

WHAT THEN SHALL WE BE?  
THE PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE OF THE CHURCH OF THE NAZARENE  
By Floyd T. Cunningham, Ph.D.  
Asia-Pacific Nazarene Theological Seminary

As the Church of the Nazarene steps into the next decades of the twenty-first century, it does so with eyes and hearts that remind us of its past, speak to us prophetically of its present, and provoke for us thoughts of its possible futures. Five essays by Harold Raser, Federico Melendez, Paul Martin, Dick Eugenio, and Rustin Brian provide lively points of view on how we have gotten where we are, where we are at the moment, and what we might become. The essays were not written to give us comfort. They beg us to push ahead toward the grand purposes God has for the Church of the Nazarene.

Several of the themes of these papers are much like ones presented in previous theology conferences. These particularly deal with the issues of a holistic message of compassion, a preference for the marginalized, and a concern for the environment.

*Holiness Past: What was?*

Each of the essays deals in some measure with Nazarene history. Harold Raser's essay focuses on the American context in which the Church of the Nazarene began. Wesley's teachings of Christian perfection were contextualized by his American interpreters. Though Raser, a professor at Nazarene Theological Seminary, assumes that "efforts to anchor Nazarene identity in the broad historical Christian tradition are more adequate than those that focus primarily on 19th century American 'holiness' and Wesleyan roots," his focus is on the American side. That is, as Raser notes, though linked to the church universal, past and present, we are a distinct church, arising in a particular context with a particular purpose. The "revivalist" heritage of the church accentuated many American values, leading to an emphasis on immediacy in the experience of entire sanctification. Wherever early Nazarene missionaries went they took these American values, models and techniques.

In contrast to Raser, who looks at the holiness from the standpoint of intellectual history, Melendez describes the holiness message in relation to the social and economic contexts in

which it emerged. Timothy Smith, whom Melendez quotes, linked the holiness movement to Protestant concerns for social issues at a time when the rapid growth of wealth determined government policies. The “great reversal” of evangelical concern for the poor began within a decade of the birth of the Church of the Nazarene. Melendez does not say all this, but the Church of the Nazarene chose to establish colleges for their own children, and to send dozens of missionaries abroad. When the Great Depression threatened both of these causes, Nazarene gave sacrificially to the causes of education and missions, but at the expense of reaching into their own cities and their urban poor. Melendez alludes to the neglect of African Americans by Nazarenes, and finds parallels to the similar neglect of the poor in Latin America (p. 7).

Attention to the growth of the Church of the Nazarene in Africa and elsewhere relates to political situations. Rustin Brian, Paul Martin, and Dick Eugenio each speak of the effects of the colonial and post-colonial contexts in which the Church of the Nazarene worked. Like their Roman Catholic counterparts that Brian mentions, Nazarenes seemed oblivious to colonial projects. Martin, a missionary in West Africa, sees few parallels between the growth of the church in Africa and its North American roots in the 19th and early 20th centuries, except to note its own “exceptionalism.”

Dick Eugenio, professor at Asia-Pacific Nazarene Theological Seminary, searches the roots and paths of internationalization in the Church of the Nazarene. Though he looks at the internationalization of the church as a noble idea, he does not wonder that those outside North America could view it (like globalization) as “the hyperextension of an already established power and not really the flattening of the world” (p. 3). When given the chance, history suggests, those who seek freedom from control have done so “to replace existing authority with themselves” (p. 4). That is, Eugenio observes, those who have opposed centrism by proposing pluralism often have done so for their own self-seeking motivations. Colonialism often gave way to severely oppressive local regimes. The same could be true of the church.

Brian notes that Nazarene missionaries from the beginning intended to promote indigenous leadership, and, like their counterparts in colonial administrations, were too slow in doing so. Like Eugenio, Brian looks at the history of the “internationalization” of the church in various documents. On this basis, Brian notes that the consensus of the church has been to desire a global

church (rather than associated national churches), to identify core values, and to allow for “non-symmetrical structure.”

*Holiness Present: What is?*

Raser implies (p. 5) that the American milieu in which the church was born gives it a very cultural cast. We prefer “democratic or participatory forms of authority” and the judgment of the “common persons” to that of “elites.” We focus on the present and future more than the past. We prefer “decisive” action and are impatient with “process, reflection, speculation.” We are practical or pragmatic. We are ready and eager to “innovate” where opportunity arises if that will get the church growing. The question is, are these cultural or also Kingdom values?

Melendez answers that in several ways these are *not* Kingdom values. Melendez paints parallels between the North American 19th century context and the modernization processes of the world today. He warns that the holiness movement must not retreat from addressing the economic effects of industrialization, as it tended to in North America. The church must critique the philosophies of materialism and provide Christian alternatives. Melendez attempts to move the church toward a “holistic mission and social ethics from the perspective of a theology of love” (p. 1). He describes the continuing gap between the rich and poor in Latin America, and warns the church not to “abandon its mission to the poor,” and become a church “accommodated to the current economic system” (p. 8). The church must not, Melendez says, degrade the image of God, the dignity of human beings, and the environment, and calls for a compassionate gospel of “holistic salvation,” which he sees as integral to a theology that has love at its heart. Compassion, he writes, “has to be the blood of the whole denomination.” Such a heart will evidence itself in a church so sensitive to its “humble roots” that it disdains “ostentatious buildings” (pp. 8-9).

Unlike Melendez, I believe that the church is responding in ways that are continuous with our 19th century forebears. Many have rediscovered a compassion for the poor. Though there is much to improve, we have much to be proud of in regards to our compassionate ministries. Outside of ourselves, the Church of the Nazarene *is* known as a church that is compassionate.

The church wins new converts in Africa primarily among those once involved in primal religions, Martin relates. If, as Raser described, cultural values shaped the American church, so does

the African worldview. Therefore, says Martin, Christian theology in Africa must relate itself to cultural values. African theologians critically reflect upon the gospel from their own context. In doing so, Africans naturally attach themselves to the quadrilateral of Scripture, tradition, reason and experience. Unlike the American values Raser describes, Africans prioritize peace, harmony and wholeness. Africans (and others) recognize the precedents and continuing state of relationships established by ancestors such as Adam; and they thereby grasp the “grace upon grace” that comes through the rectification of broken relationships through Christ. For Africans, Christ is the Mighty Conqueror.

Eugenio likewise accentuates the relational quality of the Church. On one hand Eugenio celebrates the diversity that the Church of the Nazarene represents, while, on the other hand, he wonders whether “internationalization” is only a guise for making the American control of the church more palatable. Again the American values that Raser described come into view in Eugenio’s description, as the drive for the order and efficiency of the denomination overrides that of relationship. Efficiency, Eugenio warns, must not become simply the more successful policing of the church.

Though without Eugenio’s Eucharist analogy, Brian sees the duty of the church similarly, to create a “new people, and not the spreading out of a particular empire” (p. 3). Brian speaks of the likelihood of our “sinning against our sisters and brothers in the various parts of the world that formerly were classified as ‘foreign mission fields’” by not “sharing power with one another in a radically egalitarian manner.” The present reality, Brian describes, is still a North American-dominated church. This interim ethic, if it be such, needs give way for the Kingdom.

#### *Holiness Future: What should be?*

What, then, is the future? Each of the writers provides some possible futures.

Martin sees the future of African theology as one of increasing sophistication as indigenous theologians dialogue with their particular own context. No longer will they repeat answers given by Western theologians to questions no one in Africa is asking. Western theologians are not sufficiently attuned to the African context, Martin suggests, to answer the questions that African *are* asking: including the relation of the visible to the invisible world, the relation of human beings to ancestors, their spirits, and other powers, the advisability of manipulating God, the discernment

of signs, wonder, miracles and prophets, and the relationship of the gospel to the whole environment. Like Melendez in relation to Latin America, Martin sees African Wesleyanism as emphasizing “the whole of creation.” Like Melendez he longs for a theology that compassionately addresses the needs of the poor.

But when the poor reach positions of power, they are no less susceptible to its seductions. Globalization has not lessened tensions among people. It heightens “competition for recognition and dominance,” Eugenio says (p. 5). At its worst, the unity of the Church of the Nazarene must not come at the expense of the powerful and influential becoming more powerful and influential and succeeding in imposing stricter control (which would drive people out of the church). Unlike political states, churches are voluntary institutions. Eugenio cites Philip Jenkins’s prediction that church schisms will come along North-South lines. What are the safeguards against it? De-Westernization will not solve the underlying spiritual problem. The alternative of pluralism, Eugenio observes, only creates “an overabundance of diverse competing zealots for recognition, power and authority” (p. 5).

Eugenio finds a solution to the tensions in the church in a renewed sense of the presence of Christ through a Eucharistic ecclesiology. It is an image of a church kneeling side by side at the Table. None is given greater or lesser honor. There is no power struggle at the Table. There is gathering, “general solidarity” and *koinonia*. In order for there to be true *koinonia*, members of the body become reconciled before receiving the bread and the wine. Receiving the bread and the wine requires self-examination, confession, and repentance – a lifting of others rather than ourselves. “Christians should sense the moral indictment in participating in [the Eucharist] without actually living it.” If this is the highest, and yet most immediate depiction not only of what the Church is to be, but of what holiness is, an ethics of the Kingdom will emerge. International leaders will emerge not because they have demanded it, but as the natural progression of our heritage and theology.

Brian’s solutions are much more specific. In a sense, what Brian and the internationalization processes see as the future is commitment to an American as well as Nazarene value: participatory democracy not based on economic or social position but on membership. He seeks for adjustments to the organizational structure. “It is time,” he writes, “to fully embrace our original drive towards indigenous leadership by implementing structural changes in our polity” (p. 3).

With rationale similar to that of Eugenio, Brian calls upon the North American church to willingly divest itself of power. (His words, “invite those from the ‘International Community’ into positions of power” strike me as awkward, a kind of *noblesse oblige*, and also can be taken as a preferential option for the poor about which liberation theologians speak.) The question that R. F. Zanner asked in 1985, quoted by Brian, is still pertinent: “Are we going to be an international church or will we remain an American church with branches based on foreign soil?” (p. 6). Brian insists that we must be like good Wesleyans, pro-active in seeing that the vision for the Church of the Nazarene, and all the good work of General Assembly commissions is implemented.

Specifically, Brian makes two alternative proposals. (1) Expand the number of General Superintendents, two for each region, natives or long-term residents, of that region, and reside on the region during their term of office, and require one of the two to be female. Brian does not propose how this would be accomplished. (2) Decrease the number of GSs to three, no more than one from each region, and increase the number of regional coordinators, who would be from the regions themselves. To me, if we sacrifice the teleological ethic of the one Body of Christ for the sake of an organizational ethic of division, we are moving backwards, not forwards.

### *Reflection*

The Wesleyan heritage has bent us toward a strong superintendency. Episcopacy has its strengths. For both John Wesley and Francis Asbury, being able to benevolently dictate local preachers’ and circuit riders’ appointments facilitated the rapid expansion of the gospel. The missionary movement did similarly. Methodists have used its system of appointments for the elevation of women and minorities to key pastorates and leadership positions. When our church began various merging bodies gave up radical congregationalism and local autonomy, but reserved their basic right to choose their own pastors. But the trend has been toward appointments for other leadership positions.

We cannot really to be a holiness church – a church witnessing to Oneness in Christ – without being an international church. The Spirit of Christ creates a living Body in which there is no “east or west, north or south, but one great fellowship of love.” We are still in the process of becoming what we are intended to be. Let us not give up that hope.

*Discussion Questions:*

1. In assessing a teleological pathway toward the Kingdom, is it possible to describe Kingdom ethics without cultural biases?
2. Does the structure and mentality of the church reflect a lingering colonialism? If so, how can we overcome this perspective?
3. What are the strengths and weaknesses of a strong (district, regional and general) superintendency? Is there is reason to hesitate, or, on the other hand, a means of implementing, the direct election of Field Strategy Coordinators or Regional Directors?
4. Melendez's hope is that theology papers not remain "documents in a file," yet as a church (like all churches) we have found it difficult to find the bridge between reflection and action. Specify possible futures for the Church of the Nazarene structure in the light of these essays.