

WHAT IS WESLEYAN THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION?

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Introduction

There is no doubt that the Church of the Nazarene embraces a call to Christian higher education, as our core values state and our contemporary efforts reveal (Church of the Nazarene 2003). Like much of Methodism, education remains a primary concern in the midst of evangelistic endeavors worldwide (Gunter and Robinson, 2005; Hels 2000). Ascertaining the faithfulness of our efforts in light of our Christian heritage and in conversation with our particular Wesleyan perspective remains an ongoing task and begs for criteria.

Perhaps John Wesley's major contribution to the Church at large, and to the Wesleyan movement, remains his discipleship system, grounded in biblical principles, channeled through methods God helped John develop (some transferable, others not). Through the Wesleys and others, the Wesleyan movement offers discipleship as a model for higher and theological education; something, the church generally overlooked in certain eras, including Nazarenes globally. Theological educators may do well to view their efforts through these lenses.

If there is one dreaded word within educational administration, it may well be the term "assessment." Yet assessment represents faithful stewardship of our educational task. Our responsibility nevertheless warrants close inspection based on the purpose and process of education. Are our goals consistent with a Wesleyan heritage and do we follow processes, broadly speaking, consistent with Wesleyan theological education? We offer our understanding of these components, purpose and process, for a Wesleyan theological education.

The Purpose of Theological Education: Truth and Love

Why does the Wesleyan tradition value education so highly? One obvious source lies in the educational passion of the Wesleys, in the context of the mission of the church. Brother Charles Wesley succinctly and poetically stated these efforts in his often-lauded stanza that elaborates fully the necessity of faithful discipleship (Charles Wesley, 1763/1983, 7:643-44):

Unite the pair so long disjoin'd,
Knowledge and vital Piety:
Learning and Holiness combined,
And Truth and Love, let all men see,

In those who up to Thee we give,
Thine, wholly thine, to die and live.

Knowledge, Learning, and Truth conjoined with Piety, Holiness and Love portray people, through the baptismal/Eucharistic imagery of dying and living, living in total dedication to God. Charles Wesley captures the passion of the Wesleys' concerns for educational preparation as part of the total transformation of a person. The lyrics suggest a form of ongoing, dynamic, catechesis – a “way” of discipleship reminiscent of early Christian formation that ultimately situates all educational efforts as forms of faithful discipleship resulting in Christ-likeness. The Church of the Nazarene today should intentionally embrace the same form of discipleship, if we are to remain faithful to our heritage and, more importantly, acknowledge the transformational vision that leads this tradition into a global future.

Calling for this marriage also reveals the “dual tension” resident in much of our Nazarene heritage: holding together critical yet creative appropriation of knowledge leading to “truth” while faithfully participating in “vital” piety that leads to love. This tension signals the classic struggle in graduate theological education: the *padeia* of Athenian education, with an emphasis on forming character, and the specialization of Berlin University, elevating research as critical study (Kelsey, 1993). We acknowledge that we live in an historical struggle to keep knowledge and piety together. How does one adhere to this tension without allowing either side to denigrate either into trite learning or false piety? How does one teach faithfully and yet embrace, in tension if need be, the resolute command to remain obedient in truth and love? One of the significant responses Wesley gave to address this tension appears through the means of grace.

The Process of Theological Education: The Means of Grace

The means of grace were Christian practices which Wesley identified as “outward signs, words, or actions, ordained of God, and appointed for this end—to be the *ordinary* channels whereby he conveys to men, preventing, justifying or sanctifying grace.” (Wesley 1975-2003, v.1: p. 381). The phrase remained persistent in his writing and instructions to ministers to utilize various practices for Godly living (Blevins 1999, 2002). Wesley's 1765 Sermon (1975-2003) “The Scripture Way of Salvation.” lists works of personal piety (prayer, communion, searching scripture; abstinence or fasting) along with works of mercy that directly intervened in the bodies and souls of persons (feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, practicing hospitality with strangers, as well as attending those in prison, sick, ignorant, feebleminded or struggling with

their spiritual state (v.2: p. 166). In the “Larger” Minutes of 1778, Wesley incorporated the means of grace as a part of the regular examination of all lay ministers but differing in categories (Wesley 1872/1986, ~~v. 13~~ v. 8, pp 299, 322-24). Wesley identified instituted and prudential means of grace. The instituted means include Prayer, searching the Scriptures, the Lord’s Supper, Fasting and Christian Conference (Wesley ~~v. 13~~ v. 8: pp. 322-23). The prudential means, however, included contextual practices including particular rules, acts of holy living, acts of ministry and larger attitudes toward daily living listed under the headings of watching, denying ourselves, taking up our cross, and exercising the presence of God (~~v. 13~~ v. 8: pp. 323-24).

Wesley remained certain about the faithful practice of any means of grace. John wrote, “Never can you use these means but a blessing will ensue. And the more you use them, the more will you grow in grace” (Wesley 1872/1986, ~~v. 13~~ v. 8: p. 324). It is clear that Wesley valued and endorsed various Christian practices under the title, means of grace. However, for our purpose, the means of grace provide a framework for examining the processes of theological education into a comprehensive approach for the 21st Century. These collective processes resonate with a desire to follow faithful practices (formation), to discern the efficacy of those practices in conversation with new movements of the Holy Spirit at work in the world (discernment) and to engage that self same world missionally through the practices (transformation).

Three Constitutive Components of Wesley’s Educational Approach

Wesley’s employ of the means of grace and his desire for a transformative holiness of heart and life, introduce the complementary discipleship approaches best described as “formation,” “discernment” and “transformation.” These approaches summarize an authentic Wesleyan theological education for the 21st century.

Formation as Christian Education

Wesley’s understanding of the instituted means of grace suggests an approach to Christian Education best described as formation, where grace is mediated by intentional gathering of persons into a Christian culture through a series of established Christian practices. The instituted means of grace form a series of interdependent practices that, if practiced faithfully, Wesley assumed would result in experienced grace. Persons are formed and transformed as they participate in the total life of the faith community. By faithful (i.e. intentional) participation, persons are shaped into Christian character and transformed by their new identity. Scholars note

that formative practices occurred throughout the history of Christian communities, anchored within a given Christian narrative and influenced by the culture of practicing Christians (Engen 2004, 20-22). These practices intentionally invite persons into the Christian world often through various aspects of communal life (Nelson 1967; Westerhoff 1987, 1992).

The instituted means of grace, as an approach to formation, suggest a repertoire of Christian practices that collectively shape a Christian's understanding of God. The practices provide a way of responding to God's active presence by rehearsing a way of life that is Christian. The practices also provide an opportunity to connect faith with daily life (Bass and Dykstra 1997, pp. xiii, 6-11). More importantly, Wesley's creation of various Christian communities provided an alternative form of living in an otherwise difficult world (Blevins Fall 2003/Spring 2004). Wesley understood that the instituted means were part of the broader activity of the church. It is fair to assert that Wesley believed in the formative power of Christian community as a part of theological education.. All practices within the community, traditional or new, should be examined for their formative potential. This critical and creative exploration of educational practices suggests a form of theological education that compliments formation. This second form of discipleship, discernment, emerges through the prudential means of grace.

Discernment as Christian Education

The prudential means of grace include a large array of contextual practices that may also become means of grace for the practitioner. Community practices are not "generic," they remain weighted with theological and cultural implications (Engen 20-21). Discerning which practices are truly means of grace involves both a critical (or investigative) and a constructive (or imaginative) appreciation of God's ongoing activity. Discernment, as a spiritual practice, has a long history within Christianity (McIntosh 2004) both as an individual and communal activity (Rogers 1997, pp.107-13). Wesley often engaged in practices of discernment both in shaping the devotion and discipline of the Methodist people (Blevins Fall 2002/ Spring 2003, pp. 88-92). Wesley also exercised discernment as a spiritual director to others (Tracy 1987, pp. 44-186) and encouraged accountability among Methodists involved in Class and Band Meetings (Henderson 1997).

Discernment includes a deep understanding of scripture and doctrine, as well as honest engagement with Christian conduct. Discernment engages not only through discrimination between options but also embraces an imaginative appreciation of the possibilities available for

faithful living. Discernment, in this sense, includes critical and creative components. Critical thinking can be a difficult task. It takes courage to release one's control of knowledge and trust the Holy Spirit to guide both teachers and students in the pursuit of truth. This type of thinking begins by asking hard questions of the historical, cultural and psychological assumptions that influence Christian life and practice (Volf and Bass 2002). Christians must also explore their own heritage and training. They must learn how to affirm the positive aspects of their history while becoming alert to poor influences and faulty assumptions. Most of all they must become aware that thinking is an active process rather than a passive reception of knowledge.

However, ministers practicing discernment must include imagination and constructive thought to embrace Wesley's openness to new practices and to the potential of grace through these practices. Theologically, creative discernment acknowledges the power of the Holy Spirit to empower new structures for the sake of conveying God's free grace, so that the presence of Jesus Christ might be revealed in the most remarkable places and during the most mundane practices. Creative discernment is an interpretive practice of naming God at work in the world and also seeking the means to God's gracious activity (Seymour et al. 1993). Discernment increases the faithfulness of participants as they expectantly seek God's transforming grace within transformative practices. Transformative practices, suggested by the works of mercy, encourage participants to become a means of grace as well as to use them.

Transformation as Christian Education

Works of mercy deserve particular consideration. Wesley confirmed his emphasis on works of mercy by his own discipleship practices to those on the margins (Blevins 1999, pp. 87-93, 114-18). As an educational approach, the purpose of transformation exists to heal and liberate persons, communities, society, and ultimately all of creation. Wesleyans seek to accomplish these goals through educationally transformative activities.

Education for the sake of transformation of persons and society retains a long history in Christian education (Seymour et al. 1984). Transformative discipleship includes service within the life of the church, efforts for peace and justice, service learning, and alternative Bible studies that explore real life situations in dynamic interplay with the Bible. Earlier movements have sought to engage the public in order to transform educationally and religiously. Contemporary attempts to transform social structures and the environment include liberative attempts, including Paulo Freire's educational process (Freire 1988, pp. 19, 75-118). Similar transformation

approaches surface in evangelical Christian education through mission efforts (Habermas and Issler 1992 pp. 50, 52-53) or evangelism efforts always tempered with aspects of compassion or humility (Root 2001, pp. 55-57). New movements, particularly missional strategies, incorporate practices that engage and transform society (Hunsberger and Van Gelder, 1996). Wesley's emphasized transforming social aspects in many of his educational efforts with children and adults (Marquardt 1992). John's desire to transform others spiritually and materially coincides with a broad view of transformation, including of all creation (Runyon 1998, p. 8).

Process and Purpose in Wesleyan Theological Education

Formation, discernment and transformation provide a broad understanding of our task in theological education explicated by the means of grace. Collectively these elements seek to form persons and communities into a new way of living and seeing the social order (a form of critical and constructive discernment mentioned earlier) in order to work toward transforming the world. The underlying assumptions of these processes inform the totality of a discipleship authentic to our Wesleyan heritage and global vision of living a life of learning and holiness, of truth and love. Perhaps these processes (formation, discernment, and transformation) coupled with the dual process of Christlike truth and love, provide the criteria for faithful theological education in the Wesleyan tradition. Stated another way, we participate in the means of grace in order to become a means of grace to the world, our global community, around us.

Conclusion: Towards a Practical Assessment

Which of these characteristics related to the means of grace, as a focal point of our Wesleyan theology, do we see active in our theological education institutions and programs? What can we do to bridge (while maintaining a healthy tension) higher learning, loving truth, knowledge and life, together with a vital spirituality, loving God, the Church and faithfully following Christ? How can practices of formation, discernment, and transformation **could** happen (take place) intentionally and constantly in our educational ministry of theological education? This is the prime challenge before us as Wesleyan educators for the global Church of the Nazarene into the 21st Century. For our education to be more Wesleyan we must return to discipleship as the permeating model for our church and for our theological education.

It is imperative that we begin with the Wesleyan understanding of the means of grace and its implications for our educational endeavors, as we have tried to describe here. But we must go beyond or deeper in our Wesleyan heritage than before. If we do we might discover new

challenges in conversation with our particular context, grappling with tough issues by being part of a theological education that is more:

- Relational in practice: more interpersonal, interactive, learning how to engage others personally with the meaning of life and faith. Wesley devised a mentoring relation with many of those that were trained. Modeling became a part of his educational model.
- Accessible to all: within our immediate context and around the world. We have to deal with the finances or costs of our education and the decentralization of quality education. Wesley's system provided education especially for those that did not have the possibility of any type of education.
- Social in format and focus: using, as Wesley did small groups for personal and mutual growth and contributing to the social transformation in the vital social issues that surrounded each context.
- Ministry oriented: education for service to others and society.
- Passionate and disciplined about providing written educational resources at reasonable costs: This is the motivation that impulses Wesley to publish his journals and the rest of his literature and studies.
- Centered on truly Christian convictions, commitments and life-style: This stems from Wesley's ongoing intimate relationship with God, his participation in the Church and his commitment to fulfill the needs of the world in Jesus name.
- Universal, international in focus: Theological education that is in constant dialogue with different people groups within the church. This will require a Christian perspective reflected in Wesley's view of the world as his parish.

By these means, our theological education will be more Wesleyan and become an advanced form of discipleship for all involved. Addressing challenges like these will renew and invigorate our theological education, our church and our world globally. Will we allow the Spirit to guide us on this challenge? Will we, together, seek to discern new ways, avenues, and mutual ventures to transform our Wesleyan education into a powerful and dynamic means of grace that will make disciples of all nations? With God's help, we can.

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