

WISDOM FOR LIFE FOR ALL—
A PARADIGM FOR WESLEYAN THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION
FOR THE WHOLE CHURCH

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“He who walks with the wise grows wise . . .” Proverbs 13:20a

This position paper begins with describing the task of the theological educator in terms of an artisan. In a world inundated with information, the search for Wisdom becomes a worthy goal of theological education that includes both laity and clergy. Lifelong learning is found to be compatible with seeking Wisdom as an educational goal. Several indicators provide a Wesleyan context for this perspective on the task and goal of theological education.

The Task of an Artisan—

Theological Education Requires Earthly Dust and Heavenly Imagination

I live in a West African neighborhood with many types of artisans. They make useful things: carpenters build chairs and tables, iron workers solder one-of-a-kind designs for window safety bars and garage doors, tailors and seamstresses stitch colorful and ornate clothing, masons construct complex buildings of cement and tile. These artisans also make ordinary things beautiful. Each object they make expresses something unique or significant about the maker. It is not an accident that an ARTisan impresses the object of their labor--something everyday and ordinary—with extraordinary uniqueness.

Theological education is also a task performed by “artisans” creating something useful and beautiful. It is not a task for the impatient. When the prophet Jeremiah visited the potter, he watched a lump of clay be thoroughly transformed by the patient and careful touch of the master potter. The pots in Jeremiah’s prophecy are not only useful works of art formed by the hands of an earthly artisan, but representative of a people fashioned by God. The task of theological education may be ours but not in our hands alone.

To make something useful and beautiful requires both earthly dust and heavenly imagination. More than fifty years ago H. Orton Wiley shared the legend of Enoch with other Nazarene educators (Wiley, 1951). It is worthwhile to hear it again. This story reminds us of the ancient origins of the formative task of educators. It is said that Enoch walked with God and discovered the earth would be twice destroyed—once by fire and then by water. Enoch set out to

write down all knowledge on two stone monoliths: one representing all the knowledge of the earth and the other containing all of divine revelation. Once the destructive flood waters receded these pillars of learning remained and became the first center of teaching and learning visited by royalty and the wise. From that time onward, earthly knowledge and divine revelation were necessary elements for a person to be considered educated. It can be said knowledge and revelation taken together give us wisdom. How do the educated arrive at wisdom?

T.S. Eliot wrote, “Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? / Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?” (1934) J. Glenn Gray found in these poetic lines the trajectory of learning: first, one gathers information, then organizes it into useful knowledge which may be regarded in the future as wisdom by the next generation. Thomas Groome, a religious educator, refers to this outcome of the educational task as wisdom “for life for all.” (2002, p. 361). Wisdom of this sort does not make distinctions for who may learn from it and for what task it may be used.

How quickly Westerners like me lose sight of the wisdom that shapes character and practice. A Senegalese proverb reminds us well, “En Afrique un vieillard qui meurt est une bibliothèque qui brûle” (In Africa an old man or woman that dies is a library that burns down). Wesleyan theological education is a part of a Christian tradition that looks back to Wesley through the 19th and 20th centuries and looks forward through the perspective of the expanding influence of the Church of the Southern Hemisphere. It would be wise to fireproof our library of holiness of heart and life.

Fully Digested Wisdom for a Well-Equipped Church

More people globally are inundated with information without the perspectives of acquired knowledge or ancient wisdom. Whether a theological educator works alongside a stocker broker in Hong Kong or a nomadic goat herder in West Africa, an effort needs to be made to help them integrate the knowledge necessary to build one’s family, trade, or church with a worthy and transcendent perspective to guide their lives. The educational process of seeking knowledge followed by wisdom can be the necessary corrective to lives and minds filled with “undigested notions.” This idea of “undigested notions” comes from Richard Steele (1683) in a sermon published in Wesley’s Christian Library that reminds us over three centuries later to nourish lives with God’s word and sound teaching. Theological educators must not be content to offer bullet-pointed information preparing others for the Christian life and ministry without also

taking the risk of guiding others into the murky waters of the Wisdom found in walking together with Christ. The goal of seeking Wisdom becomes even more important when viewed in light of when God graces someone with a specific call to serve in the Christian ministry or impresses someone to encourage and support ministers who have heard God's call to Christian service.

Theological education, therefore, is not only for clergy but also the laity. The entire church body is obliged to "walk with God" as Enoch did. It is not to a certified clergy member but to a lay person that Henri Nouwen wrote these words:

"Spiritually you do not belong to the world. And this is precisely why you are sent into the world. Your family and friends, your colleagues and your competitors and all the people you may meet on your journey through life are all searching for more than survival. Your presence among them as the one who is sent will allow them to catch a glimpse of the real life." (1992, 105)

The sacramental "real life" is for all members of Christ's body. Christ's witness is for all His people to proclaim and demonstrate. The equipping of the people is left to the God-called minister. Still, the theological and Biblical education is intended for the priesthood of all believers (1 Peter 2:4-5). This emphasis is sometimes missing in theological education. At the Global Theology Conference in Guatemala City, Dumerzier Charles (2002) discussed the need for developing a theologically literate laity. We should not forget this critically important component of theological education.

The importance of a theologically literate layperson is demonstrated almost daily in West Africa. Dany Gomis once told the story of a woman in his congregation in Dakar, Senegal. She was an ordinary housemaid who lived and breathed the Good News. The day she encountered an inquisitive Muslim man selling charcoal, she did not go running to Pastor Dany for help in talking about God with this non-Christian. She was well-equipped for the work of service. She evangelized the man by responding diligently and supernaturally to his daily interrogations. Today that man is a man of faith in Christ, because of the witness of a housemaid—a faithful member of Christ's body. God is great!

Laity should be involved in all levels of the educational task. Jane Vella assists us in formulating the right question to guide this task toward its goal. For each teaching-learning encounter, Vella asks, "Who needs what as defined by whom?" (1994, p. 48). Wouldn't it be right to think of the laity is as much a "Who" and "Whom" in this question as ordained clergy?

Should they play an important role in defining the “What” of theological curriculum for the church? I hope so. I hope world areas seeking to prepare ordained clergy do not forget this key element to the Church’s educational task. For this reason theological education needs to be practical and personal as well as theoretical and academic. To become theologically literate the church needs educated and prepared laity as well as clergy. With this in mind, now we turn to the goal of theological education.

Remember the Goal—Wisdom for Life

The goal of theological education is wisdom for life for all. Wisdom means far more than short, pithy aphorisms to develop good habits within one’s particular culture. Wisdom is more than knowledge imparted or even grace received. Wisdom is the sum total of the familiar 4 Cs (content, competency, character, context), but it is more than a set of measurable outcomes. Wisdom is holiness but there is more here than a theological perspective or a particular set of behaviors or lifestyle choices. Wisdom is so real that it can be spoken of as a Person, revealed through the biblical writer of Proverbs, as a mother crying out in the street for her lost children to come home. Wisdom is so valuable, according to Proverbs, it can be compared to the wealth of precious jewels. We cannot, however, possess wisdom, but we can become wise. The richness of these biblical metaphors is superseded only by the reality that one can only try to describe and as the Incarnation revealed once for all. Theological educators hold this treasure in dirty worn-out clay pots to pass to the next generation. It is a worthy goal for an inherited task that will last far beyond the contributions of one’s lifetime.

Lifelong Learning for the Whole Church

If wisdom is the goal of theological education, where does it stand beside other commonly held goals for theological education: readiness for ordained ministry (e.g. a course of study), development of mature clergy (e.g. formal theological training such as seminaries and university-level work), and lifelong learning (e.g. whole-life discipleship for the whole church)?

For John Wesley, there was only one rightful process of ordination, that offered by the Church of England. In his “Address to the Clergy” (1756), Wesley hoped to provide correctives for developing mature clergy and itinerant preachers. These correctives were deemed necessary, according to Wesley, due to the perceived failures of traditional forms of education, particularly how it failed to develop character. Wesley had hoped Kingswood would provide a suitable

alternative to the superficiality of his alma mater, as he described humorously in “A Plain Account of the Kingswood School” (1781).

It is significant to note, however, the Kingswood school was not exclusively for the ministerial training of adults. Wesley recognized the wisdom in starting early in educating children in the value of spiritual things, offering a broad curriculum, though for him it would be situated in a classically Western mold, and opening the educational endeavor to the laity. Lifelong learning for the whole church was a priority for Wesley and not just a generic means for clergy development or encouraging leadership skills.

A Lifelong Journey into New Insights for Holy Living

Wesleyan theological education can be described as a lifelong journey toward discovering new insights for holy living, or to say it another way: dwelling in wisdom for life for all. There are several indicators one should expect in educational programs situated in the Wesleyan tradition with wisdom for life for all as its goal.

A Meaningful Curriculum—Open to Diverse Sources, Loyal to the Denomination

One should find diversity in its curriculum which is open to various sources in localized contexts. Wesley synthesized “new” ideas and practices into his theology and ministry because he empathized with a variety of Christian traditions. It is also necessary to find value in the denominational structure even as its limitations are honestly acknowledged. Wesley was always a part of the Church of England, though spending most of his time on the fringe.

A Mature Church—Local Identity, Self-theologizing, Flexible Delivery Systems

Teachers and learners should be at home in their national or local identities. Wesley was truly English but allowed the Methodist movement to become Americanized. Wesley freed Francis Asbury and Thomas Coke to be Methodist as Americans would be and not Methodist as the English were. This process of indigenization included re-shaping Wesley’s theology in the 19th century and the continual process of globalizing this theology into the 21st century. With this in mind, new mission areas need to become self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating, according to Rufus Anderson and Henry Venn, but they also need the freedom to self-theologize (Paul Hiebert) before they are truly mature. (Cooper, 2005) In becoming mature, new districts need to be flexible in delivering education not just relying on what the missionaries always did, admitting that Wesley relied on both formal and informal methods of instruction. To be theologically educated does not always result in matriculation or having a nice-looking

diploma. The process for becoming theologically educated may not involve the typical tools of instruction, such as classrooms, textbooks, pencils, and paper.

A Mentoring Capacity—Learn from Failure, Fulfill a Global Responsibility, and Fill the Gap between Knowing and Doing through Mentoring

As Wesley limped back to England after his detour through Georgia, we need to understand that failures also contain new possibilities. Wesley overcame his disappointing experience in the New World by taking an honest look at the reality of his heart and life. Honest assessments and difficult decisions by principal stakeholders are always needed to shape a theologically literate church based on wisdom for life for all that stays true to the Word and the church's sacramental place in the world. Furthermore, the flattened world continually shortens the distance between any two points on the globe and, therefore, increases one's global responsibility to the task of theological education. We need to fill the gap between doing and knowing in creative ways through utilizing new technology like using podcasts and iPods to deliver lectures and rediscovering the wealth of our theological heritage that includes the 19th and 20th centuries and many different cultures around the world.

Most of all, we need to take seriously the role of mentoring in theological education. It is not a new idea, but it is again gaining ground in mission areas through the likes of George Patterson. Long ago, Wesley filled his Christian library with biographies, knowing we learn best through observing the lives of others. Teachers shape the character of others by exemplifying a godly character themselves. Thomas Coke wrote to ministers in 1855: "Blessed be the Lord, we have had our ministers, who were formed according to the model of Jesus Christ, according to his simplicity, his unction, his sacred zeal. We have had our WESLEYS, our FLETCHERS, our GRIMSHAWS, and our WALSHES." We could make a similar list from our Nazarene tradition: We have had our BRESEES, WILEYS, CHAPMANS, GREATHOUSES, GRIDERS, BENSONS, and LUNNS.

The educational task of the whole church is to be a catalyst for the theological trajectory of our inherited tradition. Only the future will tell us if we have done it right.

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