

Teach Your Children Well

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Deuteronomy 6:20-25 (NIV)

²⁰ In the future, when your son asks you, “What is the meaning of the stipulations, decrees and laws the Lord our God has commanded you?” ²¹ tell him: “We were slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt, but the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. ²² Before our eyes the Lord sent signs and wonders—great and terrible—on Egypt and Pharaoh and his whole household. ²³ But he brought us out from there to bring us in and give us the land he promised on oath to our ancestors. ²⁴ The Lord commanded us to obey all these decrees and to fear the Lord our God, so that we might always prosper and be kept alive, as is the case today. ²⁵ And if we are careful to obey all this law before the Lord our God, as he has commanded us, that will be our righteousness.”

Here in Deuteronomy, Moses eloquently retells the great acts of God in history. Deuteronomy is his farewell discourse, as Jesus was to have with his disciples (John 14-17), and comes, as with Jesus’ farewell discourse, on the boundary of new religious experience. Facing what is ahead, entering into the promised land, Moses describes through the recital of history the purpose of the people of God and God’s incredible faithfulness and time-and-time-again tolerance of his people’s failing.

If Deuteronomy was composed, compiled, or re-edited during the era of Josiah’s revival (2 Kings 22:3), it is already the future. And the children of that generation were asking again, “What is the meaning of the stipulations, decrees, and laws the Lord our God has commanded?” Deuteronomy interprets the present as well as the long-ago past. By retelling the story, Moses prepares for the future by bringing the people into the

past. Observes Patrick Miller, “Deuteronomy seeks to bring a new generation back to the boundary and give them instruction for life.”¹

Moses’ history was, for Josiah’s time, a means of reformation, as history is many times in history. *Ad fontes*, “from the fount,” meant for the fifteenth-century Humanists a return to the fount of Western civilization in ancient Greek and Roman culture, and *ad fontes* meant for both Erasmus and Martin Luther a return to the New Testament as a means of reforming the Catholic Church. Centuries later, John Wesley sought to renew the Church of England by a return to the teachings and practices of the primitive church.² The Church of the Nazarene in the 1970s sought renewal by returning to both the teachings of John Wesley and the vision of Phineas Bresee for urban centers of holy fire. Something inherent in human nature seeks out our reason-to-be by looking back at the fountain and comparing it to our present.

History is useful. Somewhere, Jephthah, the son of a prostitute, had been taught by an unknown teacher to know history. When the Ammonites presented their version of the historical record of how the Israelites passed through their country on their journey to the promised land, Jephthah knew they were incorrect. Jephthah cites to them Numbers 21.

What was to have been the substance of the Hebrew children’s education? History. History conveyed the meaning of their being a people. Think of the story Moses retells here in his farewell as the people prepare to enter the promised land. Think of the character of the story he is telling—life: failures, triumphs, victory, grumbling, hunger, thirst, God’s faithfulness, our unfaithfulness, God’s mighty acts, our idolatry.

In our own reading of the Bible, do we not want to yell at the Israelites, “Be faithful!” Every time I get to 1 Kings 12, I want to shout at Rehoboam, take the advice of your advisors! And, still wondering what is next—no

¹ Patrick D. Miller, *Deuteronomy* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), 4.

² Geordon Hammond, *John Wesley in America: Restoring Primitive Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

matter how many times I have read the text.

Deuteronomy says that the story is to be talked about, discussed “when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up” (Deut 11:19). That is, history, with all of its names and places and dates, is not just to be recited (though we are grateful to Jephthah’s teacher for his ability to recite it) but explained.

“When your son asks,” Deuteronomy 6:20 says, not *if*, but *when*. History answers this child; history conveys the purpose of the people of God, their reason-to-be, the meaning of rites, rules, regulations, signs and symbols, and beliefs—all of which the young man *experienced*. Children, learners in general, and all the more so, adult learners bring to the educational process experiences they yearn to talk about and to ask, *why*? The parent and teacher know that if the child does not understand the *why* of shared faith and sees God’s design and our privileges and responsibilities, the child will not be faithful. Why did the people of God suffer calamities? Hear Moses tell the story. He taught faith not by means of philosophy and theology, which descend to us from the Greeks, but by means of history, which descends to us from the Hebrews.

By the time of Josiah, it may have become apparent that the history had *not* been told enough to each succeeding generation, not enough to have guarded the people from idolatry and sin. Hence, the words of Moses, the history he tells, reverberated to a new generation, provoked repentance, and brought revival.

I. Why? Why history?

Several years ago, when talking with a professor at one of our universities, I told him that I was a historian—no, not a historical theologian, but a historian. He asked, what place had a historian on the faculty of a theological seminary? Previous generations might not have asked that question, as a professorship in church history was an expected and necessary foundational position on the faculty of theological seminaries. Though I have not located studies on this, it is my perception that that might not hold true today.

While some seminaries have allowed more electives, others have reduced the number of units required for the Master of Divinity, for instance, and subjects in church history have been among the casualties.³

So why history? From history, we understand why things are as they are.⁴

From history, we connect ourselves with the generations that have preceded us. Some historians might even seem more connected to the people of the past than to their own colleagues!

Through history, we are engrafted into the tradition of which we are a part. As H. Richard Niebuhr observed, “When we become members of such a community of selves, we adopt its past as our own and thereby are changed in our present existence.”⁵ In membership classes, for instance, where the history of the Church of the Nazarene is taught, even if we are from a very different era and living in a very different place, Phineas Bresee and Hiram Reynolds become our founders. When we hear about “Uncle Bud” Robinson and the story of the great theologian A. M. Hills sitting at Robinson’s feet at a straw-strewn kneeling rail while Robinson preached, it is our story, and it conveys the ethos of the Church of the Nazarene.

Equally, the story of Nazarenes around the world is our story. On my second visit to China, I went along with our General Superintendent and Regional Director to visit our old field in Hebei Province. On the long train ride from Beijing to Handan, I not only briefed them of my trip there ten years earlier with John Pattee but also told them the stories that I had learned and the research I had done about the beginnings and development of the Church of the Nazarene in China. When I learned that we would be meeting with Zhang Xin, who had been the most outstanding evangelist for

³ Arguing for the need for church history in the theological curriculum, Perry Shaw, *Transforming Theological Education: A Practical Handbook for Integrative Learning* (Carlisle, Cumbria, UK: Langham Global Library, 2014), 138.

⁴ See, for example, H. P. Rickman, “Introduction” to Wilhelm Dilthey, *Pattern and Meaning in History: Thoughts on History and Society*, ed. H. P. Rickman (1961; reprint, New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 59-62.

⁵ *The Meaning of Revelation* (1941; reprint, New York: Macmillan, 1960), 52.

our church ever since the 1920s, I made it so that the General Superintendent would be duly impressed with the person of this 90-year-old preacher that he was meeting. From history, we learn respect for the endeavors of those generations who have gone before us.

From history, we understand human nature. Those who have gone before are like us. We can feel their humanity because they are human like us. We can identify with them. We can empathize with them. Their courage inspires us. Their bravery instructs us. Their failures strangely comfort us and instruct us in our own struggles.

Like every human being, we are formed by the society, particularly that segment of society of which we are a part. Emile Durkheim observed, "It is only by historical analysis that we can discover what makes up [humanity], since it is only in the course of history that [humanity] is formed."⁶ Human beings are preeminently social beings, but the society we are a part of is constructed in history.

In my own segment of society, as a young missionary, I was skeptical about denominational missionary reading books, which are published to raise financial support for Nazarene missions. These books described missionaries as miracle-working superheroes. The books also left many unanswered questions, for instance, why a particular missionary left the field at a particular time. Besides, historians are a bit cynical. So, I did my own research in the Nazarene Archives and found missionaries, as I suspected, to be human! Struggling, and oftentimes, struggling with each other. (I recall Nazarene missiologist Charles Gailey saying something, facetiously, I suspect, to the effect that missionaries have just a little less spirituality than the common layperson.) I presented my research to my classes, and some of those who became missionaries themselves reported that this view of the mission field prepared them for real life as missionaries. Being a historian, a "professional remembrancer of what fellow citizens wish to forget,"⁷ it was

⁶ Durkheim, "The Dualism of Human Nature and its Social Conditions," in Durkheim, *On Morality and Society: Selected Writings*, ed. Robert Bellah (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 150.

⁷ Eric Hobsbawm quoted in Eric Foner, *Who Owns History? Rethinking the Past*

not surprising that Nazarene Publishing House turned down the manuscript that I prepared based on my research. Admittedly, if one reads the *Holiness Abroad*, published by Scarecrow Press in 2003, there is a twinge of irony in the title. The reader would ask, what, then, is “holiness”?

Yes, from history, we look at the reality of lived-out holiness. Writing my section in *Our Watchword and Song*, I discussed racism. Some in our denomination testified to entire sanctification but would not allow African Americans to attend their churches. How can we reconcile that? Discussing our questions helps us to understand and clarify what holiness really should be.

From history, we learn problem-solving. John Dewey said that education must be practical and applicable. In a sense, he is the one behind the Church of the Nazarene’s emphasis on the four “Cs” in theological education. (He did not put it that way, but that is the implication of his educational philosophy.) Dewey brought to the attention of educators’ context, competency, and character to balance previous generations’ preoccupation with content. Yet, for Dewey, history is the most important subject in the curriculum. To study history, Dewey observed, is to study how and why people act and how they use intelligence to solve problems, and so revealing that process to us. Furthermore, Dewey said in *The School and Society* that history “enables the child to appreciate the values of social life, to see in imagination the forces which favor effective cooperation with one another, to understand the sorts of character that help and that hold back.”⁸

Note that “character” is the sort of character that enables community. From history, we learn about character—in Martin Luther, John Wesley, B. T. Roberts, and Phineas Bresee. We learn who the heroes are—such as Bartolome de Las Casas, who transcended his own culture and came to see his people as the “enemy.” Practically every single class session in history is a

in a *Changing World* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002), 165.

⁸ *The Child and the Curriculum. The School and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, n.d.), 151-152. See Robert B. Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 171.

lesson posing questions about character.

History teaches us that grand, beautifully construed doctrines are useless unless they are incarnated. “Ideas are poor ghosts until they become incarnate,” said George Eliot.⁹ History is the incarnation of ideas, the test of ideas. History is filled with real flesh and blood people like us who believed and *enacted* their faith.¹⁰

Similarly, for we Wesleyans, historical experience tests our right understanding of the Bible’s teachings. John Calvin interpreted the Bible in ways that emphasized election and predestination to such an extent that it seemed not to matter how Christians lived out their lives. Insofar as John Wesley was concerned, this interpretation of the Bible was wrong—must be wrong—because he saw in history how it led to antinomianism.

From history, we discern what the gospel is by looking at its manifestation in culture and observing again and again how confused we missionaries have been to think of our particular form of Christianity as the “gospel.” Recently, in my History of Missions class, a Korean student who had been a missionary in the Philippines for several years came to an understanding that her mission had made Korean Christians of Filipinos, not Filipino Christians. Of course, American missionaries are prone to do the same.

But historical lessons like this come with frustrating subtlety and excessive descriptiveness. In its pursuit of the noble dream of objectivity, history tells dramatic stories without the subjective coloring of adjectives. That is, history, like other disciplines, is captured by positivism. Historians are part of the “academy.”¹¹

⁹ In E. Stanley Jones, *The Christ of the Indian Road*, 6th ed. (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1925), 188.

¹⁰ There is an entire emphasis upon “lived religion” in the study of Christian history. See especially David D. Hall, ed., *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

¹¹ Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American National Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

Within the academy, history is apologetics. Timothy L. Smith had two or three persons whom he kept in mind whenever he wrote, one of them an alcoholic at a prestigious university, all of them scoffers of Christianity. The only way to have convinced them about the goodness of Christianity was to have played by the academy's rules, which means heavily footnoted, primary-source-supporting objectivity in discussing the lives and works of the faithful.¹²

II. Teachers

We do not know the name of Jephthah's teacher, but one of mine was Timothy L. Smith. In various ways, I still convey his mind and teaching to my students.¹³

I also convey the mind of my other teachers. In my first year at Eastern Nazarene College, my writing teacher was Alice Spangenberg, then in her forty-ninth year of teaching. That is, she began teaching in 1923—a hundred years ago. Among those she taught in the early 1940s was a Japanese student named Shiro Kano, who was interred in the Boston area when World War Two broke out, who went back to Japan, and about whom she wrote.¹⁴ I have used Shiro Kano's story in my classes, but imagine how much more connected I am to him by our having had the same teacher!

I convey to students another teacher, J. Kenneth Grider, who every year commemorated the death of theologian Karl Barth by tears while reading a poem he had written in tribute to him. At the same time, Grider established rapport with many students by playing table tennis and, in my case, teaching me how to play billiards. But in my time at seminary, few teachers did that, and at Asia-Pacific Nazarene Theological Seminary, there has been a

¹² Similarly, on the apologetic aim of history, Henry Warner Bowden, *Church History in an Age of Uncertainty: Historiographical Patterns in the United States, 1906-1990* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois U. Press, 1991), 35-64.

¹³ Floyd T. Cunningham, "Common Ground: The Perspective of Timothy L. Smith on American Religious History," *Fides et Historia* (Summer/Fall 2012), 21-55.

¹⁴ Spangenberg, *Oriental Pilgrim: Story of Shiro Kano* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 1948).

vast difference in our relationship with students. Maybe it is our living on campus together, but I think it is more than that; it is the ethos that bridges cultures for Christ.

In seminary, only once did I venture to enter a class discussion. It was in a class taught by Mildred Bangs Wynkoop. She could recall as a child hearing Phineas Bresee preach. Why was her class the only class I spoke up in during my three years at seminary? For one thing, I was very shy. But also, as I recall, there were very few class discussions. Almost everything was lecture. What was it about Wynkoop's class that allowed me to speak? For her, each class was something creative. Something about the subject was being created conjointly among her and the students. Together, we might come up with something profound! I swallowed hard, took a few deep breaths, and ventured some of my thoughts.

Like myself, my seminary professors were not taught to be teachers but scholars. As a teacher, I would come to the "lecture hall," which was truly a lecture hall, with my thick notebooks, picking up at the next class session precisely where I had left off in the previous—following the examples of my own professors. Why should graduate school profs care about pedagogy? Slowly, in my years of teaching at APNTS, I began to care. Visiting professor Edythe Leupp said something that should have been obvious: that we are not teaching unless learning is taking place! I do not fail students, she said; I am too good a teacher for that. If a student is struggling, if I really believe that what I am teaching is important, to my best, I should make sure that that student is not left behind. Somewhere in those years, coming to a greater appreciation for the affective domain among our students and sensing that the affective should precede the cognitive, I began to open each class session with a hymn. And there were a few occasions where I might provide donuts or pizza.

Nonetheless, as academic dean, I was frustrated with Carol Herrmann, our adjunct professor in Christian Communication. Her grades were late. All the students worked on the same project. Unlike my near-perfect Bell curve, in which on any given test, an equal number of students failed as received an A, *all* of Dr. Herrmann's students got an A grade. Now, years

later, I think they got an A grade because they had learned something, and whatever the class might have been about, the students from different countries, in bridging cultures for Christ, had learned to work together.

I was asked to teach a PhD subject, Spirituality and Transformational Learning. The first time that I taught the subject, I knew little about spirituality and less about transformational learning. But I was hearing from my student, Ernesto “Chino” Lozano, about Critical Pedagogy, so I decided when asked for unknown reasons to teach the subject a second time that I would try to find out what transformational learning was. So, I read a lot, beginning more than a year in advance of the class. After surmising that the key connection between spirituality and transformational learning was hospitality, I painstakingly constructed the syllabus, carefully pre-selecting readings for the students. I set a few ground rules, in part to curb the tendency of some students to dominate. In class, my intention was to build on the experiences and questions, like that child in Deuteronomy 6:21, that students brought, using opening discussion, not dominating, and each day of class nervously hoping and praying that as we “walked” and talked together, there would be formative discussion.

As it turned out, because of the pandemic, the class met by Zoom. Strangely, more than meeting face to face ever could have done, Zoom helped us achieve a level “playing” field. The teacher’s face was just one of more than a dozen on the screen. One could hardly tell who the teacher was. In fact, some could not. That was, I would like to think, by intention.

Meanwhile, during the pandemic, as I taught other classes by Zoom, I realized that students could not study if their minds were on their families’ suffering—whether it was Covid killing dozens in their home villages or whether it was civil war. Going around the circle on Zoom, we identified how we were feeling and took as much time as needed to pray. Affective before cognitive. Hospitality without donuts or pizza. Whether that same care and compassion expressed over Zoom can be communicated in face-to-face classes remains the challenge!

Could I make my classes so hospitable that the shyest of the shy, after

taking several deep breaths, could do as I did in Wynkoop's class and muster the courage to say something?

I have apologized to my earlier students. You would have learned more and gotten a higher grade from me now than 30 or so years ago. I should have been more attentive to you and allowed you to speak more. I am still learning how to teach.

By the way, in the previous paragraphs detailing something of my own history, I have demonstrated another purpose of history: history conveys values. The stories we tell as historians, just like the stories that John Nielson told about several generations of his family around his dinner table, are far more than names and dates and places. There is a purpose not unlike that of Moses when he recalled with the people their history, and not unlike the revival that the recital of history brought in in Josiah's time. With subtlety, without adjectives, through stories, historians place emphasis on the particular values they wish to teach.¹⁵

Why history? To lead us to repentance. To give us hope for change. And so that in the future, when your son or daughter asks you why, you can begin a discussion: here is the story; this is why.

¹⁵ More on this and the methods of historians, Floyd T. Cunningham, "Telling the Story of the Church of the Nazarene: A Wesleyan Reflection on Church History," *The Mediator* 4 (2002), 1-14, and "A Wesleyan Historian's Response to Post-Modernism," *The Mediator* 12 (April 2017), 53-79.