

HOW TO BE THE FAMILY OF GOD  
FOR THE TWENTIETH FIRST CENTURY WORLD?  
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*Introductory aspects*

This paper aims to contribute to theological reflection on the nature and mission of the Church of the Nazarene, in the light of the challenges that the new century presents. Today we are facing the deepest sociological and cultural changes experienced in 500 years. The change brought by this postmodern era, is much more than a change in tastes and personal preferences, habits or widespread cultural values.<sup>1</sup> Much of humanity today is undergoing a change at the level of their worldview, which can be defined as "the deeper parameters we use to interpret the world." People around the church and inside the church are changing and this poses tremendous challenges to the organization and missionary task of the church.

The well-known Uruguayan writer and poet Mario Benedetti (1920-2009), bequeathed this phrase: "When we thought we had all the answers all at once all the questions changed."<sup>2</sup> As theologians today we face the challenge of providing answers to new questions which come not only from church folk but also from those outside the church. As a church we serve a God who sent us to restore every man, woman and child with the gospel message. We urgently need to find ways to continue to be salt and light to our generation and to those who will follow.

What will God expect of us, his church, as agents of His mission in the coming years? What will be the characteristics of the church which attracts the non-churched? How will an authentic Christian church be recognized? What paradigms left by the model of the church in modernity, will have to be replaced by new paradigms? What are the weaknesses in the church that urgently need to be strengthened so as not to limit its mission? How appropriate are the structures, governance and administration of the church today to meet the challenge of maintaining the global church united and focused on mission? What are the changes we need to carry out to continue to expand in a world with diverse realities?

The intention of this essay is not to answer all these questions, but to contribute to the discussion. For this we have chosen the image of the church as God's family from all the

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<sup>1</sup> Postmodernity is a cultural movement which has deeper roots in western societies.

<sup>2</sup> Poemas del alma.com. Frases de Benedetti. <http://www.poemas-del-alma.com/blog/especiales/frases-de-benedetti>

metaphors of the church in the Word, as the author considers that it brings great richness to the understanding of the issue. The image of the church as a family is also easier to capture for contemporary people, for whom some biblical metaphors of the church are foreign to their culture and way of life.<sup>3</sup> In addition, this metaphor is able to transcend cultural, social, educational and religious barriers.

While we cannot build a biblical ecclesiology from a single metaphor of the church, for reasons of space, we will just reflect on the contributions of this powerful image of the church as God's family.

The author believes that this metaphor communicates much more than the idea of membership of the church of God as his chosen people, which most authors attribute to it. Belonging to the family of God is much more than being bound by ties of blood and inheritance; it carries a vocation that requires action, as the Apostle Peter said in 1 Peter 2:9: "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light" (NIV).

The study of this metaphor poses certain hermeneutical challenges. The first is that unlike other metaphors of the church developed in a text or portion of Scripture, the metaphor of the family of God, permeates the theology of both Old and New Testaments.

The new covenant between God and his church in the New Testament has its roots in the history of God's covenants with families, tribes and the nation of Israel. Thanks to the Old Testament we can see the progress of God's plan to form a universal family in Christ.<sup>4</sup>

This metaphor is taken up by Jesus and then developed in the writings of the Apostles. Jesus taught that the "House of Israel" is the foundation of the church (Matt. 10:5-6). In the New Testament, God's relationship with His chosen people is expressed in terms of family: God is the "Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 6:9, Eph. 3:15) and the "*Abba* Father" (Ro. 8:15, Gal 4:6), Jesus Christ the "big brother" (Rom. 8:29, Heb. 2:11,17), Jesus' disciples are "brothers and sisters" and parents (1 Tim. 5:1-2, Jas. 2:15), the faith community is the "bride of Christ", the Christian is "adopted" (Rom. 8:15), and is also heir with Christ (Rom.

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<sup>3</sup> For example, the pastoral image (Psalm 23; Jeremiah 13:17; Micah 2:12; John 10:1-21), the church as a garden or a plant used mainly by Jesus in his parables (Luke 8:4-15; 13:6-9, 18-19; Matthew 9:37-38; John 15:1-17 (and others), are all strange for urban societies.

<sup>4</sup> For example: in Isaiah God is the Father of Israel (Is. 54:5, 63:16), the relative who redeems (Is. 63:15-16) and the mother (Is. 49:15). In Psalms, God carries out the duties of a father providing (Sal. 23) and disciplining his children (Pr. 3:11-12).

8:17) and a member of the family of God (Eph. 8:19). The apostles see themselves as fathers of the church (1. Co. 4:14 ff., 1 John. 2:1, 3:18, 4:4).

Another hermeneutical problem is where to look in the Bible for that "ideal" church as God's family. In other words, when we talk about a family, who should give us a model or archetype for the church: What kind of family are we talking about? What is the prototype of family in which God wants to mold his people? In the Word there are two sources from which we can extract principles for the nature of the church as God's family, as well as her task of carrying out the missionary task. We find the first in Genesis, in the primal family in a state of original purity designed by God. The second is found dispersed throughout the New Testament and provides the characteristics of the profile of the "ideal" family that God is building through his Spirit.

In this paper we focus on three principles of the church family of God that are present in the prototype of Genesis and in the great family of God embodied in the New Testament.

### *An integrated family*

In Eden (Genesis 1-2) God initiates the first and the most important of all human institutions and societies in the union of the first couple, from which all the families of the earth come. Although brief, the story describes the first family performing in a unique context which has not been repeated in history, where there was no contaminating presence of sin. The first pair (the first Adam) failed in the realization of the divine plan because of the entrance of sin and was not able to develop this ideal model of family under God. It was not until the redemptive work of Jesus Christ (the second Adam) that this project was taken up by the family of God, his church.

### *The equality of all human beings*

The revolutionary statement of the author of Genesis for its time and ours is that man and woman were created in the image of God (Gen. 1:26-27). God's plan was that this condition of absolute equality was to be transmitted to all mankind.<sup>5</sup> The value of each person in the Word is that they have been created in the image of the Creator. It is this statement about the original sacredness of every human being, that condemns by the laws of God, every act of violence, murder, torture, brutality, injustice and domination (Gen. 9:6, Ex 20:13, James 3:9).

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<sup>5</sup> Voth, Esteban. Comentario Bíblico Hispanoamericano. Génesis, Primera parte (Miami: Caribe, 1992) p. 81.

When man turns away from God, he loses his identity, because we discover who we are and why we exist, through our knowledge of God. All human beings are made in the image of God and are the lost children of the Father. So the church, like the Father, should yearn for their lost brothers and sisters and do everything in their power to bring them back home and restore them to their identity as children of God.

Statistics reveal that there are millions of excluded people in this world, treated as waste.<sup>6</sup> The family of God is called to open its arms to all kinds of people, regardless of their condition. But there are few Nazarene churches seeking to reach those who have been excluded from society, and who minister to those who are "invisible". Jesus taught that the excluded bear his image. This was the truth that transformed the ministry of Mother Teresa of Calcutta in India's impoverished slums.

The New Testament reveals that God's purpose is to unify the entire human race as one family, a family built on Christ. The family of God must be characterized by an integrating attitude, a family of open arms and hearts. Attitudes are what move us to actions. It is easier to integrate the excluded in the area of the church or in church meetings, but how many take this practice to their own families, neighbors, community, or the "invisible" living on the streets or in the slums of our cities?

### *Discussion Questions*

1. *How much evidence is there for equal leadership opportunities for Nazarenes of different nationalities in our organizational structures?*
2. *Does the church promote laws, ideologies or theologies which are oppressive towards other humans or does the church promote equal rights and opportunities for all kinds of people, regardless of gender, race, religion, economic status, education, or sexual orientation?*

### *Gender equality*

The word *Adam* in the Old Testament is used in most cases to refer to the human, human nature, human race.<sup>7</sup> This includes both male and female genders. In the first family, still uncontaminated by cultural stereotypes, both genders had equal responsibilities and rights. Both were related to God on the same level. Both members of the couple received the mission to preserve and multiply all that God had created, contributing to the spread of the

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<sup>6</sup> In 2013 UNICEF reports "it is expected that about 1,400 million people will live in informal settlements and slums in 2020 ". 1,000 million children are without access to clean water, education, health, technology, victims of inequality.

<sup>7</sup> For further development see Girdlestone, Robert Baker *Sinónimos del Antiguo Testamento*, Barcelona: CLIE, 1986, p. 57-59.

glory of God in this world (Gen. 1:28, 2:15). There is no evidence that God favored or granted responsibilities or privileges to one gender over another. There is no "permission" granted for the oppression of the stronger over the weaker. No roles are more important than others in this family.

In the couple created by God, both found meaning serving God according to the mission given to them. Both were to keep the balance between work (service to God and other living beings) and free time for resting. They enjoyed God's creation and the fruit of their labor to the same extent. Both were delighted with each other. Both had free will and both were called to account before the Creator.

In the New Testament Jesus stands up in defense of oppressed women laying the foundations of a church that should provide a model for a more fair and balanced society. The ministry of our churches is impoverished when sexist attitudes coming from cultural environments, are permitted to mold the denominational culture, excluding women from leadership positions

#### *Discussion Questions*

1. *How much evidence is there is for equal opportunities for brothers and sisters alike in our organizational structures?*
2. *Does the church accommodate oppressive cultural models towards women or is the church an instrument of liberation for oppressed women, following the model of our Lord?*

#### *A united family in "koinonia"*

In addition to declaring that both were created in the image of the Creator, the author of Genesis presents two original purposes of God for the creation of the family. The first that we will examine in this section is to provide fellowship

In the original model of family, *complementarity* is present. At the beginning of his mission as steward of creation man discovered his limitations. The Hebrew phrase "*ezer kenegdo*" helpmeet (2: 18) means: *ezer*, the woman was provided as the help of God to man who was in difficulty and *kenegdo*, says that she was right for him, not equal to him, not less, not more, but she complemented him. Together they provided fellowship and support to live fully.<sup>8</sup>

In this family there was perfect communion. "It is not good that man should be alone" was the assessment of the Creator (Gen. 2:18). We need other people, form the human family

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<sup>8</sup> Voth, op. cit. p. 79

to feel "complete human beings." Human beings were created to live, develop and serve in community. Mental health and healthy relationships require a level of intimacy with other human beings. It is in communion with others that the image of God is realized, John Stam says: "The image is made in the human community, not in the individual (let alone the individual male), the model and prototype is made up of male and female".<sup>9</sup>

The individualistic model promoted by Western civilization, has triggered the feeling of emptiness, low self-esteem, loneliness and a meaningless life. We have wandered far from the original model. Today we face an epidemic of depression associated with depressive disorders and a behavioral epidemic of depression that now occupies the third most important disease after cancer and AIDS in countries like Spain, as reported in this article in the Independent Newspaper Online *The Spanish Voice*:

*The society of the new millennium is marked by the lack of solidarity and individualism. Since there is no longer the teamwork, camaraderie of friends, family gatherings, after dinner, chats from friend to friend, etc. that existed years ago. Although our lifestyle enhances the pleasure, fun, leisure ... the problem of depression grows and spreads. Pure coincidence? Ours looks like a selfish, hedonistic and materialistic society while depression is already one of the largest epidemics affecting humanity.*<sup>10</sup>

In Eden, both were one, united in a relationship that included not only complete sexual intimacy but also emotional and spiritual nearness. The author of Genesis highlights the perfect unity of the couple that formed the basis of this family. In this union both give to each other without reservation (2:25). The family is the place to learn and practice true friendship. It is where we learn to love and respect our differences.

The New Testament writers used the Greek word *koinonia* to describe this communion that should characterize the relations of the members of the family of God. This fellowship is made possible by the presence of the Holy Spirit in the New Testament Church. *Koinonia* describes the generous sharing in the family of faith, contrasting with a selfish lifestyle.

The church is a spiritual community that builds relationships on the values of the Kingdom of God, which in many cases are opposed to the values of society, such as, for example, loving relationships, the culture of forgiveness, sharing material goods, and sharing skills and knowledge. This *koinonia*, that characterized the first community of believers

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<sup>9</sup> Stam, Juan B. Las buenas nuevas de la creación. (Michigan: Nueva Creación, 1995) p, 78

<sup>10</sup> La Voz, 26 setiembre 2013. <http://lavoz.cat/2007/09/depresion-e-individualismo-extrana-pareja/>

described in Acts 3:44-47, should serve as the objective upon which to evaluate the quality of our relationships and mutual care that we give each other in the family of God.

We conclude that the *koinonia*, as described in the Word, is not compatible with church models that do not compensate with dignity the labor of their workers; nor with authoritarian models of leadership; nor with vertical type flowcharts where the authority is concentrated in a few; nor with the individualistic, self-indulgent, hedonistic lifestyle, typical of our times.

### *Discussion Questions*

1. *Are we cultivating in our churches relationships based on deep friendship and companionship or we do we settle for superficial relationships?*
2. *Are our pastoral teams characterized by fellowship and mutual support? Are relationships between leaders a model of koinonia for church members?*
3. *Are the material goods of the members and congregations shared generously with brothers and sisters in need?*
4. *How can we as a local, district and global church be more responsible in taking care of our pastors and ministers in different areas, supplying for all their needs (food, housing, education, health, recreation, among others) during their ministry and in their old age?*

### *A family serving God's world*

The second purpose of the Creator in creating the family was that they were to be a *team in the service of God*. God did not create them just to "be", but to "do", to invest their lives in a special service for God which is described as: be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth and subdue it (Gen. 1:28). The family in Genesis is organized as a company focused on "bearing of fruit". This result was to reproduce humans and exercise responsible stewardship over nature.

### *The family serves as a team*

In the family of Eden and in the family of God in the New Testament, gifts are complementary to achieve common goals. In Paul's ecclesiology we can see clearly that the ministry was to be carried out by teamwork, where everyone had different responsibilities for which they were qualified through gifts of the Spirit, but where the common goal was the development of disciples in the image of Christ (Eph. 4: 11-16).

Today we have a lot of knowledge about teamwork, which has become a common practice in the leadership style of many businesses and churches. However, we need to implement this model of leadership more in the Church of the Nazarene, providing an opportunity for leaders at all levels to participate in the evaluation of what has been done, in

decision-making and in the design of effective strategies for different contexts in the coming years.

### *Discussion Questions*

1. *To what extent would it be helpful for the cross-cultural mission of the Church of the Nazarene in the future, to submit their strategies to missionaries, members and leaders of the churches founded in the last 10 years, for their evaluation?*
2. *Are we listening to the Nazarene family before making key decisions that affect them, such as the selection of leaders, strategies, budgets? Are the views of members and local and district leaders taken into account?*
3. *What involvement of team work at the regional and global level do we have with regard to the selection of leaders, budgetary decision making and selection of strategies?*
4. *Is the family model compatible with the current structure of the church?*

### *Invest family resources in the development of human talent*

In the original family human reproduction had to grow in two dimensions: quantity and spatiality (geographical expansion). But there is an implicit dimension of intellectual and individual spiritual development. Human beings are held accountable for the development of other human beings, so that they can perform efficiently the stewardship received from the Creator.

The New Testament church had the goal to develop the disciples to maximum capacity, so that they in turn could reproduce generations of disciples according to the pattern of Christ. The authors use Greek words which were used to describe the growth of plants, as *Auxo*, *auxesis*, *huperrautarse*, to describe the normal process of development of Christians. Paul also used *hyperauxano*, meaning *growth to the limit of their possibilities* in 2 Thessalonians 1:3.

The call to Christian discipleship in the New Testament is a call to grow and serve. The goal of discipleship has been summarized as: love God, love others and serve others.<sup>11</sup> As we know, discipleship is more than just a basic course to know the articles of faith. It starts with life in a new direction under the lordship of Christ; it implies a paradigm shift (mind), a change of the motives (heart) and transformation of character, attitudes and

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<sup>11</sup> Rainer, Thom S., Geiger, Eric. *Iglesia Simple. Cómo volver al proceso divino de hacer discípulos*. Nashville, Tennessee: B&H Publishing Group, 2007.

behavior (holiness of life) following the prototype who is Jesus Christ. Discipleship is integral growth; the life of Christ must permeate and transform all areas of the Christian life.

The most valuable resource of a family, company, nation or church is the talent of its people. In the family of God's church, the leaders and the apostles were responsible for developing human talents; they were compared to parents whose priority was not only multiplication, but the development of mature disciples in faith. As Wesleyans, true to our heritage, we are responsible for guiding the healthy growth of the church both in quantity and in quality. In the last century our beloved church has prioritized the amount, which is easily visible in the categories that are measured in statistics of church growth.

### *Discussion Questions*

1. *Has our church in the last century developed its daughter churches effectively leading them to be able to grow fully and healthily on their own, in all regions in the same way?*
2. *Has the expansion program of the church missionary been paternalistic, fostering dependency and immaturity?*
3. *In how many regions do the members suffer from biblical and doctrinal illiteracy because of deficient discipleship?*
4. *Do all our pastors know how to lead their congregations into comprehensive growth? Do they understand what are the stages and goals of healthy growth? Are we providing training and literature oriented to these goals?*

### *Transforming the world through our human talents*

Just as in the case of the first family, the new family of God is called to invest their talents (gifts from God) in the transformation of the world, their environment. The early church was a revolutionary church. Its leaders and members were persecuted for their ministry of transformation. The family model in the New Testament promotes diversity of roles and vocations that the ministry of the church requires to "equip the saints for the work of ministry" (Eph. 4: 11).

One of our weaknesses as Nazarene family has been the inability to *produce and maintain the diversity of ministerial vocations* (callings) that God has given to our sons and daughters.<sup>12</sup> In most of the last century, pastoral ministry has been the only possible way to exercise a call to full-time service, for Nazarenes outside of the United States and other European countries. This "*mono-ministerial*" approach in world mission areas became a

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<sup>12</sup> The divorce between "secular" and religious vocations does not have a biblical basis.

reality when schools were created that offered a single track for the training of pastoral leadership.

In the same century, the Nazarene churches in the United States created universities offering careers in different areas, while in Latin America a few schools of primary and secondary level have been established. This is not the case of other denominations who have gone ahead to develop schools, colleges and even some universities on the Continent. As a result the Church of the Nazarene has not developed in all regions in the same way. Today, thank God, in Latin America we have new generations of Nazarenes professionals in different areas; we need to integrate them into theological reflection, the development of more comprehensive and effective ministries that respond to the felt needs of our people.

Our Church of the Nazarene descended from Protestant and Wesleyan families and the early Nazarenes who knew how to "produce" disciples who transformed our world.<sup>13</sup> But over the years, the church has increasingly focused more and more inwardly, helping those of the denomination and has been losing its wider influence.

Are we becoming more and more a mute, blind, passive, complacent church, while evil is being strengthened in the political, economic and social structures? How can we become again a church who makes passionate and revolutionary disciples?

### *Discussion Questions*

1. *Are we helping our brothers and sisters to use their talents for the transformation of their contexts?*
2. *The model of the family of God challenges us to evaluate the motives behind the management of human and material resources of the church. Are they both being invested in the task of producing disciples who minister to a humanity whose needs are so diverse?*
3. *How can we bring the church to refocus their ministries in reproducing disciples trained to be transformative?*

### *Generously sharing the resources God has given us*

The Genesis passage reminds us that *the resources that we have as a church are gifts from God to share with the whole human family*, so that any policy that hoards resources is an offense against the Creator. The churches established in the developed areas of the planet

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<sup>13</sup> . For example, Protestants have been pioneers in bringing universal and free education for all; Wesleyans have made progress in terms of abolishing slavery; Nazarenes have struggled to help people with alcoholism and other social evils.

instead of seeing themselves as "privileged daughters of God", must take responsibility to share the abundant resources they possess.

Adam and Eve did not invest their skills and their time selfishly only seeking to satisfy their own needs and have a more enjoyable life. This story contains the foundation for a Christian ecology which is opposed to the hedonistic consumerism that is destroying our planet. A family who serves God cannot remain indifferent to the destruction of His creation (Heb. 1:2-3). We need to apply the same principle to other types of resources that we have as a church such as knowledge, technological resources, experience, among others. As the family of God following the New Testament pattern, we are responsible to share all our resources and especially our most valuable asset, which is the transforming gospel of Jesus Christ; but we have settled to share on a superficial level.

All human societies build their economy based on the exchange of products. Each family, people and nation are dedicated to produce one or more goods than others need, and one or other of the groups is more favored than others to produce. We know that as Global or regional Nazarene family we cannot solve all the needs of this world. Spending time and energy to this end, we will have no lasting results. After our first century we should ask, what are Nazarenes good at? What is this treasure that God has given to us to manage, reproduce and share with the family of God outside the Church of the Nazarene and the human family outside of Christendom?

Let me share some ideas. Many may feel that our wealth is our approach for the global missionary expansion. We rejoice to have a church in so many countries but ... To what extent are the decisions and policies of the church globally supporting and sustaining the development of new disciples in the new congregations? Are we sharing our rich theological heritage at a deep level with the new generations of Nazarenes around the world? While our church has made great efforts to provide education and produce literature in several languages, a lot of theological knowledge has been "trapped" in English, leaving many of our members plunged into a state of biblical and theological illiteracy. A global church should be responsible that all congregations have access to theological education at all levels and in their own language.

One of our riches, which, in the opinion of the author, has been underestimated, is our Wesleyan-Arminian theological heritage. Hispanics Nazarenes have suffered in recent decades the decline in the production of literature in Spanish and worse, there has been a silence on how to reflect theologically on contemporary challenges facing the church. Our

pastors need urgently a solid theological biblical foundation, not only for ministerial training, but to face the new challenges of the twenty-first century. We need to revitalize the role of the theologian and biblical scholar for the development of a healthy and mature church.

The new millennium challenges us to integrate our theological heritage with the practice of spirituality. In other words teach spirituality which is grounded theologically and a theology which is learned spiritually.<sup>14</sup> Theology is not useful if it does not help us to look to the future and to live out our lives more effectively in mission.

We are responsible before God to share the theological heritage of God's family outside the boundaries of the Church of the Nazarene. In our continent we have seen an ever increasing interest in the doctrine of holiness, and the heritage of Wesleyan theology and practices, and solid biblical theological training for pastors. Many churches and leaders of other denominations are coming to seek training in our theological institutions. Our Church today has the opportunity more than ever before in its history, to share their theological treasure generously and extend the doctrine of scriptural holiness, so as to contribute to the development of Christian leadership in Latin America

#### *Discussion Questions*

1. *What is the most valuable asset that the world needs and that we have as a global Nazarene family which we could administer better in the future?*
2. *What has been the attitude of our church in the last century with regard to serving the people of God outside of the Church of the Nazarene with our human talents, theological institutions and property? Do we need a change in this regard?*
3. *What benefits would come if we developed global strategies with other Christian denominations for the advance of God's people?*

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<sup>14</sup> Conference of Norberto Saracco, FADES, Seminario Nazareno del Cono Sur, Buenos Aires, Marzo 2013.

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