

Response

By

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One can only wonder what the Church of the Nazarene would be like if, indeed, it found “its ethos and example in the theology and practice of Scripture as exegeted and defined by John Wesley and the early Methodist movement.” Fletcher Tink’s Church of the Nazarene is just that . . . a vibrant body of believers, coursing with pure Wesleyan blood. The benefits to Wesley’s Nazarene heirs are myriad. Believers are victorious over sin, candidates for entire sanctification, and those who receive it are compelled to combat systemic evil with swords of “collective influence” of holy lives doing what holy lives do.

Tink understandably laments the ways in which Bresee’s kin have lost their way over the last century and contests the ways they have tried to reconnect to their roots via compassionate ministries. To bring the prodigals to the table, Tink appeals to “our Wesleyan character, worship and activity.”

Before speaking to the heart of Tink’s essay, one must look more closely at the premise incarnate in his opening paragraph. While it might be fair to say that “some” Nazarenes find their ethos and example in John Wesley and his world view,” it’s equally fair to say that many, if not most, come from another gene pool. Some would say that many early Nazarenes looked far more like Phoebe Palmer than John Wesley; and what can be said of their great-grandchildren? Today’s Nazarene stock reflects a hybrid faith, subtly influenced by the enlightenment, humanism, empiricism, pragmatism and watered-down, garden-variety evangelicalism; and not so subtly by materialism, consumerism, and narcissism.

Clearly, the Church of the Nazarene in the 21st century bears little resemblance to Wesley or Palmer; and the offspring sing a different theological tune. Victory over sin lost out to “twelve steps to overcoming sin;” and “entire sanctification” was ousted by “highway to holistic health.” Naturally, folks caught up in “twelve steps” and “highways to health” have little time to take on the needs of the neighbor whose names they are not likely to know, not to mention the needs of starving masses in other parts of the world.

Perhaps Tink meant to say, “the Church of the Nazarene *may* want to find its ethos and example in the theology and practice of Scripture as exegeted and defined by John Wesley and the early Methodist movement.” Even that assertion “begs a truly Wesleyan scrutiny,” and merits a warning label. “Such an exercise may turn your denomination upside down.”

First, “Wesleyan worship” may shed a lot of light on the current state of the state, where we do tend to talk about compassion in terms of “us and them.” Wesley would know little of worship void of Word and Table. He would *Amen* the notion that worship shapes believing, and that life around the table has a way of uniting “us and them” until we can tell who is who, accepting our identity as diners at the table of grace.

Coincidentally, worship that centers on Word and Table is in fact, worship that is Christocentric. Admittedly, most Christians would get their hackles up if told that the worship in which they were participating were something other than Christ-centered, but hackles be raised. One only has to give a cursory glance at customary Sunday service ordos to see that the believer or the sinner often enjoys center stage both in music and story, while Christ may be relegated to a parting line in a prayer.

Second, while the holiness movement rightly reminded believers of their holy calling, they inadvertently fostered an inward gaze that blinded many to the plight of those in their own household. A focus on a “personal” Saviour, “personal” prayers, “personal” devotions, and a “personal” walk with no one save Jesus “in the garden” or on the “Jericho Road” clouded a vision of the world for whom this same Jesus died.

Third, folks who did respond to the Gospel-call frequently profited from the decision. Those who gave up evil, costly habits [substance abuse, gambling et al.] experienced redemption and lift. With money in pocket, good folk enjoyed the good life; and for those born in capitalistic pockets of the world, good folk could do quite well. The explanation for their relative fortune was predictable. “God has blessed.” There is no explanation for the vast masses of redeemed persons who will go to their graves in poverty.

With relative affluence, one has the growing ability to disengage from the gripping needs of the world, isolate behind gated communities, frequent private clubs, belong to “members only” golf courses while climbing “corporate ladders”. Daily one is reminded of what one has compared to the “less fortunate.”

In a community where we don’t know those with whom we commune, at a Table where we still prefer name-plates for special folk, and at a Table where we can’t conceive of a common cup, or eating with “those kind,” we choose to live at risk. Clearly, God was gracious to use John and Charles, the brothers Wesley. Though long dead, they may still have a voice to those who hear but if we are in the mood to listen, dare we strain to hear what the Spirit is saying to the church?