

DIDACHE: “GENERATIONS”
Kent Brower and Deirdre Brower Latz

Question #1: *What is your current role?*

Deirdre Brower Latz

I am currently working for *Nazarene Theological College*, in Manchester England as lecturer and head of Pastoral and Social Theology. I also lead the pastoral team of a local church (Community Church of the Nazarene, Longsight) part-time.

Kent Brower

I am also at *Nazarene Theological College* in Manchester as Vice-Principal and Senior Research Fellow in Biblical Studies. In addition to teaching some undergraduate courses, I currently supervise seven PhD candidates in NT. My administrative role includes being chair of the Research Degrees Committee as well as being available for support of the International Board of Education.

Question #2: *Why did you choose this Discipline?*

Deirdre Brower Latz

I think that I stumbled into practical theology. I am called to be a pastor, but love teaching, and when the opportunity presented itself to me to teach, I took it. Initially I was involved in teaching in the field of youth ministry - NTC had just started a programme in Youth work and Ministry. Then, over time, my interests shifted towards contextual and practical theology – in dialogue with history. I think that part of my character is activism, and so an area of theology that had its roots in the soil (so to speak) was strongly appealing, but mindfulness of the big questions of **why** we do what we do as well as **how** we do seems really important.

Kent Brower

Yes, Deirdre, you probably did stumble into the discipline of practical theology. But I remember when you talked to me about your call to be a minister. I knew it would be costly for you, and I recall the chats we had about the pressure on women in ministry but confirming my full confidence in you and your response to this call. I have also watched you emerge as a very gifted teacher. You probably scored better than most because of your experience as a youth pastor and international leader in NYI. That certainly made you the ideal person to be part of our new programme. Of course, your BA (honours) and MA dissertations in John Wesley prepared you for the PhD research you have been conducting on Wesley and the Emergent church. I have watched this with great interest and learned a lot from it. I see whole areas of great interest and importance stemming from this general topic that will be of potential benefit to the church.

In some senses I stumbled into biblical studies. I think it was during my MA studies that biblical studies began to rise to the surface (I was also very interested in philosophy of religion), but it was not really until I finished my PhD that the direction was clear. In fact, for four years after finishing my MA, I did something completely different – I returned to the family farm to work with my father and brother. On reflection, that contributed more to my development than might

be thought. So, I would probably say that my sense of direction and calling emerged over the years rather than a clear direction from the start.

Deirdre Brower Latz

It's funny, but I think 'the farm' and your up-bringing there are essential to your character as a teacher – you practice 'good husbandry' taking incredibly good care of your students – it's one of the things that I love about your example. Not only that, but the way you work in rhythms and seasons – and your willingness to think in new ways – maybe all of that came from 'making do' on the farm. I also think that you've never been afraid to think differently about something – even though that makes you unpopular sometimes!

Question #3: *What key contributions does your discipline offer?*

Deirdre Brower Latz

I think that practical theology marries thinking and practice – encouraging the church to actively reflect on who she is, and how she lives out who she is.

Kent Brower

This is a healthy view of practical theology. An older paradigm, one that I grew up with, really divided practical theology from 'academic' theology. It is a great relief to see those artificial distinctions disappear. Theology, in my judgement, must by definition be practical or it is not theology.

I work as a believing biblical scholar. Both adjectives are important for the integration that you speak about. And I am particularly interested in a narrative approach to scripture because I think it is both fruitful and faithful to the canonical shape of the text. This, in turn, influences my hermeneutical strategy because I see scripture as the witness to God's revelation in Christ throughout the story of God's interaction with his creation. I also believe that the work that I do must be conducted in the context of dialogue within believing community. So I try to help my students see how an internalisation of the story of God's work with his created order is essential for their lives as God's holy people.

Deirdre Brower Latz

And again, your churchmanship, and commitment to the local and particular is part of what keeps your thinking in the realm of biblical scholarship so fresh. I wonder what the main changes have been in Biblical studies in the time you've been teaching?

Kent Brower

Hmm. That's a very interesting question. I think I could highlight three shifts among many. First, when I was working on my PhD in the gospels, the reigning historical critical paradigm was form criticism. That was coupled with a touching confidence by some scholars in their ability to analyse ever smaller bits of text to distinguish between tradition and redaction. That has gradually changed. Formal structuralism was making an impact on biblical studies. This proved to be largely a scholarly cul-de-sac; but what I gleaned from it was an appreciation of narrative structure that was not dependent upon particular structuralist models. Second, a major paradigm shift occurred in Pauline studies leading to the so-called 'new perspective on Paul', a view that

wished to understand Paul within the context of Second Temple Judaism. Third, in the UK at least, the face of the discipline has evolved significantly in the right direction. Forty years ago, Professor Bruce, my supervisor, was probably the only evangelical scholar to hold a top professorship in a British university. He was very much a pioneer, demonstrating by his world class scholarship that believing Christians could also use the tools of scholarship with integrity and rigour. Now, many of the top professorial chairs in the UK are held by practicing Christians. And the high profile of people like N T Wright, the Bishop of Durham, in the academic as well as the public sphere has been amazing.

Question #4: *What is the future of your discipline?*

Deirdre Brower Latz

Practical theology is evolving – continually drawing on the thinking of other disciplines and seeking to integrate them into a whole. I love that! That history, biblical studies, theology, philosophy, sociology, and anthropology can be drawn on to enrich recontextualising is important. I think that practical theology as an integrative approach to thinking will be increasingly important in developing an ‘everyday theology’ that is able to exegete the culture and enable theological reflection into the future.

Kent Brower

One of the blessings in my life is to be active in a local church where the proclamation of the gospel is rooted deeply and consistently in God’s revelation in Christ mediated to us through scripture and theology. (It so happens that you are one of my pastors!) It is gratifying to see the integration of theology and practice in practice. This is, in some respects, a reflection of the encouraging dissolution of walls between the theological disciplines so that theologians and practitioners are engaged in serious reflection on scripture and that biblical scholars are in conversation with them.

Question #5: *What do you see proves a challenge to Wesleyan Higher Education?*

Deirdre Brower Latz

Sometimes I think that the church thinks of Wesleyan Higher Education as neither use nor ornament, as if theology doesn’t really matter ‘on the ground’ and is just for ‘academics.’ I think that more and more people are less able to afford education (without racking up enormous debts) is a threat too. Umm...

Kent Brower

Actually, I echo your concerns at a range of levels. This suspicion of education is not, of course, a new phenomenon. It has been lurking in the background throughout my whole ministry as a lecturer for well over three decades. Years ago the title of a book called *The Strange Silence of the Bible in the Church* was haunting accurate. The most worrying thing is that this silence is so pronounced in churches which affirm, as we do, that scripture is our rule of faith and practice. And, to be fair, people who are in my guild of biblical scholars have to take a significant part of the responsibility for this. We have been isolated from the church all too often – and those walls

have been built from both side. Our work needs to be done with skill and integrity for the sake of the people of God, not merely for academic point scoring

From the church's side, I worry about the apparent inexorable drift towards evangelical fundamentalism. Here is where a robust and coherent Wesleyan view of scripture would counter this brand of fundamentalism. I think that scholars need to listen and patiently articulate our firm commitment to the authority of scripture while resisting the eclipsing of Christ in the fundamentalist view of scripture.

As for your second concern about the perceived cost of education, I, too, worry about this, but perhaps not simply in terms of the debt. (For what it is worth, I think the church should assume more of the cost of educating its ministers than it does, but that is likely too counter-cultural to be taken seriously in a very individualised culture.) Of course, you have had your education in a system where state support has been historically very good. My student loans lasted almost into my third decade of teaching! All too often the solution to 'the high cost of education' is to see if there is a shorter and cheaper way to 'tick the boxes'. But I remain firmly committed to a communal context for ministerial preparation.

The spiritual health of the people of God may be at risk if the vision of practical theology as integrative (as you outlined above) is lost and ministerial candidates in particular are not given the time to read, reflect and mediate deeply on scripture and theology. Our Wesleyan heritage is all grounded on scripture – tradition, reason and experience are taking their shape in conversation with scripture.

Deirdre Brower Latz

That's an interesting one, because I think that in both of our fields the role of Scripture as both engaging the world around us and drawing on the best of the past traditions of the church is critical. Being able to engage in meaningful cross-disciplinary thinking is vital.

Generally I also think that the idea of the church being under threat makes us more 'protectionist' and a series of dangers (for the church and education) emerge: either, we become entrenched in defensive 'return to the halcyon days' type of thinking, or we become more offensive, fundamentalist almost – enforcing our views on others at the expense of humility and dialogue. Or, we become reductionist: if we provide enough 'tool kits' then the church will turn around, or faddish - following the latest and best trends... This impacts those of us in practical theology especially - the pressure to educate people who can 'perform' in product-driven ways makes us compete in the market-place rather than carefully consider the depths of what it means to form leaders and churchmen and churchwomen who are people of character, who have an understanding of how we should be as communities of the Kingdom of God and of how we can align ourselves with God's purposes.

Question #6: Where are you hopeful concerning Wesleyan Higher Education?

Deirdre Brower Latz

I think that a lot of Wesleyan theologians are involved in a process of engaging the best of our heritage in order to shape the present and future. Too, there's an increasing emphasis on

integrity within our scholarship, and a greater dialogue with the richness and breadth of theological thought which is helping us be honed. I am hopeful that Wesleyan theology is increasingly perceived as generous and dynamic and able to engage with real life people in real life situations – gracious towards people.

Kent Brower

I really cannot improve on your hope, Deirdre; I share it. I might articulate aspects of it in a different way. For instance, I think that one of the key points that emerges from scripture is that the people of God may need to be counter-cultural at significant points if they are to be God's holy people. That certainly applied to Israel vis-à-vis the Canaanite context; it is one of the challenges Paul faces in his new churches. And it will be, at the very least, uncomfortable for us in some situations – when we find ourselves arguing for social justice against a government and a popular press set against asylum seekers, for instance.

That leads me to the wider answer. From a biblical perspective, I think the Wesleyan voice needs to be heard clearly in the conversation the whole church has about the question, 'What does it mean to be God's holy people, on God's mission and in God's power in this world.' I find a delicious irony that the question of 'holiness' is very much on the agenda of current biblical scholars (in a way that was unheard of last generation) just at a time when its importance for our denominational identity is only gradually being recognized. But I am also concerned that discussions on the meaning of holiness within our circles is at risk of completely by-passing the work of this generation of biblical scholars who share a passionate concern for an understanding of holiness that is biblical grounded and theologically coherent. We cannot simply repeat the teachings of the past – we need to keep thinking and alive theologically on many questions, and probably specifically on this one.

Question #7: Final words for future "generations?"

Deirdre Brower Latz

Right and good thinking and right and good practice are vital for the church. As theologian Miroslav Volf says: "At the heart of every good theology lies not simply a plausible intellectual vision but more importantly a compelling account of a way of life, and that theology is therefore best done from within the pursuit of this way of life." (Volf and Bass, *Practicing Theology*, 2002)