

KAIROS PROJECT

STANDARDS OF EXCELLENCE BLOG SERIES

KAIROS



WEEK 1

ROMANS 12: TRANSFORMATION



By David Williams, President, Taylor Seminary // Published June 15, 2020

When I was a young believer, I was mentored by someone who stressed to me the importance of memorizing Scripture. One of the first passages I learned was Romans 12:1-2:

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. ²Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Most commentators recognize that Paul makes a major shift in his thought in the twelfth chapter as he moves from talking about what has happened in Jesus to exploring the impact this new reality has in the life of those who recognize Christ as Lord. What difference does it make that in Jesus the Gentiles have been brought into the covenant community previously restricted to the children of Abraham, or that there is a new humanity formed in Jesus, the new Adam, or that life in the Spirit transcends what Jew and Gentile alike have understood about living faithfully as God's covenant community? What difference does it make that God's mercy has been shown to all of creation through Jesus?

For Paul, the world has dramatically changed. The promised new age has begun and this changes everything. Paul's admonition to the church is stated both positively and negatively. "Do not be conformed to this world" he says. The language is evocative. It pictures an artist pressing clay into a mold forcing the clay to take the shape of the mold (schema). The

mold Paul is concerned about is the pattern of “this world” (aeon), this old age, rather than the new world Christ has brought into being. As C. E. B. Cranfield argued in his magisterial commentary on Romans, the Greek construction here implies that their lives were already being conformed to something. The issue is not ‘whether’ to be conformed but “what” mold to be conformed to, and Paul wanted them to stop being formed by the mold of this age.

“Be transformed,” Paul says. There’s a new pattern. There’s a new mold into which believers are to be pressed that will shape us by its patterns. This is the shape of the new age, the patterns of the promised age which the Jews anticipated as the kingdom of God. That mold is the form and pattern of Jesus, the crucified Messiah. And we are transformed by making our minds new again.

Paul knew that the old age deeply formed the way his readers thought and acted in the world. As if by default they were shaped to think about and interact with each other in ways that now were simply inappropriate. Changing these patterns would take a lot of effort. It would be hard and possibly even painful. They would have to be diligent yet patient with each other. But this work would be worth the effort as their life together reflected more and more of the truth of the new age Jesus has brought, and the future which was coming upon them.

Please join us next week, as we continue to explore Romans 12 and how Paul calls attention to a renewing of our minds.

WEEK 2

ROMANS 12: RENEWAL



By David Williams, President, Taylor Seminary // Published June 22, 2020

Last week we began our multi-part exploration of Romans 12 by reflecting on Paul's call to "be transformed" and to focus on the future that was coming upon them. Today's article emphasizes Paul's concern about the mind.

Be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Paul was concerned about the mind. More than any other NT writer, Paul calls attention to our minds. Twenty of the 24 references to "mind" (nous) in the NT are by Paul. Twenty-three of the twenty-six references to "thinking" (phroneo) are his as well. Paul was well aware that the patterns of the old age shaped how they thought about everything and that they were already in the process of formation. His call was to a reforming that was so radical it could only be called transformation.

Paul's connection between "mind" and "formation" is instructive. When we think of "mind," we tend to think of it as a "container for ideas" which are judged as right or wrong, true or false. There's something different going on here. He's not merely admonishing them to hold true ideas (though that is certainly part of it). The mind Paul is concerned about is something that is formed, shaped, and molded. In this case, after a different mold/schema than comes naturally. He wants them to do more than think true ideas. He wants them to be formed by them, to embody them, to have them shape our lives.

This means changing the way they see things, not the least of which is the way they see themselves and others. Of course, seeing isn't merely looking out and seeing what is there; we

all know that we see what we want to see. This calls attention to the fact that seeing involves our desires, values, commitments, hopes, dreams, and fears.

Of particular interest to Paul in Chapter 12 is the way his readers see the different gifts, different vocations, and different contributions they each make to God's kingdom work. He recognized that in the church there are different gifts and that these gifts were all given by God and had their own part to play in what God was doing. He was also aware that part of the "way of seeing" that is endemic to the "old age" was to perceive some gifts and vocations as more valuable, more important to the Kingdom work than others. It was natural to assign privilege and status to the bearers of these gifts.

The Romans lived in a deeply stratified social world that was very much at odds with the social world envisioned by, or rather embodied by the Kingdom of God brought into being by Jesus. Theirs, like ours, was one that attributed different levels of honor and one's value and worth was associated with one's place in the hierarchy. He knew that those hierarchies, often in spite of one's best intentions, became inherently self-serving and tools to protect the rich and powerful at the expense of the poor and powerless to the detriment of everyone involved.

Paul is making it clear that in the kingdom things have changed. Since every believer has the Spirit of Christ dwelling in them, every believer has a part to play in what God is doing in the world. All of them are important; all of them are dependent on each other. The gifts graciously given by God were not given for the benefit of those to whom they were given, but were given to benefit the whole community. Paul was well aware of the temptation to use these good gifts of God selfishly. He addressed it often in his writings, most famously in his letter to the Philippians in Chapter 2:

1 "If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, 2 make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. 3 Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. 4 Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. 5 Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus ..." [NRSV]

At the heart of Paul's teaching is the recognition of the need to be transformed from the self-serving patterns of "this age" to the life-giving patterns of the new age. Paul names this the mind of Christ. He wants his readers, whether in Rome or in Philippi, to be of the same mind as Christ Jesus.

If we were to look, we would see that this theme isn't limited to Romans and Philippians but can be found over and over in his epistles such as in 1 Corinthians, Ephesians, Galatians, and Colossians. I don't think it would be overstating the case that it comes up in all of Paul's writing, and probably in all the New Testament. Resisting the patterns formed in us by the old age and

being transformed by the mind of Christ, the patterns of the new age, is a constant and ongoing process. It is a never-ending task.

Looking ahead to next week, we will take a deeper look at patterns, how we are formed by them, and some of the disruption that can happen when they change.

WEEK 3

ROMANS 12: PATTERNS



By David Williams, President, Taylor Seminary // Published June 29, 2020

Last week, we talked about renewal of the mind, the importance of “looking into the interests of others,” and being of the same mind as Christ Jesus.

Previously, we saw how Paul warned his readers that they were already in the process of being squeezed into the patterns of this world and admonished them to “stop it!” Rather they should be squeezed into the pattern of the Kingdom of God. That pattern is in conflict with the patterns of the world, and Paul warns them that it will take a lot of persistent and difficult work. Paul is talking specifically about the way they treated and valued (or devalued) each other. That’s vitally important for those wanting to live faithfully to the kingdom. We are shaped in ways we are often unaware of.

Today, we are going to dig a bit deeper into patterns, how our lives are formed by them, and some of the disruption that can happen when they change. Too often we think that being squeezed into patterns is an unusual thing or something unique or even special. Actually, it’s a lot more common than you might think. The ability to develop patterns is really important to all of us.

Think about what it is like to learn something new. At first you have to practice it over and over. While you are learning, it is hard, confusing, and complicated. It often takes intense concentration and a lot of work. But, once you have learned the task it takes much less effort, it seems much simpler, less complicated, and others watching you do it say that you make it look

easy. The very act of learning is a process of becoming patterned, of being squeezed into a new shape.

Let me illustrate, think about when you learned to drive a car. When you first got in the car you had to check the rear-view mirror, the side mirrors, and the seats. You very deliberately looked in front of you and behind you. You learned to turn the key just enough to engage the starter but not so much as to grind it. You put just the right amount of pressure on the accelerator to start the car but not to rev the engine too high. Learning to use the brakes, the turn signals, looking before you change lanes, all of this has to be mastered. There are a thousand things involved, and it can all be a bit overwhelming at first. If you have taught someone to drive recently you are aware just how complicated driving is, and how hard it is to be patient with someone when it is so easy for us.

You don't have to think much about driving once you've done it for a while. You do all these things automatically, habits developed over your years of driving. Driving becomes easy, almost second nature, and the car becomes a space where you can do lots of other things too, which of course is why there are "distracted driver" laws which detail what you can't do while driving. The ability to learn behaviors like this is a gift that allows us to do more things than we could do otherwise. Imagine if you had to concentrate on driving as much now as when you were learning.

Next week, we will explore cultural conditions and talk about why patterns of behavior might be good in one context and not in another.

WEEK 4

ROMANS 12: CULTURE AND CHANGE



By David Williams, President, Taylor Seminary // Published July 6, 2020

Today, we are picking up on the topic of cultural conditions and why it is that sometimes patterns of behavior can be good in one context but not in another. In the closing of last week's article, I talked about driving. It's something that when first learned takes a lot of focus and concentration. However, over time, it becomes a learned behavior and one that can be done with little thought.

The truth is that most of the things we do we do because they are habits learned through repetition and practice and can now be done effortlessly and thoughtlessly. Most things we do are so much a part of us that we don't realize that we are doing them. That's all well and good as long as our habits serve us well, helping us do what we want to do and be who we want to be. But that's not always the case. Sometimes things serve us well for a time or in one context but then when things change, they no longer serve us so well.

My wife often tells the story of growing up as a missionary kid in Hong Kong in the 1960s. In her family she was taught to show respect by always answering adults with Ma'am or Sir. "Yes Ma'am" or "No Ma'am" was deeply ingrained into her way of interacting with adults. But when she got to her British school responding with "Ma'am" wasn't a sign of respect but disrespect. She quickly gained a reputation as the 'cheeky American' and that brought her no end of grief during those early years of schooling.

It's important for us to remember that patterns of behavior may be great in one context or at one time but do not work so well for us in another. Habits we have worked hard to develop or practices that we regularly participate in may have served us well in the past, sometimes even been liberating or life-giving but they don't serve us well in a new context or when we face other issues. Sometimes what is liberating at one time can be bondage at another.

This is the situation we are facing today. The cultural conditions we are living in are bringing rapid changes to almost every dimension of life. These changes are causing significant disruption to our patterned behaviors. Challenges to the habits of mind and body, so deeply engrained in us leave us not only confused, frustrated, and angry, but also alienated from the culture that used to feel so much like home. Often, we are at a loss as to how to respond to what's going on. Think, for instance, of the changes around communications and social media.

There once was a time when if something important happened it could take days, weeks, months, or even years for the message to get from one place to another. As travel became easier and safer, communications traveled faster and more securely. The ways we communicated adapted to the changes. Because information was scarce institutions were created not only to collect it but to protect it and for transferring it from one place to another and from one person to another. Complex systems emerged. Because institutions are expensive, money was required, and financial models were created to support, protect, and maximize the work of the institutions involved. All of this was built on a cultural of scarcity. But the days of information scarcity are gone.

We all know that is no longer our reality: information isn't scarce, it's abundant. With the creation of the internet it's not that there is too little information but that we have too much. We have more information at our fingertips than has ever been available to humans in the history of the world. And it doesn't take days or hours or even minutes for information to travel around the world, it takes nanoseconds.

Next week, we will take a closer look at the information revolution and how access to so much information so quickly is and how it is changing us.

WEEK 5

ROMANS 12: ABUNDANT INFORMATION



By David Williams, President, Taylor Seminary // Published July 13, 2020

Last week, we talked about how the cultural conditions we are living in today are bringing about rapid changes in almost every dimension of life. These changes are causing significant disruption to our behaviors. One such change is the abundance of information that is now available.

There are countless benefits from the information revolution; we are better informed about things that are important to us, about history, science, medicine, events going on in the world, to mention only a few. Most of us embrace our new situation enthusiastically. Think about how often you “Google” something to get information you want. We love that we can communicate instantly with people around the world, or get an update on something you care about that has happened somewhere across the globe.

But access to so much information so quickly is also changing us. I know as a teacher, this has dramatically impacted what happens in the classroom as students now can “fact check” claims during the class lecture and look up alternative critiques or concerns about ideas being presented; not to mention the variety of new resources available for use in writing term papers or doing other assignments.

We have always assumed that more information would mean we would make better decisions. We believed that with more information we are less easily deceived, misled, or taken advantage of. But what we have found is that as good as it is to have lots of information at our

fingertips it really is a double-edged sword. With so much information we have to be more discerning about the information we collect, whether the source can be trusted, or whether important information is being intentionally left out or distorted. More information has made it harder to make good decisions not easier.

This highlights what has always been true but just more hidden in the past: that knowledge is based on trust. What is now clear is that we have always trusted someone if we say we know anything. When the cost of publishing a book was high, we trusted that someone was making sure what was being written was trustworthy. Books were only published by recognized experts in the field. But that has changed. The cost of publishing something is now so low almost anyone can do it. The trustworthiness of our sources is now strongly contested, and the very abundance of information once so empowering has become a stumbling block.

Educational institutions are being overwhelmed by the implications of this new reality. In a thousand ways, from educational philosophy to institutional structure to governance models to financial models, everything is impacted by these cultural changes. This has been painful particularly as they disrupt the deeply engrained habits and practices that we have developed to do our work.

It's tempting to look at what's going on in culture and to wring our hands in despair in the face of all these changes. But if we believe in the sovereignty of God, then we must trust that God is ultimately in control of even these changing realities and that God's work is being done in and through these changes. If that is the case then our task is to discern what the Spirit is doing and to join God in that work. That takes deep discernment because hearing the voice of God in the midst of change means that God may call us to change as dramatically as the changes in our cultural situation.

Over the next weeks and months, we are going to explore what these cultural changes mean for us as an educational institution. This includes what it means for the way we think about teaching and learning, for how we structure ourselves as an institution and the financial models we use, for how we do our work with the communities we are called to serve, and what it means for collaboration and communication. We are excited about what God is doing in the world around us, particularly in the world of education and the church; we are excited for the opportunity to be a small part of this work.

WEEK 6

ROMANS 12: LEARNING IN A NEW WAY



By David Williams, President, Taylor Seminary // Published July 20, 2020

Over the past several weeks, we have looked at how following Christ is an invitation to be transformed by the renewing of our mind. We have learned that when Paul refers to the “mind” he has much more in view than we have traditionally understood. Transformation requires us to break from the molds in which we are often so comfortable. This can be a challenging – even disorienting – process because it invites us to become aware of and then to reconsider what has shaped us.

We are learning that one of the more disorienting aspects of the transformation we are experiencing in Kairos is related to how it requires learning to be understood, practiced, and assessed in new ways. Historically, the academy, the church, and really modern culture in general, have approached learning as the process by which one acquires knowledge. Over the years, we have attempted to include things like “praxis” or “field education” but have done so from a pretty limited perspective – one in which the goal is still “knowing” ideas or content. Our definitions of excellence, measurements of quality, systems of assessment, and priorities have all been shaped by one particular stream or tradition wherein “content” (and only particular types of content) is the most important aspect of learning.

Over the next few weeks, we are going to explore what it means to approach learning in a new way. We will ask questions like:

- What are standards of excellence and where do they come from?

- Is there a more robust way to think about knowledge, one that encompasses whole life discipleship?
- How do we ensure quality in a new paradigm of learning?
- What might we need to let go of in order to embrace a more holistic way of learning?
- Does student learning assessment need to look different in this approach?
- Is there a way to approach contextual theological education that keeps us from being developed in an echo chamber? That is to say, how do we learn alongside the “fellowship of differents” that is the Body of Christ while simultaneously learning to engage faithfully in our local context and theology?

I am sure we will bump into a few more questions along the way and even change some of these as we go. Stay with us each week as we reflect on what we are learning and what it might mean for the future of theological education.

We will begin with a deep dive into standards of excellence!

WEEK 7

STANDARDS OF EXCELLENCE



By David Williams, President, Taylor Seminary // Published July 27, 2020

When people talk to us about the Kairos Project, one of their first questions is about quality. More specifically, how do we ensure quality when we don't require so many of the traditional aspects of education that have been required for the explicit purpose of securing and maintaining quality in education? Not only is that our most frequent question, it is one of the most important questions we are asked.

We believe that quality is essential if the educational journey we provide is going to have the transforming impact on students, churches, communities, nations, and God's Kingdom, that we believe God desires it to have. This, of course, invites us to dig deeper into what we mean by quality and the standards of excellence one might use to identify and promote that kind of education. For the next little while we are going to engage these questions. We will look into some of the standards that have traditionally shaped theological education as well as how the Kairos Project maintains but also transforms them in order to do better what we all want and need theological education to do.

There has been so much written about educational quality that we could not possibly engage much of that conversation here. What I want to do is to help us become more aware of important dimensions of standards of excellence to better understand why we have done things the way we have. Over the next several weeks, I am going to make a few observations that are sometimes overlooked or, at least, not adequately accounted for in traditional educational practices. Perhaps I will name things that you are already familiar with; perhaps some of this will be new to you. Either way, by attending to these observations, I think we will better understand

the educational journey of Kairos and why we think it is even better than what we have been providing before. (For those interested, several of these observations are heavily dependent on the work of Alasdair MacIntyre. *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981, 1984.)

Please join us next week when we talk about the first observation: context.

WEEK 8

STANDARDS OF EXCELLENCE: CONTEXT



By David Williams, President, Taylor Seminary // Published August 10, 2020

In our last post, we began talking about how we ensure quality through the Kairos Project. Because we don't require many of the traditional aspects of education that have been associated with securing and maintaining quality, we often get questions on the topic. We are excited to kick-off this short series on standards of excellence in Kairos and to provide a little more insight into why we have done things the way we have.

Starting this week and going into the next several weeks, I will be making a few observations that are sometimes overlooked or, at least, not adequately accounted for in traditional educational practices.

The first observation I want to make has to do with context. Standards of excellence are contextual. In recent years, we have become more and more aware of the significance of context. The things that traditionally have been understood by many as being non-contextual are being shown to be inherently contextual. To put it simply, we are discovering that context matters. Context matters greatly. Context matters greatly for everything. This is true in every dimension of our lives and that's becoming clearer to us every day. I want to explore why it matters in thinking about education.

When I was growing up in Texas, we had a colloquialism that we used to characterize anyone who had made a really bad shot. We said that they had "missed by a mile." It didn't matter if one was throwing a baseball, shooting baskets in basketball, or target shooting at the rifle

range, “missing by a mile” meant you were a really bad shot. Sometimes in class, I ask students if they were aiming at a target but “missed by a mile,” if their aim had been accurate? After some discussion they come to see that the best answer one can give in the abstract is “it depends.” It depends on the context.

Let me illustrate how this is so. If I was shooting at a target 100 yards away, but it missed the target by 5 feet, you would judge my aim as inaccurate. It was a bad shot. But if you were sending a space craft 240,000 miles into space and missed the landing spot on the moon by 5 feet that would be characterized as amazingly accurate. Whether or not missing a target by 5 feet is judged to be ‘accurate’ depends on the context. Accuracy as a standard by which we judge something is always a contextual judgement.

I say this to raise awareness of the fact that every standard we use presupposes some context for it to be meaningful. Whether we recognize it or not, whether we acknowledge it or not, there is an assumed context in which the judgement is being made. That is simply the way things are. As I say, this is hardly new stuff. Missiologists have been trying to bring it to our attention for decades. That’s one reason I have often characterized the Kairos Project as shifting toward a Missiological philosophy of education. One simply can’t avoid the contextual nature of our judgements, and we need to stop making it appear as if we can.

This leads us to a second observation that standards of excellence are communal. Please come back next week as we take a closer look at why this is.

WEEK 9

STANDARDS OF EXCELLENCE: COMMUNITY



By David Williams, President, Taylor Seminary // Published August 17, 2020

A few weeks ago, we began talking about the important dimensions of standards of excellence associated with the Kairos Project. Last week, we discussed a first observation about the educational journey of Kairos: context. This week, we will look into a second observation. This observation is that standards of excellence are communal.

Standards emerge from communities which are involved in a common practice moving toward a particular end. The “community of practitioners” both create and are governed by these standards. Think about it this way, who is it that sets the standards for good medicine? Doctors do. Doctors determine what medical care leads to health and which doesn’t. Then they are held accountable to those standards in the care they provide. Who is it that set the standards for being a good lawyer? Lawyers do. Who is it that sets the standards for good therapy? Therapists do. That’s one reason peer-review is so important. Standards immerge out of and govern the community of practitioners.

Now, we shouldn’t think that these standards are determined solely by the community of practitioners, they are not. There are more aspects than just the community of practitioners but that community is inherently related to the standards. And, the standards are not arbitrary. They are arrived at by reason with rigor and care. Another dimension we shouldn’t miss is that these standards are created by the community to help the practitioners arrive at the result the practice is striving to achieve. It is important to recognize that practices are always moving toward an end or goal. That is, there’s a purpose for why the community does what it does.

Recognizing the communal dimension of our standards of excellence is important because our participation in these communities deeply impact our lives. We all participate in a variety of different communal practices and attending to them more intentionally can give us critical leverage over forces that shape us. In our series on Romans, we talked about the way culture shapes us, molds us, forms us into particular types of people often through habits and patterns of behaviours to which we pay very little attention. Our participation in these communities of practice do the same thing. Though often unseen their power is real and permeates many aspects of our lives. Later, we will pay particular attention to the way the practice of education forms us.

Recognizing that practices always strive toward a particular end helps us recognize the ways in which the activities, skills, habits, and even the language we use in the practice are in service to that end. It is only when we know what we are trying to do that we can assess whether or not we are doing it. Thus, recognizing what we are trying to do is essential in developing the appropriate standards of excellence for hitting our target.

Next week, I will share a third observation about the standards of excellence.

WEEK 10

STANDARDS OF EXCELLENCE: CHANGE



By David Williams, President, Taylor Seminary // Published August 24, 2020

We continue our conversation on standards of excellence in the Kairos Project. We have been working through some observations related to these standards. This week, we look at a third: standards of excellence aren't static; standards of excellence change.

This might sound strange at first. Many of us were taught to believe that if standards change then they can't really be binding and must be essentially arbitrary. But this isn't true.

A stark illustration of this is from when I was younger and is related to my family's experiences of the practice of medicine. My brother struggled with asthma. I remember many occasions when something would set off a quite serious asthma attack. He would find it harder and harder to get a deep breath. Sometimes, he had to work so hard to inhale that it was painful just watching and listening to him trying to get a breath. I remember our mother bringing him home from the doctor after a very serious bout with asthma. She remarked that the doctor had told her if we were away from home without his inhaler and he was really having difficulty breathing that she could give him a drag on her cigarette to help open up his lungs.

Before we get too critical of our family doctor, you have to remember this was back in the 1960s when the dangers of cigarette smoking weren't medically acknowledged (whether or not they were known is disputed). For many people, cigarette smoking was a pretty normal part of life. The world has changed a lot since then. Now the harmful effects of cigarette smoking are so well accepted that any doctor telling a patient to take a drag from a cigarette to ease their

difficulty of breathing during a fit of asthma might be subject to malpractice. You might suspect that our doctor wasn't a very good doctor back then, but he certainly wouldn't measure up today.

Most of us have experienced this kind of change in medical standards. I am a bit of a "foody." In talking about food, I often hear people complain about "not being able to keep up" with the latest medical advice on whether it is healthy to eat this or that food. Research changes our understanding of how food impacts us, so if we want to "eat healthy" we have to keep up with the research. One frustration my wife and I have had in this regard is that many doctors don't keep up with the research. The advice we hear friends being given by their doctors about how to eat is sometimes shocking to us.

These are all the illustrations of the contingency of medical standards of excellence. As medical knowledge grows so does our conception of health, the standards for what we need to do to be healthy, and what it means to be a good doctor. These standards change but that doesn't mean that they aren't binding. After all, doctors can lose their license by violating applicable standards of good medicine even as those standards change over time.

So, I hope it is clear that standards can be binding even though we recognize them to be contextual, communal, and contingent. The importance of these observations can hardly be overstated. Next, we will spend a few weeks exploring the implications that these observations have on the Kairos Project. This is, perhaps, the most important practice in which we participate as the Kairos Project.

WEEK 11

IMPLICATIONS OF CONTEXT, COMMUNITY & CONTINGENCY, PART ONE



By David Williams, President, Taylor Seminary // Published August 31, 2020

We've spent the last three weeks talking about some key observations related to Kairos Project standards of excellence. We have recognized the standards to be contextual, communal, and contingent. Now, let's explore the implications that these observations have on the Kairos Project.

When we talk about being "educators" we should recognize that we are already situated in a particular community of practitioners. This community has a history in which the standards that govern the practice has changed as we learn better how to do what it is that we are attempting to do. The practice of education exerts a profoundly formative influence on everyone involved, whether we are aware of it or not. We want to become aware of it so that we can better achieve the ends we are striving toward and to faithfully live into our calling as educators.

In the final post in our series on Romans 12, I drew attention to some of the implications of the fact that we now live in a context in which knowledge is no longer scarce. Recognizing that reality forces us to ask, if schools aren't primarily in the business of providing information to those who wouldn't have access to it otherwise, then what are we doing? What is our *raison d'être*, our reason for being? Why do we exist? The importance of answering this question simply can't be overstated. The answers we provide to these make the Kairos Project what it is.

Some of the deepest changes embodied in the Kairos Project center around our fundamental understanding of knowledge. In the west, we have tended to identify knowledge with content. If you listen, you'll see they're virtually synonymous in our language. We may bristle when we say it that way but it's clearly embedded in our practice. We treat knowledge as if it is essentially content, and then act under the assumption that the more we get the better off we are. The problem with this reductionist approach to knowledge is that it stripes away other essential aspects of knowledge.

One sign that something was missing in our attempts to educate students came when there appeared to be little correlation between success in the classroom and success in ministry. The unfortunate reality was that success in the classroom simply wasn't a predictor of success in ministry. Doing well in ministry (or doing poorly) in ministry had too little connection with doing well (or poorly) in school. One thing that often was missing was a connection between what was being learned in the classroom and one's ministry context. We often heard that what was needed for ministry wasn't being taught in seminary. Too often there was also the perception that what was being taught wasn't really what was needed or even had a detrimental effect in ministry.

Please join us next week as we finish reflecting on the implications of context, community, and contingency.

WEEK 12

IMPLICATIONS OF CONTEXT, COMMUNITY & CONTINGENCY, PART TWO



By David Williams, President, Taylor Seminary // Published September 7, 2020

Last week, we began reflecting on the implications of context, community, and contingency. We had uncovered that doing well (or poorly) in ministry had little connection to doing well (or poorly) in school. There was a perception that what was being taught wasn't really what was needed for ministry and that, sometimes, it could even have a detrimental effect in ministry.

A typical response by many schools was to add "practical ministry" courses, "field education" programs, or "internships" to the curriculum. This helped in some ways but created problems in others. To address lingering problems, faculty eventually even began allowing students to adjust particular course assignments to be better directed toward their ministry needs and context. But the impact was still not enough. We continued to hear complaints that seminary education was not "relevant" or "applicable" to the ministry needs of the church.

But other complaints arose as well. Sometimes what was identified as being missing was the positive impact of the education on the student's personal life. Students could learn everything being taught in class but it didn't transform their lives in the way schools thought it should or that our church communities wanted it to. We often heard this complaint as education being too focused on the "head" and not enough of the "heart."

This was even compounded by students going to seminary and losing the fervor of the faith they had entered with. You have probably heard that old "slip of the tongue" that someone going to

school was attending “cemetery.” To address these issues, we began paying attention to the integration of what was being learned in class with the life of the student. Again, we added things to the curriculum, developed mentoring programs, and intensified efforts on other extra-curricular activities. Also, we tweaked course assignments to help the course material impact the whole life of the student. This culminated in what we now call “spiritual formation.” All of this was done in growing recognition of the fact that education must transform the student’s “way of life” as well as their “way of thinking.”

As good as all these adjustments were, they simply did not help enough. The understanding of knowledge that was driving the academy made “spiritual formation” and “field education” programs “add-ons” to the real “education” which focused on the content delivered in the classroom. In the Kairos Project, we don’t believe that formation nor field education are “add-ons” to the more essential dimension of content. We reject this sort of reductionism and embrace a holistic understanding of knowing which requires all three dimensions.

Beginning next week, we will start a three-week exploration of the fact that knowing is integrative.

WEEK 13

KNOWING IS INTEGRATIVE, PART ONE



By David Williams, President, Taylor Seminary // Published September 14, 2020

In the last couple of weeks, we have drawn attention to how theological education began to recognize and then address problems that we were experiencing in educating students. Treating the problems as if they were piece meal and solutions were “add-ons” assumed we only needed “technical changes” (in the language of Ronald Hieftz), Of course, each time we added this or tweaked that we created more complexity and thus more costs. But the changes we needed were not “technical” but rather “adaptive.” We needed a more fundamental change.

That’s why in the Kairos Project we talk about “knowledge” as “content, character, and craft.” Without all three of these aspects of knowing, something essential is missing. By speaking of knowledge as content, character, and craft, we constantly are forced to integrate and thus to remember that content isn’t the goal no matter how good, credible, or important that content may be. We recognize that there is an essential mutuality to these three dimensions which has been missing previously.

This linguistic change isn’t merely semantic. It dramatically changes the educational journey. If knowledge is a three-fold mutuality between content, character, and craft, then the pathway students take toward an educational outcome, the assessment as to how well they have achieved that outcome, as well as whom needs to be working with the student on the journey toward embodiment of that outcome must reflect this integrated nature of knowledge. This is why in Kairos the mentor team includes a faculty mentor, a vocational mentor, and a personal mentor. It is only when we look through all three lenses that we can adequately assess a student’s knowledge.

An institutional shift toward a more robust, integrated understanding of knowledge does imply a shift away from the previous role content has played. This is inevitable. When knowledge was identified with content then delivering content was at the center of the institution. That is no longer the case. This “decentering” of content and content delivery in the educational process in order to include attention to character and craft is a far reaching and sometimes painful process. It may be painful, but it is good.

But de-centering doesn't mean content is not essential. Content is essential. It is as essential to knowledge as character and craft are. One shouldn't think we are throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Because of this, we still have to address perhaps the most significant problem related to content: what content is necessary? This question is exacerbated by the fact that the amount of content in virtually every discipline is growing at phenomenal rates.

Of course, the abundance of knowledge really isn't anything new to any of us. I remember as a seminary student feeling just a little overwhelmed by the amount of reading that was expected of us for each class we took. And, it seemed the further I went in my education, the longer my reading list became. The more I knew, the more I wanted to know about a growing list of subjects, authors, ideas, and debates. One of my favorite T-shirts was a gift from my wife lamenting “So many books, so little time!”

Our earlier observation about the communal nature of standards of excellence provides us with an important starting point to answer our question. The default answer has always been the faculty. The faculty are hired as content experts with the result being that they control what is taught. In the language of our accreditors: faculty must control the curriculum.

Historically, it has been the faculty that constitute the community of practitioners who determine the standards of excellence regarding what should be learned. This really makes sense because they are the recognized experts in all the disciplines contained in the educational journey. Of course, it's not just a particular school's faculty that creates these standards (though they are forever called on to make these determinations). Really, it's the larger community of practitioners of the disciplines, which we sometimes call “the guild” or “the academy” that was essentially defining the standards.

I think this served the church fairly well when the community of practitioners in the academy was the same community of practitioners in the church. Many schools can recall a time in their history where the faculty not only served as faculty of the school but also pastored congregations and/or served in other denominational roles. When the ecclesial community and the academic community were populated by essentially the same people, there was strong convergence between the work of school and church. But, we all are aware that this hasn't been the case for most schools for decades.

As the disciplines became more specialized, complex, and nuanced, success in school more and more meant cultivating and honing the abilities to navigate the nuance and complexity of a variety of different disciplines, not to mention to accumulate and process the immense quantity of information the disciplines were each creating. Doing well in school was no longer necessarily connected to doing well in ministry. As communities of faith were challenged to engage an ever-changing world, the educational needs of those giving pastoral care and leadership to these congregations changed as well. Doing well in ministry wasn't essentially connected to doing well in school.

Next week, we will continue to call attention to adaptive changes that come when you embrace a more integrated understanding of knowledge, particularly as we more fully attend to the communal nature of our standards of excellence for determining what a student should learn.

WEEK 14

KNOWING IS INTEGRATIVE, PART TWO



By David Williams, President, Taylor Seminary // Published September 21, 2020

In previous posts, we have called attention to the fact that there is simply too much content in any discipline for anyone to know everything. That being the case, someone has to make a determination as to what is most important to be learned. Historically, that decision has been made by the faculty.

The Kairos Project has taken a different approach to answering the question of who decides what content needs to be learned. We deeply value the importance of advances in knowledge and the rich nuance associated with the academic disciplines. We believe the guild should be received as gifts from God to the church. Our faith and lives would be greatly diminished had the academy not been doing its work so well for many generations. We believe that the academic credibility associated with the content dimension of knowledge is essential for the work we are called to do. That said, we also recognize that the faculty alone cannot determine what content is needed. We believe that the vocational context to which a student is called should have as much say in what needs to be learned as the academy does.

To understate the obvious, there may be disagreement here. It is human nature to value things differently. God has created us in such a way that we are drawn to and have capacity for some things more than others. The result is that we will give greater value to some things than others. Those of us who have given our lives to the study of a particular subject matter will likely be strong advocates for all the good things our discipline can bring to the student's learning. (I don't know if I have ever met a faculty member who didn't think the curriculum could be strengthened if more of their discipline was required in it.) But because those with the

deepest commitments to the student's vocational context were either under-represented on the faculty or had no vote at all, the important impact of that context has been greatly diminished.

That is why, in the Kairos project, we have made vocational mentors full partners with the faculty mentor in determining and prioritizing what needs to be known to do good work in a particular vocation. We believe that someone who successfully practices the vocation has an essential contribution to make regarding what content is most important. The vocational mentor is not a "consultant" from which the faculty asks "advice" (which can then be accepted or rejected), but rather a full partner together determining the content needed for the student to be successful. This is why you may hear us say that "vocation controls content."

But the vocational mentor's contribution isn't limited to helping identify and prioritize content. We believe the vocational mentor has an essential contribution for determining what skills and abilities the student needs for their vocation. Or, in Kairos, the "craft" needed for the vocation. This draws on our earlier observation that communities of practitioners (of the vocation) develop standards of excellence which help them move toward the ends to which they are striving. As we noted earlier, when the two communities of practitioners were essentially the same folks, when those on faculty were also pastoring and leading our churches, there was fairly good alignment in understanding the appropriate elements of craft. But the context has changed and those days are largely gone.

But we shouldn't think this contribution is limited to naming and assessing skills more or less unique to the vocation. (For example, if a person is called to pastoral ministry then the pastoral vocation has an important contribution to make in helping identify important pastoral skills and abilities.) A contribution in this area is no doubt valuable, essential even, but we believe there are other significant contributions to be made. Vocation helps contextualize other skills as well.

Next week's posts will help us see how this is so.

WEEK 15

KNOWING IS INTEGRATIVE, PART THREE



By David Williams, President, Taylor Seminary // Published September 28, 2020

Our emphasis these last couple of weeks has been to drill down into the communal and contextual nature of the standards we use, particularly as we embrace a more integrated understanding of knowledge. When “knowledge” is equated with “content” and decisions about “which content” have to be made, we have suggested that the vocational context not only has to be consulted, but it should be given a privileged place. “Vocation controls content” is how we put it last week. This week, we are going to draw attention to the importance of one’s vocational context for helping us better define the standards of excellence having to do with “craft.”

Let’s take writing as an example. The vocation, through the vocational mentor, helps us understand appropriate writing standards by helping us better understand how writing functions in a specific vocation. Writing can be significantly different if one is a pastor, a chaplain, a social worker, a business person, or an academic. Paying attention to what is most important for success in the vocation is essential for the student’s journey.

Since writing is already an integral part of our standard pathway, it might be helpful to reflect on some of the formative dimensions of our current standards of excellence and the community out of which those standards have emerged. As we noted earlier, faculty tend to be hired as content experts in particular disciplines needed to be covered in the curriculum. The “gold standard” for academic credentials of a faculty member is a PhD. The PhD is a research doctorate inherently designed to create scholars, those who advance the goals of the discipline by making scholarly contributions. The culmination of this educational journey is a dissertation in which the candidate is deemed to have made a scholarly contribution. It is a rigorous,

intense, and life-changing process. And, for the most part, faculty are expected to continue making contributions throughout their careers.

It is in no way surprising that one primary way faculty assess the knowledge gained in a course is through writing, and usually through a research paper. Often the research paper is the culminating project of a course and bears the greatest weight of the course grade. The standards used for writing these papers are rigorous and the documentation of sources is meticulous, as anyone who has written a graduate-level research paper knows. In fact, many of the style guides used in graduate school were developed by university presses for their own publications. I remember my own seminary experience and the hours upon hours of proofreading and care given to making sure every jot and tittle was exactly as the guides said they should be. I remember how thankful I was when I bought my first computer, an Apple IIe, and was able to edit my papers without having to totally retype the page!

Now, don't get me wrong, these standards are really important for documenting and attributing sources for the information used in the paper. These standards are appropriate and make perfect sense for a community of scholars where the standards of excellence are essentially shaped by the task of making an original contribution to an academic discipline and for persuading the reader of the correctness of a thesis.

I think this is informative as to why one of the "chief sins" in academic writing is plagiarism. Taking someone else's work, insights, or contributions as if they were your own is a violation of the academic community's deepest purpose. The standards for developing and organizing the paper are important, too, in that a research paper needs a clear thesis, display credible engagement with alternatives to what's being proposed; give clear evidence of the breadth of resources consulted; etc. There is absolutely nothing wrong with any of this, in a particular context. Given all of this, I don't think it's a coincidence that one of the highest praises we can give for a student paper is to suggest that it might be publishable.

Again, don't misunderstand me. I am not trying to argue against the value of writing a research paper: I am only trying to highlight some of the communal and formational dimensions that we might not have noticed. Seeing these communal/formational dimensions of a particular writing assignment and the standards of excellence used to assess it, helps us better see the essential role the vocation (and vocational mentor) should play in assigning and assessing the types of writing required for the journey.

All of this has been to point out that the contribution of a student's vocational context to their educational journey is significant and too often has gone missing. The vocational context is necessary for determining the required content as well as for helping prioritize it. The vocational practice is necessary, not only for helping us in recognizing the particular skills and abilities needed to be successful in the vocation, but also for particularizing more general skills and abilities toward the vocational practice. At the end of the day, we believe that the traditional

approach to education has not attended in a satisfactory way to the vocational context in which a student is called to serve. The standards of excellence that have been formed largely by the academic community alone do not serve us well in helping our students flourish in the vocations to which they have been called. We have designed the Kairos Project in such a way as to specifically address that deficiency.

WEEK 16

SERIES REVIEW



By David Williams, President, Taylor Seminary // Published October 5, 2020

We've spent the last several weeks talking about what it means to approach learning in a new way. This week, we are taking a look back at some of the topics we have explored.

We began our series with a few observations about standards of excellence. The first observation was about context. We observed that standards of excellence always assume a context though that context is often ignored or not acknowledged. For decades, missiologists have been calling for attention to context. The Kairos Project is our attempt to take that call seriously.

The second observation we made had to do with what we called "communities of practice." We observed that standards of excellence, in part, grow out of a community of practitioners trying to achieve an end or a goal. Here, the fact that educators are part of a communal practice is important, but added to that is the recognition that the community is always striving to achieve a result or goal. Attention to that goal is essential for understanding the standards which immerge from the community trying to achieve it.

The third observation had to do with change. We simply noted that standards of excellence can change. This change doesn't mean that the standard is arbitrary. It can be significantly binding but it is not a necessary quality of a standard to be unchanging.

From these observations we explored their implications for the Kairos Project. First, we developed why it is that we talk about knowledge as the three-fold mutual interaction between content, character, and craft. Knowing is an integrative process. Next we explored the important contribution the vocational context/practice makes for determining and prioritizing both the content and craft dimensions of knowledge. It has largely been the vocational context of the student that has been under attended to. The privileged status of the “academy” particularly as it relates to its end of the creation of new knowledge and formation of faculty who can make a contribution to their disciplines has deeply formed the educational experiences in ways often unrecognized. We only began to scratch the surface here, but more is sure to come.