

COMMUNICATING THE COVENANTS:
A PROPOSAL FOR APPLYING PRINCIPLES FROM THE COGNITIVE SCIENCES TO
THE BASIC EDUCATION OF NAZARENE MEMBERS

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Introduction: The Requirement

In the global Church of the Nazarene, the basic “job requirements” for the lead pastor of a local church are given in the *Manual of the Church of the Nazarene*. As of the latest edition of the *Manual* (2013-2017), the ministry expectations of a pastor are organized under two categories: (1) The “Core Duties of a Pastor,” including prayer, preaching, equipping others for ministry, administering the sacraments, visitation, comforting the mourning, spiritual direction, evangelism, marriage counseling, and continuing education; and (2) the “Administrative Duties of a Pastor” (*Manual* 2014, 195-96). These administrative duties, while they are considered secondary to the core duties, are nevertheless a vital part of the work of the local church pastor in the Nazarene family.

I will be focusing in this study on one of the administrative duties of the Nazarene pastor: “**515.4.** Read to the congregation the Constitution of the Church of the Nazarene and the Covenant of Christian Conduct contained in 1-21, 28-34, both inclusive, within each year (114), or have this section of the *Manual* printed and distributed annually to the members of the church” (*Manual* 2014, 196). The sections of the *Manual* referenced above include, in addition to the Covenant of Christian Conduct, the sixteen Articles of Faith of the church and the Covenant of Christian Character.

Typically, the pastors of the Nazarene churches do exactly what is required of them by the letter of ecclesiastical law. As time has passed in the denomination, the tendency has been to favor the distribution of these *Manual* segments, trusting the members to take the time to read them for themselves. The Nazarene Publishing House facilitates this by publishing a booklet that contains these three critical statements of life and faith.

In spite of the obvious weaknesses of this approach, I do want to acknowledge several positive aspects of this educational and pastoral requirement. First, the intention behind the duty is admirable and valuable. Church members ought to regularly reflect on their *koinonia* beliefs and ethics in order to be spiritual healthy disciples of Jesus. Second, the covenants were formerly designated as the General Rules (Covenant of Christian Character) and the Special Rules (Covenant of Christian Conduct) of the Church of the Nazarene. The older titles had the connotation of a fear-based deontology, i.e., “You had better keep these rules or else!” The newer titles have a better connotation of commitment to and connection with one another in the Body of Christ, not out of coercion, but out of love.

Nevertheless, the basic communication plan of reading the Articles of Faith and the covenants, and/or distributing these documents for reading and reflection, has proven to be both inadequate and ineffective in an age where many options of communication are used that transcend simple speech and reading. Moreover, many of my colleagues have expressed a frustration that even their long-term members have quite inaccurate knowledge of the covenants

in their present form. In light of these issues, the Nazarene mission to “make Christ-like disciples in the nations,” and the recent insights from cognitive science, the focus needs to shift from fulfilling a pastoral requirement to embodying these spiritual principles in oneself and in others.

I have made several efforts in my past two pastoral assignments to infuse more meaning and purpose into communicating the covenants and doctrines of the Nazarene family. I have created a sermon series that focuses on each separate component of the articles and covenants. In addition to this, I have accumulated a collection of videos to supplement these sermons. I believe that a better way, however, can be developed.

I. How Cognitive Science Can Provide Guidance

Justin L. Barrett, the Thrive Chair and Professor of Psychology at Fuller Theological Seminary, has defined cognitive science as “the interdisciplinary area of scholarship that considers what the human mind is and how it functions; how people think” (Barrett 2011, 5). Even though it is not the same thing as neuroscience, cognitive science explores such common problems as perception, attention, memory, conceptualization, communication, reasoning, learning, decision-making, and imagination. The disciplines involved in this field include, not only neuroscience, but also psychology, computer science, linguistics, philosophy, anthropology, and archaeology (Barrett 2011, 7-14).

As regards to the problem of better fulfilling the *Nazarene Manual* requirement for communicating the covenants, several insights from the broader disciplines of cognitive science will be considered and applied to forming a methodology and creating a program. These are as follows:

1. Expressed in the words of Christopher D. Rodkey, “Our brain circuitry is wired to be negative when not intentionally trying to be positive” (Childre 2004, 230-55). Positivity must include both life-changing thoughts and feelings, however, to be effective (Rodkey 2012, 50-51).
2. The brain must function as a healthy and balanced unit in order to be effective in life-changing learning, including both left (analytical) and right (connective) hemispheres (Taylor 2006, 15-16, 138, 140).
3. Not only should the individual’s mind and life be sound and healthy, however, but the relationship of the individual to others should create a community of mental and emotional well-being for all. This vision is described as “agapeic otherness” by William Desmond, a Professor of Philosophy at Katholieke Universiteit Leuven. In essence, this otherness is the character of a community with “metaxological” relationships in which “external differences can be mediated from the side of the other, as well as from that of the self” (Desmond 1987, 7, 163). This is referred to as an empathic approach by many in the cognitive sciences. It is, in a sense, thinking through someone else’s brain, which is an essential component of the “I-thou” relationship of Martin Buber—a component that is also being examined in contemporary second-person neuroscience, which focuses on brain function and development in the light of close relationships and the perspective of the “other.”

In addition to these concepts, I also would bring in one set of insights from the field of educational assessment that I believe can be helpful in developing agapeic otherness—a selfless love for others. How does one know when something is learned? In her article on “authentic assessment,” Marilla D. Svinicki identified six characteristics of effective learning assessment. These are: (1) A focus on using knowledge and skills in a real life setting, i.e., practical knowledge; (2) an involvement in the solving of “unstructured problems,” i.e., problems that reflect the uncertainties of real life; (3) an encouragement of students as they “do” what they study; (4) a replication of the real world setting of the subject, i.e., getting learning out of the “ivory tower”; (5) a demonstration of a “wide range of skills” to address complex issues; and (6) an allowance for “feedback, practice, and second chances” (Svinicki 2004, 23-24).

It is obvious, then, that so much more could be done to engage members in a transformative experience instead of just having them read or be read to! This is an essential challenge as the Nazarene church enters into its second century of existence and passes on its unique heritage to new nations and new generations that are culturally different from the original “pioneers.” Both old and new Nazarenes can be led in better applying what they believe and know to their daily lives.

II. Teaching “Old” Nazarenes in New Ways

In light of these insights, the methodology for my proposal will be developed within the overarching theme of covenant. According to Peter D. DeJong, this idea of covenant has existed throughout biblical and Christian history. In Clement of Alexandria’s *Stromata*, seven divine covenants were identified: (1) Paradise, (2) Adam after the fall, (3) Noah, (4) Abraham, (5) Moses, (6) the Church, and (7) the millennial period. While two primary covenants have been recognized by Christians over time—the Old Testament covenant and the New Testament covenant—the early church fathers set the tone for the future church in seeing both covenants as fulfilled in Christ, as was expressed in the Epistle of Barnabas, Irenaeus, and Augustine (DeJong 1949, 15-16).

As I seek to interpret the Nazarene beliefs and lifestyle guidelines in the light of a covenantal understanding, several key ways of putting living “wine” (the Articles of Faith and the Covenants) into new wineskins (improved ways of embodiment) can be noted. First, whereas the language of “rules” encourages the brain to follow its innate tendency to be negative, the language of “covenant” speaks a positive word of hope to both the individual and the community. If rules are broken, the immediate response is to impose the required penalties upon the rule breaker. If a covenantal condition is broken, on the other hand, the focus is—or properly should be—upon reconciliation and restoration of those who have been alienated.

In other words, the covenants should not be means of exclusion for those who violate them, but means of inclusion for all who will embrace them. In addition, rather than using these covenants to judge the spirituality of others, they can be employed to inspire a vision of what the holy life can be. While “rules” may repel others, “covenants” can invite others into a new way of thinking and living. This latter view, then, is more consonant with a denomination that is committed to holiness of heart and life and to making Christ-like disciples in all the nations of the world.

A second way of teaching old and new Nazarenes in novel ways is to involve both sides of the brain in the experience of embodiment. These unique perspectives contained within each person's brain can be illustrated, although in a somewhat exaggerated fashion, by two paintings highlighted by Larry Kent Graham:

1. Albrecht Durer's "The Night, Death, and the Devil" – As Graham reflected on this work, he observed that “The world is seen as a dangerous place that must be overcome personally with God's help” (Graham 1992, 15). This is characteristic of the left brain, which tends to major in rigid thought patterns, details, organizing, and categorizing (Taylor 2006, 138-139, 142). Also, this is typically how church members tend to process church doctrines and “rules.”
2. Picasso's "Three Musicians" – In this painting, the musicians, instruments, and environment are all blended together. While there is fragmentation and disruption in this scene, there is also harmony (Graham 1992, 16). This image is an accurate portrayal of right-brained thinking, which tends to major in an existential embrace of the moment, inner joy, and a vision of a unified reality (Taylor 2006, 139-41). This side of our humanity should never be sacrificed!

Finally, I agree with Rodkey that worshipping communities ought to be circles of empathy: “I will argue that through circles of empathy, solipsistic (that is, solitary or separated) individuals *become* communities” (Rodkey 2012, 13). Therefore, the covenants of membership can only be fulfilled in interaction with and support of others. This will be foundational in my plan for communicating the beliefs and covenants in a better way. There is, in essence, no covenant of faith with God that can be expressed in isolation from others. With Pauline pretention, then, I will hopefully discover with our church family the “more excellent way” of embracing our Nazarene covenants as expressions of Christ-centered community.

III. A Possible Congregation-Wide Approach

The ongoing process which I would propose for communicating the Nazarene Articles of Faith and the Covenants would involve an intense one-year focus followed by three years of maintenance “review.” In this way the status quo of the *Manual* requirement is drastically altered once every four years. To do so more often might create a counterproductive level of cognitive stress.

The first year of this emphasis would begin following the quadrennial General Assembly of the global Church of the Nazarene. The next such gathering of representatives is scheduled for 2017 in Indianapolis. At this Assembly, changes and adjustments can potentially be made to the beliefs and covenants of the church, thus making this an excellent opportunity to lead the congregation in remembering and embodying these *koinonia* values.

The basic plan for Year One would include the following components:

1. The Articles of Faith – The foundational experience here will be a sixteen-week sermon series focusing on one Article of Faith each week. The whole congregation will be together for these messages, with a children's object lesson planned each week to illustrate one aspect of that week's doctrinal emphasis. For example, since Article I on God the Father refers to God as

“holy love and light,” a warm source of light—like a candle--could give some physical and emotional substance to this theological concept. Follow-up discussions on the sermons could take place either in the age-appropriate Sunday School classes or in the mid-week small group ministries, focusing on the difference that our beliefs can make in our daily lives.

2. The Covenant of Christian Character – This covenant is divided into three sections: (a) The things that Nazarene members are called to do and be; (b) the things that Nazarene members are to avoid; and (c) the priority of building up the community of faith rather than tearing it down. Following the sermon series on the Articles of Faith, the children and/or youth of the church would plan and share a focus on one covenant characteristic each week during the service opening. It could be a drama, puppet skit, video clip, power point, or object lesson.

3. The Covenant of Christian Conduct – Following the focus on Christian character as indicated above, this segment would be entitled “Making Positives out of Negatives: How Nazarenes Live Out Their Faith in Christ.” These educational activities would take place during the midweek gatherings of children, youth, and adults, and the aim will be to place these somewhat “negative” guidelines for members into a positive light. In other words, rather than teaching, for example, “You had better be not caught drinking any alcoholic beverages,” the focus will be on why we take our stand—the concern for our physical and mental well-being and a stand of solidarity with those who struggle with addictions to alcohol.

Following the first-year intensive instruction on the beliefs and covenants of the church, the remaining quadrennial cycle would be patterned in this fashion:

1. Year 2 – The Articles of Faith and the two covenants would be distributed in both print form and online.
2. Year 3 – One of the Articles of Faith or a guideline from one of the covenants would be printed in the bulletin each week, with a volunteer highlighting it during worship.
3. Year 4 – The pastor would read a segment from these documents weekly.

Conclusion: The Status Quo Has Changed

In the movie *National Treasure* (Turteltaub 2004), the character Benjamin Franklin Gates, played by Nicolas Cage, used a line that has stuck with me since I first viewed the film: “The *status quo* has changed.” While in the movie this sentence was a secret code between father and son, for my purposes this brief statement is a mission clarification for our denomination in the 21st century.

Whenever my Nazarene family reflects on the changing world in which we are called to minister, a common idea that is shared is that, while the methods may change to address our times, the message remains the same. In many ways, my heart and mind resonate with this statement, but several clarifications must be made. First, the “methods” include both the programs we use and the technologies and sciences we embrace to accomplish our God-given mission. Second, the message of the Gospel does have a constant core of identifiable truth, but our understanding of the Gospel can change, either to more accurately reflect the truth or to

distort it. Finally, clarifying our understanding of and our living out of our beliefs and covenants should not be seen as an abandonment of our core identity.

In presenting these embodiment suggestions to the Nazarene family at the local, district, and global level, I would begin by affirming the legitimacy of the existence of these beliefs and covenants. Following the epistemology of the philosopher Thomas Reid, I agree that “if our cognitive systems naturally produce a particular type of belief, we are justified in believing it until sufficient reasons amass to the contrary” (Barrett 2011, 89). The Articles of Faith and the Covenants of Christian Character and Conduct have arisen out of the complex cognitive system of Nazarene life and witness, and my proposal will not call their existence into question.

On the district and global level, I would propose a change of wording for the aforementioned administrative duty of the Nazarene pastor as follows: “**515.4. Read or creatively present** to the congregation the Constitution of the Church of the Nazarene and the Covenant of Christian Conduct . . .” (The added words are in bold print.) This change would have to be approved by the General Assembly delegates from our West Virginia North district and then presented as a resolution to the General Assembly. This paper would be presented along with the proposal as the rationale for the rewording. In essence, this change would give churches permission to use their “sanctified imaginations” to share these beliefs and covenants in fresh ways.

For the local church, I would recommend that this proposal be embraced regardless of what the denomination did with the resolution. The matter would be considered by the local church board one year prior to the next General Assembly, i.e., June 2016. In the period of consideration, supportive ideas and arguments from this paper could be shared in the pastor’s presentation to leadership. A discussion should also be held with the Sunday School and Discipleship Ministries board of the church, since they will be directly involved in developing the programs and curricula that would be used.

Following a supportive decision from the leadership teams, a promotion of the Year One emphasis should be done using the 13:7:3 method of publicity. This entails a detailed focus on the upcoming congregation-wide experience thirteen weeks in advance, then seven weeks in advance, and finally three weeks in advance.

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