

WESLEYAN WAYS OF KNOWING AND DOING

Timothy J. Crutcher

The churches in the Wesleyan tradition, like John Wesley himself, have always placed a high value on education and on the acquisition and use of knowledge. From the beginning of the Holiness Movement, those who became Nazarenes embraced the idea of Sunday School and founded Bible schools and colleges alongside churches, as if education were as crucial to becoming a holiness people as worship, as if informed heads were as important as enflamed hearts. Today, the 57 institutions of higher education of the Church of the Nazarene continue the tradition of affirming the role of knowledge and learning in the formation of Christian persons and Christian communities.

An important feature of a Nazarene and Wesleyan approach to education is the interplay between the things we learn from teachers and books and the way in which those things are validated and deepened by our own processing and experience. Wesley optimistically believed that God uses our experience, through the work of the Holy Spirit and through God's prevenient grace, to open up our lives to His truth and the truth about the world. But while he placed a very high value on the role of experience and reason in the process of coming to know, he also affirmed that there are things we need to know before experience and reason can play their part. Wesley was, of course, most concerned with the spiritual truth that comes from scripture, but his insight into how learning works does apply, regardless of the subject matter. Education begins in faith, as we trust what others (scripture,

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parents, teachers, textbooks) tell us about what the world is like. We then process those traditions and insights through our own thinking capacities (reason) so that they shape our experience and allow us to truly own what we know. This processing and experience then leads to new opportunities to learn new things from others, which just starts the cycle over again. We often refer to those four distinctive components—scripture, tradition, reason, and experience—as the Wesleyan quadrilateral, and the interplay between them gives a stable method of learning and testing what we know.

This emphasis on the role of experience means that a Wesleyan approach to education is going to be, in the main, very practical, meaning it is going to be oriented toward real issues in the real world in which we live. God’s purposes in learning are never self-oriented, never learning-for-learning’s-sake (something Wesley referred to as “spiritual idolatry”). A true education will lead people out of their condition of ignorance and enable them to become better persons, not just people with more information. Education is as much about enabling us to experience well as it is about stuffing our heads with facts. This is not to say that purely theoretical or academic subjects have no place in education. Indeed, learning to think well may even require a level of precision found only in exercises like logic or mathematics, which means the church always needs people who can do those things well. But that does not change the affirmation that the purpose of having an informed head (as well as an enflamed heart) is to have engaged hands. This is why many of even our liberal arts colleges and universities began as schools having a much more directly practical focus, like teacher training schools, nursing schools, or Bible schools that would prepare people for ministry.

This practical bent toward helping human beings flourish in the world is a natural outgrowth of the grounding commitments of the Wesleyan tradition in general, and the Church of the Nazarene in particular, to become more like God and to serve God’s purposes in the world. In a sense, everything we learn ought to be used to reflect God in deeper and deeper ways, which is why holiness is one of our core values. And because the God we try to reflect is a God who is actively en-



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gaged in the world, one cannot emphasize being holy without also emphasizing being missional. Education, then, ought to lead us to becoming full persons after the image of God, persons whom God can use in establishing His kingdom and His purposes in the world.

There are clear implications of this line of thinking about knowledge for both the education of traditional-aged students (pedagogy) and also for the growing field of adult learning (andragogy). In both areas, recognizing the link between learning and experience means that any and all fields of learning can have a place at the educational table if they serve the purpose of the formation of persons who will engage the world and serve God's mission. For universities, this means

a strong liberal arts component, both for areas that are obviously practical, such as business and science, and also for areas that shape our sensitivities and awareness, such as literature and art. Wesley himself was a strong proponent of the burgeoning sciences of his day, but he steadfastly resisted those forces that would make one type of experience (such as scientific experience) normative for all experience. Breadth is as important as depth if we wish to prepare students who can effectively

engage the world in all its many facets. Additionally, given the easy access to information in our Western world, providing information these days is less important than providing the skills to put that information to work in experience. Nazarene schools serve their constituents well by focusing on the skills of the practical use of information instead of merely its access.

When it comes to traditional students, the interplay between information and experience during the formative late-adolescent years should invite exploration and experimentation with “service-learning,” where students are encouraged—even in the most elementary phases of their education—to put what they know to work in the world. From



mission trips that give a chance for students to put their classroom knowledge to cross-cultural work to semester-abroad programs to the structured use of internships, apprenticeships, and practicums in all areas of student learning, all these serve the role of bridging the gap between information and experience that is crucial to a Wesleyan approach to education.

A Wesleyan approach to learning also informs the way in which the church serves adult learners. Where the church needs to help young learners move from information to experience, it needs to help adult learners process their life experience into information that can be used to open the door to further experience. Providing collegiate credit for life experience is one way this is done, at least when it can be shown that the experiences resulted in real learning. Another way to do this is to focus on learner-based educational methods, in which the instructor's job is more about helping learners understand their own experience than dictating to them new blocks of information. In fact, given the intuitive way in which a Nazarene and Wesleyan approach to education validates the learning that has gone on outside formal educational contexts, most Nazarene schools consider it part of their mission to reach out to those adult learners whose lives have provided them with abundant experience but not with the tools to process that into real education. Given that Nazarene schools affirm this learning process as a life-long process and one of utmost importance to spiritual growth, it is natural for them to actively seek opportunities to help people of all ages grow toward deeper and deeper understanding.

A Wesleyan approach to education is one that focuses on the dynamic interplay between trusting enough to learn new information and needing to put that information to work in experience for oneself. It balances respect for the authority and expertise of teachers and professors while it also affirms the indispensable and central role of the student in the educational enterprise. It balances and affirms the role of every area of learning, from physical education to music to business to science to theology, and it offers a way to show how they all work together in pursuing the God of all truth and in serving God's mission in the world. ■

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