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The Great Commission: A Socio-Ethical Comment

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CONTEXT

Perhaps the thought that every generation finds its era interesting is not far-fetched. This holds true for us today. Our world has interesting challenges. World leaders in their various fields (politics, economy, social, military, ecology, religion, etc) should find this era challenging in many ways. A good hint of that could easily be observed in the pace with which the United Nations and its various agencies, the World Bank and International Monetary Fund and other world environmental bodies, conduct their business and follow their agenda. This is the era in which this denomination strives to fulfil Christ's last injunction – the Great Commission.

It is within that background that this brief paper will look at the Great Commission. More specifically, this paper will focus on the Great Commission in relation to its achievements, failures, and present/future challenges. This is not going to be a theological/religious reflection on the theme. It is hoped that others will follow that line of thought. My focus will be to discuss the Great Commission in the context of socio-political challenges that prevails in the world today. A particular focus will relate to the South African scene.

SUBSTANCE

It is within this world-context the Church of the Nazarene seeks to live and concretize the Great Commission. Until now, the denomination has understood the Great Commission as God's expression of his love for the lost and seeking to save them from a life of sin. Sin, in this view, is personalized individual behaviour such as adultery, theft, drunkenness, murder, etc. Salvation is understood in terms of a personalized decision to forsake that kind of life and follow Jesus. The missionary and evangelistic efforts of the denomination have been largely based on this understanding of the Great Commission.

It appears as though it has been difficult for the Church of the Nazarene to define sin in broader terms. Understanding sin in socio-economic and political structural terms has thus been foreign in the preaching and conduct of the Nazarene evangelists and church planters. On the contrary, they have seen it fitting to understand and define sin in a narrow sense.

SUCCESS

It is that belief that accounts for the tremendous advances of the Church of the Nazarene in her world missionary effort. The reality that this denomination is continuing to advance into new world areas when other denominations are scaling their missionary activity down is enough to underline the previous point. Due credit befits the denomination for remaining steadfastly focused on what she regards as the primary mission of her existence.

FAILURE

It is true, however, that as the Church of the Nazarene advances across the world it is coming into contact with serious structural and social challenges which beset the people they are trying to win for Christ. This is true not only around the world but also in this continent.

Paragraph 904.5 of the Manual of the Church of the Nazarene says that holiness should drive Christians towards the creation of a more just and equitable society and world. Judging from the priorities of the Church of the Nazarene, it would appear as though the denomination has opted to leave that challenge to individual choice. The Church of the Nazarene seems to have deliberately forgotten to create a denominational strategy and programme to concretize this challenge as set out in the *Manual*. I want to submit that, in taking this route, the Church of the Nazarene has gambled with an opportunity of proclaiming a holistic and truly liberating gospel. She settled for an emaciated gospel. This is the gospel of the spirit only that is accompanied by handouts that entrench dependency and eternal slavery.

A perfect illustration of this is found in South Africa. When the denomination advanced into this southern part of the continent nearly a hundred years ago, the superstructure of an evil socio-economic and political system was being erected in this country. The reaction of the church to such structural and systemic sin was a loud silence and an

attempt to pretend that it was not happening. This position crystallized in the early 1970s when this denomination withdrew from the World Council of Churches, because the council was accused by some of supplying the world with guns rather than Bibles through its Program to Combat Racism.

Perhaps one could understand the reluctance of missionaries to engage in matters socio-political because they did not directly disadvantage or affect them. What is unforgivable is that they displayed a typical American arrogance – the right to decide for others what is good and what is not good for them. In this context, they forbade anyone within the church membership to challenge the apartheid sin. Space does not permit for a list of instances to substantiate the foregoing point.

In one of his works, William Barclay observed that it is fairly safe to talk about God and angels in heaven. It becomes dangerous when you begin to talk about people on earth. This aptly captures the real and fundamental motivation behind the non-involvement stance of the Church of the Nazarene in matters that border on genuine social concerns. The Church of the Nazarene has chosen the easy way out - to supply bandages for wounds inflicted by unjust socio-political structures, rather than confront, challenge, change and remove them.

BETRAYAL

The conspicuous silence of the Church of the Nazarene in the face of such gross social sinning is a betrayal to the black membership of the denomination and to black people in general. The Church of the Nazarene proved that she was so accustomed to affluence and comfort to the point that she lacked the capacity to understand oppression, let alone to deliberately acknowledge or talk about it. In taking this route, she thought that she was remaining neutral in the face of challenging questions of the day. However she was blind to the fact that in this world, you cannot be neutral, more importantly theology cannot be neutral. You side with either the powerful or the powerless. Unfortunately, the Church of the Nazarene sided with the powerful and affluent. This is also illustrated by the reality that her missionaries who came into our country to work among black people lived in white areas in town, not in the townships where their constituency was found. This poses serious incarnational (service) questions. It is no wonder then that among stories of goodness told about God's servants, there are also narratives about missionaries who behaved

like white South Africans in their treatment of black people.

CHALLENGE

Given the momentum of the denomination, it would appear that the Church of the Nazarene has a challenging future. Here I propose what should be considered if the denomination is to genuinely serve the needs of its greater target missions effectively.

First, I believe that should the Church of the Nazarene continue in her position of non-involvement in matters terrestrial, she will remain guilty of using the truth of the gospel selectively. A clear example of this position is found in our International Headquarters. When Bill Clinton was accused of improper sexual conduct with Monica Lewinsky, the Board of General Superintendents made their voice heard and urged him to consider resigning. However, nothing has been heard from them concerning the butchering of the Palestinians by Israel with America's unqualified support and guns. Their voice is also not heard now when America is busy invading and destroying Iraq in the absence of sound legal and moral basis. They are saying nothing about America's policy of regime change in Iraq. (If they are saying anything at all, it is not audible enough). I submit that the truth of the gospel is not just relevant to matters of adultery, murder, and stealing. It is also relevant to the way in which you treat your fellow human beings. It is concerned with how you use the social, political, and economic power that you possess.

Second, by prioritising spiritual freedom over earthly liberation, the Church of the Nazarene is guilty of advocating a heresy. The scriptures do not elevate the spirit above the flesh. On the contrary, scripture suggests that living in the flesh is just as important as living in the spirit. And by incarnating human body, God in Jesus sanctified the reality of being in the flesh, of being a human being on earth.

Third, the distinctive doctrinal emphasis of holiness of the Church of the Nazarene needs thorough contextualization. Holiness of heart should reflect itself in the promotion of holy (and just) socio-political and economic structures, so that God's people 'may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness' (1 Timothy 2:2). What kind of holiness is it that burns in the face of personal sins and says nothing when confronted by social and structural sins which insult what God has made in his own image.

Lastly, if the Church of the Nazarene hopes to be a home not only for the affluent but also for the poor, then the denomination needs to abandon the myth of neutrality in matters terrestrial because it is unlike Christ. When he was on earth, Christ consciously chose a side. You do not need a doctor's degree to understand that he sided with the poor and outcast of society, not with the powerful. It is the powerful who felt uncomfortable with him and ultimately crucified him. Without this change the Church of the Nazarene will exist for herself and the affluent, and not the poor. She cannot exist for the poor if she refuses to speak their language or relate to their existential situation, their fears and aspirations.

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