

VOLUNTARY ASSOCIATION OR THE BODY OF CHRIST? A WESLEYAN
ECCLESIOLOGY FOR THE CHURCH OF THE NAZARENE TODAY

By Mark Mann and Brent Peterson

Point Loma Nazarene University and Northwest Nazarene University

Ecclesiology has been one of the least developed doctrines in the Church of the Nazarene. It was not until 1989 that the General Assembly adopted an official statement on “The Church” for inclusion in the Articles of Faith. It is not that Nazarenes have been entirely bereft of an ecclesiology—only that it has not been clearly understood or formally articulated. Our contention is that there have actually been two dominant ecclesiologies embodied by Nazarenes throughout our history. The prevailing ecclesiology, drawn largely from the revivalist context of the holiness movement, views the church as a voluntary association of believers who have gathered together in fellowship and mission. The second, drawn primarily from our Wesleyan heritage, views the church as the Body of Christ, gathered together in holiness by the Holy Spirit through the sacraments, and sent into the world with a ministry of reconciliation. Our purpose here is to highlight ways that the second view has been nascent within the Nazarene tradition, and should be elevated as a corrective to some of the problematic tendencies of the first. Finally, we suggest that tying together ecclesiology as the body of Christ with a robust Wesleyan understanding of the sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist provides a helpful way for Nazarenes to be faithful to our tradition while effectively living out God’s call for us to be a Christian, Holiness, and Missional church.

Church as a Voluntary Association

The language of the church as a ‘voluntary association of believers’ can be found in the earliest of Nazarene statements, such as in the 1908 *Manual*: “The Churches severally are composed of such regenerate persons as by providential permission, and by the leadings of the Spirit, become associated together for holy fellowship and ministries” (24). A bit later, in the introduction to the doctrinal statements that would become the Articles of Faith, the same language is used to describe the nature of our church—they were “Christians associated together for fellowship and service in the Pentecostal Church of the Nazarene” (25). Similar language appears in the 2009–2013 *Manual*, in which the Church of the Nazarene is stated to be “composed of those persons who have voluntarily associated themselves together according to the doctrines and polity of said church...” (37).

That this view of the church would predominate much of Nazarene history makes perfect sense in light of Nazarene origins. The idea developed during the Reformation among Anabaptists and Pietists (reacting to the ecclesiology of Catholics and the Magisterial Reformers) who wished to emphasize that true Christian faith requires personal commitment. Personal conversion and sanctification were central to the development of Methodism and then carried over into the Holiness movement revivalism, which was the seedbed of Nazarene theology and practice.¹

The view of the church as a voluntary association of believers would also serve an important function in early formation of Nazarene unity. The Holiness movement was an ecumenical movement with advocates in every branch of American Protestant Christianity. The first Nazarenes understood rightly that members of all denominations were truly members of Christ's Church, even as they— as Nazarenes—had chosen to come together in fellowship around a common experience of and commitment to the proclamation of Christian holiness. To think of themselves as a voluntary association created a kind of open hospitality and inviting space for various holiness groups with differing doctrines, practices, and politics to join together in common mission. In a way, they were *voluntarily associating* with one another in forming the Church of the Nazarene. This did not mean that they *only* understood the church as a voluntary association, even if this view would dominate Nazarene theology and self-identity in subsequent decades.

Despite the importance and helpfulness of ecclesiology as voluntary association in the formation of our denomination, there have been some downsides. These problems have been well documented, but we will nevertheless mention several here. First, it tends toward an individualism that can dangerously treat faith as merely a matter of the *individual's* choice and relationship to God. Indeed, if the church is *only* a voluntary association of believers, the implication is that faith is decidedly distinct from and prior to the life of the church. And, if that is the case, why is there need committing to any denomination, or to belong to the Church at all? (In America, this individualism often manifests itself in church hopping, wherein believers move from church to church without ever committing to any local church. More recently, we are seeing the disastrous effects of this individualism among our nation's youth. They see Christian

¹ It is important to emphasize that the model of the Church as the body of Christ also celebrates the importance of personal responses to God in the Church, empowered by the Spirit.

faith as a solo journey and are increasingly forsaking participation in the church altogether, believing they can remain strong in Christ on their own.) Second, this ecclesiology tends toward viewing the church as being formed by individual Christians coming together. This stands in stark contrast to Scripture, which declares that the Church belongs to and is the work of Christ by the power of the Spirit and the community where Christians are made. Third, it can serve as the basis for thinking of Christian faith as something that we as humans have constructed—and therefore can pick and choose from—rather than as ‘faith given to the saints’ to which we are called to be faithful. Finally, it tends to undermine the unity of the Church. If you disagree with the teachings of your church, since you are only a voluntary associate, you are welcome to leave and start your own!

The Sacraments and the Church as the Body of Christ

In 1989, our denomination adopted its first Article of Faith on the church. Not only does the article avoid speaking of the church as a voluntary association, it speaks of the church as the body of Christ. Of course, the language of the church being a voluntary association continues to be used in the first sections of church constitution, so we should not think that this article marks the adoption of a completely new ecclesiology for Nazarenes. Rather, we see it as a move to greater balance that we would like to encourage.

However, this imagination of the Church as the body of Christ was latently present in our denomination before 1989. The clue to finding it is by looking at the practice and celebration of the sacraments. It seems early Nazarenes had a far more elevated view and practice of the sacraments than Nazarenes have had through most of our history. It is through baptism that new believers are *initiated* into the body of Christ. Infant baptism was practiced widely among early Nazarenes, and there was a clear expectation that all Nazarenes would be baptized. However, by mid-century believer’s baptism had become normative as we tended to see Christian faith as something we cognitively assent to. Persons become Christians when we “have decided to follow Jesus.” Thus, baptism became essentially a public testimony to the salvation the believer had *already* experienced. It is therefore typical to find Nazarenes who prolonged their baptism

until long after having been saved or becoming church members.² This is the natural outcome of viewing the church as a voluntary association.

Similarly, early Nazarenes generally had a higher view of communion than what became normative by mid-century. Late nineteenth century holiness movement revivals and camp meetings typically concluded with communion. Two of the groups that joined at Pilot Point in 1908 held relatively “high” eucharistic views. The Holiness Church of Christ, heavily influenced by the Disciples of Christ, practiced communion weekly, while many of the APCA congregations not only celebrated communion frequently, but used formal liturgies with language drawn from the Anglican-style liturgy Wesley had adapted for Methodists in America.³ At the Lord’s Supper the Church is renewed and unified *as* the body of Christ and sent out to serve the world.

Phineas F. Bresee’s Nazarenes possessed the ‘lowest’ view of the sacraments among early Nazarene groups, and it was essentially their sacramental theology and practice that was adopted by the unified denomination in 1908. Nevertheless, Bresee’s contingent had a higher view of communion than many Nazarenes have had throughout the denomination’s century of existence. Communion was practiced at least six times per year at LA First Church, and the liturgy Bresee developed for early Nazarenes survived in the *Manual* of the combined church and maintained significant vestiges of a ‘Body of Christ’ ecclesiology. For instance, celebrants were called by faith to “partake of the life of Jesus Christ” and never to forget that they were “one” at “the table of our Lord” (1908, 68-69). While the language here does not explicitly identify the church *as* the body of Christ, the clear implication is that, in their *unification* at the table, the church *takes on the very life* of Christ. Similarly, in the prayer of consecration from 1908, we find that communion is not merely a memorial, but that “that the church may be made partakers of the benefits of His sacrificial death” (1908, 69). Unfortunately, Nazarenes would

² Cf. Stan Ingersol, *Past and Prospect: The Promise of Nazarene History* (Point Loma Press, forthcoming), ch. 2, “Christian Baptism and the Early Nazarenes.”

³ This discussion of ecclesiology and sacramental thought and practice among the pre-1908 Nazarene groups relies primarily on James N. Fitzgerald’s *“Weaving a Rope of Sand”: The Separation of the Preaching of the Word from the Sacrament of the Eucharist in the Church of the Nazarene* (Vanderbilt University Dissertation, 1999), esp. chs. 4-5.

later adopt a strict memorialist view and, in the 1920s, would first ignore then remove altogether the call to frequent communion from the Article of Faith on The Lord's Supper.⁴

Despite the general demise of a sacramentally centered ecclesiology in Nazarene doctrine and practice, several influential theological texts offer important windows into the ongoing formation of the Church's ecclesiology and sacramental theology. These include H. Orton Wiley's *Christian Theology*, Purkiser, Taylor, and Taylor's *God, Man, and Salvation*, H. Ray Dunning's *Grace, Faith and Holiness*, and Rob Staples' *Outward Sign and Inward Grace*.⁵ The impact of these works was limited because many of the positive eucharistic and ecclesial insights were relegated to the back of books or footnotes, while largely being neglected in official Nazarene doctrine and practice. However, specifically Dunning and Staples mark the beginning of a recovery of a Wesleyan ecclesiological balance for Nazarene theology—one that holds in proper tension the biblical understanding of the Church as the body of Christ with the importance of personal faith and commitment.

To a large extent, this recovery was rooted in the retrieval of the theology and practices of the Wesleys. It is our intention to contribute to this recovery by looking to the Wesleys' understanding of the sacraments as a resource for recovering a properly balanced view of the Church. *First*, we will explore how the Wesleyan tradition has affirmed God's healing (sanctification) through the sacraments as a means of grace. *Second*, we will discuss ways in which the Eucharist is central to the Wesleyan understanding of the ongoing renewal of the Church as the body of Christ. *Third*, we will explore the eschatological dimensions of the Wesleyan understanding of sanctification as it relates to the sacrament of communion. As such we seek to recover viewing the church as the body of Christ through the rhythm of God breathing in the Church for communal worship in the sacraments, and then exhaling them to be missionally engaged. To this end the Church of the Nazarene can become more fully Christian, Holiness, and Missional.

⁴ It states: "Of the obligation to partake of the privileges of this sacrament, as often as we may be providentially permitted, there can be no doubt" (1908, 31).

⁵ H. Orton Wiley's *Christian Theology* (Kansas City, MO: NPH, 1943); W. T. Purkiser, Richard S. Taylor, and Willard H. Taylor's *God, Man & Salvation, A Biblical Theology* (Kansas City, MO: NPH, 1973); H. Ray Dunning's *Grace, Faith & Holiness* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill, 1988); and Rob L. Staples *Outward Sign and Inward Grace: The Place of Sacraments in Wesleyan Spirituality* (Kansas City, Missouri: Beacon Hill, 1991).

Eucharist as a Means of Grace

Christian salvation in the Wesleyan tradition is the healing of the disease of sin. As such what specific role do the means of grace play in the *ordo salutis*? The means of grace are central to Wesley's ordinary *ordo salutis*:

By 'means of grace' I understand outward signs, words, or actions ordained of God, and appointed for this end—to be the ordinary channels whereby he might convey to men preventing, justifying, or sanctifying grace... The chief of these means are prayer, whether in secret or with the great congregation; searching the Scriptures (which implies reading, hearing, and meditating thereon) and receiving the Lord's Supper, eating bread and drinking wine in remembrance of him....⁶

A sacrament for the Wesleys, more than a simple pointer to an experience or spiritual state already accomplished, was itself an *event* of sanctifying grace, a divine-human healing encounter to love more perfectly. Such grace should not be thought of as some material outside of God's presence. Grace is the gift of God's healing and transforming presence, which sanctifies persons, by healing and renewing the church as the body of Christ. Individual members come to the table broken and in some sense alienated from God, each other, and themselves. Yet in the Eucharist, they are offered healing by being united as members of Christ's body so that this renewal as the body of Christ would send the Church out to participate and continue the ministry of the Incarnation.

Unfortunately, the issue of presence of Christ in the Eucharist has been a source of discord between Christians. One reason this occurs is because when the topic of presence in the Eucharist arises, persons tend to focus only on how Christ is present in connection with the bread and wine (juice). In this respect we wish to embrace—with the Wesleys— what we have labeled a “doxological agnosticism.”⁷ That is, we do not pretend to exhaust the science of how it is that Christ is present in the Eucharist (hence, agnostic). We only wish to embrace the metaphysical mystery that Christ *is* truly present by the power of the Holy Spirit, when we gather together at

⁶ Sermon 16, “The Means of Grace,” §II.1, in *Sermons I*, ed. Albert C. Outler, vol. 1 of *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1976–), 381.

⁷ See. Brent Peterson, *Created to Worship* (Kansas City, MO: NPH, 2012) pp. 176-179; and his unpublished 2009 Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary dissertation “*A Post-Wesleyan Eucharistic Ecclesiology: The Renewal of the Church as the Body of Christ to be Doxologically Broken and Spilled Out For the World,*” 162-211.

the table in worship, such that we experience the invitation to sanctifying grace and communion. At the Eucharist somehow our eyes are opened to see Christ and our hearts are opened to receive Christ. As such, Christ's presence in this event always comes as a surprising irruption and yields a doxological (worshipful) joy. As Charles Wesley writes,

*Sure and real is the grace, the manner be unknown;
only meet us in thy ways and perfect us in one.
Let us taste the heavenly powers, Lord, we ask for nothing.
Thine to bless, 'tis only ours to wonder and adore.*⁸

It is interesting to note that an opening for Christ's presence as doxological agnosticism can be found in early *Manuals*. In the 1903 *Manual, Church of the Nazarene* the first statement on the Lord's Supper appears under the chapter "Church Membership and General."

The Supper of our Lord is a Sacrament of our redemption by Christ's death. It is in memory of His death and passion, and in this hope of His coming again. In the partaking of it, by faith, we are enabled by the Holy Spirit to be partakers of His flesh and blood to the strengthening of our souls (16-17).

Even here there is tension between the emphasis on memory and a prayer that the Holy Spirit would help congregants to "partake of Christ's flesh and blood." It would seem that partaking implies a dynamic *present* encounter with Christ. Within this encounter the primary emphasis remains on the strengthening of souls.⁹

The Sacrifice of Christ, the Sacrifice of the People

As previously noted, the issue of 'presence' is not only concerned with Christ, but also with Christians. While the Spirit gathers and breathes in the congregation for communal worship, the Spirit also invites and empowers congregants to present themselves "as a living sacrifice" to God. The Wesleys were very clear on this point—the Lord's Supper *is* a sacrifice. Unfortunately the Eucharist as a sacrifice is often misunderstood.

In developing this connection between sacrifice and sanctification, the etymology of the Latin roots becomes helpful. Sacrifice in Latin is *sacrificium*, which is formed by the roots *sacer*

⁸ Charles Wesley, "O the Depth of Love Divine," st. 4 (1745). (Hymn no. 627 in *The United Methodist Hymnal* [Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 2003]).

⁹ This also seems consistent with the texts and intent of the 1662 *BCP*.

(holy) and *facem* (to do or make). Literally sacrifice is “to be made holy” or “to make holy.” This is a helpful corrective grammar recovering the term “sacrifice” from images fixated on “bloody payment,” “restoring honor”, or “appeasement of divine wrath.” A sacrifice is the means by which one is being made holy. This has far reaching implications not only for considering how Christ’s presence at the Eucharist is sacrificial, but similarly how the church sacrifices itself in the Eucharist as an act of doxology. The church’s sacrifice at the Eucharist is the church’s response to God’s invitation of further healing and renewal in the *imago dei*. In other words, the Church’s eucharistic sacrificial offering is a means for the Church’s continual growth in sanctification. Hence, not only is Christ made present by the Spirit, Christians are also invited to be present by the Spirit by offering their lives with Christ as a living sacrifice.

Such a move is faithful to the Wesleyan tradition. As the Wesleyan sacramental scholar Ole Borgen points out, this links the Lord’s Supper to subsequent sanctifying growth:

It is this same concern which permeates Wesley’s thoughts on sacrifice in connection with the Lord’s Supper. In fact, in no place is the idea of offering oneself, soul and body, all that we have and are to God through Christ, more often emphasized than when Wesley discusses sanctification and ‘Christian Perfection.’¹⁰

This is precisely why the Lord’s Supper was primarily the sacrament of sanctification.¹¹ The sacrificial *human* response to God at the table depicts the consecration Wesley also describes as the sacrificial posture for those seeking entire sanctification. Those seeking entire sanctification are called upon to give themselves sacrificially to God.

In light of the three foci of a eucharistic ecclesiology in the Wesleyan tradition, what are some eucharistic and ecclesial implications for the means of grace within the *ordo salutis*? First, the Lord’s Supper is *the central* performative act of the church in the ongoing healing of Christians. In its observance, we do not simply obey a command but rather embrace the gift whereby God by the Spirit is sustaining the Church and furthering its ongoing healing. Second, as the Lord’s Supper offers sanctifying grace, the healing occurs as an encounter with God and others, as well as serving as a prefiguring of the future healing that will occur. Our presence to

¹⁰ Ole Borgen, *John Wesley on the Sacraments* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Francis Asbury Press of Zondervan Publishing House, 1985), 252.

¹¹ John Wesley, *The Sunday Service of the Methodists in North America* (London: Strahan, 1784: reprint ed., Nashville, TN: United Methodist Publishing House, 1992), 137-138.

God and one another is an eschatological event: not only a vision of what will be, but a healing event that transforms the present into that future hope. Therefore, recognizing Christ's presence and the presence of others at the Table is essential. Third, the Lord's Supper, in its offer of sanctifying grace to love, is the event of renewing and unifying the Church again with Christ as the Head and with each member as the body of Christ. The Lord's Supper is an ecclesial becoming, not simply an individual expression of personal piety. This also helps to ground the gift of sanctification as a healing of the *imago dei* (image of God), a healing to love God, ourselves, and others.

Doxological Mission: God Breathing Out the Church as the Body of Christ

The Church is renewed as the Body of Christ through its primary purpose and practice, a divine human encounter in the Service of the Word and Table. But after the Church has been gathered by the Spirit (breathed in) for communion, it is then breathed out, but for what purpose? Mission. Yet what is the purpose of being a missional people? Why did Christ eat with sinners, tax collectors, and prostitutes? Why does the Church care for the poor, widows, homeless, orphans, and all broken and lost persons? Not simply to put food in their bellies or a roof over their heads (though this is very important), but that they may become members of the body of Christ by being brought into the communion and fellowship of the Church. Mission's primary goal is communion. Moreover, the Church's vocational ministry of mission in the world is always within a spirit of doxology-thanks-giving.

While all of these ideas are interwoven, it is on this issue of doxological mission in the world that an emphasis of the Church as the body of Christ challenges the individualism of a voluntary association and perhaps describes one of our primary passions of this paper. One major benefit of imagining the Church as the body of Christ moves the final goal of creation beyond individual souls receiving the reward of their utopian (and often hedonistic) vision of heaven to *theosis*. The goal of the full coming of the Kingdom of God, the redemption of all creation, is that creation would fully glorify God, and we will see God face to face and God will become all in all.¹² This is certainly the view espoused by St. Paul, expressed powerfully in Christ's prayed

¹² See I Cor. 13:12, I Cor. 15:28

at Gethsemane.¹³ This is an image of the church in which every person matters, and finds significance as part of the whole rather than disparate and isolated monads seeking a pleasurable and comfortable eternal destiny. Conversely, a robust sacramental theology and practice helps shape the Church as the body of Christ within a robust formation in the sacraments. In this way the Church can eschatologically be and become more fully Christian, holy, and missional.

In the end, the Church as the body of Christ is a very important symbolic metaphor that can offset the individualism within the Church as a voluntary association of like-minded persons. The Service of Word and Table is the essential practice of the Church as persons continue to be made *Christian* as God's Holy people, sent from communal worship, set apart (*Holy*) to participate in God's redemption of the World (*Missional*). God gathers (breathing in) the Church for *communion*, in order that the Church may be sent out (exhaled) to participate in God's mission in the world, in order that the following week more of the world could be gathered into the communion of God in the Church. Hence, this essay asserts that the Church as the body of Christ grounded in the practice and celebration of the sacraments in the Service of Word and Table is essential in order for the Church to become more fully *Christian, Holiness, and Missional* all for the glory of God.

¹³ See John 17:20-22.