

GLOBAL THEOLOGY CONFERENCE INTRODUCTORY PLENARY: CHRISTOLOGY
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Welcome to the 2018 Global Theology Conference for the Church of the Nazarene. We are here, gathered from every world region for the purpose of theological discussion, in service to the church.

Last summer we had our General Assembly, and many would say that it was a pivotal time in the life of the Church of the Nazarene. It seemed that God's Holy Spirit was moving as the church family worked through difficult issues and wrestled with creating beautiful unity in the midst of diverse voices and perspectives from around the globe. It felt as if God was doing a new thing, and that we had all been invited to become participants in a holiness church that is willing to grapple with what it means to create space for all of God's children to find their place at the table.

Today, the strength of the church outside the United States and Canada is palpable as God is raising up leaders who will stretch our thinking and lead us into new territory. While we have had Global Theology Conferences before, I come here, to Florida, in anticipation that what began last summer in Indianapolis will overflow into our theological conversations.

Why do we need to gather and spend time in theological reflection? Because, in my opinion, the world is in desperate need of Christians who know what it is that they believe. Whether social, religious, or economic pressures, we all have issues which are unique to our local context. A strong theological foundation provides direction, leading the church through the challenges which she faces. The more I travel the world, the more I realize we cannot ignore the need to intentionally create space for theological reflection.

The theme for this conference is "Christology." While a variety of themes were considered, the Board of General Superintendents felt that it was vitally important for the church of the Nazarene to spend time focusing on the One from whom we derive our name. We are the Church of Jesus, the Nazarene!

Traditionally Christology has been the study of the person, nature, and role of Christ. The Board of General Superintendents brought the theme to the GTC committee, which is made up of representatives from all six regions. The committee, in turn, helped to design the framework, bearing in mind the traditional forms of study in relation to Christology, while at the same time taking into account some of the current realities of the church. This conference has been divided into three major sections, using scriptural references to lead us into our conversation:

1. "Who do You Say I Am?" - Knowing and Becoming More Like Jesus Christ
2. "Take Up Your Cross and Follow Me" - Becoming More Faithful to Jesus Christ
3. "As the Father Sent Me So I Send You" - Joining the Mission of Jesus Christ

My life has changed radically since we began planning this conference. I had served as the co-convenor, along with Dr. Dan Copp, and we worked with the committee to plan this event. Today, we are glad to welcome Dr. Jeren Rowell into the role which I had previously held. This new season of ministry has taken me to the beautiful continent of Africa where I have spent more of my time since October, than anywhere else in the world. Whether Africa, or any other region, we have to recognize that this conversation on Christology is timely. There have been numerous occasions in the past few months when I have had to stop and ask myself whether the Christ I have been serving and representing is the Christ of the Bible, or one of a particular cultural construct. We, as a global church must ask ourselves some difficult questions about our Christology, and how we have defined our understanding of Christ through the years. The beginning chapter of our story in the church of the Nazarene has been written, but we have entered a new era, where new chapters, filled with many stories must be written.

Nigerian author and novelist Chimamanda Adichie warns us that there is danger in a single story. She says, “Show people as one thing over and over again, and that’s what they become.” She warns that we risk critical and cultural misunderstanding when we fail to understand that every life, every situation, has their own overlapping story

What is the Danger of a Single Story?

Adichie say, “The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete.”

When we hear the same story over and over again, it becomes the only story we ever believe. And this stands especially true for the story of Africa.

Too often do we hear this version—Africa, the poorest “country” in the world where only rural landscapes exist and where people live in terror amongst wild animals.

Too often do we treat Africa as one narrative, one we have fostered over generations and generations, becoming so institutionalized that even those who graduated from universities will sometimes slip and refer to Africa as a country or their language as “African.”

This is the danger of a single story, and it brings to mind a quote by American writer Alvin Toffler: “The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn and relearn.”

We must learn to unlearn these perpetuated stereotypes in order to allow ourselves to see that there is more than this one narrative to Africa—to anything, really.

“Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity.”¹

¹ Review by Chelsea Yee. <https://borgenproject.org/review-chimamanda-adichies-danger-of-a-single-story/> (13 March, 2018)

We must recognize that we, as the Church of the Nazarene have had a Christology that has been shaped and marked by Western European, and American cultural influences and experiences. There have been aspects of American faith which have influenced the ways in which we have imagined Christ. And this may be the danger of the single story.

The concept of the Manifest Destiny had an impact on American expansionism, and even missions in an era of colonialism. There were those who adopted an image of Christ which did not include people of color. Our own “Home” and “Overseas Missions” departments were divided between people of white European descent and the rest of the world. Europe was a part of home missions, while the native Americans were administered under “World Missions.” We may not have consciously realized that our structures reflected a particular Christology and perspective on the *Imago Dei*.

For example – how do we see Jesus? In our different cultural contexts and experiences, we may each visualize Jesus differently.

These are different faces of Jesus:



I grew up in Europe where Jesus was always white. I remember moving to Russia and seeing this icon in the Kremlin for the first time. This is known as the Icon of the Savior, **Image Not-Made-By-Hands**.



It was in that moment that I realized that this was probably a much closer representation of the real Christ than what I had created in my imagination.

Without knowing it's happening, the danger of a single story is that we may begin to form our Christology in our own image. When we look at the different faces of Jesus, we discover the reflection of many cultures. Does one picture make us more comfortable than another?

² https://orthodoxwiki.org/Image_Not-made-by-hands The tradition of this icon is that it was created during the time of Christ. We are told of a man named, Abgar, who was the ruler in the Syrian city of Edessa. This man, Abgar, was afflicted with leprosy. News of Jesus' miracles reached as far as Syria and Arabia. Abgar had never seen Jesus, but he wrote a letter, asking Jesus to come and heal him. He sent the letter with his court painter, Ananias. The plan was for Ananias to paint an image of this healer, Jesus. When Ananias arrived in Palestine, he was unable to get near Jesus because of the great crowds. He tried to produce an image of Jesus while standing at a distance but was unsuccessful. We are told that Jesus called to Ananias and promised him that he would send a disciple to heal Abgar from his leprosy and instruct him in salvation. After this, Jesus called for water and a towel. When he wiped his face with the towel, there remained his Divine Image. The towel and a letter were sent back to Edessa with Ananias. Abgar was grateful for the gifts and his body began to heal. Eventually Thaddeus, one of the 70 Apostles arrived, preaching the gospel and baptized the Abgar and the entire community of Edessa. Abgar wrote on the image, now called "not made by hands" the words, "Christ-God, everyone trusting in you will not be put to shame." He mounted this image, placing it over the gates of the city. Since that time reproductions have been made and can be found throughout the world.

This is why now, in this time, the Church of the Nazarene has to ask herself difficult questions about whether there has been a more dominant story.

The Jesus Film has been successful at bringing the gospel to millions of people. This is the Jesus of the Jesus Film. The film has been a powerful tool, yet, one of our own theologians, Dr. Bill Kwon has asked whether the viewers are able to deconstruct the Western themes shown in this film?



Franz Fanon, a writer in post-colonial studies, tells that an inferiority complex develops when there is an “unconscious and unnatural training of black people, from early childhood, to associate ‘blackness’ with ‘wrongness.’”³ This was illustrated to me when my South African colleagues told me that during Apartheid, young black and colored children wanted to grow up to be white. The danger of a single story begins to unfold when we use a series of colors to tell the gospel, where black is bad and represents sin, and white is a cleansed heart, and represents all that is good. When we present Christ in a particular way, framed by one culture, we come dangerously close to the possibility of creating an inferiority complex in those who are not from the Christ culture.

The value of this conference is that we will spend time speaking with one another, listening to our sisters and brothers, and opening our minds and hearts to discover that we are not trying to prove a “right” answer. We are engaged in a practice that will help us shape the future of who we are as Nazarenes, as we embrace the global nature of who we have become, the reflection of Jesus in many different cultures. Philip Jenkins, distinguished professor of History at Baylor University warns us that it is wrong to simply take the ways in which we have done things in the past and add something “global” to it. Instead, he says, we must embrace a new perspective which is entirely global.⁴

There is good news for us. We come from Methodist roots and while historically, the Reformed and Evangelical movements seemed to embrace the concept of the Manifest Destiny, the Methodists began to question the ideas that were being brought forth. This healthy introspection has been a feature of the Wesleyan/Holiness movement.

A Christo-centric doctrine of holiness should bring us to a place of reflection and self-examination. This is also found in the language of the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Philippians. In Phil 3:7-11 we read:

Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish,

³ Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Mask*

⁴ Philip Jenkins, ATS President’s Gathering

in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

We are here, at this conference, to examine our Christology; to ask ourselves hard questions regarding our past and the future into which God may be leading us. But ultimately, we want to know Christ, and this is more than head knowledge. This is where we affirm our thoroughly Trinitarian and Christo-centric understanding of holiness. When we become “partakers of the divine nature,”⁵ we truly “know” Christ. An early commentary on *Song of Solomon* invites us into an understanding of the beauty found in participation with God, who is beauty and far beyond our comprehension. When our desire is to know Christ, then we will be led to a new level, where human perception cannot reach. One where we are “led to a desire for that beauty of which the heavens tell the glory and the firmament of all creation proclaims the knowledge. In this way, the soul, rising and leaving behind all notice of unimportant things, arrives at a knowledge of the grandeur beyond the heavens.”⁶ This is intimate communion with Christ.

Our prayer is that this time together will not simply be an intellectual pursuit, but intimate communion with Christ, as we desire to know him more.

As the Board of General Superintendents began to ponder this conference, the question of Christology emerged in relation to praxis. We are challenged to reconsider how our Christology informs our praxis, specifically in areas such as discipleship, evangelism, church planting, passion for the lost, compassionate ministries, etc.

Christology has informed the Church of the Nazarene from the very beginning. Our second Article of Faith affirms our understanding:

We believe in Jesus Christ, the Second Person of the Triune Godhead; that He was eternally one with the Father; that He became incarnate by the Holy Spirit and was born of the Virgin Mary, so that two whole and perfect natures, that is to say the Godhead and manhood, are thus united in one Person very God and very man, the God-man.

We believe that Jesus Christ died for our sins, and that He truly arose from the dead and took again His body, together with all things appertaining to the perfection of man’s nature, wherewith He ascended into heaven and is there engaged in intercession for us.⁷

Do we think that we have wandered far from our second article of faith? Most of us would probably say a wholehearted “no,” and yet, is it possible that we have drifted and unconsciously

⁵ 2 Peter 1:4

⁶ Nyssen, *DV* 11 (PG 46:364) (SC 119) (GNO VIII.I) (FC, 39).

⁷ *Manual 2017-2021*, Article of Faith 2. Jesus Christ, 26-27.

adopted practices, either informed by a singular Christology, or not informed by Christology whatsoever? These are the questions that we are being asked.

We affirm that we are to make “Christlike disciples in the nations,” but maybe we need to get back to Jesus. In Ephesians 4:20 we read, “That is not the way you learned Christ!”⁸ For the church in Ephesus there had been some drifting from the original teaching, creating a dangerous trajectory, and there was need of correction. This was Paul, pointing to the very substance of Apostolic preaching. What humans are to attain to, to reach the mark, is Christ himself. This is not just about a doctrine of Christ, but Christ is the direct object of the accusative in the sentence. We are to intimately “know” the person of Christ, and it is in knowing him that we put on his character, holy love, and are transformed into God’s holy people. The hope then, of this conference, is that we will embrace a truly full-bodied Christology that informs our praxis in a culturally diverse, beautiful global church.

In our first session, we will take time to discuss who Christ is, and this, within our many and varied contexts. Veli-Matti Karkkainen encourages us to remember to embrace a high Christology that acknowledges that “material primacy belongs to the eternal Son, who has become man by his incarnation in Jesus of Nazareth.” However, this cannot be divorced “from the history of Jesus” or we will be in danger of “violation of the biblical insistence on Jesus as the way to the knowledge of God (John 14:6).”⁹ The incarnation becomes vital to our understanding. Kara Lyons-Pardue, in her new book *Following Jesus: Prophet, Priest and King*, edited together with Tim Gains tells us that we must embrace the reality of Jesus’s incarnation, “that is, that the Son, truly God, was born and grew and became a man, truly human. And this “ties together forever the course of human history and the reality of God.” We must take history seriously if we are to understand Jesus. At the same time, we must also take seriously our context. “Where we are in space, time, and culture must necessarily shape our understanding of Jesus. This is not an imposition on or a lessening of Jesus’s identity; it is a necessary corollary of us taking Jesus as real, living, and reigning.”¹⁰

Knowing Christ is knowing who Jesus is. As we acknowledge the layers of culture which may have influenced our image of Christ, we just may discover a genuine Jesus who speaks volumes into the varied settings of Christianity today and we can attempt to answer the question of Jesus, “Who do you say I am?”

Once we wrestle with who Christ is, we have a clearer view of the one whom we are to follow. The mission of the Church of the Nazarene is to “make Christlike disciples in the nations.” Jesus challenged his listeners, calling them to “take up [the] cross and follow [him].” This was said to a group of people who had no idea that Jesus would eventually die on a cross. The call was rooted in a vision of submission to Roman authority which was played out before them daily.

⁸ NRSV

⁹ Kärkkäinen, Veli-Matti. *Christ and Reconciliation: A Constructive Christian Theology for the Pluralistic World*, vol. 1 (p. 39). Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.. Kindle Edition.

¹⁰ Kara Lyons-Pardue, *Following Jesus: Prophet, Priest and King*. From the advanced reader copy, Introduction.

Jesus was asking the people to consider a new kind of submission, and that was to the authority of God's kingdom. This was discipleship, that might just cost his followers everything.

The Board of General Superintendents believes we need a renewed emphasis on disciple-making and Christian formation which must include the life of the local church. Discipleship happens in community, both in the local church, the district, and in gatherings such as this one, on the denominational level. When we are together, we sharpen one another and there is a type of synergy in which we “provoke one another to love and good deeds.”¹¹ Disciple-making is a part of our DNA, going back to the days of John Wesley and the accountability for spiritual growth and development that was found in his class meetings. There is no cheap discipleship, and there will be those among us who will pay the ultimate price, sharing in Christ's sufferings.

Finally, a thoroughly Trinitarian Christology will bring us to a discussion of the *Missio Dei*. In the last ten years the church of the Nazarene has added approximately 800,000 members. Nearly 32% of the people who call themselves Nazarene have just recently joined this family, bringing its own particular challenges. How do we stay true to our Christology in a period of rapid growth? What is God's vision for our future?

This past weekend I was privileged to be with the leadership from West Africa. There, our team from Nigeria placed before us a vision and dream of joining the mission of Jesus in their vast country, with 200,000,000 people, the seventh most populated nation in the world. This is half the population of the entire West Africa field, a continent, in and of itself.

This history of the Church of the Nazarene in Nigeria is unique. Near the close of World War II Mr. Dan Iwok, a Nigerian soldier, was sent to Burma to serve. There he met Nazarene soldiers and chaplains who gave him gospel tracts and a Nazarene *Manual*. On return to Nigeria he read these “eternal gifts” and fell in love with the Church of the Nazarene. He organized in Nigeria as an independent church in 1945.

In 1946 Dr. Hardy Powers, General Superintendent made his way to Nigeria to meet with this church but it was not until 1988 that they were able to officially affiliate with the International Church of the Nazarene. This independent Nigerian Church of the Nazarene was planted because a soldier gave a man a *Manual*. A huge celebration was held on the day of the merger where they sang, “The Lord has given the joy of my heart, after so many years of my sorrows; the Lord has given me the joy of my heart.”

Adjustments had to be made after the merger, as there were those who could not accept our theology. There were losses, but today the number of churches has tripled since that organizational celebration. We currently have work in two of the thirty-six states in the country. The vision is to join Jesus in the mission by eventually practicing presence in every state. At the same time, the urban centers are experiencing explosive population growth. Lagos, Nigeria's largest city had a population of 21 million in 2016, and is expected to reach 25 million by 2020.

¹¹ Ephesians 10:24, NRSV.

Lagos will become one of the world's megacities, doubling in size by 2050. At that time Nigeria will have a population larger than the United States. Today these church leaders are asking all of us to join with them in their vision to reach their country, every state, and the urban centers, doing mission in ways we have never done before.

Joining in the mission of Jesus Christ means that we become channels of prevenient grace intersecting with society and culture. Responding to need through a wholistic encounter with Christlike disciples.

The Father sent Jesus into the world, and now, Jesus sends us, his followers. Having been a more rural church, we must consider how we follow Jesus into the sprawling urban centers of the world. At the same time rural areas remain in great need with diminished access to goods and services. In the United States alcoholism and drug abuse threatens to destroy rural communities. There is a need for faithful kingdom presence across a myriad of social contexts.

In the meantime, our dividing lines are becoming blurred. Just when we get used to the Global structure of the Church of the Nazarene, things become less cut and dried. Just last week the Upstate New York District announced the merger of a Congolese congregation with the Church of the Nazarene. Our Sudanese leadership in West Texas is helping to plant churches in their home country. When you attend the Metro New York District Assembly you feel as if you've landed at the United Nations, where multiple languages are spoken and cultures celebrated. In Zambia you discover a large Chinese population. In Spain there is a new Ukrainian church plant. The Seminary in Costa Rica is helping to service Spanish-speaking needs in multiple locations in North and South America. And who knows, the vision of the church in Nigeria just may spill over to Houston, Texas where we find the largest Nigerian population in the United States. All of this shows our old lines, ways of understanding things, are blurring.

David Busic in his Quadrennial address at the 39th General Assembly challenged the church and asked the question, "Can we be a movement again?" The reality is that movements are messy, including a movement of God's people as they join Jesus in mission. This week could be challenging as we learn even more how old lines have blurred and we need to create a new understanding of who we are as a global movement of people who join Jesus in the mission of God.

Christology. We have much to ponder and to consider as we look to write chapters and stories filled with glorious diversity as we allow God to knit us together. The words of Isaiah challenge us...

Isaiah 43: 18 Do not remember the former things,
 or consider the things of old.
19 I am about to do a new thing;
 now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
 I will make a way in the wilderness
 and rivers in the desert.
20 The wild animals will honor me,

the jackals and the ostriches;
for I give water in the wilderness,
rivers in the desert,
to give drink to my chosen people,
21 the people whom I formed for myself
so that they might declare my praise.

A holiness people, who want to know Christ, participating in fellowship with a holy God. Who knows what God may want to accomplish this week, in Florida.