
WE BELIEVE IN QUALITY EDUCATION – *SELAH*

Musings on the Subject of Quality Education

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I suppose everyone in this conference—in fact, most people in general—would agree with the statement, “We believe in quality education.” We might even hear some hearty “Amens.” Our students also agree. They want a “good” education. Sometimes they even demand a “better” education. The mission statement for this conference reads, “To develop a worldwide system of quality education to prepare pastors to carry out the mission of the church.”¹ That is why we are here. We believe in quality education. But, note the final word in the title. *Selah*.

Selah is an isolated Hebrew word occurring 71 times in the Psalms and three times in Habakkuk. It is generally agreed² that *Selah* is a musical or liturgical sign, although its precise meaning is not known. So, why does this obscure word appear in the title for this discussion of quality education? The various possibilities of its meaning provide

¹“Great Commission Pastors for the 21st Century: A Global Strategy for Theological Education,” (Unpublished paper of the Church of the Nazarene, revised 3-4-99).

²According to D. J. Wiseman, “*Selah*” *The New Bible Dictionary* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1962), via Logos Library System.

perspectives for approaching this statement which we so unanimously endorse.

Selah may be a musical direction to the singers and/or orchestra to “lift up”, that is to play or sing *forte* or *crescendo*. In this understanding, *Selah* would simply emphasize our belief in and commitment to quality education by asking us to say it with uplifted voices. This reminds me of a team support chant from my high school pep rally days. We would repeat the statement, We like our team, emphasizing each element. In the case of quality education, we would raise our voices, as follows: WE believe in quality education. We BELIEVE in quality education. We believe in QUALITY education. We believe in quality EDUCATION. And, finally, WE BELIEVE IN QUALITY EDUCATION. Well, you get the point. It becomes a slogan, a rallying point, an affirmation of our commitment to quality education. This understanding of *Selah*, then, is appropriate to our meetings here in Bangkok—we believe in quality education.

Selah may have been used to indicate a liturgical mark. It may mean to lift up the voice or hands in prayer, or to bow—directing the worshiper to prostrate himself. In reference to quality education, then, it would indicate the need for divine help in accomplishing the task. We believe in quality education—God help us. The task is too big. We do not have enough qualified personnel. We do not have enough up-to-date equipment. We do not have money for textbooks and library books. We do not have adequate facilities. We do not have well-prepared, motivated students. We could go on. So, this meaning of *Selah* is appropriate. We believe in quality education, but the task is enormous. We need God’s help and guidance.

A third possibility for the meaning of *Selah* is an exclamation, “for ever.” This would make it a cry of worship like “Amen” and “Hallelujah.” So be it! Praise God! Quality education is both a reality (Praise God!) and a goal (so be it). Sometimes we feel good about the way we have been able to prepare and develop a course. Praise God.

But sometimes the tyranny of the urgent means we just stay one chapter (or page) ahead of the students as we prepare for class each day. “Quality” becomes a distant goal. Sometimes the needs are so varied that we are not able to specialize as we would like, and quality seems quite illusive. Amen. Quality education is something we do, as we do our very best in spite of all the difficulties. Recent testimonies and comments by our students at Melanesia Nazarene Bible College have emphasized their thankfulness for the quality education they are receiving. Hallelujah! Praise the Lord. But they are also looking forward. They are criticizing some areas where we need to improve. Amen. We must keep working toward better quality education. Our faculty concurs. Two of our faculty who are not here today asked us to stress the need for a vision coupled with action that refuses to accept defeat. Amen. Hallelujah. *Selah*. Forever.

My favorite (if not the most technically correct) definition of *Selah* is “chew on that a while.” Many years ago, during my undergraduate years, a college president gave that interpretation. He suggested that when we come across *Selah* as we read the Psalms, we should pause and consider what we have read. And as a cow chews her cud, we should take time to think about its truth and how it applies to us, how it might be implemented in our lives. We believe in quality education. Let’s think about that. What do we mean by that statement? How do we achieve quality education?

The following thoughts stem from over 18 years in the classroom in theological education in developing countries. By no means do we intend to suggest that we have arrived or that these ideas are the final, definitive answers to the immense task we face every day. These are observations and recommendations gained from fruitful interaction with students and fellow faculty members and administrators, all seeking excellence in education.

I. Commitment

A pre-requisite for excellence in education is a firm commitment to both the concept and its implementation.

A. We have an historical precedent in the Church of the Nazarene for such a commitment.

The various groups that joined to form the denomination supported at least eleven different Bible colleges. These were intended to prepare pastors and missionaries. Within the context of the United States it was decided to progress to liberal arts colleges in accordance with the educational development of the country. The desire was to be able to prepare ministers to be able to speak to all levels of society, from the least to the most sophisticated.

This idea was not confined to the United States. Early on the Bible college faculty and church leaders of the Church of the Nazarene in the Cape Verde Islands determined to provide the best possible education for their students. Necessary sacrifices were made to provide this level of education. As a result, today, the most respected, influential and largest evangelical church in Cape Verde is the Church of the Nazarene.

The unique demands of Cape Verde required unique solutions. Every situation, every school is unique. Due to the unique needs and resources of each field, contextualization is a must. While we have a core curriculum to unite and standardize our theological education, we have great latitude in delivery methods and teaching techniques to present the curriculum as well as significant freedom in supplementary courses to help make the Gospel message understandable within each unique context. We have a mandate from our constituency to deliver this eternal message of hope in such a way that it will penetrate to the core of each and every culture which it encounters.

B. Creation of Life-long Learners

I asked 16 first-year students at Melanesia Nazarene Bible College what they thought about quality education. Almost unanimously they

emphasized the quality and commitment of both teachers and students. They understand that quality education is more about who we are than what we do. In terms of quality teachers, our model is the Master Teacher.

He never taught a lesson in a classroom; He had no tools to work with, such as blackboards, maps or charts; He used no subject outlines, kept no records, gave no grades, and his only text was ancient and well-worn.

His students were the poor, the lame, the deaf, the blind, the outcast—and His method was the same with all who came to hear and learn. He opened eyes with faith; He opened ears with simple truth; and He opened hearts with love—a love born of forgiveness.

A gentle man, a humble man, He asked and won no honors, no gold awards of tribute to his expertise or wisdom. And yet this quiet teacher from the hills of Galilee has fed the needs, fulfilled the hopes, and changed the lives of many millions; for what He taught brought heaven to earth and revealed God’s heart to mankind.³

We must model to our students the spirit of our model, Jesus. That is first and foremost what quality education is all about. But, it is not enough to “know” or even to “be”, we must demonstrate our knowledge and character in action. That is why the Church’s educational objectives, stated in terms of knowing, being, and doing are so important.

One of the “doing” outcomes we desire for our students is that they pursue life-long learning. As the *Sourcebook* states, “. . . the educational approach should stimulate the desire for ongoing

³“The Teacher,” as presented at Faculty Retreat, Northwest Nazarene University, 1992.

education and provide the tools for personal development.”⁴ Quality educators seek to instil a lifestyle of learning and development.

One aspect of that educational approach is a refusal to settle for “banking” education. The banking image is that of depositing information into the students and withdrawing it for examinations. Certainly, some basic rote learning is necessary, but we must go beyond such a banking mentality. In spite of his theological shortcomings, Paulo Freire⁵ provides insights for the development of lifelong learners. He maintains that students need to be set free from the teacher who limits the activity and power of students. He advocates a way of teaching that will enable persons to become more aware of and responsible for themselves and their world. This is achieved through “praxis,” a process of reflection followed by action and further reflection.

The goal is to transform students from depositories of a prescribed body of information to active agents. And students who are active and creative, who have the capacity to examine critically and interact with their world, continue to do so. Learning through praxis becomes a lifestyle that transforms them and their world.

⁴Chapter 5 of the *Sourcebook on Developmental Standards for Ordination* delineates the philosophy, purpose, responsibility and program development for lifelong learning.

⁵Freire contrasts banking education and “conscientization” in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Seabury, 1970), 58-74. Unfortunately, his theology fails to deal with sin and so distorts the application of his theory. For a fuller critique of his position see Robert W. Pazmiño, *Foundational Issues in Christian Education: An Introduction in Evangelical Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 68-72, 162-63.

II. Investment

A. Financial: Education is an investment in the future.

Education is an expensive proposition. No matter what delivery system is used, there are considerable sums of money involved. This is of particular concern for those of us in developing countries because the move within the Church of the Nazarene is to self-sustaining programs. The day of subsidies is drawing to a close, and rightfully so. It is time for each school and its constituency to take ownership in all areas as soon as possible.

The implications of this move are far reaching. Are the current institutions and delivery methods sustainable in their present form or should they change to meet the needs and available resources of the communities they serve? Who will make these difficult decisions? Once the decisions have been made, who will implement them and pay for them?

Since the prospects of outside support for our educational institutions is waning, the questions we must immediately ask are: Will we take up the challenge? Will we make the necessary changes and financial sacrifices to provide excellence in education?

B. All investments must be wisely made.

We must never lose sight of the fact that our commitment to excellence in education is an investment in the future of our church. Investments must always be wisely made to reap the greatest dividends. Today we are challenged by the need for pastors to fill vacant pulpits. Church planting has progressed faster than our ability to produce trained pastors by traditional means. The temptation is to lose sight of our long range goals of excellence in education in order to fill quickly the pulpits. This need not occur if we continue to value and support our institutions while significantly strengthening our non-

institutional delivery methods. As long as our educational institutions are committed to excellence in **ALL** theological education and are vitally involved in developing and implementing **ALL** delivery methods, quality education will be maintained.

This excellence demands plain, old—

II. Hard Work (Implementation)

A. It means not cutting corners to accommodate short term goals of a student.

We must be compassionate towards our students. Not only are we their teachers, often we are their role models and mentors. Our lives are (or should be) closely intertwined for the time we are together. Often they adopt our attitudes which will influence their ministry for the rest of their lives. Our influence upon them is an awesome thing and needs to be considered. But this topic is beyond the scope of this paper.

Despite the closeness we develop with our students, we must never lose sight of our commitment to excellence in education. Sometimes there are requests made by students for special considerations and exceptions to the established rules and requirements. There is the temptation to waive rules or requirements out of compassion. However, an underlying premise is that the requirements and/or rules were established to insure a quality education. If we refuse to acknowledge the rules and requirements, we are, in effect, lowering our academic standards; and our calls for excellence in education ring hollow. Referring requests for exceptions or exemptions to an academic committee relieves the individual teacher of the burden of making such a decision when she or he is emotionally involved. It also allows a group to consider the request and rule upon its merits. Exceptions should be just that—exceptions. They should be few and far between as long as our programmes are well thought-out and driven by a quest for excellence .

B. Syllabus

A syllabus is a contract between the teacher and the student. As a contract it is binding on both student and teacher. It spells out what is expected of both learners and teacher. It forces the teacher to set goals and develop means of achieving them. It clarifies the tasks at hand.

C. Calendar of Events - Daily Schedule

The goals that have been set in the syllabus can be progressively achieved through the publishing of a daily schedule, provided with the syllabus. The overall goals can be divided into daily goals. Topics of discussion/lecture can be set out so that everyone involved can prepare adequately for the event.

D. Teaching Plans–Expansion of Calendar of Events

The teacher can use the Calendar of Events to produce detailed teaching plans for each day of class. Here the teacher can plan how best to approach the topic at hand and the materials needed for the class period. The whole purpose of this exercise is to plan ahead to insure meaningful, varied educational activity.

E. Specialize (as far as possible)

To enrich the learning experience for student and teacher it is best for the teacher to be able to teach out of a depth of knowledge. This depth is obtained by additional study by the teacher either informally or formally. If we want our students to become life-long-learners, we must set the pattern.

A teacher should supplement a course every time it is taught. Preparation need not be simply reviewing what has been presented previously. It should include careful evaluation of a class which was taught previously. It should also plan on implementing new teaching methods and introducing new material or at least refreshing that which has been done previously.

F. Using Non-Teaching Time to Upgrade Skills/Update Information

When not teaching, one is not on holiday. Perhaps some of the incorrect perceptions of teachers having the “good life” because they have so many holidays or teach only a few hours per day are justified. Often non-teaching time could be spent more productively by the educator. This time is ideal for taking courses or reading new material in one’s area, i.e. improving oneself as an educator.

Educators, like mere mortals, need holiday time to regroup themselves. However, these times should be scheduled and used for this purpose. Otherwise, educators are (or should be) “on the job” even though there might not be a classroom full of students in front of them.

There is a real danger for theological educators to feel (or be made to feel) that the “real” ministry is “out there.” Consequently, the educator takes on other ministerial roles (such as pastoring a church) in their “spare” time. The result of this is overload which causes the minister/educator to perform both ministries less effectively.

G. Network with Other Teachers/Schools

Re-inventing the wheel in this day and age is tantamount to educational sin. It is sheer audacity to think that we are the “yea” and “amen,” the only ones holding the keys to theological education. (Some have defined the essence of sin as elevation of self to the place of God.) Developing reciprocal relationships with nearby theological education institutions can be mutually beneficial. It is also good stewardship of resources.

We believe in quality education.

Selah.