

FUTURE CHALLENGES IN WESLEYAN THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

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Introduction

A paper on future challenges in Wesleyan theological education makes two assumptions. First, we know what Wesleyan theological education is. Second, many of us are engaged in Wesleyan theological education already. Most of us have made a serious commitment to meeting the challenges of the future. Neither of us is a prophet nor the son of a prophet. And we can only view the future from where we stand. We propose to highlight three challenges, two of which has significant subsidiary aspects.

Challenge One: Determine How Wesleyan We Wish to Be

The current *Manual* makes reference at a number of points in the Historical Statement to our denomination being “Wesleyan-holiness” and the *Core Values* booklet carries the same emphasis. But to what extent do we live these out in practice? Later sections of this paper make reference to pressures that impact our church and seek to shape it in a more generic evangelical framework; there is little doubt that in sections of the church these pressures have had an effect. Particularly in those areas of the church embedded in Western culture, the challenge facing us is that questions are asked and answers framed within a context shaped more by the latest sociological, technological, philosophical, educational or market forces than by an explicitly Wesleyan theological perspective. When this is coupled with a devaluing of the importance of history and tradition, we can very quickly lose our anchor point and simply drift with the prevalent cultural and religious flow. This may make us ‘successful’ in terms of church growth and student enrolments, but if we lose our reason for existing as a distinct denomination (advancing “God’s kingdom by the preservation and propagation of Christian holiness”¹), then we no longer need to worry about Wesleyan theological education at all!

Challenge Two: Articulate Authentic Wesleyan Theology for Our Time and Place

In our judgement, it follows that the greatest challenge facing Wesleyan theological education is theological. This is a challenge to us because theological faculties, who are a critical part of our theological community, should be instrumental in shaping the theology of the church for the future by helping us to identify the true nature of the challenges being faced and offering genuine Wesleyan responses. The question for us to face is, what kind of theological profile will this denomination and others in our tradition have in the future? We would like to pose four statements that summarise what we would like to see happen in the future.

¹*Manual Church of the Nazarene 2005-2009* (Kansas City: Nazarene Publishing House, 2005), 7. See also the Historical Statement on 16-26.

It will be catholic and creedal.

At first glance, this might seem obvious. But we happen to agree with the observation² that some recent developments in Wesleyan thinking are insufficiently rooted in Scripture and the Classic Christian faith, let alone Wesley himself. This may stem from a number of forces affecting us, the cumulative effect of which is theological drift in the church and, indeed, in the confessional academy. One pressure comes from a theologically illiterate generic conservative evangelicalism that has permeated the church; another comes from the parallel lure of a respectable theological liberalism to which a tradition that gives value to experience is susceptible. An authentic Wesleyan theology (WT) will resist both pressures. It will resist the temptation to become too trendy, too wed to the postmodern agenda of the western world. Instead, it will continue to see itself as founded upon the revelation of God in Christ as expressed in scripture and secondarily in the creeds of the early Church.

In some sense, the ironic consequence of this affirmation is that WT will become more, rather than less, ecumenical—not, however, in the lowest common denominator sense that is sometimes paraded as the true ecumenism so beloved of the ecclesiastical managerial classes, but in the firm conviction that WT has a contribution to make to the contemporary articulation of the gospel. Accompanying that will be the acceptance that ours is not the only viable reading of scripture or tradition. Any recognition of this will be accompanied by humble repentance that we have not always embodied this ecumenical spirit but have all too often been sectarian, isolationist and even triumphalist in our relationship with our brothers and sisters in the faith.

It will be clear from this that a central theme in this articulation will be the Wesleyan commitment to the Lordship of Christ over his Church and the authority of scripture as the primary means of grace through which that Lordship is exercised, under the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Equally clear will be the fact that this is light years away from a resurgent fundamentalism, itself a product of modernism. Wesleyan biblical scholars have a responsibility to embody a commitment to scripture in their teaching and research that is text-centred but neither pre-critical nor historicist.³ If our theological development into the twenty-first century is to be authentically Wesleyan, we will need to return again and again to the metanarrative of scripture and to be corrected by the Spirit through our submission to God's story as articulated in scripture and coming to focus in Christ. Thus, a Wesleyan reading is essentially soteriological. Our theology emerges in part through our critical engagement with scripture but it is also interpreted and corrected by scripture. We will want to have confidence that our use and reading of

²Ben Witherington III, *The Problem with Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 3.

³Joel B. Green, 'Is there a Contemporary Wesleyan Hermeneutic?' *WTJ* 33 (1998), 116-129, reprinted in Barry L. Callen and Richard P. Thompson, *Reading the Bible in Wesleyan Ways* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 2004), 123-134.

scripture is compatible with tradition, is amenable to reason, and engages with the lives of real people. All of this will be done within the context of the personal and corporate relationship of the people of God with the holy God, that is, in the light of experience directly connected to the witness of the Spirit.

None of this can be taken for granted. There have been, to be sure, clear overtures from Wesleyan biblical scholars who have sought to engage with theology. These discussions are occurring, and a renewed biblical theology is on the evangelical agenda in general. Nevertheless, at the academic level, the *via media* of our tradition is still at risk from the blandishments of the bright lights of the academy in which a pluralistic higher education agenda shapes our future. But if we are to be faithful servants of Christ and the church, we will remain unapologetically confessional, resisting the bankrupt modernist perspective of a neutral reading of scripture.

Ironically, our confessional stance has a significant but limited compatibility with a post-modern agenda that values all stories. But while we are grateful for this willingness to listen to all stories, we cannot succumb to the view that all stories are equally true. Rather, we continue to insist that the metanarrative of God's good purposes for his entire created order revealed and accomplished in Christ is the story that overarches all others. Willingness to listen attentively and with respect to other competing narratives is fully compatible with the insistence that all paths do not lead to God apart from Christ. This leads quite naturally to the second statement.

It will be dialogical

Wesleyan theology is a lived doctrine and therefore inseparable from the community of God's people and its mission in God's world. It will, therefore, only be preserved and enhanced in a context of dialogue in which the confessional academy is seen as a part of the ecclesia of God. Any cleavage between academy and church must be resisted at all costs, and from both sides. Divisiveness is inherently dangerous.

The confessional academy away from the church is particularly vulnerable because it becomes isolationist. Isolation leads to the development of theology and encourages practice that is distant from the life of the church. Until recent years, for example, biblical studies has been particularly guilty of isolation. In a proper anxiety to distance itself from an exegesis, pre-determined by dogma, that ran roughshod over the text, it became alienated, elitist and irrelevant. We no longer listened to our brothers and sisters in the church. In turn, our voices were rarely heard in the church. We became 'ivory tower' scholars.⁴ A worrying consequence of isolation is the risk that disenchantment and cynicism become the prevailing

⁴The phrase 'ivory tower' is bandied about in a pejorative sense because it implies a negative sense of isolation from 'the real world', conveniently ignoring the fact that the real world is increasingly to be found in the 'ivory tower'. A recent article by Huw Richards ("On both sides of the Iron Curtain", *The Times Higher Education Supplement* [Nov 24, 2006], 16-17) on Soviet-era historian Aleksandr Fursenko reminds us of how culturally specific this sort of comment is really is. Richards writes, 'When he

spirit even in the confessional academy. This is particularly seen when the academy is not part of the shaping of the theology of the church and is ignored in the conversations that shape the ministry of the church.

Equally, the church separated from the academy risks muting the prophetic voice that the academy can bring to the rest of the church. A clear articulation of our WT heritage with its biblical and creedal foundations against which our structures are always held to account will call us from the temptation to become comfortable in a syncretistic assimilation of cultural values into the ecclesia. Open and continuous dialogue is important for clarifying our understanding of the mission of God. We are called as a people to embrace and embody the breathtakingly vast purposes of God for his entire created order in our communal and personal lives and ministry.

At the centre of WT is the worshipping people of God. We are called to a communal devotion to God. This sense of church engagement, not just as people whose calling is scholarship, but also as servants (clergy or lay) who are actively involved in the ministry of a local congregation is vital. The Spirit sanctifies the entire worshipping community, at the corporate and personal level, in relationship to the Holy God through Christ and for his purposes. All of us know that worship is misunderstood, however, if it is thought to be solely what occurs on a Sunday morning at 11:00. Wesleyans know that we are called to model the life of the triune God in our community and to be involved in God's mission of redeeming his and our world.

It will be ecclesial

The choice of language matters because it may betray something of our underlying, even unconscious, assumptions.⁵ Revising our language symbolises our desire to reflect critically upon our own presuppositions and practices. We noted earlier that Wesleyan churches are Protestant in their view of Scripture; they are also Reformation churches in their realisation that the church is always in need of reformation.

If the very existence of the holy people of God is predicated upon its origins in Christ and, as such we are the body of Christ, then the description of the people of God is a theological identity, not an organisational identity. That is why churches in the Wesleyan tradition take their identity from the great historic creeds of the church. The language that we use to describe ourselves and justify our continued existence flows from the call of God to be his holy people as expressed in the great creeds of the church.

[Fursenko] speaks of the academy as an “ivory tower” it is a rare use of that phrase in a positive sense, as a place that provided refuge from some of the harsher aspects of Soviet life’ (p. 16).

⁵See John W. Wright, “How Many Masters: From the Church-Related to an Ecclesially Based University” in Michael L. Budde and John W. Wright, eds. *Conflicting Allegiance: The Church-Based University in a Liberal Democratic Society* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2004), 13-18 for a perceptive analysis of the place of confessional institutions in the US.

We do need renewal, but this cannot be a corporatist renewal as if what were needed is renewed structure or a clearer mission statement or agreement on new ‘core values’. Companies and corporations need core values and mission statements. But the church has doctrines and a mission.⁶ If we express our church mission in terms that reflect a military model and command structure (Nazarene language is replete with examples); or if our organisational structure and ‘corporate image’ reflects working models in the business world; or, indeed, if our *raison d’être* is couched in the language of the business world, are we reflecting a drift away from our historic roots in the catholic faith? The values and structures of the business world must be judged on the basis of their coherence with WT before they can be sanctified for use in the kingdom.

It will be research-led.

To some this point may seem odd; to others it will express one of the greatest challenges facing Wesleyan theological education in the future. The very notion of being ‘research-led’ conjures up in the minds of some the epitome of irrelevance. But within the last 15 years, the notion of scholarship has been broadened.⁷ Pure research pushes out the frontiers of knowledge. Research also includes scholarship directly related to teaching and application. Both kinds of research are needed in our church now, and for the future. We require theological research on the frontiers of academic study in bible, theology, and church history as well as in leading edge ministerial models and practice. Two areas in particular are crucial.

First, the urgent need for the renewal of authentic WT is a pressing need that must include all those around the world whose calling is to theological education and reflection.⁸ Sustained research on theological topics of direct relevance to fresh Wesleyan thinking is essential. Without it we will cease to exist. Organisationally, this would be a simple consequence of market forces—we were unable to maintain our market share. But in theological terms, the church catholic would be impoverished by the loss of our theological accent if we fail.

This kind of research is most often linked to doctoral studies. In the past, our support of candidates who embark upon PhD research has usually been confined to a ‘be warm and be fed’ blessing. But perhaps a greater measure of intentionality needs to be built into this process. These candidates are the

⁶We owe the heart of this statement to a colleague (who shall remain nameless), who wryly observed that ‘corporations have core values; churches have creeds.’

⁷See Ernest Boyer, *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate* (Princeton: Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1990).

⁸Global theology conferences are a useful step in the right direction, now that we are bringing people to the table who do not self-select because they have money or expense accounts. But on their own, they are insufficient. Participation in the Wesleyan Theological Society is also helpful for those in North America/Western Europe but this first world club has little impact around the world.

next generation of our biblical scholars, theologians, church historians, counsellors, pastoral theologians and, especially, teachers.

There could be a down-side to this, of course. Indeed, this could be one of the several unacknowledged elephants in the room. At the risk, therefore, of treading on some very big toes, let's identify one. There is a risk inherent in off-the-shelf PhD research no matter how prestigious the candidate's university. All of us here today know of people, perhaps even close friends, who have completed graduate level education in universities in which the academic context is hostile to classic Christianity and, in some instances, specifically anti-Christian. Others have worked at institutions that are mildly reformed; some have worked in institutions that are staunchly conservative in a fundamentalist direction. It would be alarmist to suggest that this is necessarily dangerous or could not be ameliorated; it would be naïve to suggest that these contexts do not affect us. Is there a risk of theological drift, either away from more than a loose attachment to the classical Christian doctrines upon which Wesleyan theology is founded, or towards acquiescence to the conservatism of cultural Christianity? To the extent that either of these directions becomes entrenched within our own confessional institutions, the *via media* that is the genius of authentic WT would be at risk.

That is not to suggest that every PhD should be earned within a context committed to a Wesleyan perspective. Very few of us here today have had that privilege. Still, we are here. Furthermore, such a decision would lead to greater insularity, missing out of some of the richness of diverse traditions that can contribute to the enhancement of our communal Wesleyan perspective. But some recognition of the value of a context that addresses issues in light of Wesleyan theology may be helpful. To what extent, for instance, do professional qualifications such as DMin degrees gained with little or no Wesleyan theological underpinning tend to result in practice that is, at best, accidentally Wesleyan, or, at worst, completely alien to WT? Ecclesial practice earthed in clear and acknowledged theological foundations might help us resist the adaptation of faddish approaches to ministry and mission that are antithetical to our WT perspective.

The second reason that we need to be research-led is simply because it enhances teaching in the confessional academy and practice in the ecclesia. Research-led practical divinity challenges us to re-think Wesleyan holiness through new eyes, for a new day, with fresh metaphors and culturally appropriate practice and expression. This kind of teaching stimulates in students a hunger for engagement in critical theological reflection and theologically-informed mission because the lecturers themselves are so stimulated. Teaching of this calibre should produce committed and reflective practitioners who will be ministers, educators and other leaders for the future. But this will not happen unless those parts of the body, the theological educators, responsible for engaging in precisely this task take research seriously.

Challenge Three: Shaping our identity within the People of God

The challenge of understanding our identity within the people of God is intimately connected to the second challenge. WT emerges from our reading in scripture of God's big purposes for his entire created order in which all of creation is the object of God's love. Hence, the vision of the church embracing all peoples emerges from its theological roots and is not dependent upon any cultural expression of it. This challenge is especially to be embraced by the theological community because of its commitment to WT.

The implications of this have not always been understood. Recent work in postcolonial literature has drawn attention to the colonial past of Christian missions including theological education. Whatever the truth of this analysis—and questions can be raised about some of the assumptions as well as some of the conclusions—the work makes sobering reading.

Perhaps because we are immigrants to our respective homes, accents fascinate us. For years the BBC had a policy that it applied to all English spoken by its presenters.⁹ It required them to use what is called 'Received Pronunciation' (RP), which is, essentially, the form spoken by the London and Oxbridge educated and ruling elite. Today, although clarity and the widest possible accessibility are still crucial at the BBC, it is no longer so pedantic. English may well be as close to a *lingua franca* as we are likely to get in our multi-lingual world, not least because of colonial and neo-colonial history, but no two people speak English in precisely identical terms. An extensive range of factors contribute to the way every English-speaker uses the language; each of these owes a great deal to the cultural context in which English is first learned.

The serious point that we are making has to do with the grammar and articulation of Wesleyan theology. Although it finds its coherence in the Scriptures and the creeds as interpreted and lived throughout history, it is spoken in diverse ways in different places. A problem arises, however, when any one section of the church sees its accent as expressing the coherent centre of WT, the theological RP, rather than one of its diverse accents. This is a particular challenge for theological education. For the sake of clarity, we propose to look at the challenge of this family identity through three related pairs of possible outcomes in the future. But underlying this brief analysis is a fundamental conviction: all theological discourse is spoken with an accent.

The first pair of outcomes is really antithetical: a **colonial/neo-colonial v global future**. All of us agree that the good news of the gospel is for all. But a contrast exists in the extent to which the gospel is thought to be encased in the cultural clothes of those telling the story. All too often, our theology has been clothed in Western liberal democratic values and mores, as if these were the best or even the only

⁹For an interesting article on BBC English, see <http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/h2g2/classic/A657560> [accessed 23 December 2006].

expressions of Christian ethics. Recent world events have exacerbated the perception that Christianity is a ‘Western’ religion¹⁰ and therefore to be rejected by those who wish to retain their cultural identity. Here a critically reflective analysis of the extent to which our mission practice and the articulation of our theology is a product of colonialism and is currently infected by an unconscious neo-colonial spirit is essential.¹¹ Of course, to supplant one cultural hegemony with any other is not to gain anything at all but to replace one mistake with another of equal proportions.

The need for critical reflection is made even more acute by the development of technology that transforms us into a global village. Our institutions are using cutting edge technology—often effectively and to great advantage. But technology must always be the servant of the mission and the ministry, never the master. Simply because we can do something, or do it with greater technological efficiency is not necessarily a reason why we should do it. Two attendant risks need to be noted here. First is the danger that we lose the essential flesh-and-blood contact between people, not least in the classroom. That cannot be sacrificed at the altar of technical wizardry.¹² Second is the risk that the theological accent we use will be overwhelmingly that of the geographical location with the most technological toys and greatest financial power.

Theological educators need to be particularly attuned to these problems. A re-invigoration of WT for the future is not the project of any particular part of the church. Nor can a discussion that privileges any culturally, geographically or technologically defined expression of our theology over others be anything more than unacceptable theological cultural imperialism. WT, if it is properly so-called, will have a rather different contingent expression in Bangalore, Boston, Beirut and Brisbane, in Manila, Manzini, Moscow and Manchester.

There are no easy ways to achieve this, nor will the conversation be painless. The starting point, we admit, will be repentance for the way in which we as a denomination have given the impression, unwittingly to be sure, that there is one neutral way for this denomination to express its faith and that everything else is a ‘cultural adaptation.’ But our coherent centre is a theological centre, not a

¹⁰An article by Rowan Williams, ‘Pray for the little town of Bethlehem’ in *The Times* (December 23, 2006), 17, gives a sobering analysis of the consequences for Christians in the Middle East of the Iraq War. Williams writes, ‘One warning often made and systematically ignored in the hectic days before the Iraq War was that Western military action—at that time and that way—would put Christians in the whole Middle East at risk. They would be seen as supporters of the crusading West.’ Williams concludes by calling for Christians to ‘spare a thought for those who have been put at risk by our short-sightedness and ignorance.’

¹¹The term ‘globalisation’ is sometimes used, but is itself laden with overtones that, at best, give it unhelpful connotations of a neo-colonial economic hegemony.

¹²See for example David McEwan, “Quality Theological Education from a Wesleyan Perspective” *The Mediator* II, no. 2 (April 2001): 94-108. Reprinted in *Didache: Faithful Teaching* 1, no.1 (Summer 2001).

geographical centre. We will only discover the richness of our theological centre when we listen to all the accents and hear the good news of the gospel in other accents. What is required is a genuine dialogue amongst the many members of the Nazarene family—a true and ongoing ‘conference’ in the Wesleyan sense. Listening is, at the same time, critical listening. There cannot be a naïve sanctification of every idea that is spoken in a different accent. All cultures and accents need the transforming sanctification of the Spirit.

It follows that some of our institutions will need to become much more ethnically and culturally diverse. None of this will happen by accident. But there is significant hope already on the horizon. The quality of young European and Asian scholars at the recent European and Asia-Pacific Theology Conferences was exceptional, and, no doubt, would be replicated around the world. We have a group of young people who have first class minds, who are open and critical scholars, committed to the mission and message of the Church of the Nazarene. But none of them will ultimately figure in the future of the church without intentional encouragement. There is no *via media* in this pairing—we will either have a truly all-embracing family identity or remain a branch-plant denomination.

The second pairing is, in our judgement, not so antithetical. At first glance, the choice between **an empowering v controlling future** seems to be a rather obvious. But once one begins to scratch beneath the surface, it becomes rather more complex. For empowering some usually requires others relinquishing power. To some extent, this is a concern of denominational structure. If WT is truly determining our structures, will power flow to the centre and will the mission of the church be controlled from the centre? Or will they be designed to empower and support the people of God for mission? Here is a place where the denomination needs constantly to be reforming itself, not because people in leadership are inherently power hungry, but because the seductiveness of power is ever so subtle and insidious. Only through constant reform, spiritual renewal and, yes, repentance, can the leaders of our denomination—any denomination—avoid fulfilling the well-known diction of Lord Acton, “All power corrupts; absolute power corrupts absolutely.”¹³ And when power is discussed, the issue of funding cannot be far behind. Here the future is far less clear. Authority and responsibility must always be linked. Proper use of resources is always important and accountability is essential.¹⁴

A particular educational concern here is ‘quality assurance.’ The denomination’s institutions around the world have come a long way in terms of quality. We have excellent university-level education

¹³A quotation attributed to British historian, John Emerich Edward Dalberg Acton, http://thinkexist.com/quotation/power_corrupts-and_absolute_power_corrupts/213620.html, (accessed 30 December 2006).

¹⁴It would be facile to suggest that western democracies are above corruption. The British government halted a recent investigation into potential corruption in arms contracts between Britain and

in all regions. At the same time there is a desire to decentralise theological education—thought to be the panacea that will deliver pastors for a growing church. Some evidence exists that the church is beginning to ask some hard questions about the integrity and quality of what it is doing. But this seems to us to be a pragmatic challenge that has not yet been satisfactorily met.

The next pairing is even trickier to negotiate. This is a **culturally relevant v syncretistic future**. It is essential to make the gospel relevant to the cultural context in which it is found or else it becomes an irrelevancy. WT demands embodiment in the life of the world. But in its anxiety to make the gospel relevant, the church can become a captive of the prevailing culture and become little more than the religious veneer on culture. When that happens, the gospel loses its power to challenge culture and exercise its prophetic voice. This is a problem that has plagued the church ever since it became a world faith. It is acute wherever rapid expansion occurs.

One commentator recently stated, ‘The movement’s [Pentecostalism’s] emphasis on experience rather than doctrine gives it a remarkable ability to absorb other faiths, from spirit possession in the Caribbean to ancestor worship in Africa, from folk healing in Brazil to shamanism in Korea. As the Pentecostals say, “the man with an experience is never at the mercy of the man with a doctrine”.’¹⁵ This telling comment about our cousins is of little comfort to us—we are subject to the same temptations. And, ironically, the temptation to compromise is as great in western liberal democracies, even if it is more subtle. It is never easy to be counter-cultural in these contexts—indeed, the tragedy is often that the church in the West succumbs to the prevailing cultural norms without even noticing it. And the responsibility of the church’s theologians in all of this is? Once again, the development of leaders who are so firmly rooted in scripture and tradition that they can be alert to the risks and help the people of God avoid either of these two traps.

So, are there only three challenges? No, of course not. But we suspect that others will have considered something like these. May God through his Spirit give us the confidence to respond to these challenges to his honour and glory as we proclaim the good news of Jesus into the future.

Saudi Arabia when it appeared that continuing it would be ‘against the national interests.’ See <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/6186057.stm> [accessed 23 December 2006].

¹⁵‘Christianity Reborn’, *The Economist*, December 23rd 2006, 85.