

A SHORT NOTE REFLECTION

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At the first hour of our coming together in this place, the leaders of this second global theology conference reminded us that we came here “to do the work of the church”. It is time now to ask, what have we done?

I also want to ask, what am I supposed to tell the African Nazarenes about the second GTC? African traditional religions continuously alter their borders by negotiating for space with other religions. I do not feel the existence of the Church of the Nazarene in Africa demands that she fights for space with other religions and philosophies. What I believe is that the theological fighting that others do offers us excellent opportunity to reflect on our identity and to ask about the relevance of our mission to the Kingdom in Africa.

I have been helped by this conference. From small groups discussions I gathered that Nazarene theologians (in this conference, apparently more educators than other theologians had the privilege of writing and responding) seem to have arrived at this place with concerns. Some of the concerns were being quietly pondered; others were carried from various recent theological forums. Among these concerns is the idea that the Nazarenes have distanced themselves from their particular history and moved toward a broader Wesleyanism, that they may be looking like general Methodism, or even moving to generic fundamentalism rather than Methodism. Some of us believe that we are too accommodating to the rules of nationalism.

It surely is true that “it is in talking that we make sense of things.” We came here to allow our minds and souls to eat homemade food not ordered from public restaurants, not cooked yesterday, and not pre-cooked by any particular part of the church alone. The invitation was that all should contribute ingredients and flavors to the Wesleyan-Nazarene cooking pot.

The conversation has been affirming to the church in many ways:

- 1) We have confessed the need to journey beyond the foundational concept of salvation of the human soul to advocating the emancipation from physical hardships like epidemics, diseases of all kinds, famine, fear, witchcraft, poverty, colonial oppression, racial discrimination, etc. The conversation has empowered us to think about the necessity of condemnation of our own silence regarding social evils of the past by confession and action. We also seem to agree that though it is difficult to forget the evil of the past, much of our attention should be given to the evil of the present and

the future, and hopefully we will be able to articulate an affirmation that would sound like this: “silence no more in the history of the Church of the Nazarene.”

- 2) We have supported each other in our common understanding that the church does not exist in isolation. Out of the necessity to create and exist in community, we have been reminded that “it is not our job to create unity. Jesus created unity on the cross and our calling is to confess it” (Dr. J. Middendorf)
- 3) We also reflected on worship and asked questions like, “Can we sanctify popular music?” This seems to be happening especially in areas of the world where spontaneous and unwritten music is used more than the traditional written music. In some of our schools, students are encouraged to write and translate music into their cultures as part of their theological training. Others are willing to take the example of the Wesleys to bring theology and music together.
- 4) Nazarene theologians in this conference asked if an “open table” means treating others well without endorsing their faith, if we are to be open to other world religions. The same Nazarenes affirm that we are not syncretists, but we can see in other religions that God is at work to bring all to Christ. It is necessary to balance what is common and what is secret.
- 5) If the church is missional, why does she settle to focus on internal issues rather than going outward? The tendency is often for the church to be self-serving. Is the church in survival mode? Isn't she allowing culture to influence her instead of the other way around? The church is about communion, community, and compassion. People seek God when there is a crisis as in Bresee's days when the immigrants were the most open people. In modern days, Mozambican, Sudanese, and other wars are examples of the same crises causing people to seek God.

The church needs to rediscover its mission and replicate it in students who are going into ministry. That must include sacrificial aspects of the mission. We have to find ways to avoid training church leaders under the pressure of accreditation as is now dominating the American higher education system. More and more students are coming to our theological institutions with no sense of our doctrine. There is a disconnect with what the Church of the Nazarene used to be. Other Nazarene students are compassionate, but do not care about the institution as much as they care about the Kingdom; they are not interested in church growth since they are in ministries outside the institution.

What do I tell the African Church? The messenger's job can be made easy by nailing things down to statements. It is easier to translate statements than try to make sense of the

expressions of great thoughts and ask the questions that they provoke. After all, to ask questions seems to be the task that we are to take home.. While doing so, we must remember that the test of objectivity and the subjectivity in theology is not limited to logical coherence. The lives of the persons making theological statements are more verifiable and more meaningful to the church than the logical coherence. Therefore, I am pleased to be able to tell the church in Africa that the Nazarene theologians came together to “listen to the past” in order to be more alertly responsive and sensitively engaged in the future of the church.

I can tell African Nazarenes that there is no reason to fear that theological education will destroy faith because our theologians are not distant from the dimension of the salvific knowledge. They are critically engaged in a conversation that has the task of discipleship as the top priority of the church.

Since we need a theology that is spiritual and a spirituality that is theological, let us do it the way Jesus did. That way our words will be consistent with our work. At the end, that is what makes a sound theology.

Relevant theology responds to the questions of ordinary people concerning their personal and communal relationship with God and with each other. It does recognize the merit of the privilege of cognition as it keeps wisdom over rationalism.

My hope is that we will be willing to shift from the great academic exercises like this one to the real applied theology in the clearest and most useful language for ordinary people to follow. This hope of mine is greatly encouraged by educators who see education as “a servant of the church”.

In his opening remarks, Dr. Lambert expressed the hope that at the end of this conference, we would have the urge to “go and serve the church”. Let us go and do it.