

The Need for Fresh Thinking*

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Over recent years, in my time spent on and around the Eurasia Region, it has become evident to me that the day for fresh thinking is here and the need for clear articulation of who we are as the Church of the Nazarene, and what we have to offer to the cultures we serve, has become imperative.

In many of our recent regional conferences, and notably in many of the field and district conferences, one word continues to be placed at the fore on agendas, both for presentations and dialogue...the word *Identity*.

It seems as though we are all caught up in the pursuit of some mystical concept which alludes us. Is it who we've been historically, or who we are, or maybe who we wish to become...that drives us in this pursuit?

The purpose of this conference and indeed this introductory paper is to say, "Now is our opportunity to consider our past with appreciation and esteem, confront our present with truth and honesty, and commit ourselves to live out our future with courage and integrity."

We are the product of our past. We are here because we have found a home in the Church of the Nazarene with its theological tenets...not as if we had no other options, but as having made conscientious choices...joined together with others of like mind and heart. We want to be here because we love the Church we call 'ours'.

We are men and women who have spent much passionate discussion together at various times, in various settings, trying to come to grips with theological expressions which do not always seem consistent with our truest historical roots, much less our personal spiritual experiences. We have sometimes tried to change terminology only to be frustrated with charges of 'unfaithfulness' or 'disloyalty'. Yet it is our love of fellowship in this Body of Christ which brings us to such discussions, and which keeps us trying to find a way ahead...together.

We have a future ahead of us, which calls us to articulate for coming generations in these cultures of Europe a theological understanding of our core ideologies which is based not upon 'doing', but upon 'being'. The

* Opening 'challenge' to the conference from the Regional Education Co-ordinator

binding legalism of the past, sometimes nothing more than a survival mechanism, or an attempt to preserve something called 'doctrinal purity', has become to so many a wall which separates them from the Church of which they really would love to be a part.

Our future must not be based upon a fearful set of preservatives, but rather on a courageous set of Biblical principles, firmly founded in Scripture, and proven in the best and worst of times through experience of the worshipping heart. Our generation and those who follow need more than anything to see here, among us, in our lives, the integrity of deeply held values lived out for all the world to see. Scriptural holiness, rightly understood, is probably one of the greatest messages for our highly secularised, individualised and pluralistic age...above any other on offer.

How we understand this and articulate it in clear and consistent ways is very important to the future of the Church and its influence on the societies we represent. The mission of the Church is much dependent upon its ideologies, and the passion with which it holds them, and seeks to share the Good News of the Gospel with 'every person'.

The historian Lawrence Goodwyn wrote, "A community cannot persist simply because some of its members have a strong conviction that it ought to persist. A community needs to have something to do. It has to have **purpose** in addition to fellowship that reaffirms the community's need to continue its collective effort" (Russ Bredholt, *The Soul of the Church*).

This is true not only of the Church of the Nazarene in general, but also of this gathered body of thinkers. We are here to 'think out loud', if you please. That thinking needs to be anchored in the best of our historical 'identity', but also needs to be set free to challenge and call to question those aspects of 'who we are' which cause us to be less than our best in impacting our world as God intended. We must be allowed to think and speak and debate together unencumbered by strictly a sense of 'oughtness'. We must feel free with one another to venture into new areas of thought and expression...to allow 'truth' to take us where it will. I do not say here to be careless, but maybe carefree.

It may be that here we need to "reaffirm the community's need to continue its collective effort". That effort must surely have to do with the Church's mission...its fulfilment of Christ's commission. The effort must

surely have to do with our own ministries of education and discipleship. The effort must surely be redoubled in these last days, focusing not so much on some 'sectarian' survivalist mentality, but rather on an open, passionate pursuit of the holy...and an open-armed passionate sense of mission to bring men and women to encounter the Holy One.

We are not here to put 'theology' in the tower...out of reach, and so complex that men and women and young people cannot hope to attain to it. Rather, we are here to find ways of bringing this 'queen of all the sciences' into reach; that in the languages of our societies and of this age, we may all become more effective in sharing the Good News which "sets captives free", bringing God's children home to him.

Dr. J. B. Chapman, in his first convocation address to Nazarene Theological Seminary on 28 September, 1945 said this:

Far from being an isolated or detached thesis, the doctrine of Christian holiness is central to the commands, promises, prayers, exhortations, statements, and narratives of the Bible. In the words of Bishop Foster, "It breathes in the prophecy, thunders in the law, murmurs in the narrative, whispers in the promises, supplicates in the prayers, resounds in the songs, sparkles in the poetry, shines in the types, glows in the imagery, and burns in the spirit of the whole scheme, from its alpha to its omega—its beginning to its end." Holiness! Holiness needed! Holiness required! Holiness offered! Holiness attainable! Holiness, a present duty, a present privilege, a present enjoyment, is the progress and completeness of its wondrous theme! It is the truth glowing all over and voicing all through revelation; singing and shouting in all its history, and biography, and poetry, and prophecy, and precept, and promise, and prayer; the great central truth of the system. The truth to elucidate which the system exists. If God has spoken at all, it is to aid men to be holy.

If this is true, then we have reason to join God in this...that we speak with him this message to our generations...that we allow him to use us as he will in bringing those of our societies to him, and that having come to know him, we all together may be instruments of furthering the reach of this message...this creed...this purpose.

It is important that we understand here that we are not all alike: not in the way we would wish to express our commonly held core values, and not in the way we will influence the cultures which we represent here. This being so, we should remember that it is possible to have commonly held, deeply felt, values, and yet be diverse in the ways in which we articulate

these values, both in language and in life. We must allow each other to try and reveal something of the personal 'facet' of their faith, without insisting that we walk from here identical. We must esteem one another's differences and yet attend that commonality which we share, careful to build up one another in this holy faith.

It is also important that I express to you a personal conviction here. I have been of the opinion for some time that there can be a significant European contribution to theological thinking in the Church of the Nazarene which could take a leading role in helping the Church to focus and rightly articulate the faith. We must be careful, however, that we not be so critical of thought 'because it is American'...or Latin, or Oriental, that we fail to see the international nature of our *identity* as a value...a positive, not a negative. We too easily become 'superior' in our thinking about our own thinking, that we isolated and cut off from our potential effectiveness. If we become exclusive in an age which requires 'inclusion', we will compromise our effectiveness, and possibly thwart everything we say we long for.

We are in an emerging age of our *identity* and it is important that we carefully consider our past and whisper a prayer of thanksgiving; confront our present, and humbly offer a prayer of confession; commit our future with a prayer of conscientious covenant to *be* a movement that God called us to *be*, righteous in our generation, holy in the midst of the unholy, and redemptive in mission.

It is not clear from the titles of these papers alone what they each reveal of the pilgrimage of the faithful in their pursuit of the holy, but one thing is clear...we can all learn something new and fresh from this exercise. If only we will be open to the Spirit of God, sensitive to the honourable gifts within each other, and courageous in the mission we are called to fulfil...the results of this conference may impact our personal lives, our college campuses, our districts, fields, and region.