

UNITING TRUTH AND LOVE: A CONJOINED APPROACH TO FAITHFUL TEACHING

Dean G. Blevins

Introduction

When thinking about faithful teaching in a Wesleyan Tradition it seems only appropriate to consult occasionally the thoughts of our "great grandfathers," the brothers Wesley. However, since 18th century preaching prose is not the most stimulating way to begin, it might be best to start with a worship chorus to focus our attention, penned by John's brother Charles but really surfacing out of their mutual passions.

This sampling of Wesley's writing remains an interesting piece of poetry that gives us a real window into our educator's role and gives us the "heart" of both brothers Wesley. Charles wrote the words but there is little doubt that brother-John provided the vision. It was written in 1748 for the opening service of the "New School" in Kingswood.¹ Kingswood was actually John's most ambitious project in formal education for children and adults. John dedicated most of his efforts toward Kingswood, including writing curriculum, hiring and firing headmasters, and raising money yearly through the Methodist Societies. Ultimately this boarding school for youth became a ministers training college when Methodist pastors were denied access to Oxford and Cambridge. The chorus speaks to all of these circumstances.

The hymn has six stanzas, but one need only focus on the key stanza that addresses educators. Though the tune remains unfamiliar, the verse speaks to students and faculty today.

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 The we give, Thine,
wholely thine, to die and live.²

As the passage indicates, it does seem like Wesley continually drew upon a simple grammatical term, the conjunction, "and." Wesley loved to hold together doctrines and beliefs from a number of different perspectives: Justification AND Sanctification, Works of Mercy AND Works of Piety, individual faith AND loyal churchmanship. At times the terms stood in tension, other times they required integration or perhaps a form of synthesis that still respected the strengths associated with each perspective. Wesley knew instinctively that we tend to fragment our lives into little compartments, yet he wanted us to hold things together. He knew such connections remained crucial... including in student education. Take a moment and note what Wesley wanted teachers to hold together for their students.

Knowledge and Vital Piety

John knew the importance of education for each person, yet he also was interested in each student's spiritual life. In our different settings we remain challenged to assist students to "practice" their faith as well as master classroom content. In chapels, in times of prayer, through devotions, Bible study, Christian service, and other means of grace, faculty are challenged instill in students that education and faith must come together if graduation has any meaning. It means that content is not enough, students must have a vibrant, active, spiritual life or they have missed the goal. Knowledge without piety is only technical knowledge (like a computer manual), not transformative knowledge that guides the rest of student lives.

However, Wesley knew that vital piety lasts only if it is based on a sound knowledge of Christian convictions. Piety without a sound understanding is always susceptible to empty emotionalism. If we always lead with the heart and not the head, we will often do things in the name of Jesus that is nothing more than a mask for student own emotional desires. Content does give shape to emotion (just ask those attending the Super Bowl, World Cup, or other large political gatherings). Discipleship, the act of sound

¹ John W. Prince, *Wesley on Religious Education* (New York: Methodist Book Concern, 1926), 90-91.

² Charles Wesley, "Hymn 461, For Children" in *The Works of John Wesley*, Vol. 7, *A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists*, eds. Franz Hiderbrandt and Oliver A. Beckerlegge (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983; reprint Nashville: Abingdon Press), 7:643-44.

Christian teaching, conjoined with nurturing personal spirituality, remains our task if we wish students to live an authentic faith.

Learning and Holiness.

Wesley knew that knowledge embodies not merely content, but also process. I think we know this as each day we labor not only to teach students the vital information they must know; we also encourage ongoing learning. Education remains a life-long process and we recognize that we cannot teach students everything in a few short years. However, as teachers, we hope to ultimately equip students with the tools to continue their learning.

In juxtaposition, the hymn also states that students need to also "live out" their learning through a life of holiness. Wesley would stand for nothing less than to see students live lives as continued expressions of the holiness of God. He believed it possible that each day we could learn and each day we could live out Godly lives. Knowledge remains incomplete if it does not lead to ongoing learning. Piety, personal spirituality, remains incomplete if it does not lead to a concrete living out of faith. Wesley believed in holiness of heart and life, that we could embody expressions of God's redemption.

Yet Wesley knew we needed both together, learning and holiness. We need an open, inquiring spirit, to learn new aspects of life, and we need a committed lifestyle to put that new knowledge to redemptive practice. One might think Wesley learned well from medieval preacher Bernard of Clairvaux at this point. Clairvaux knew that learning without the goal of holiness is problematic since it can result in idle curiosity or intellectual arrogance or shameless exploitation for personal gain (and I think we have learned that too well where education without morality can lead us all).³ However holiness can also stagnate; it can be reduced to trivial practices or dead legalisms, if we are not always searching and learning new ways to express and guide student commitment to God. Wesley says we must hold both together, learning and holiness, to keep ourselves and our students "alert" (attentive to learn) and "responsive" (practicing holiness) to the Holy Spirit.

Truth and Love

The verse next leads us to the most foundational pair. Knowledge and learning (content and process) are worthless if they do not lead into Truth. Truth however, remains more than sterile facts or some abstract literalism that negates the wonder of life. Truth describes an awareness of what is real in this world, in a world with so many competing messages, so many deceptions, so much confusion, living a life of authentic meaning, of "truth," remains crucial. Our hope as faculty revolves around the conviction that students will be taught to discern the truth, to make sound decisions and live a life of integrity. We hope that students now understand the claim of Jesus Christ as the way, the truth and the life and know that THAT truth will indeed set us all free.⁴

And yet we also hope, along with Wesley, that these selfsame students, and we, live a life of love. We hope that the vital spiritual life within them (piety) and the committed lifestyle they live out toward others (holiness) will always be conditioned by a love for God and people. Wesley often called holiness a "perfect" love. In this he really believed we could live in such a way that the love of Jesus could manifest itself outward. It is a vision I think that is larger than our own individual dreams, but one worthy of pursuing. I actually believed that to be true for Wesley. I think the most remarkable thing remains that Wesley was willing to proclaim, organize, and teach toward a radical vision of life that might have normally been beyond his imagination...but not beyond the grace of God.

And yet again that leads us to another conjoined phrase, truth AND love. The love of Jesus can only work if it is shaped by the "truth" found in Christ. Without this truth we might do a number of things in the name of "love" that we later regret. Wesley knew that love must be disciplined by truth to keep us and students from self deception. Yet truth can carry a "hard" edge if not buffered by love. I don't know about you but I

³ Bernard Clairvaux. *The Love of God*, ed. James M. Houston, *Classics of Faith & Devotion*. (Portland, Ore.: Multnomah Press, 1983), 198. "There are some who long to know, simply for the sake of knowing, and that is shameful curiosity. Others long to know to show off before others, and that is shameful vanity. To such as these the world of the satirist apply: Their knowledge is worthless unless their friends know about it.' (Persius, *Satires*, 1:27). There are others who long for knowledge to make a fat profit from it, or to make honors from it; and this is shameful profiteering. But there are those who long to know in order to be of service to others; and this is charity. Finally, there are those who long to know in order to benefit themselves morally; and this is prudence. Only the last two categories avoid the abuse of knowledge, because they desire to know for the purpose of doing good."

⁴ John 8:32, 14:6

get nervous when someone wants to be "truthful" with me or, worse, wants to share with me "in love." But when we do speak the truth in love, when we allow the character of Christ to inform student affections, then we can be sure our love-and our convictions-are guided by the Holy Spirit.

Dying and Living

Knowledge, Learning, Truth, combined with Vital Piety, Holiness and Love provide profound combinations to hold us on the middle path. However, Wesley included one more "pairing" in this stanza that commands our attention: that of dying and living. John knew that we couldn't bring together academics and worship, truth and love, without a cost. I think we all know that education often includes a "sacrifice" of preconceived notions, pet theories, and uninformed perspectives. As much as we are teaching a fresh accumulation of knowledge, the corollary challenge to encourage critical thinking involved in all our disciplines often means a kind of "dying out" for our students; sometimes a painful process for them, and for us. Indeed, if we accept John Wesley's teaching there may be some things we have to die to.

For example, as much as academic commencement exercises are moments of celebration, they are also a memorial of all the sacrifices we and our students have made to get to that point in the journey. Yet it should serve also as a reminder of the future times when students as well ourselves will have to make sacrifices. We all face a number of small "deaths" along the way of life. Sometimes these moments are forced upon us through tragedy or crises in our students' lives. . .when a small part of us dies with the event. Sometimes the issue lies closer to home, then we are called to die to ourselves in deeper ways, as we discover, when we learn, of sin or frankly there remain limits to our humanity. Those moments often surface in our treatment of our vocation as professor, or in our interpersonal exchanges with students, friends, and love ones. Those moments of dying will probably be somber acts but necessary ones on more than one occasion in our lives.

However, Wesley knew that death does not have the last word. New life waits when we are willing to sacrifice that which impedes our daily walk in the academic or the spiritual life. And this life does not mean just a return to normalcy, it means a resurrection life. No matter how hard life becomes, there is always hope, always new life just beyond the struggle. I think we live that in the cycle of the new semester, where the end of one class gives new life in the beginning of the other. Wesley knew that God always provides the power, the ability to live a resurrection life. In the midst of our day-to-day struggles to be faithful to our craft, in the midst of our students day-to-day struggle to "survive and advance" toward graduation, new life always exists as form of hope for us all. This is the good news of the Gospel that John Wesley knew so well. Maybe that is why Paul calls us to be "living sacrifices."⁵ We all should live resurrection lives, filled with knowledge, holiness, love and truth. Perhaps it is appropriate we do not have this worship chorus down to sing, but it can be one we choose to live.

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⁵ Romans 12:1-2