

DISCUSSING TOGETHER AS WE WALK ALONG:
ENDNOTE TO GLOBAL THEOLOGY CONFERENCE 2007
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A One Hundred Year Journey

One hundred years ago, Phineas Bresee, accompanied by Rev. and Mrs. H. D. Brown, E. A. Girvin, and C. W. Ruth, was aboard a railroad somewhere in North America on his way to an important conference, traveling from Los Angeles to Brooklyn, NY. From April 9 to 14, 1907, Bresee met with leaders of the Association of Pentecostal Churches of America at the Utica Avenue Church, an inner city church surrounded by slums, squalor and sin.

Before a committee was adjourned to discuss the basis of union, the assembled congregation sang “Blest Be the Tie that Binds.” And when the committee brought back a report favorable to union, the official minutes recorded shouting, singing, waving of handkerchiefs, weeping for joy. The two bodies, the committee affirmed, were one in doctrines considered essential to salvation. They agreed on the necessity of a limited superintendency in order to help organize churches and to foster care for existing ones.

The assembly sang “Hallelujah, Amen,” and then marched triumphantly around the church. The now nearly-united church invited further union “in order better to spread and conserve the work of holiness.” Bresee emphasized “the importance of Christianizing the Christianity of America as a basis for reaching the unchristian heathen in foreign lands.”¹

This beginning of the 1907 union, officially consummated in Chicago October later that year, linked together separated peoples with differing polities and accents. Not only that, these two groups already represented an international movement of God’s Spirit. Both the East and West had work in India, and the Association a mission in Cape Verde Islands.

With various later unions and accessions, the Church of the Nazarene embraced a holiness mission in England dating to 1874, which had become part of the Calvary Holiness Church,

¹ *Association of Pentecostal Churches of America: Minutes of the Twelfth Annual Meeting* (Providence, RI: Pentecostal Printing, 1907), 3-4, 5, 12, 15, 17.

and a work in Washim, India, begun in 1877 – a decade or more before similar independent holiness churches arose in North America. Out of such movements, unity overcame diversity.²

What has the Lord been talking to us about during the last few days of these more than 100 years? I will not be attempting to summarize the many papers that have been presented and, even less, the discussions that have gone on in the small groups. (Hopefully, the conference organizers will post the summaries of the small groups on-line.) But I will present my subjective perceptions of where our talk is at.

Talking Together as We Walk Along the Emmaus Road

We have come to greater maturity corporately as we have walked along this path together – as God has whispered to us about this or that doctrine, this or that experience of the heart, this or that practice. I sense this year (compared to Guatemala conference), that we are a bit more at ease with ourselves. I also sense that there is more of a seeking, and less a “we have found it” mentality. This greater restraint, this chastened triumphalism, I suspect, will better fit this questing generation.³ Not only that, it fits the best of our tradition: we are not a movement that has not yet arrived at its final destination; and we hope that as we walk along this road together, with Christ in our midst, he will still be talking to us, whispering to us about himself, until the end of the age.

Nazarenes have been concerned about right doctrine, that Word spoken to us. We have had our Articles of Faith, not ones that either John Wesley or Phineas Bresee called councils to decide. They were given to us, largely, as if a gift, from the centuries. What we were more concerned with than even doctrine, was experience. There must be an encounter and a relationship with God in Christ through his Spirit. To possess doctrines that we have not experienced, and yet pass on, is scholasticism. This is *not* our passion, our calling, to pass on doctrines divorced from experience. The consuming desire along our walk these one hundred years has not been primarily to transmit doctrine; it has been, rather, to lead many into the presence of God through Christ’s sanctifying Spirit.

² T. A. Noble, *Called to be Saints: A Centenary History of the Church of the Nazarene in the British Isles, 1906-2006* (Manchester: Didsbury Press, 2006), 142; Floyd T. Cunningham, *Holiness Abroad: Nazarene Missions in Asia* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 2003), chapter on India.

³ Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (Princeton: Princeton U. Press, 1999), 163, 307, and throughout.

In terms of doctrinal development, some might be disappointed with this conference. For one thing, appropriately for a conference in this setting, we have not heard so much of the nineteenth century American “accent” of holiness. Instead, we have dug from deeper wells, turned to broader theological roots. Content with neither predominantly Spirit-centered nor Christological categories, we have come to the Trinity itself as the ground of our understanding of holiness. This Trinitarian-ism evidences itself in our thinking not only about knowledge and piety – but, about knowledge, piety *and* practice – the three, and without all three of these we are incomplete as a body of Christ.

Lord, help us to become by grace what you are by nature.

There is an organic, intrinsic, relationship among the three – knowledge, piety and practice – and one missing part de-forms the church. How can we holistically, corporately, “incarnately” integrate the three – knowledge, piety and practice — as a body?

Lord, help us to become by grace what you are by nature.

Others might be a bit disappointed that our theology is so ordinary. So understandable. Too understandable. This is a legacy of our tradition, our heritage. We ask that even our most learned theologians speak plainly to God’s people. Show us the implications. Map it out. We have the knowledge; what then must we do?

While we are walking along this path conversing with Christ, we seem to sense collectively that he is whispering to us: it is good to believe rightly, and I have invited you to experience my wholly sanctifying grace, my hallowing presence, but, now, as we go on a little farther, do not miss *doing* what is essential here and now. It seems the Lord may be warning us, as we walk along, in the past you kind of missed it. You were obsessed with lipstick and long hair while I was imprisoned, naked, and hungry. The gentle question seems to be this: do we have such or similar obsessions now, that might divert us from being and doing what is essential for us to be and to do now in this world?

As Nazarenes, our theological conversation constantly gets entangled with ecclesiastical issues. That is not, I suspect, simply because this particular conference focused on “One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism,” and “unity and diversity” – ecclesiological questions – it is more basic to our Wesleyan heritage. Unlike some of our brothers and sisters, we are not content, and in fact frustrated, with issuing propositional papers, declarations, and, even, confessions. What do we *do* with all this? How do we *embody* these theological papers?

Lord, help us to become by grace what you are by nature.

What I sense is that we are collectively coming somewhere beyond compassion to *solidarity*. We are not there yet, but along the road this discourse has begun. Some time ago the Lord began speaking to us about not only being compassionate, but *doing* compassion. We have always been a giving, caring, loving church. In grand, expansive, expressive ways, we have demonstrated compassion. But without a firm commitment to equality – without solidarity – compassion becomes condescension.

My impression is that we are suspecting that the Lord may be whispering to us along this road that what my people care for more than your material help, is your trust, your respect, and that without your trust, your respect, all the material help in the world is not really getting us much farther along.

Lord, help us to become by grace what you are by nature.

Many of us have come from other meetings, discussing procedures, policies, structures. How does our theology inform our corporate existence as a church? This conference comes at an opportune time, when our leaders are contemplating possibly far-reaching changes in the structure. I wonder if there were any “Aha” moments among our leaders as they listened to and participated with us in our discussions!

Some papers have raised the point of going beyond Matthew’s “Great Commission” to John’s, with the implicit understanding, I think, that John’s way of putting the *missio Dei* resonates with our theological commitments. That is, that as a corporate body of Christ, we “breathe in” the Spirit of Christ, and “breathe out” into the world forgiveness. This expresses a more organic, less programmatic, way of being the body of Christ.

Lord, help us to become by grace what you are by nature.

Conclusion

This has been a good walk, these last days. In conference with each other, with Christ in our midst providing the unity, we have come a few meters further along the Emmaus road. We are still a pilgrimage people, a church on a journey, not yet finished, not yet arrived, but still figuring out in particular contexts what it means here and now to be a people of God.

Not that we have already obtained all this or have already been made perfect,
but we press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of us.
Forgetting what is behind; straining toward what is ahead;
We press on toward the goal.

In *With Burning Hearts*, Henri Nouwen writes: “Augustine said, ‘My soul is restless until it rests in you O God,’ but (says Nouwen) that God also is yearning to belong to us. It seems as if God is crying out to us: ‘My heart is restless until I may rest in you, my beloved creation’.”⁴

In the mornings, before breakfast during these days, I have been walking down a dusty road that goes out through this beautiful Dutch countryside. When I turn around to walk back, the sun is rising right over the de Bron Conference Center, and, also, God’s risen Son is rising still over his beloved creation, the Church of the Nazarene.

⁴ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *With Burning Hearts: A Meditation on the Eucharistic Life* (1994; reprint, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2003), 86.