the human or institutional will but of the will of a God who loves and gives himself.

Historically, this emphasis on God on mission has been striking. The theologian Karl Barth, as early as 1932, “initiated the connection between mission and the doctrine of the Trinity” at a missionary congress in Germany.⁸ It follows that “God is both the sender and the sent” in all human missionary action⁹; God gives himself as the message of the mission, according to the words of the Willingen documents (1952), affirming that the mission finds its source in God. In short, *missio Dei* means that every human missionary attempt must be subordinated to divine dispatch; the church is not the starting point, but the place of participation in the mission of the Triune God.¹⁰

The Church’s Participation in the Missio Dei

The church, in this perspective, is not the initiator of the mission but its instrument and witness. Christ gives an example and an explicit command of this: after the resurrection, he says to his disciples, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you” (John 20:21). This command makes mission the very identity of the church, not just one mandate among others. By delegating his own mission in this way, Jesus entrusts the continuation of his redemptive work in the world to the church.

This ecclesial participation is manifested in many ways: through the preaching of the gospel, through service to the poor, through compassion for the suffering, and just as much by the education of disciples. In the Nazarene vision, reflecting God’s holiness means not only proclaiming his word, but also putting it into practice in the formation of believers. As the Willingen Conference in 1952 pointed out, “The Church is sent to every corner of the world; it must proclaim the reign of Christ in every place and every situation.”¹¹ This trait emphasizes that the church acts as God’s agent, not as the master of her mission. In other words, the church is “an instrument of what God accomplishes” (*missio Dei*), and not a place of missionary self-satisfaction.¹² Therefore, teaching God’s truth in the church, whether in Sunday school or in

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Baik and Kim, “*Missio Dei*.”

¹² Ibid.

community life, becomes an extension of Christ's incarnate word. Each lesson, each formation, is thus an ecclesial act, a moment in which the gospel continues to educate its people.

The Link between Holiness and Mission

In the Wesleyan tradition of holiness that inspires the Church of the Nazarene, personal holiness and mission are closely linked. To be holy is to be consecrated to God and "sent" to the world to act in his name. John Wesley himself emphasized this point in his sermon, "The General Propagation of the Gospel." He taught that personal holiness is a key element of world evangelism. According to him, if Christians lived fully in sanctification, "The nations would be attracted to Jesus by the deeds as well as by the words of God's people."¹³ In other words, lived holiness becomes a powerful missionary witness.

This idea is also reflected in the fundamental Nazarene doctrines. The *Founding Manifesto of the Church of the Nazarene* states: "Our mission in the world is not only to spread scriptural holiness as doctrine, but also to be an example of it.... Our people should watch over the development of holiness ... and its manifestation in everyday life."¹⁴ Thus, missional education is also a means of sanctification; it aims to form believers who embody God's love in their thoughts, words, and conduct. Education, therefore, prepares disciples capable of living holiness in all dimensions of their lives. Thus, for the Nazarene theology, holiness is a driving force of mission. Christian instruction is not neutral but aims to radiate the holiness of God and to transform lives in his image.

Education in the Perspective of God's Mission

Biblical Foundation of Missional Education

As early as the Old Testament, education is presented as the heart of the covenant. For example, in the *Shema* of Deuteronomy (6:6–7), God commands his people, "These commandments which I give you today shall be in your heart; you shall inculcate them in your children, and you shall speak of them when you sit in your house, when you walk on the road, when you lie down, and when you get up." Teaching here is an act of covenant and family fidelity: parents transmit God's will to the next generations, ensuring the spiritual and moral formation of the people.

In the New Testament, Jesus presents himself as "Rabbi" and teaches his disciples. He uses parables and preaching to gradually reveal the Kingdom of God to his disciples. At the end of his earthly ministry, Jesus entrusts the missionary mission to the apostles in the same educational spirit: "Go and make disciples of all nations ... and teach them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19–20). Education thus appears at the heart of the Christian mandate. It is not enough to proclaim factual good news, but to form disciples so that they understand and live the commandments of Christ. Each new generation must be instructed in the faith and how to follow Jesus. In this sense, education is constitutive of the Christian mission: it

¹³ Matt Friedman, "Holiness and God's Mission." *The Wesleyan Church*, July 13, 2025. <https://www.wesleyan.org/holiness-and-gods-mission> (Accessed November 25, 2025).

¹⁴ The Wesley Center Online, "Nazarene Manifesto, Chapter III." <https://wesley.nnu.edu/what-is-wesleyanism/nazarene-manifesto/nazarene-manifesto-chapter-iii/> (Consulté le 27 novembre 2025).

extends the work of formation that Christ himself has begun, ensuring that the people of God grow in conformity with the gospel.

Theological Foundation: A Pedagogy of the Kingdom of God

Theologically, educating in mission is tantamount to participating in the revelation and advancement of the Kingdom of God. Christian education is never neutral; it is imbued with biblical truth and aims at interior and community transformation in the image of the Kingdom. As the seventeenth-century Puritan philosopher John Milton wrote, “the end of learning is to repair the ruins of our first parents by regaining the knowledge of God... and, from this knowledge, to love God, to imitate him, to resemble him.”¹⁵ In other words, Christian education does not only seek to transmit intellectual data: its ultimate goal is that the learner truly knows God, loves him wholeheartedly, and bears similar fruit.

This educational process contributes to the sanctification of the believer; according to the Scriptures, intellectual renewal leads to the transformation of life (Romans 12:2). In fact, “be transformed by the renewal of your mind,” St. Paul asks, closely linking knowledge and the pious life. In the Trinitarian perspective, it is the Holy Spirit who ultimately serves as the true pedagogue of the faith (John 16:13): he leads the disciple in all truth and enables him to understand the profound things of God. Consequently, we can speak of a pedagogy of the Kingdom of God: Christian teachers transmit the truth as a gift of divine grace, and their classes are “places of grace” where the Spirit activates the word learned to generate faith and holiness. Education thus unites truth and love, faith and reason: it aims not only at mental instruction, but at integral formation.

The Education and Integral Formation of the Disciple

The ultimate goal of all missional education is the formation of a disciple according to the image of Christ. This formation is integral: it is not limited to the mind (intellectual formation) but touches the heart (spiritual life) and the hands (concrete commitment). To be a disciple is above all to learn from the Master to be like him (Luke 6:40). The Wesleyan pedagogy of “enabling grace” emphasizes this integration. Wesley identifies “means of grace” (prayers in communion, sacraments, Bible readings, service to others, etc.) to help the believer grow in both knowledge and holiness. In other words, intellectual growth must always be accompanied by moral and spiritual transformation. From this perspective, education is truly a sanctifying act; it frees the mind from ignorance, purifies the heart from prejudice, and prepares the believer to serve in righteousness. For example, the Bible teaches that “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (Proverbs 9:10). In other words, it is through learning rooted in the fear of God (respect and love) that the disciple acquires true knowledge and matures spiritually.

Thus, teaching biblical content is always accompanied by a call to live that content. In the Methodist and Nazarene traditions, faith and reason are not separated; knowledge serves new life in Christ. Missional education, therefore, aims to form the “all-new man” (Ephesians 4:24): a believer who can discern God’s will (testing everything by the gospel) and put into practice what he learns. Institutions and classes are so many “laboratories” where the Kingdom is gradually built; disciples, teachers, and the church build each other in love and truth.

¹⁵ Wesley Center Online, “Nazarene Manifesto, Chapter III.”

The Church of the Nazarene and the Educational Vocation of its Mission

Educational Heritage and Vision

From its beginnings, the Church of the Nazarene has affirmed that education is an essential ministry in the service of holiness. The official international website states: “Christian education is the ministry by which the Church seeks to communicate her faith and to form disciples like Christ.”¹⁶ This sums up the Nazarene twofold aim: knowledge of God and service to one’s neighbour. Aware of the importance of forming committed leaders and laypeople, the Church of the Nazarene has established an extensive educational network. The International Board of Education (IBOE) now oversees more than 50 colleges, universities, and seminaries worldwide, totaling approximately 43,000 students per year in 110 geographic areas.¹⁷ These institutions do not only seek academic success; they train students above all to become “disciples of Christ in all nations,” endowed with a Christian vision of the world and committed to the mission of the Church.¹⁸ For this reason, the slogan often quoted is that of “Educate to serve.” Nazarene education always unites holiness, faith, and knowledge. In every school, teaching is akin to a ministerial office; the teacher, by transmitting the truth, becomes a “priest” sharing God’s grace with his students.

Education as a Means of Community Sanctification

In the Nazarene vision, education is not limited to school buildings alone; it permeates the whole of ecclesial life. The local church is seen as a “formative context,” where catechesis, house groups, shared worship, and even ordinary conversations participate in mutual learning of the faith. Thus, each believer is both teacher and student; no one is reduced to a passive role. In practice, this means that community life is formative. The Nazarene Manifesto insists on this practical dimension of holiness in community. It calls believers to manifest holiness “in daily life” and in all their relationships.¹⁹ In other words, any exchange within the church, whether it is a moment of prayer, a biblical sharing, or a simple personal witness, can become a place of spiritual education. In a sanctified community, every Sunday school class or house cell is as much a “sanctuary of mission” where God acts to form its members in his image.

Teaching and Integrative Pedagogy

To meet these challenges, Nazarene theology reaffirms the constitutive unity between knowledge, holiness, and mission. It reminds us that all truth is theologically rooted. As Milton observed, God-oriented Christian education seeks above all the likeness to the Creator.²⁰ Nazarene schools and programs are therefore encouraged to rethink their curricula in an integrative way, so that each discipline academically taught dialogues with gospel values. For

¹⁶ Nazarene Church, “Global Education,” *Church of the Nazarene*. <https://nazarene.org/global-education/> (Consulté le 26 novembre 2025).

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ ¹⁹ Wesley Center Online. “Nazarene Manifesto, Chapter III.” <https://wesley.nnu.edu/what-is-wesleyanism/nazarene-manifesto/nazarene-manifesto-chapter-iii/> (Consulté le 27 novembre 2025).

²⁰ John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (1667), 17–22.

example, science or literature is not taught in a vacuum; care is taken to emphasize their ultimate coherence with the Christian vision of humanity (creation, fall, and redemption). Thus, students learn from the outset to “think and act in a Christian way,” rejecting the divide between their faith and their professional or social vocation.

In short, the future of the Nazarene educational mission rests on this integrative theology. The church is called not to treat education as a separate thing, but as a crucial dimension of her missiological identity. This implies investing in pedagogies where learning becomes participation in grace. In each lesson, an effort should be made to ensure that the truth taught is “embodied” in the teacher’s attitude and in the lives of the learners. We will then be able to affirm with the Fathers of the church that the church is not only a “community of adoration,” but also a “community of learning” where grace is transmitted from heart to heart.

Towards a Theology of Missional Education

An Embodied Theology of Educational Mission

The supreme model of missional education is that of the incarnation of the Word. God did not only speak from the heights of heaven; he became flesh, taking part in our existence to teach us concretely his love. Jesus himself embodied divine wisdom in his person and his daily actions. This incarnate dimension must guide the Christian educator: to teach is not to dissociate truth from life, but to manifest in concrete terms what is transmitted in words. In practice, this means that a theology of missional education must always recall that the Word transmitted is alive. The teacher, like Jesus, who trained “by doing” (by healing, serving), will have to embody the grace he proclaims.

Education as an Act of Grace and Hope

Christian education carries with it a strong eschatological content. Each teaching announces, in a certain way, the promise of a world recreated by God. Revelation 21:5 states, “Behold, I make all things new,” and teaching divine truth contributes to this progressive “recreation” of mankind. Through education, the Church plants the seeds of a reconciled world: justice is taught in the classroom, compassion is cultivated in everyday life, and the peace of the gospel is transmitted as a social leaven. For this reason, education can be considered a true act of grace, opening minds to God’s liberating truth, and an act of hope, because it believes in the possible transformation of individuals and cultures. Every Christian lesson carries the promise of the coming Kingdom: in discipleship, the educator sees a foretaste of the “new heaven and the new earth” promised to believers (Revelation 21:1–5).

Implications for Contemporary Nazarene Theology

In today’s Nazarene theology, the question is rediscovering education as a ministry of salvation. It is necessary to unite three dimensions that have hitherto been sometimes approached separately: revealed truth (doctrinal dimension), lived holiness (spiritual dimension), and mission accomplished (ecclesial dimension). This fundamental unity presupposes a rethinking of the role of the disciple-learner and the disciple-teacher. The church should never consider education as secondary; each education is, in fact, a moment in God’s overall mission. In fact, the educator becomes an ambassador of the Kingdom in his class or circle, and the learner is trained to be a witness in the world.

Thus, a theology of missional education for the Nazarene can be formulated as follows: teaching the word of God (truth) is an act of divine service that leads to personal and community holiness, and this holy education is itself an active participation in *missio Dei* (mission). The Church of the Nazarene is called not only to preach and serve, but also to be a home of learning, a place where grace is transmitted and cultivated. In other words, in ecclesial praxis, education is simultaneously prayer, knowledge, and commitment to the Kingdom.

Conclusion

Christian education, seen as a missional tool, is thus much more than a strategy of institutional growth: it is a praxis of the Kingdom of God. It articulates faith and reason, revelation and transformation, knowledge and holiness. Through education, the Church of the Nazarene is not content to transmit knowledge about God; it participates in the very work of God, who enlightens minds, forms hearts, and sanctifies the whole of creation. In teaching, the church acts as an “ambassador of Christ” (2 Corinthians 5:20) by preparing the disciples to live in expectation of the promised Renewal.

Finally, the true educational mission is less about accumulating information than about “learning from God and with God” to cooperate in his universal redemption. Every class, every school, and every teaching moment is a chance for the church to spread salvation. In doing so, the Church of the Nazarene fulfills the *missio Dei* and makes the Incarnate Word visible, forms holy disciples, and puts into practice the hope of the Kingdom in the world.

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