

Chapter 8--Penultimate Integrity Wheel Thoughts

Ordinarily, this section/chapter would be headed “Conclusion,” “Final Thoughts,” or “The End.” Instead, penultimate seems to be the better qualifier.

That designation finds its source in a conversation several years ago. Conversation might be too soft a term, at least from my perspective. It was an interview for a job. On the search committee sat John Claypool who asked, “You are working on your dissertation. When do you project you’ll be turning it in?” After my reply, he said, “You know, that dissertation will be the last thing that you finish.” Anyone who remembers John Claypool, or has heard any of his sermons, which usually ended with “And . . .you?” knows that he had a knack for embedding ideas that would resurface at a later time and space. That comment in the interview was one of those for me. I’m still reflecting on his observation, one of both clarity, profundity, and challenge.

His point, I think, was that a person can work hard at concluding, resolving, and closing off a presentation, a book, a sermon, a discussion, a class session, but that never really happens. The never concluding phenomenon fits with those involved in theological and ethical thinking and acting. The contexts in which such thinking and acting are brought to bear keep changing and offering challenges to our theories, convictions, and closing arguments. At best, we are talking about ultimate matters, but only in penultimate ways when we become honest with ourselves and our limitations, mortality being a primary one.

My suggestions to doctoral students, after Claypool’s conversation many years before but still moving through my thoughts, was that they had several options for concluding their dissertations. Rather than being anxious over finding the absolutely, perfect conclusion, they

should choose one that works, apply it, and turn in the document. Further, they would find themselves still writing and rewriting the dissertation in their heads long after the turn in, even after graduation, probably still as they are into the career track that has been enhanced by having a doctoral degree. Ideas worth having have long half-lives, and could even be considered organic. Claypool was right. In so many ways, some things never get finished, or at least the need for us to think about them.

If I've done a half-way decent job of getting the metaphor and its facets of the Integrity Wheel into your imagination, the ideas of identification, description, analysis, interpretation, and application will keep coming up. You should be finding points of resonance for working or reworking these ideas toward the common good of your life, individually and corporately.

In that vein, the idea of the Integrity Wheel has yet another facet to be considered.

A Part of the Wheel Left Until Now

The image for the book cover, an iron wheel, was chosen deliberately. What did/do you notice about the wheel? Its rustic nature? Its obvious lack of usefulness for a car, but rather usable for a more basic kind of transportation, or conveyance? Maybe a wagon of some size? Even, perhaps, for a wheel-barrow? Have you noticed that the informative, formative influences are six in number, the same number of spokes coming off the hub? Each of those items have a chapter of their own. Missing, but made up for now is the rim of the wheel.

And, the rim merits its own attention. Where does one begin, though, with the why of, the reasons for, a rim?

Imagine a wheel without a rim. Do we still have a wheel, able to get some things done which a whole wheel enables us to do? Some further thought is needed.

The rim gives connection for the spokes as the energy from the hub flows through each of them to a point that transfers the energy into movement. The simplest rim does this transfer.

Contemporary rims designed to add sportiness or luxury to a vehicle still have the basic purpose of utility. Looks do not always add to the value, whether we're talking about wheels, clothes, or human physiology.

So much about the rim gets subordinated to other parts of a wheel. Among those important functions of the rim is that it serves as something to attach a tire to. The rim can be conceived of as a kind of mediating presence.

The Rim and Meeting the Road

The phrase, "where the rubber meets the road," has several meanings in our society. Perhaps the first one coming to mind, though, is that of a tire touching a surface, a paved or unpaved. The phrase also identifies a potential crisis or one has already arrived.

Tires' width, tread, substance of which they are made, make a difference toward finding traction, meeting the road. The traction depends on the rolling coefficient of friction factor—indeed relatively simple physics comes in to play with wheels. Another way to say this, why and how the rubber meets the road depends on the energy transferred from the wheel hub, through the spokes to the rim so movement happens.

As a mediating factor the rim is a go between, a broker, a negotiator, a peace maker. Without the rim, motion has little expression, positively or negatively.

“Peace maker” is filled with substance from biblical, theological, ethical influences. The connection is a quick and easy one as passages like Isaiah 9:6, Proverbs 12:20, Philippians 4:7, Hebrews 12:14, 1 Peter 3:11, James 3:18 inform us. Walter Brueggemann considers shalom, peace, to be the core of the constellation of Hebrew values. Peace is both the objective of the person of God to fulfill, as well as the mechanism to move toward that objective through life.

Peace, too often even among theologically framed congregational contexts, is identified as an empty, non-heroic, weak approach. The irony is that a primary driver and energy of the universe has been reduced and reshaped in the image of the cultural definitions of peace.

The Wheel and Applied Theology

Whichever of the former expressions of “the rubber meets the road” one chooses, there is not only implied but expected action. For congregations and their leadership, the synonym is applied theology, practical theology, applied Christianity.

Among some Protestant faith traditions, applied theology has gone into some decline. That decline is recognizable in congregations as well as the theological education institutions those congregations support.

There are different facets to applied theology, each of which needs recovery among congregations, individuals in those congregations, and theological education frameworks—from

local church education protocols to accredited academic institutions. These particular facets can find resource in the Integrity Wheel toward the necessary recovery.

For starters, the foregoing portions of this chapter and previous chapters have developed the thought that a wheel is for motion, for transfer of energy, for transporting goods, application.

The application can take a variety of forms. Reflection, thinking, especially theological reflection burns calories—something is in movement. Contemplative worship practices take energy.

Focused prayer requires concentration, which requires energy.

With these kinds of energy exchanges, the portions of the wheel, in part or all together, can be used as reflective ideas.

As a reflective exercise, use the parts of the wheel as hermeneutical tools. At least one scripture has been used in each chapter of this book. With a little more time, reflective time, *lectio divina* time, these passages will begin to build an associative pattern through the rest of scripture. One matter that will dawn upon the hermeneutician is that there is a level of connectivity in the Old and New Testaments that otherwise can be easily missed. Brevard Childs talked of this connectivity with his use of “a grid of warrants” to describe what others may call the weight of scripture.

The lessons of scripture played out in ancient times display the needs, hungers, drives, victories and defeats, legacies (good and not so good) are archetypal in nature. They are part of the makeup of being human. With those ancient lessons in hand, one’s own contemporary context can be more easily identified and given response.

For the pastor new to a context, for instance, having the ideas of the Integrity Wheel in hand can shorten the time one needs to become acquainted with the local and regional community. The

“spokes” can be good conversation starters wherever the pastor goes—not just at church meetings but at the grocery store, athletic events, in the academic settings where parishioners work or have children, for example.

Most congregations have at least an unofficial historian, the person or maybe persons who have the institutional and community memory banks. Walking around the wheel with that person or persons over coffee can reap a wealth of perspective that is needed—by the congregation, or the pastor—for the place and people to be more who they are called to be in the place they are. Who have been the heroes/heroines—the best pastor the church has had, maybe! What are the losses the church has experienced and how have those been handled? What has the congregation not recognized as losses but were exactly that?

These results can be invaluable toward sermon preparation and presentation, toward strategy planning, and pastoral care.

Too many congregants think in terms of compartments of life. What they know of scripture may be reduced to a handful of memory verses or their verse claimed as the guide to life. Person’s conversations, behavior, and attitudes are different when in the church facility than when in their work place, home, outside their usual pattern of life.

Presenting the Integrity Wheel can give people a clearer perception of scripture and life. There are not so much compartments as interfaces throughout life. The wheel demonstrates these connections.

For example, as the wheel has been presented, the spokes began with calling, set in imagination as sitting at the 4 o’clock position if the wheel is a clock. The movement proceeded to be a counterclockwise pattern. A legitimate question is why that pattern? The response is that is how I

began when I first presented these ideas to students! It makes sense if one considers the wheel is moving forward from right to left. Here's the suggestion, though, if you don't care to replicate that motion when and if you use these chapters with your own groups, simply start at another point. The connectivity of the hub, spokes, and rim will show through no matter where one starts, just like in real life. A crisis in one spoke will move to all the others, just like scripture comes to us and how life happens.

And life happens with the driving emphases of money, sex, and power swirling all about. That realization can break some congregants out of the semi-coma they operate in. These three areas have everything to do with the lives of congregants, one's family, society, world culture; but, we act as if they are not around. Thus, conspiracies of silence have developed. The result, and part of the reason, for the decline in applied theology is that we roam about in abstractions and trying to claim we have ethereal thoughts. But, we never catch that these informative and formative influences, as projected through the Integrity Wheel, have everything to say about how we recognize and work with and through these areas of money, sex, and power.

A Conclusion, of sorts—

Still trying to be true to that comment from John Claypool, I end this chapter and this book with some sense of inconclusiveness. Simon and Garfunkle's song from years ago, "The Dangling Conversation," describes these kinds of discussions. You have those conversations with friends whom you see only occasionally. But, the relationship, and the topics you talk about, pick right up where you left off—life is full of dangling conversations. And, those are quite possibly the best kind we can have. This conversation about the Integrity Wheel is one of those.

Integrity, wholeness, is the label for one from whom we can expect will tell us the truth, have reserves of justice tempered with grace, has a sense of timing for when to speak or be silent, will lean toward the underdog. A conversation with such a person, or being a part of a joint project, will indicate the sources, the influences on that person which have shaped her/his character. Undoubtedly, that person will, at some point, not in a “humble bragging” way but true humility, indicate from her/his perspective they are not as whole as they want to be or can be. They are still in a pattern of being informed and formed toward integrity. At the least, they will be someone we want to learn from and emulate, and at least explore our own informing and forming influences, and keep on talking about.