

Response

by

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Reinterpretations of historical events have been in the news recently in the UK. An article in *The Times of London* (2 January 2002) entitled “Aborigines ask for a royal apology” began, “Indigenous leaders in Queensland have asked the Queen to apologise for the way aborigines were used as human ornaments during a royal visit to Australia in 1901.”

Bassett’s article strongly hints that an apology to God and the global church is now in order for the way we have interpreted particular aspects of the history of the Church of the Nazarene.

If our history is skewed, what was the intent behind such an interpretation? For example, we know that the politicians of many countries of the world engage in ‘political spin.’ This is putting the best possible gloss on developing policies and decisions. Sometimes the reason is to buy some breathing space in order to give a policy a chance to establish itself before the brickbats are thrown. On the one hand, it can be a risky business. Those who see the weaknesses of the policy say that it is ‘all spin and no substance.’ On the other, one cannot fully blame a government for trying to put the most favourable interpretation on a fledgling enterprise in order to give it a chance of survival.

It may be fair to say that Nazarene historians have been guilty of ‘spin.’ Is this sinful? Does it need an apology? It will be interesting to consider the response of the participants to this conference as to whether this is the case.

When we look back over our history, we can begin to appreciate how difficult it must have been to hold together disparate groups in what was emerging as a new denomination. The spirituality of these early pioneers is not in doubt; and there probably was the temptation to see the best in most situations. The further we get from these early events, however, the less we need or want ‘spin.’ Thus, as the church nears its centenary, we must be more realistic about our successes and failures.

Where this is particularly important is in the development of a truly international Church of the Nazarene. Nazarenes around the world may or may not be willing to forgive and forget a Western interpretation of Nazarene history; but what is important now, is the present and future development of an ‘international church.’

The report of the Commission on the International Church presented to the 1997 General Assembly, spoke of “the desire of the Church of the Nazarene to be a global church” (page 3). Much of the report elaborates on administrative restructuring that would be needed to make this a reality. This includes such aspects as Regional Assemblies and additional funding. The report envisions that the first such Assemblies would occur about 2008 or 2009 (page 64).

A second point made in the Report is that “There is a strong commitment to maintaining a set of ‘non-negotiable core values’ of the denomination (page 3). This is of particular interest in our debate. If we are not to repeat the alleged mistakes of the past, these core values must have international input. No longer can a certain branch of the church claim the ability to decide upon or write down these values. Growing world scholarship within the ordained and lay Nazarenes would not forgive an imposed set of ‘non-negotiable care values.’ Of course, we would say that this is not intended. However, by raising the prospect that we may have angled our history to the advantage of persons and institutions, we dare not repeat the error. And as politicians sometimes say “justice has to be done, and justice has to be seen to be done.”

We call the Holy Spirit to help us listen to ‘history in the making’ in our world church. Bonhoeffer said that “The first service that one owes to others in the fellowship consists of listening to them” (*Life Together* 75). As a church, we may consider ourselves to be adequately gifted in this area. What we do with what we hear may begin to address the issues Bassett raises. Bonhoeffer concludes, “We should listen with the ears of God that we may speak the Word of God” (76). As we enter our second century, a common purpose will release us to express the identity of the various strands of our family in the context of an international church under God, and do it with pride.