

IN ALL THINGS CHARITY:
LOVE, UNITY, AND INCARNATIONAL TRUTH
John Bechtold, USA/Canada Region

“Humanly speaking, truth is to be found in unhindered dialogue. Fellowship and freedom are the human components for knowledge of the truth, the truth of God.”¹

As the Church of the Nazarene moves forward in the 21st Century we must recognize that we are but a small part of the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church. From the beginning of our movement the message of the availability of entire sanctification has been our clarion call and the reason for our existence as a denomination. The Church of the Nazarene was formed through an important, and difficult, process of unification. We came together from across the Mason-Dixon line; churches from the East Coast and churches from the West Coast of the United States saw in each other familial relations. All of these churches, and all of these individuals, came together not because of theological and doctrinal unity, but in common motivation. We were brought together for a common cause, to spread the message of entire sanctification. It is very telling that the Church of the Nazarene celebrates 1908 as the year of its inception. Many individual churches, including Phineas F. Bresee’s original Church of the Nazarene in Los Angeles, pre-existed the year 1908. Yet, the Church of the Nazarene recognizes that we, as a denomination, are more than a simple compilation of individual components. The components, while important in themselves, are but microcosms of the whole. The unifications of 1907-1908, as well as subsequent instances of unification, have been proclamations that collaboration of mission is of greater importance than doctrinal unity. Yet, despite this heritage of unification, in the century since the Church of the Nazarene formed there has been a continued temptation to develop a univocal theological stance that will primarily serve to distinguish us from other Christians. This temptation demonstrates a tragic loss of missional vision. Paradoxically, the attempt to further define a particular doctrinal identity runs counter to our historical identity. This essay will address this topic by answering the question, “Who will guide us to where we need to go?” The answer to this important question will require a varied approach. The arguments of this essay will bring together historical, biblical, and pragmatic liturgical sources in order to argue that it would be to the detriment of the denomination that we

¹ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, Margaret Kohl, tr. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), xiii.

seek to enact and enforce a strict denominational theology. The question of ‘who will guide us?’ ought to have an open answer.

Those who are familiar with the 1907 assembly in Chicago and the 1908 assembly in Pilot Point are well aware that doctrinal differences were one of the primary obstacles to a full national (American) unification. These doctrinal differences were both theological and practical—many of them culturally derived. Despite, or more accurately, because of the great dialogues regarding theological issues and questions of doctrinal conformity and personal piety, the united Pentecostal Church of the Nazarene had taken an official stand of theological charity. “Nazarene theology” was never viewed as anything but in-line with historical orthodox Christian doctrine. In an article in the *Nazarene Messenger* regarding the history of the original Church of the Nazarene, Phineas F. Bresee discussed the rationale for founding this church. Bresee described Nazarene doctrines as, “The common belief of Christendom.”²

Bresee made clear that even though the Church of the Nazarene is theologically in-line with the whole of Christendom, there is yet an important reason for its existence. Bresee argued that many of the classical doctrines of Christian theology had, at that time, fallen into such “disuse and practical unbelief”³ to have rendered them all but impotent. The reason that the Church of the Nazarene came to exist, then, was to renew focus on these doctrines. Bresee was not only speaking of the doctrine of entire sanctification, but he did argue that this is the chief doctrine which had been neglected. Entire sanctification was not, for Bresee, merely a doctrine, but the heart of the gospel. Bresee called entire sanctification “an all comprehensive truth,” which embraces “all that has come before.”⁴ Because it is an all comprehensive truth, the early Nazarene focus on entire sanctification was not in contrast to credal Christianity. However, Bresee did recognize that there was something unique about the Church of the Nazarene. “This is the doctrinal peculiarity of the Church of the Nazarene--it believes in the incarnation of the truth by the Holy Spirit in human hearts.”⁵ Nazarene doctrine, then, at least as described by Bresee, is embodied, not codified. Entire sanctification is experienced, and lived, and thereby gives flesh to theological dialogue.

² Phineas F. Bresee, “The History of the Church of the Nazarene,” *Nazarene Messenger*, Vol. XII No. 1, 4 July 1907, 5.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

This understanding of incarnated truth, allowed the early Nazarenes great latitude in theological dialogue. Early Nazarene periodicals are rife with quotes about the importance of unity in the face of theological disagreements. One such example is found in the *Nazarene Messenger*. “There is a love in our heart that unites us with every holy man, and disposes us to leave all non-essentials in the background, and put all of our strength to unite all of God’s true children into a mighty effort.”⁶ This quote makes clear that doctrinal divergence, at least as far as the ‘non-essentials’ are concerned, is easily covered over by filial love. Agreement is seen to be much less important than collaboration. Bresee made a similar argument in a letter to J.O. McClurkan while the two were discussing the possibility of the Pentecostal Mission joining together with the Pentecostal Church of the Nazarene. Bresee was making a pitch for the unifying of these two organizations, and explained the Nazarene stance on the development of theological doctrine. “A doctrinal basis of necessary belief should be very simple and embrace what is essential to holiness. All not essential to holiness should be relegated to personal liberty.”⁷

In the same letter, Bresee went on to describe, “We mean by ‘personal liberty’ in belief, that a person has a right to hold it, and to recognize the same right in another, to believe differently without fussing about it. We have and do hold that any truth about which there can be two theories, and a person can be holy and believe either theory, may be safely, and should be, relegated to individual liberty, and is not sufficiently important to be our real message.”⁸ Bresee’s great organizational victories came because of his emphasis on love and unity over and against doctrinal certitude. Bresee’s claim that truth is incarnate is a claim that truth is incarnate in the church. The life of the church speaks more strongly to the ‘essentials’ of Christianity than a univocal doctrinal statement ever could. “This evidently must be the ground of union: In the great essential, unity; in non-essentials, liberty.”⁹ Moving forward, it would be a very profitable discussion to continue collaboratively working toward meaningful description of holiness. However, such a practice would be outside the scope of this essay. For the purposes of this essay,

⁶ *Pentecostal Era*, quoted in “From Other Pens,” *Nazarene Messenger*, Vol. XII No. 15, 10 Oct 1907, 12.

⁷ Phineas Bresee to J.O. McClurkan, Personal Correspondence dated 1907. Nazarene Archives. Lenexa, KS (found in File 616-11).

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

it is enough to simply demonstrate that the Church of the Nazarene has historically, and foundationally, placed filial love above the possibility of univocal doctrinal development. We have never needed to develop a comprehensive denominational theology precisely because we stand in a long tradition of credal Christianity. Liberty of belief is the cornerstone of theological dialogue.

Of course, just because an organization was founded on a particular principle does not mean that this principle should continue to be the watchword throughout the organization's entire lifecycle. This means two primary things for this essay. First, we cannot simply accept at face value that just because Bresee and other early Nazarenes believed theological liberty to be important that it still remains so. Second, while the early Nazarenes claimed that entire sanctification was an essential doctrine, we need not to assume that the way the term 'entire sanctification' was used by early Nazarenes, if a univocal usage could even be supposed, ought to be the same way that the phrase needs to be used now. Thus, it is necessary to move beyond strictly historical sources. Who will lead us to where we need to go? Why ought we to narrow down the answer to such a question? Who will lead us? You will, they will, we will.

A Christian community, such as the Church of the Nazarene, which holds an intentional allegiance to the Bible must be open to a multiplicity of voices. After all, the Bible is itself a multiplicity of voices. The Nazarene understanding of scripture has been carefully crafted in order that the Bible be recognized as a multivocal text. Article IV of the Nazarene Articles of Faith is given the heading, "The Holy Scriptures."¹⁰ It is notable that this heading is plural. The singular Christian Bible is comprised of the 66 individual texts which are each and corporately regarded as scripture. Many of these singular texts were composed by one or more unique authors. Even within a single book, Isaiah for example, most biblical scholars agree that there were multiple voices involved in its composition. Beyond even the initial composition, there have been numerous other voices exerting influence on the text in the processes of editing and compiling. In spite of this multiplicity of composition, the Bible is still viewed as a unified single text, and this is both important and right. The Christian scriptures are known as "The Bible", a unistic title for a multiplistic group of texts, for reasons beyond the simple fact that they are often

¹⁰ Dean G. Blevins, Charles D. Crow, David E. Downs, Paul W. Thornhill, and David P. Wilson, eds., *Church of the Nazarene Manual: 2009-2013* (Kansas City: Nazarene Publishing House, 2009), 29.

printed as a single book. Indeed, there is something beyond the actual text of these texts that serves as a unifying principle for them. This extra something takes place in the encounter between text and readers. It is an act of interpretation. The Christian scriptures are a united whole because the Christian tradition has recognized in them an element of divine inspiration. Of course, inspiration is itself a tricky notion, and one upon which Christians can and should have disagreements of interpretation. Nevertheless, this is the commonality between these varied texts. The many voices of Christian scriptures are all brought together insofar as they share divine inspiration.

In the same way that the many voices of Christian scriptures are viewed as a united truth, the same general process should be at work in Nazarene ecclesial and theological development. Bresee's claim that truth is incarnational helps to explain the importance of a wide variety of charitable voices in the process of theological development. It is foundational to the Church of the Nazarene that the Holy Spirit is actively involved in the world and in our lives. Article X of the Articles of Faith proclaims that sanctification is wrought by God's grace through the Holy Spirit. This article also describes the work of the Holy Spirit as 'perfecting', 'baptizing', 'indwelling', and 'bearing witness'.¹¹ Bresee's understanding of incarnational truth would fit cleanly with the witness bearing function of the Holy Spirit. Yet, in the same way that the many writers of Christian scripture were uniquely and independently inspired, so too are theologians, both 'professional' and lay. Theology is a dialogue, not a contest.

The Bible offers an example of what it means to recognize unity in the midst of a profound diversity. Moreover, the Bible offers an example of what it means to celebrate unity in the midst of diversity. The Church of the Nazarene needs to embrace the Bible, not only for the truth which it contains, but also for the truth which it exemplifies. The Church of the Nazarene strives to be a global representation of the body of Christ. Even though the denomination began in the United States, it has never been a solely American enterprise. Although we have failed, and, in many ways continue to fail, in recognizing the importance of, and implementing, a truly global leadership, the denomination has continued to strive toward growth in celebrating a variety of global voices. However, even while we seek to further embrace international diversity, there is often an underlying fear that doing so will lead to some sort of moral relativism.

¹¹ Ibid, 33-34.

It would be wise to follow Bresee in proclaiming that not all theological claims are beneficial. Bresee never claimed that a person can believe anything that (s)he wants, even on the so-called ‘non-essentials’. Rather, Bresee was very careful to say that a person should have liberty of personal belief so long as one can hold such a belief while still maintaining a holy life. It would be ludicrous to claim that, because of a few biblical references, slavery is divinely sanctioned and ecclesially acceptable. The practice of slavery is clearly antithetical to a holy life, and even the most charitable understanding of slavery would demand this conclusion. Thus, the allowance of personal liberty of belief is not a slippery slope to relativism, but rather a profound celebration of the importance of holy living. Liberty of belief ought to be encouraged because it allows true ethical holiness rather than the sort of legalism which has so badly scarred the church in both reality and perception. Liberty of belief, when tied to the possibility, if not the practice, of holy living, clearly rejects the sort of dangerous theologies which are led more by ideology than by faithfulness. Holiness of life becomes an integral part of the hermeneutical circle through which and by which scripture is interpreted and a conception of God is nuanced.

Bresee’s emphasis on holy living is particularly important because it necessarily roots ‘personal liberty’ in a communal form of life. Sanctification, properly understood, can never be a solitary endeavor. This is attested to time and again throughout the biblical text. The biblical references that have been included in the *Nazarene Manual* to further explain Article X themselves often speak to the importance of Christian community for holy living. At several times the words of Jesus are recounted to say, “Love each other,” “Love your enemies,” “Love your neighbor,” and “Love the Lord.” Article X even offers “Perfect love” as a term synonymous with “entire sanctification.” Jesus’s discourse on the greatest commandment in Matthew 22 further elucidates this idea. “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”¹² It is telling that Jesus describes his second commandment as ‘like’ the greatest commandment. These two commandments cannot but go together. No person can love God unless (s)he likewise loves the neighbor. Perfect love is that love which is so abundant that it overflows all aspects of life. One’s love for God is not different in kind than one’s love for the neighbor (or the enemy). Thus, the holy living that Bresee

¹² Mt 22: 37-39 NRSV

demanded can only be rooted in a frame of life in which love is the primary relational characteristic. All Christian practices stem from this singular point.

Love serves as both the message and the medium for that church which is passionate about preaching entire sanctification. Bresee believed that Nazarenes ought not to ‘fuss’ about most personal theological beliefs because they were, in a sense, subsumed by the perfect love of holy lives. The primary criterion by which to judge a theological belief is simply whether or not it can be held by one living a life of holiness. Of course, even if the Church of the Nazarene intentionally lived into this heritage, there would still be those who see exclusion to be a primary task of theology. From the beginning there have been those who believe it to be an important personal and ecclesial function to name outsiders. At times this work has been classified as apologetics, or defending the faith, but it often takes the form of attack much more than of defense. Yet, Bresee’s description of theological liberty would not in any way encourage, or perhaps even allow, personal attacks. When two people have contrasting theories about a particular theological truth, the question that Bresee asks is not whether they both live holy lives, but whether they both can live holy lives. It is a slight but important distinction. Indeed, Bresee could not make a character judgment about a person based upon theological beliefs because Bresee recognized that truth is spiritually incarnated in human hearts. Thus, theological disagreements must not be allowed to play out through exclusionary practices, for it is the Holy Spirit at work in each heart. Yet, the work of the Spirit is not a perfect transference of knowledge, but an incarnation of truth. Incarnate truth, then, will always be perceived, always experienced, and always interpreted. This is the reason that Bresee’s call for liberty of the ‘non-essentials’ is so very important. Every one of us is practicing truth as best we can given the life experiences that we have been given. Theology, even when an academic practice, is always a matter of the heart- always grace.

The Church of the Nazarene has a rich heritage of theological liberty. This liberty is not a theological, nor moral, relativity, but a recognition of the gracious work of God in the hearts and minds of all believers. Unfortunately, the Church of the Nazarene and its members often do a poor job recognizing the grace of God in the hearts of others. There have been numerous examples of Nazarene movements aimed at forming a more determinedly restrictive denominational theology. An easy example, because it has played out numerous times at recent General Assemblies, is the push to alter Article IV of the Articles of Faith to describe a much

more restrictive conception of biblical inerrancy. This is also an easy example because this article was so clearly crafted to embrace Bresee's notion of liberty for 'non-essentials'. Indeed, this article has undergone only minor revisions since the Church of the Nazarene was founded in 1908. This article demonstrates Bresee's own hand. This is, of course, only one example of many attempts to more clearly define a necessarily confessional denominational theology. This sort of denominational theology is dangerous insofar as it intentionally restricts membership and rejects the possibility of constructive theological dialogue. While this is problematic within an American context, it becomes even more problematic for a denomination which seeks to be truly global. So long as the majority of Nazarene leaders are American, a strictly worded denominational theology would serve to further shut out Nazarenes from across the globe. Whether we like it or not, much of the inherent structure of our beliefs is conditioned by our histories, by our native languages, and by our societal and geographical contexts.

If the Church of the Nazarene is to continue to have a positive presence in the world, it is important that we refocus ourselves around a common mission. To craft a denominational theology lies contrary to the heart of the Church of the Nazarene. As Bresee noted, this denomination was built upon a uniting love rather than an ostracizing suspicion. The Church of the Nazarene can only truly become a global institution when its American base rejects any form of cultural superiority which might lay particular claim to definitive theological stands. To call sanctification an "all comprehensive truth," as Bresee did, is not to claim that all of theology can be understood through the study of this doctrine, but rather that theology ought to be engaged from within the practice of this doctrine. Sanctification, then, perfect love, must reject attempts at exclusion in favor of offers of friendships. Even an incarnate truth is going to be mis-represented by all who try to represent it, but this is the nature of discourse. Theology is not about perfect representation of the divine, but about a developing relationship with a loving God. Perfect love of God likewise requires love of the neighbor. Theology is a gracious practice, an unofficial means of grace. Like the practice of Eucharist, theology ought to bring people together in a demonstration of filial love. Nazarenes practice open communion because we believe that the grace of God transcends denominational or personal differences. This grace is no different than that through which the early Nazarenes believed the Holy Spirit incarnated truth in human hearts. We come to the Eucharist imperfect, as sinners in need of a savior. We ought also to face each other with the same humility.