

DIDACHE "GENERATIONS"  
Ruben and Juan Fernandez

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

*Juan Fernandez*

I am currently a 10th-12th grade history teacher at a Christian high (secondary) school, worship leader and Sunday School teacher at my local church. I graduated in 2006 from Mount Vernon Nazarene University with a major in Communications.

*Ruben Fernandez*

I am a third-generation Nazarene from Argentina. Today, I am a missionary serving as the president of the Nazarene Seminary of the Americas (SENDAS), in San Jose, Costa Rica, and Regional Education Coordinator for the Mexico and Central America (MAC) Region. I have D.Min. from Nazarene Theological Seminary in Kansas City, Missouri. I am currently pursuing a PhD in Ecclesiology at an evangelical university in San Jose.

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

*Juan Fernandez*

I chose communications as my field of study because I feel that it is the foundation of our society. Christianity has a great and simple message, but somehow, Christians complicate things by not being able to communicate it properly. We sometimes get caught up in the deep theological discussions and forget that Jesus used simple analogies to communicate eternal truths.

*Ruben Fernandez*

I have a pastoral heart. I have been a pastor for many years in my home country, but at the same time served as theological professor in several seminaries there, because I am a pastor-teacher. Medical doctors prepare medical doctors; lawyers prepare lawyers. Pastors prepare pastors. While attending Bible institute in Buenos Aires, One hundred percent of my professors were pastors. That made a difference in me. I fell in love with the pastoral task back then, even during the breaks between classes, taking time to talk about ministry with real pastors!

Today I recognize that our seminaries are preparing men and women in several ministries, and we need experts in different areas (philosophy, sociology, history, etc.), but all our professors must have pastoral gifts and graces (and exercising them in local churches), if they are trying to teach pastors. In my case, I feel that preparing other colleagues I can expand my ministry.

On the other hand, I think I also have the gift to be able "to provide for others", or to lead (Romans 12:8 TNIV). In this way, I have served in various positions at local, district and general levels of the church, and in the last twenty years, more in relation to theological education.

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

*Juan Fernandez*

As a Sunday School teacher and communicator, my discipline offers an indispensable source of discussion regarding our everyday walk with Christ. My college-age group is always eager to discuss about doctrinal issues, but not from a distant perspective, rather from a down-to-earth, experience-driven focus. How can we grow as a body of believers if important theological issues are only discussed in classrooms using complicated vocabulary? I'm happy that we have great theologians in our church, but it seems that their reflections and teachings do not reach the average church-goer, especially not in Latin America, where we live. The books Christians tend to buy are usually self-help books masquerading as religious. Authors write them because they know they will appeal to both Christian and secular markets. Now, I don't think this is wrong, we must strive to create material in every field and formulate appeals to non-believers; however, believers must seek to discuss the deep theological concepts in light of how they relate to their everyday life—something which I think is lacking greatly in our church today, and I seek to accomplish this through my Sunday School classes.

*Ruben Fernandez*

Theological education begins at home, in our everyday conversations with our kids (Deut. 6:7), before coming from the pulpit or into the classrooms. More importantly, theological education starts modeling Jesus to our family, friends and community. The fact is more than fifty percent of Nazarenes in Latin America have come to Jesus in the last fifteen years. They were not born in Christian homes. For them, theological education begins in Sunday School Ministries and Discipleship programs. One thing is sure, or at least should be: no one should begin theological education in the seminary or Bible institute.

Having said that, I think theological education is one of the means or tools for the fulfillment of God's mission in this world. We co-operate with the Holy Spirit in making more and better "...Christlike disciples in the nations," using the words of the Board of General Superintendents.

*Juan Fernandez*

Dad, do you think that in Latin America theological education is seen as something reserved only for those who have a pastoral call? Should we try to change this mindset, or should we provide other ways, besides Sunday School, for people to receive Wesleyan theological principles to strengthen Nazarene identity and walk with God?

*Ruben Fernandez*

As I mentioned, I believe that there are responsibilities that mainly belong to Sunday School and Discipleship Ministries. Our seminaries in the MAC Region require an intentional discipleship process in the local church for everyone who plans to follow an ordination track or degree granting program [for ministry].

There are challenges, however, regarding SSDM teachers' preparation and materials that need to be faced in order to revitalize that ministry in our context. Teachers need to be carefully taught in Wesleyan holiness theology, and also in teaching skills in order to be able to share deep but simple classes with lay persons. Some professors just "read the book" and share boring and

unexciting classes. Some materials are very good, but others are translated from English to a “generic” Spanish-speaking context (we need to remember that there are huge differences between someone living in Spain, USA or Latin America) or written in Spanish but emphasizing the Biblical world but with no connection with today’s world.

It needs to be said that a good percentage of our seminaries’ professors are serving also as SSDM teachers, and it makes a great difference, resulting in dynamic and well coordinated classes and contextualized materials.

I still need to believe (and I think that most of our seminaries do the same) that theological institutions have been raised to prepare pastors and other main leaders for the church. The problem that we are facing is that local churches are not teaching and discipling their members as they should be, and we are seeing, at least on the MAC Region, the potential for the institutions to collaborate with local pastors in that task.

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

*Juan Fernandez*

I believe that as times continue to get tougher around the world, Christians will be forced to deal with tough questions about their faith. Lukewarm Christians will be pushed toward a real decision for Christ. This will undoubtedly bring a revival to the body of Christ. Sunday School and small groups will play a key role in this movement. We are already seeing around the world, churches that grow the most are those that have a strong small-group foundation. Mega-churches come and go, but churches that have a strong doctrinal foundation based on one-on-one and small group discipleship are tough enough to resist through the troubled times ahead.

*Ruben Fernandez*

[The future is in] technology and delivery systems of education. We must be open to the whole new world that communications and educational technology have opened to us. In these new times, it is hard, and not healthy, to keep the concept that there is just "one way" to prepare ministers. We need to rethink and intentionally move forward with creative ways to continue educating with excellence all the people that God is calling.

[Also, the future is in] diversified lay training. As I already stated, we normally have thought that seminaries train pastors and local churches train lay people. That is true. However, in most of the cases and for different reasons, local churches are not discipling in a lifelong way. Last year, I received a call from the Regional Office to the theological institutions. They agreed in support and cooperate with local churches in a "School of Leadership" for those working in seven different ministries. That represents a great responsibility and a new exciting scope of service for us.

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

*Juan Fernandez*

I guess I have already mentioned this before. How can we take deeper Wesleyan theological discussion into our local church's Sunday school and small group settings, in a language that the

average church-goer can understand? Jesus did not choose a group of philosophers as his twelve. He chose all kinds of men, the majority with very little or no education. If these men could understand Jesus' message so clearly, and be inspired by the Holy Spirit to write about such deep theological concepts in surprisingly simple words, why can't we do the same?

*Ruben Fernandez*

Some challenges that we will be facing more and more during the coming years are:

The existence of our schools in their present form. Latin Americans have lived in crisis for decades. So, the actual global [economic] crisis does not scare us. However, most of our schools depend on an allocation from the World Evangelism Fund, which have been and probably will be declining in the future. It is true that in some countries we do theological education in "survival conditions." On the other hand, it is also true that we have fostered -in some cases- paternalism and dependency. Only a few districts give support to their jurisdictional school, and we need to drastically improve that. Thanks to God, many schools have launched innovative programs and different ways to provide genuine local incomes for funding their theological education.

Doctrine. We need to be balanced in understanding of and living out our Wesleyan-holiness doctrine. We are at risk to being "not Nazarene enough" - losing our core values two and three (holy and missional people), our heritage and identity, but also we are at risk to being "too Nazarene" (if that is possible) – losing our core value one (christian people), believing that we are "the one" church, and not having communion with other good evangelical traditions.

Church growth. Hundreds of new churches are being established in our countries, in many cases in very rural areas. We need to get closer to the new pastors that God is calling with theological education by extension (that we call decentralized) in a proper way. The one-year training plan for lay pastors started this year in the MAC Region (School of Leadership) can be a very helpful tool for those with a very low education. Materials are needed to be written and distributed.

On one hand, I believe that there will be always a Christian responsibility that comes from the New Testament where the people in towns with more resources help people in towns with less resources. Philip Jenkins in "The Next Christendom" states that by the year 2050 the higher number of Christian people will live in the Southern hemisphere but the resources among the Christians will remain in the Northern hemisphere.

Documents like "Commitment with a Simple-living Style" from Lausanne (1980) reflected conversations and decisions between Christians in rich countries and poor countries Christians, and remain pertinent today. In some places in the Nazarene world the discussions are about what kind of plasma TV will be placed in the outside hall of the sanctuary, in other less fortunate places the discussions are about how they raise the money to buy a few bricks to built a small place to meet and worship the Lord. There is nothing wrong with having good facilities in order to attract people of all social levels to church in the developed countries, but at the same time, there is an extra responsibility for those churches (besides the normal support to the World Evangelism Fund). For example, Nazarene local churches, districts and institutions in the "first world" could help two or three local churches, districts and institutions in the developing countries by sending W&W teams, providing endowments funds for self supporting projects, etc.

On the other hand, we certainly need to change some things. In some countries on our region, the Nazarene [presence is] 104-105 years old. It is time to begin assuming our own responsibilities even in financial issues. Talking about theological education we are asking a tuition fee from every student in the Region (apart of the amount that he or she is paying in the district) to be sent directly to the jurisdictional institution. There is a cost in the education and they need to start contributing to that, at least in a small proportion. Also an annual offering from the local churches for the seminaries is being promoted. The recent decision of the General Board regarding a 2.5 % from every local church 's income be sent to the theological institution on its field would be extremely helpful to continuing the teaching process about a sense of ownership of district and local people for education.

*Juan Fernandez*

Dad, speaking of doctrine, one issue that I am concerned with is that US Nazarenes feel much more responsible for being involved in government and civil action than Latin Americans. It is very common to hear American Nazarenes outwardly supporting a political party or directly getting involved in political issues by attending rallies, public demonstrations, calling their representatives, etc. What similarities or differences do you see with the Latin American Nazarene, and how do you think our doctrine relates to all of this? Should we be more or less intentional in our doctrinal statements when it comes to the Church's position and its members' responsibilities when it comes to social injustices and moral issues in the political arena (abortion, gay marriage, etc)?

*Ruben Fernandez*

You are right, but you need to remember that there are huge differences between USA and Latin American histories and governments. The USA has lived in democracy from its inception. They have worked for a long time on social equality, consensus and civil participation. Latin Americans have lived under military regimes for decades. I was born in the 1960s and grew up in the 1970s under repression, no liberty at all, no human rights observed, thousand of missing people and a lot of stolen children. Back then, many people in Latin America voted for the first time [when they were] close to the age of 30.

You were born and I begun my ministry in the 1980s under a brand new democracy in Argentina (thanks to God). Other countries did the same. With the building of democracies in Latin America many evangelicals understood their political responsibilities as Christians, and became majors, senators and filled other governmental positions. Even though, regrettably, we have had some evangelical presidents in our continent who were also accused of corruption and violation of human rights. That fact discouraged some good evangelicals with a call to be politicians from being involved in political parties.

However, the church may not be foreign to the political arena. We just need more true servant leaders involved in our counties and states. Christians do have a political responsibility. Sadly, there are Christians who think that there is some kind of separation between "sacred and profane" or church-living and secular-living. In the last Latin American Encounter of Nazarene Educators in Quito this was one of the topics treated. We believe that from the classrooms we can change the mindset of thousands of ministers in formation. As we know, the way that the pastors think will be reflected in the way what churches do.

I believe that the national churches need to have a prophetic voice in human and moral issues, like the ones you mentioned. I think, by my own experience, the local mini-efforts to transform our communities in many different ways and making relationships, while trying to influence Nazarene ministers in our countries will be the encouragement the people need. The key thing is that all our pastors need to be involved in this process. We need to face the macro but always taking care of the micro.

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

*Juan Fernandez*

I hope institutions teaching Wesleyan theology are kept in constant check regarding their focus. What is the purpose of this education? Is it to gloat about our theological knowledge or is it to have better tools to reach the lost for Christ? Is everything we are teaching focused around this objective?

*Ruben Fernandez*

Some things make me feel optimistic about the future are...

We are being more vulnerable, more open, more humane, in other words, more Wesleyan. In our schools the barriers between faculty and students are falling down.

We are the body of Christ together, holy people, together. We are not masquerading our feelings, or even weaknesses; we start to use small "accountability" groups as Wesley did. The process is slow, but is beginning.

Between West - East - North - South schools the same is happening. God has been and is still using some global leaders who—like the "expert builder" Paul—"laid a foundation" (1 Cor 3:10), for the global educational system in the Church of the Nazarene. And, the foundation is Christ himself before Whom we are all the same, without any kind of distinctions.

*Juan Fernandez*

Dad, when I read about the primitive church, I get the feeling that they relied much more on the Holy Spirit than we do today. Also, it seems that education, although they had teachers, happened because people were interested in discussing theological issues. They wrote to each other about them. It was the topic of their everyday conversations. Has the McDonaldization of our culture (where everything is quick and superficial) created a Church where people just do not care about discussing these issues as it once did? What will it take for us to go back to that hunger that the disciples had?

In Latin America we have lost some valuable things because we were afraid "to be identified as..." For example we have lost in some places the use of some rituals or symbols in our liturgy because we would resemble the Roman Catholics; but also we have lost the supernatural side of the Gospel because we did not want to be mixed with Pentecostals. We need to recover the

expectation for God's power manifestations and marvelous things that the Holy Spirit will do among us, in the same way that the primitive Wesleyans and founding Nazarenes had.

Why are we losing the interest in theology discussions? It's simple. The interest is fostered when the theology touches the needs of people's daily life.

Long and disconnected sermons and monologues in Sunday School classes, as I mentioned before, don't help very much. We need to begin seeing people in a different way. We must be more constructivists in teaching, starting where the people are, not trying to write on them as if they are "white sheets." We need to stop seeing laypersons in passive roles, just offering and tithing to support the "professional" ministers. We must see them as protagonists of the *Missio Dei*. That was God's plan, because He knows very well that we will never transform our society only with professional ministers.

### *Final words for future generations*

*Ruben Fernandez*

Be an authentic Christian for your time. Keep the essence of the Wesleyan-holiness doctrine even maybe changing some words that will help post- postmodern people to a better understanding of our message. Stay focused on God's mission even changing some almost "sacred" methods. Be a continual learner and a Christ-like disciple. Teach with your life first. Be contagious to your family, friends and beyond. Be faithful and "pass the torch" to next generation.