

“Our History and His Story”
Paul Bassett

Response

Let's Tell the Story

by

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The recent resurgence of interest in genealogy testifies to an almost universal longing to find one's roots. Knowing who they are, where they originated, and why they exist is central to the integrity of any group of people who have come together for a common purpose. Understanding their collective history helps define their purpose for the present and their focus for the future.

All of these are central to the Body of Christ and more specifically to the Church of the Nazarene. However, we exist to venerate not our historical foundations but our Founder. Dr. Bassett calls Nazarenes to root our memory not in our accomplishments but in the work of the Holy Spirit. Our history is not so much about ourselves as it is about the One who has called and commissioned us to be His Body. Institutional focus turns inward, calling us to calculate and celebrate ourselves. Holy living is Christ-centered, calling us to focus on Him and His mission.

The story we celebrate is not our history; our story is His story. It did not begin with Bresee, a glory barn, Pilot Point, and 1908. Our story is an ageless, eternal, ongoing celebration of the work of the Holy Spirit. It is a deflation of self and an inflation of the Master. It is, as Bassett says, not about a great church or a great person; it is about a great God.

This proper focus demands one essential prerequisite: We must know our story. Those of us in the Church of the Nazarene are often asked about the story that forms our basis for existence: “Who are the Nazarenes, and what do you believe?” The responses are varied. Some effort is generally made at describing ourselves as a holiness church and as people who seek a holy life. Beyond that, the average Nazarene mumbles and stumbles his way through attempts to respond to further questions. The reasons are multiple, but one is paramount: we don't understand it. Although holiness is our cardinal doctrine – a central part of our story – it is arguably the single word we are least able to explain.

Collectively, we are poor stewards in offering answers. We are deficient in explaining our existence; we do not understand our doctrine; we are unable to define our distinctives. In short, we do not know our story.

It is little wonder then that the characteristics of a holy people are so often lacking in demonstration. And perhaps this is why we turn more often to institutional memory than to God-memory.

The story of a body is not the collective story until it is shared and owned by all members of the body. Our theology is not *our* theology until it is known, understood, and owned by all.

Our doctrine is not *our* doctrine until we have transferred it to all who desire to know and live in accordance with it. In particular, we have a great responsibility to share His story with the laity, with the younger generation, and with new Nazarenes.

Outside our seminaries and universities and Nazarene geographic “strongholds,” our laity tends to be theologically ignorant. The potential for a solution lies in the hands of theologians, editors, and publishers who must team together to produce instructional basics in lay terminology. Pastors and teachers on the local level must then transfer this knowledge in understandable terms. Until the story is communicated to the people in the pew who can then communicate it to the lost, only the institutional few have the story.

An entire generation of young people is growing up in the Nazarene church seeking a holy life without an understanding of holiness. Our willingness to translate this doctrine to them in terms they understand and to which they can relate is paramount for the ongoing mission of our church. As Shakespeare said, “There is a tide in the affairs of men which taken at the flood leads on to fortune. Omitted, all the voyage of their life is spent in shallows and in miseries.” We do not launch the tide, and we cannot change it; we can only choose to launch our purposes with it or to sit back and see our opportunities flow away. The tide of the rhetoric of Generation X has left the shore. We cannot call it back; we cannot re-launch it according to our preferences. Our choice now is simply to communicate within it. Will we? Some fear that relinquishing our terminology will dilute or even destroy the integrity of the holiness message. On the contrary, I believe it is the answer to preserving the memory and perpetuating the story to yet another generation. If we fail to do so, the memory stops with us.

Dr. Bassett calls us to redirect our serious attention from the institutional side of our story to the Godward side of our story. I agree. Let’s tell the story to all in ways that the whole family can understand so that they in turn can pass it on.