

“THE COLLECTIVE CHRISTIAN CONSCIENCE”
AN EXAMINATION AND THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION
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The phrase of interest—“the collective Christian conscience”—appears in paragraph 28.2 of the *Church of the Nazarene Manual, 2017-2021*. It belongs to the introductory paragraphs (*Manual* 28-28.2)¹ of The Covenant of Christian Conduct which itself is situated as the first section of the *Manual* following the Constitution of the Church of the Nazarene. These introductory paragraphs present the reasoning behind the prohibitions and practices specified in the Covenant; namely,

- That believers are to put off old patterns of conduct and put on “a new and holy way of life” (28),
- That the Church of the Nazarene “purposes to relate timeless biblical principles to contemporary society...in many lands and within a variety of cultures.” (28.1)
- That the Church of the Nazarene “acknowledges its responsibility to seek ways to particularize the Christian life so as to lead to a holiness ethic.” (28.2)

The latter paragraph opens with the following assertion: “It is further recognized that there is validity in the concept of the collective Christian conscience as illuminated and guided by the Holy Spirit” (*Manual* 28.2). It is an interesting and curious beginning. Conceivably, the paragraph might have just as easily begun, “It is further recognized that the Holy Spirit illumines and guides the Church” as the theological ground for the statements that follow. Such a beginning would have connected with the concluding sentence of the previous paragraph (28.1) and would have echoed the affirmation previously stated in Article III of the Articles of Faith that the Holy Spirit is “ever present and efficiently active in and with the Church of Christ,... guiding into all truth as it is in Jesus.”² Instead, the Holy Spirit appears to be cast as a supporting actor to a concept—the concept of “the collective Christian conscience,” and raises the question of what was supplied by this concept that was otherwise lacking in the declarations of Article III? This and other questions that come to mind suggest theological reflection on the phrase is warranted. To be thoughtful and fair in that reflection, the context in which the phrase was minted bears consideration followed by an investigation of four important questions.

¹ I have identified paragraphs 28-28.2 as introductory for the reason that, in my judgement, these paragraphs most directly present a) the reasoning behind affirmations concerning ministry to the poor, the importance of discernment, pastoral guidance, and education in developing “the faculty of discrimination between the evil and the good” (*Manual* 28.3-28.6); and b) support for providing a specific list of what is to be avoided (*Manual* 29-29.6) and what is to be practiced (*Manual* 30-35) with respect to Christian conduct. The report of the Commission on Our Holiness Ethic included additional paragraphs in what it described as “in effect a preamble establishing the biblical responsibility of the church to give guidance to its people in the light of its understanding of the demands of Christian ethics.” See “The Commission on our Holiness Ethic” in *Journal of the Nineteenth General Assembly of the Church of the Nazarene, June 20-25, 1976*, edited by B. Edgar Johnson (Kansas City: Nazarene Publishing House, 1976), 182.

² “III. The Holy Spirit” in *Church of the Nazarene Manual 2017-2021* (Kansas City: Nazarene Publishing House, 2017), paragraph 3.

A Little History

Clues to an answer as to why the paragraph opens with a declaration of “the validity of the concept of the collective Christian conscience” can be found in the Report of the Board of General Superintendents to the 1972 General Assembly. The church—at least, and perhaps especially, the Church of the Nazarene in western developed countries and in the United States in particular—found itself in the midst of a seismic shift in society that brought a tsunami of social changes to the fore in the 1970s. It was a frightening moment for many, and the heightened concern of the church was palpable as the assembly convened. In its report, the Board noted,

Change will undoubtedly be the pattern of the world in the decade of the seventies. Social, scientific, and moral changes will affect the lives of all individuals and institutions.... But as far as the Church is concerned, the most important change is the shifting attitude toward the role of the Church and the value of religion in general and Christianity in particular. the questions of authority and meaning and purpose in life are increasingly important to the coming decade. For most people[,] God and the Bible are no longer their Authority. Rioting and rebellion reveal that the state has ceased to be authority to many. Unless our civilization can be rallied around some common core of values, we are doomed.³

As preface to its comments related to the General and Special Rules,⁴ the Board applied an illustration from sailing, noting that the direction and movement of a vessel is impacted by two factors: the surface winds and the deep, undersurface tides that ultimately are more controlling than the surface winds. The report highlighted the threatening winds of materialism and relativism, the latter leading to a permissive society which “gives liberty to indulge in the fleshly appetites without restraint.” Despite the concern over these “surface winds” the Board expressed a greater concern that “the ‘deep, undersurface tides’ of the Holy Spirit shall move through the Church of the Nazarene with power and blessing.” The report further asserted,

Our doctrinal position is scriptural and sound. To be consistent with that doctrinal statement there must also be a glad and willing acceptance of the ethical and practical requirements of personal morality as expressed by our General and Special Rules.... They are not intended to be used as a club, but as the Board of General Superintendents has taught in other days, “They should be followed carefully and conscientiously as guides and helps to holy living. Those who

³ “Report of the Board of General Superintendents” in *Journal of the Eighteenth General Assembly of the Church of the Nazarene*. Edited by B. Edgar Johnson (Kansas City: Nazarene Publishing House, 1972), 206-207.

⁴ In 1972, a section called Special Rules followed immediately after the Church Constitution which also contained the General Rules. By action of the 1976 General Assembly, portions of the General Rules were relocated to the Special Rules, and continued under that same name until being renamed Covenant of Christian Conduct by action of the 2001 General Assembly.

violate the conscience of the church do so at their own peril and to the hurt of the witness and fellowship of the church.”⁵

The Board of General Superintendents urged “a common fidelity to certain principles and practices” in the face of “newer and more sophisticated evils,”⁶ and expressed its support for establishing the Commission on Our Holiness Ethic, an action taken subsequently by the very same general assembly to which the Board reported. The reference in the report to “the conscience of the church” can be found at least as early as the report of the Board of General Superintendents in 1928:

The heart of the church must love God. The conscience of the church must be in harmony with the Word of God. The will of the church must choose God and His plans. The whole church must work to one grand end, but she never can do this unless she is one in character, for community of interest is impossible in the final analysis without community of character.⁷

The Commission on Our Holiness Ethic established in 1972 presented its report to the 1976 General Assembly, and included in its recommended changes to the *Manual* the strong word of caution about violating the conscience of the church that had been included in the report of the Board of General Superintendents in 1972: “Those who violate the conscience of the church do so at their own peril and to the hurt of the witness of the church.” Though some form of this warning or admonition seems to have been part of the currency of the Church of the Nazarene’s longtime concern with articulating “a holiness ethic”, this does appear to be the first time this word of caution was incorporated into a *Manual* provision.

The Presenting Question and the Questions behind the Question

This word of caution, together with the Board’s extensive commentary on the social milieu of the early 1970s, suggests that the role of the Holy Spirit illuminating and guiding the church was not the concern. The affirmations of Article III on the Holy Spirit simply were not in question. For the Board of General Superintendents and for the Commission on Our Holiness Ethic, the question at hand entailed how “our historic holiness ethic may effectively relate to the rising tide of present-day evils which confront the church, without sacrificing the timeless, Bible-based principles which have given the church distinctiveness through the years.”⁸ And furthermore, the

⁵ “Report of the Board of General Superintendents” (1972), 199-200. Later in the report, having listed a number of social concerns the Board endorsed the forthcoming action to establish the Commission on Our Holiness Ethic and essentially provided the charge to the Commission. See the report from the Commission in *Proceedings of the General Board of the Church of the Nazarene and its Departments* (Kansas City: Nazarene Publishing House, 1974), 180.

⁶ “Report of the Board of General Superintendents” (1972), 207-208.

⁷ “General Superintendents’ Address to the Seventh General Assembly, Church of the Nazarene, Convened at Columbus, Ohio, June 13-26, 1928” in *Journal of the Seventh General Assembly of the Church of the Nazarene*. Edited by E. J. Fleming and M. A. Wilson (Kansas City: Nazarene Publishing House, 1928), 53.

⁸ “Report of the Board of General Superintendents” (1972), 208.

charge given the Commission, and the even composition of the Commission itself, suggests the group assumed and relied upon the doctrinal affirmations of Article III.⁹ However, another prior, and perhaps more pressing, question awaited an answer behind the presenting question of how best to relate the historic ethical standards of the church to the present day. The prior question asked: on what basis might the judgement of the church be received as compelling and even binding?

At the heart of this “question behind the question” was the matter of whether the conclusions and recommendations of the Commission might actually have effect in the lives of the rank and file members of the church, even if the recommendations were adopted by the General Assembly and incorporated into the *Manual*. The appeal to “timeless, Bible-based principles” seemed to need reinforcement, with more voices raising questions about these applications of scripture to moral and social concerns, some of which were not specifically addressed in scripture. In faithfulness to its mission and sensing itself under threat now more than ever, the church felt it had to make a judgement on these matters in order to counter to “the wind of relativism” fueling the idea that “right and wrong, good and evil are just matters of human opinion and that there are no permanent values, timeless truths, or biblical absolutes,” on the one hand, and on the other, as a response to those who “advocate the abandonment of the church’s responsibility to interpret biblical and ethical standards.”¹⁰ The Board of General Superintendents had warned to retreat would mean that “Christianity will fall like a house built on sand,”¹¹

Against this background it is possible to appreciate how *Manual* 28.2 begins not with restating the affirmations of Article III but with positing that “there is validity in the concept of the collective Christian conscience.” On a pragmatic note, asserting the validity of the concept provided a defensible reason both for providing such specificity and for calling upon its members to be “a community of character” by adhering, willingly and with understanding, to the practices and prohibitions. Yet another question remained: what was the church affirming in recognizing the validity of the concept?

⁹ W. T. Purkiser served as chair of the Commission and Richard S. Taylor as secretary. Other members included Arnold Airhart, William Blue, Grady Cantrell, C. William Fisher, Harold Jackson, Vernon Lunn, L. Glenn McArthur, Stephen Nease, L. S. Oliver, Kenneth Pearsall, Neel Price, H. T. Reza, Bob Scott, and Bill Sullivan. The only Article of Faith to which the Commission recommended amendment was Article X, Entire Sanctification and Christian Holiness. See “Report of the Commission on Our Holiness Ethic,” in *Journal of the Nineteenth General Assembly of the Church of the Nazarene*. Edited by B. Edgar Johnson (Kansas City: Nazarene Publishing House, 1976), 174-183.

¹⁰ “Report of the Board of General Superintendents” in *Journal of the Eighteenth General Assembly of the Church of the Nazarene*. Edited by B. Edgar Johnson (Kansas City: Nazarene Publishing House, 1972), 199, 207.

¹¹ “Report of the Board of General Superintendents” (1972), 199.

Four Questions

In consideration of the foregoing question, examining the concept of the collective Christian conscience by investigating the following four questions provides further context, both historical and theological.

1. What is the origin of the phrase?

In terms of its first appearance in the *Manual*, the phrase “the collective Christian conscience” clearly originated from the Commission’s recommendations to the 1976 General Assembly, subsequently adopted by the Assembly. Undoubtedly, its appearance in the report emerged in the conversations among its members over the course of the Commission’s work leading up to the presentation of its report in 1976. However, it is doubtful that the concept originated with the Commission or any one member of the Commission. It is more plausible that the concept was in circulation in academic circles and was adapted to the purposes of the Commission.

The basis for this assertion is the fact that it is well-established that the concept of the collective conscience originated in the thinking of French sociologist Émile Durkheim (1858-1917), one of the fathers of modern social science and credited with establishing sociology as an academic discipline. There is no question that it is Durkheim who coined the phrase *la conscience collective* “to denote shared moral rules and maxims. The collective conscience,” explains Ernest Wallwork in *Durkheim: Morality and Milieu*, “refers, in part, to shared moral rules widely held... that is, a large percentage of the people, not necessarily all, accept them and act according to them in ordering their social relations.”¹²

Adding to this evidence is the fact the Durkheim’s work was being given fresh attention in the late 1960s and early 1970s. This Durkheim revival fit the developments of the period, especially in the west. Interestingly, Durkheim’s social theory suggested a natural and evolutionary progression in society from the religious and transcendent to the increasingly secular and human-oriented¹³—the polar opposite of the interests and convictions of the Commission. In Durkheim’s framing, the “mechanical” phase of a society’s development was the religious and transcendent phase in which “the *collective conscience* is ‘extensive and strong’ and ‘harmonizes men’s movements in detail.’”¹⁴ As a society evolves and becomes more vast, the mechanical

¹² Ernest Wallwork, *Durkheim: Morality and Milieu* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1972), 37.

¹³ Durkheim describes this as a progression from mechanical to organic solidarity. The mechanical is more external (transcendental) while the organic is situated more within the individual. See Steven Lukes, *Emile Durkheim: His Life and Work, A Historical and Critical Study* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972),

¹⁴ Lukes, *Emile Durkheim: His Life and Work*, 151-52. It is difficult to not call to mind the phrase from *Manual* 28.2 that the Church of the Nazarene...acknowledges its responsibility to seek ways to particularize the Christian life so as to lead to a holiness ethic. However, it would be imposing too much on the Commission’s thinking to see a purposeful alignment the Durkheim. It is much more likely that the matter of particularizing had more to do with a preventative endeavor to provide guidance to the church globally ahead of the anticipated inroads of materialism and relativism across the world; thus the desire that the “doctrines and covenants of the church may be known and understood in many lands and within a

gives way to the “organic” in which the collective conscience has far less bearing upon the individual and the glue that holds society together transitions from moral convictions having a transcendent character that are shared across the society to the ascendant influence of the emerging division of labor.

Arguably, then, the concept of the collective conscience is derived from the social sciences and specifically originates with Durkheim. It is less clear, however, whether the Commission was aware of the origin of the concept. Nonetheless, the Commission did seem to resonate with the idea that whatever binds individuals together to create an identifiable social cohesion also involves their shared exposure and responsiveness to an external, transcendent influence that calibrates and guides their conduct in this world. The Commission along with the Board of General Superintendents, and no doubt a host of Nazarene pastors and laity, felt the “gale-like force” of the surface winds. However, this community would have resisted Durkheim’s evolutionary framing that characterized sailing with the surface winds as the preferred, if not inevitable, embrace by a society on its way to a more developed, mature state. This difference notwithstanding, the times posed fresh questions about authority and emboldened the voicing of alternative points of view, creating pressure not only from without but from within the church. It is no accident that the Special Rules, as published in the 1976 *Manual*, appeared prefaced by an extensive preamble. The Rules emerged completely reordered, and supplied with supporting scripture texts. The Special Rules appearance in the 1972 and previous editions of the *Manual* lacked these presentation features.

2. *What conscience?*

This may seem a strange question, with the matter of *whose* conscience seeming a more natural inquiry. However, to invoke Durkheim’s notion of the collective conscience is to raise the question, “What conscience?” and to consider its implications for the Commission’s use of the concept. According to Durkheim,

There are in each of our *consciences* [i.e. in each person’s conscience, there are]...two *consciences*: one which we share with our entire group, which, in consequence, is not ourselves, but society living and acting with us; the other which, on the contrary, represents only that which is personal and distinctive to each of us, which makes him an individual.¹⁵

Durkheim goes on to explain that the solidarity of a group proves greater when there is more extensive resemblance among individuals of the conscience they share; that is, when the collective conscience is dominant over “that which is personal and distinctive to each of us.” This interface of consciences is a dynamic rather than static relationship and, for Durkheim, there

variety of cultures.” See paragraph 28.1 in *Church of the Nazarene Manual 2017-2021*. This portion of the paragraph is unchanged from the 1976 edition of the *Manual*.

¹⁵ This quote from Durkheim appears in Lukes, *Emile Durkheim: His Life and Work*, 149.

is movement in this interface toward the eventual dominance of that which is personal and distinctive. Durkheim's social theory assumes an evolutionary lens. The natural progression in a society migrates toward the ascendancy of the "personal and distinctive," driven by increased "vastness" or complexity (in numbers of persons, geographical expanse, increased mobility and, thus, cultural diversity). The impact of complexity reduces the shared sense of the transcendent character of morality resulting in "fewer common denominators and...fewer common experiences and phenomena"¹⁶ As this movement occurs, influence shifts from widely held convictions across an entire society or larger group to smaller to more self-contained units within the society or group. Instead of beliefs the division of labor defines the common ground, and moral authority arises from the members of these smaller units.¹⁷

As noted above, there is no basis to conclude that the Commission subscribed to Durkheim's social theory or even had investigated it closely. Yet, the level of affinity between the Commission's navigation of the concerns it was charged to address, and Durkheim's concept of a collective conscience, appears striking, however inadvertent. The concept necessarily posits a conscience outside or external to the individual that acts as a coalescing (unifying) and binding (obligating) factor.¹⁸ The Commission's appeal to the "historic ethical standards of the church" remains noteworthy, pointing toward the dynamic relationship between the two consciences and making an appeal to secure the influence of the collective conscience against erosion by the "personal and distinctive." The plea for continued "adherence to the standards which have guided us" (since the denomination's inception) expresses the desire for these standards to have continued, discernible influence and formational impact in the lives of Nazarenes.

At the same time, by applying the concept, the Commission also accounted for the reality and legitimacy of the individual conscience, acknowledged the increasing complexity or vastness, and recognized that the evils of the day are themselves accentuated and multiplied by such complexity and thus beyond capturing in a list.¹⁹ The Board of General Superintendents and the Commission appeared sensitive to the fact that pressing too hard against the increasingly bold, even militant assertion of the ascendancy of the individual conscience that was finding voice across western society as a whole placed the church in a tenuous position. The long-term outlook seemed not likely to be positive for the future of the church, particularly if the alarm felt by the leadership and many Nazarenes resulted in reigniting a new wave of legalism. The Special Rules, the leadership indicated, "are not intended to be used as a club, but are to be 'followed carefully and conscientiously as guides and helps to holy living.'"²⁰ This is further reinforced in the

¹⁶ Wallwork, *Morality and Milieu*, 80-81.

¹⁷ This paragraph is a very general summary derived from Wallwork's *Morality and Milieu* and Lukes' *Emile Durkheim: His Life and Work* summaries of Durkheim's thought in his first published work, *The Division of Labor in Society* (1893).

¹⁸ As noted earlier, the notion of "the conscience of the church" was neither a new or recent addition to the conversation in the Church of the Nazarene.

¹⁹ See paragraphs 28.1 and 28.2 in *Church of the Nazarene Manual 2017-2021*.

²⁰ "Report of the Board of General Superintendents" (1972), 200.

Commission’s recommendation adopted by the assembly that, given the impossibility of listing all practices to be avoided, “it is imperative that our people earnestly seek the aid of the Spirit in cultivating a sensitivity to evil that transcends the mere letter of the law.”²¹

3. *What does collective mean?*

As argued above, a primary consideration of the Commission in recognizing the validity of the concept of the collective conscience was to give weight and authority to the Special Rules. In all likelihood, the Commission anticipated its recommendation to move some elements from the General Rules into the Special Rules (thus expanding the Special Rules) would touch a sensitive nerve, particularly since the Special Rules were not part of the Constitution and thus not afforded the protection given to constitutional provisions.²² For more than a few delegates, the very recommendation communicated a lowering of importance of these specific elements and a relaxing of obligation to abide by them. At the same time, everyone understood that changes to the Constitution could not be made with the frequency that would be required to keep pace with the speed at which new developments and ethical challenges were emerging.

If the Commission intended to calm the nerves by recognizing the validity of “the collective Christian conscience,” the effort did not prove particularly fruitful. Once the recommendations of the Commission made it to the floor of the assembly, the question moved into the direction of determining what makes the collective conscience collective. The debate was taken over by the question, though the question as phrased here appears never to have been raised. Instead, the question emerged in the form of an extensive debate on how to keep the Special Rules from being amended (or, in the view of many delegates, “undone”) by a simple majority vote by a future General Assembly. After efforts failed to approve moving the entirety of the Special Rules inside the Constitution, the assembly finally voted to require a two-thirds favorable vote of the assembly in order to amend the Special Rules.

On the one hand, this apparent solution seems to reveal how quickly the qualifier “collective” could be reduced to be shorthand for the outcome of a democratic process, the modifier “Christian” and the reference to the illuminating and guiding role of the Holy Spirit notwithstanding. This is not surprising considering that inherent to the term itself is the idea of something being “widely held”—a quantifying descriptor that seems an easy and natural parallel to the idea of obtaining approval by a majority.

On the other hand, the debate illustrates the assembly’s recognition that such a pragmatic understanding is susceptible to the winds and whims of the moment—to theological, social, and

²¹ See paragraph 28.4 in *Church of the Nazarene Manual 2017-2021*. It is interesting that despite the Commission’s success in reversing the first and second main section of the General Rules so that they began with what believers were to *do* instead of to *avoid*, the emphasis in paragraph 28.4 speaks only of seeking the aid of the Spirit in cultivating a sensitivity to evil.

²² The Constitution can be amended only by two-thirds favorable vote of the General Assembly followed by ratification by two-thirds favorable vote of two-thirds of the district assemblies of all phase 2 and phase 3 districts.

philosophical movements that may capture our interest and even allegiance but have yet to face the sort of critique that only time and reflection can deliver. In such moments, what has been widely held can give way to the persuasive power of strong personalities or to the momentum of our own particular history as a denomination or to a particular cultural or political point of view. A majority that may emerge in a singular, segregated moment in time may not, in and of itself, be a trustworthy representative of the collective conscience. Circumstances may converge resulting in a majority in a given instance, but without proper consideration having been given to the matter of continuity with the past. Potentially, the outcome could have a coup-like effect (despite the majority voice) on the affected body, profoundly shifting its future based on what is actually an anomalous moment.

The point is that continuity remains a critical feature of “collective.”²³ To borrow from sociology as an example, cultures have traditions enmeshed with a prevailing world view formed over a long period of time and integrated into their very language, dress, customs, roles, laws, and so on. Such continuity provides a critical aspect of cultural identity. The level of the congruency of a majority view in a given moment with what has been widely held over time matters. Similarly, continuity indicates a concern with respect to the self-identity of the Church of the Nazarene.²⁴ To better secure this sense of amenability to continuity with the past, the assembly, as noted, imposed the two-thirds majority required for amending the Special Rules.

4. *What makes the collective conscience Christian?*

With delegates to the assembly skittish over the fate of the Special Rules, the theological affirmations incorporated into the new preamble proposed by the Commission received little if any attention from the floor. As previously noted, these affirmations simply were not in question, and the assertion of the validity of the concept of “the collective Christian conscience” stirred no particular interest. The theological affirmations articulated and approved by the Assembly remain significant nonetheless, especially in light of the Commission’s two modifications of Durkheim’s concept. The first modification was to add the word “Christian” so that the phrase read, “collective *Christian* conscience.” The second modification placed the collective Christian conscience itself into accountable relationship to the activity of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church. Both modifications made future General Assemblies amenable to more than a majority, at least potentially.

²³ It would require a deeper investigation to see whether or to what extent Durkheim factored in continuity as an aspect of the collective conscience. However, it is clear from his discussion of the transition of a society from a mechanical to an organic collective conscience transpires over time in concert with other developments (urbanization, mobility, increased geographical vastness, to name a few).

²⁴ In its report to the 1972 General Assembly, the Board of General Superintendents stated, “The church of the Nazarene faces a dual responsibility—to proclaim with clarity and love the message of holiness and also to seek to maintain the distinctiveness of a holy people by interpreting the patterns of conduct revealed in God’s Word.” The Board continued by referencing “the spiritual insight of our founders” with respect to the use of intoxicating liquors, tobacco, and theater entertainment. See “Report of the Board of General Superintendents” (1972), 207.

Clearly, the addition of “Christian” to Durkheim’s phrase does not remove the vulnerability always present in a given gathering of believers who “see things imperfectly” (1 Cor 13:12 NLT). However, the adjective does place the judgments of any body of believers into accountability to the Church at large, and not only to the Church at large in the present moment but also to the Church at large over the course of its long history. Even this accountability remains nuanced in that the Church itself has understood that its own history does not stand on its own, but only in relationship to the living Christ. The early Church, through the Spirit, definitively portrayed its institution by the living Christ; and by that same Spirit, the living Christ is made known to us even now (Titus 3:5). The Nicene Creed expresses this vision when it speaks of the “holy, apostolic church.” As Yves Congar notes:

‘Apostolic’...indicates a reference to or conformity with the origins of Christianity [and]...a reference to eschatology. Christ is Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the one who is, who was and who is to come.... [Apostolicity] makes the Church fill the space between the Alpha and the Omega by ensuring that there is a continuity between the two and a substantial identity between the end and the beginning.²⁵

The clarifying theological work of the Church in the early centuries after Christ remains critical to this continuity and thus essential to the meaning of “Christian.”²⁶ Indeed, the formation of the Christian canon itself was part of this early and definitive theological work of the Church.²⁷ Thus, the very appeal to the authority of Scripture incorporated into the Special Rules properly expresses this accountability of the Church of the Nazarene to the Church over its long history. While underscoring the fact that John Wesley regarded Scripture as the primary authority in theology, Geordan Hammond further notes that Wesley

used *tradition* as an authority for interpreting Scripture and for Christian practice, because “in every succeeding age and in each new cultural context, there is also a need for the positive aid of Tradition, understood as the collective wisdom of the Christian community in all centuries and communions.”²⁸

²⁵ Yves Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*. Trans. by David Smith (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2003), 2:39.

²⁶ Specifying the theological work of “the early centuries” is not intended to diminish incredibly important theological work by various Councils and other convened bodies of the Church over the centuries. It is, however, a recognition of the foundational work of the early Councils and their relative proximity to Christ’s death and resurrection.

²⁷ See Hans von Campenhausen, *The Formation of the Christian Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972).

²⁸ Geordan Hammond, “Wesleyan Essentials and Opinions” (Unpublished paper presented to the Methodist-Roman Catholic International Commission, October 2022), 3. That Wesley’s deep regard for Christian tradition was relative to the higher place of scripture is evident in his July 31, 1747 letter to his brother, Charles, where he takes exception to his own and the shared initial conclusions of the recently concluded annual conference regarding justifying faith. He recalls the assertion of Article XXI of the Thirty-Nine Articles (that the General councils of the church “may err, and sometimes have erred, even in

For Wesley, this meant the conversations at the annual conferences he convened should be undertaken with one foot firmly planted in Christian antiquity and the other pressing into the unfolding moment in history.

At the same time, this continuity—this accountability outside of and beyond ourselves—is monitored and enlivened by the Holy Spirit, the Spirit who guides and illumines the Church (capital C) and the church (lowercase c)²⁹ Congar reminds us,

The treasure of the Church is contained in an earthly vessel, and the continuity between Christ and the Church is formed on the one hand by what comes to the Church from him institutionally—[his] words, baptism, Eucharist, the apostolic mission and so on—and on the other, [by] the Spirit communicated by him to the Church. [At present], all that we have of that Spirit who is to renew all things, however, is the ‘earnest-money’. [Yet,] he is even now the eschatological gift that is substantially present to the Church and active in the Church.³⁰

Congar describes the implications of the Holy Spirit being “substantially present to the Church” as follows:

It is possible to see nothing in Scripture but a literary text, nothing in Tradition but a human history, nothing in the Eucharist but a ceremony and nothing in the Church but a sociological phenomenon. Each, however, also has a deep spiritual aspect, to which God is committed through his Spirit. The Spirit makes the Word present, taking the letter of Scripture as the point of departure. He enables the Word to speak to each generation, in every cultural environment and in all kinds of circumstances. He helps the Christian community at different times and in different places to understand its meaning. Is this not what Jesus promised?³¹

things pertaining unto God”) and declares, “All men may err: but the word of the Lord shall stand for ever.” Such declarations reflect Protestantism’s rejection of the magisterium along the lines articulated by Anglican Gilbert Burnet (1643-1715), Bishop of Sarum (Salisbury). Burnet contested the idea that “to distinguish betwixt true and false doctrines and traditions, there must be an infallible authority lodged by Christ with his Church” and that this authority is worthy of being received on a par with the Scriptures. He countered, “The Scriptures are a complete *Rule of Faith*, and...the whole Christian religion is contained in them, and nowhere else.” See *An Exposition of the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England written by Gilbert Bishop of Sarum* (London: printed for R.I. Chiswell, 1705), 72. For more on Wesley’s assertion and his correspondence with Charles, see Stanley J. Rodes, *From Faith to Faith: John Wesley’s Covenant Theology and the Way of Salvation* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2013), 77-78, 119-120.

²⁹ The church (lowercase “c”) being “the churches severally...composed of such regenerate persons as by providential permission, and by the leadings of the Holy Spirit, become associated together for holy fellowship and ministries”, of which the Church of the Nazarene is one. See paragraphs 17-19, *Manual of the Church of the Nazarene, 2017-2021*.

³⁰ Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, 2:24.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 2:28-29.

Perhaps the importance of inserting “Christian” into Durkheim’s concept of the collective conscience is most clearly seen over against Durkheim’s own outworking of the idea. For him, such a modification was incompatible with functioning as an advanced society because it created an external obligation for the individual. He writes,

If one recalls that the *conscience collective* increasingly reduces itself to the cult of the individual, one will see that what characterizes the morality of advanced societies...is that it is more human and therefore more rational. It does not attach our activity to ends which do not concern us directly; it does not make us into servants of imaginary powers of a nature other than our own, [powers] which go their own ways without considering the interests of men. It simply requires that we be kind to one another and be just, that we perform our duty well, and that we work to achieve a situation in which everyone will be called to the function that he can best perform, and receive a just price for his efforts.³²

The Commission’s modifications of the concept shift the trajectory of the Durkheim’s social vision dramatically. The “collective Christian conscience” resists reduction to the cult of the individual. For the Christian, the Holy Spirit is hardly an imaginary power that makes us into servants and acts without considering the interests of women and men. Indeed, the activity of the Holy Spirit, who “does no other work but that of Jesus Christ”³³ arises from a holy love that meets humanity in the brokenness of the fall in order to redeem and restore.³⁴ And it is the Holy Spirit who pours out the love of God into our hearts. Yet, it is not uncommon to hear overtones of Durkheim’s view as the church wrestles to understand and live faithfully in this moment. This may be due in part to Durkheim’s contribution to the question of the place of the individual in society; or, with respect to this examination of “the collective Christian conscience,” the place of the individual in the life of the church.

The More Delicate Way of Communion

On this point—the place of the individual with respect to the collective Christian conscience—Congar reminds us, “The Holy Spirit is given to the community and individual persons... The Church is in no sense a great system in which... the individual is simply the sum of a million divided by a million. It is a communion, a fraternity of persons.”³⁵ He continues,

Persons are the great wealth of the Church. Each one is an original and autonomous principle of sensitivity, experience, relationships and initiatives.

³² From Durkheim’s *Division of Labor* quoted in Lukes, *Emile Durkheim: His Life and Work*, 157.

³³ Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, 2:35. “The soundness of any pneumatology,” Congar continues, “is its reference to Christ.”

³⁴ Durkheim envisions kindness, and consequently, justice, primarily as accommodation to the individual conscience, “to that which is personal and distinctive” to each person. Conversely, and with loving regard for the individual, the kindness of God is significantly disruptive in order to ultimately be restorative: His kindness leads toward repentance (Rom 2:4).

³⁵ Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, 2:15-16.

What an infinite variety of possibilities is contained in each individual!... Nothing less than the Spirit of God is needed to bring all these different elements to unity, and to do so by respecting and even stimulating their diversity. Not, however, at any price.... The Spirit does not bring about unity by using pressure or by reducing the whole of the Church's life to a uniform pattern. He does it by the more delicate way of communion.³⁶

And delicate it is. For the Church, the way of communion is not merely a democratic process applied to spiritual things, and the Church of the Nazarene must discipline itself to not settle into this pragmatic convenience. The way of communion is brought about by an actual and active dependence upon the Spirit that arises from a real expectation of and receptivity to the Spirit's leading. It involves recognizing that the oneness of the church "is different from the phenomenon described by sociologists and is to be found at the level of faith."³⁷ The whole enterprise of being the church—the assembly of God's people, of living stones built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit—is tender and tenuous! We literally have no defense against being undone by treacherous vulnerabilities apart from the manifest presence and power of the Spirit. Yet, even in the midst of such vulnerability and dependence, we have the Holy Spirit as earnest-money, as first-fruits (Rom 8:23; 2 Cor 1:22; Eph 1:13-14)—the Holy Spirit who guides and illumines and who thus "thrusts the gospel forward into the period of history that has not yet come."³⁸ Consequently,

We can 'grieve' the Spirit (Eph 4:30) or 'quench' him (1 Thess 5:19). We can even 'resist' him (Acts 7:51). On the other hand, we can also listen to the Spirit and co-operate with him so that we can 'reflect the glory of the Lord' and be 'changed into his likeness', by the Lord 'who is the Spirit' (2 Cor 3:18).³⁹

Any validity of the concept of "the collective Christian conscience" ultimately rests on both a confidence in and pursuit of the Holy Spirit who illuminates and guides in ways that always advance the work of Christ. The theological affirmations of this opening portion of this *Manual* paragraph speak to us who belong to the Church of the Nazarene as a distinct community of discipleship and mission, and call upon us to acknowledge with humility that our own judgements are vulnerable, and that, even at our best, we are an expression of the "not yet" in "the already" of the Kingdom. Nevertheless, by the Spirit we also are enabled to discernibly exhibit something of "the already" of the Kingdom in this "not yet" moment in which we now live.

³⁶ Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, 2:16-17. In this passage, Congar notes that the desire of individuals to be the subject of their actions is strengthened when a person's faith becomes truly personal, and they know the reality of the Spirit in their own heart and life.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 2:52.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 2:34.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 2:58.