

Response

By

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(translated from Spanish by Ramón A. Sierra)

As I read Rev. MacMillan's characterization of the early Church of the Nazarene, a crucial period in our history, the apex of Dr. Bresee's leadership within a fragile but rapidly growing holiness movement, a few compelling thoughts came to mind.

First, why have we lost some of these characteristics, at least in some quarters of our Church? Is this due to the natural development of the Church in different times and circumstances? Or have we, somehow, neglected and left by the wayside some vital elements of who we were meant to be?

"Born" into the Church of the Nazarene, I was influenced by **mature** pastors and "laypersons," who incarnated the **holiness lifestyle** (MacMillan's characteristics # 1 & 8). As a child and youth growing up within the church, I recall leaders of great **conviction**, who avoided legalism and sectarianism (MacMillan's # 2). Mine was a **happy**, vibrant, **urban** church (MacMillan's ## 9 & 7); the Manhattan New York Hispanic Church from the late 50s through the early 70s was socially concerned and culturally relevant. As a young man preparing for ministry, I met a **theologically creative** Church through my studies at NTS. There I confirmed what I had intuitively believed, learning from some of our leading theologians that holiness could be expressed in more dynamic and relational terms.

My second thought relates to MacMillan's appreciation for first generation Nazarenes: But I am grateful that we have outgrown some of these characteristics. We have transcended the fallacy of being too "apolitical." Although the Church did not officially endorse a particular political stance, it did denounce social and moral evils in the early days. And today, through its stance on politically sensitive issues such as abortion, discrimination, war, etc., it motivates political involvement and advocates a more humane and just life based on the gospel of grace we affirm.

I am also grateful that we are working to rectify our earlier inclination to promote an exclusively individualistic, personal relation with God. We have taken great strides toward revitalizing the communal dimension of the church. Nevertheless, in some contexts we are embroiled in "worship wars," which undermine what genuine community life within the church is all about.

Are these early characteristics of our Church presently reflected in Latin American Nazarene Church experience? We are a growing church with young pastors and leaders. Most of our members only recently entered the church. We are beginning to participate in areas of the church that were inaccessible to us earlier, for different reasons. We continue to struggle with our heritage of overly individualistic faith, theological mono-perspective, and institutional exclusiveness. We are trying to recover our holiness tradition in a complex socio-cultural setting. We continue to work in our cities and to express our joy and celebration through worship and service. We are a happy, church!

I would add to Rev. MacMillan's list three other key characteristics that I consider instrumental among early Nazarenes:

1. They were genuinely committed and oriented towards the poor and outcasts of society.
2. They (the laity) of the church — notably influential women clergy and laity — made significant contributions.

3. They struggled to unify the various member-groups of the church into a cohesive, united holiness movement. They managed to deal with tensions between home missions and foreign missions, narrowing down denominational publications, organizing the educational efforts of the church, and continuing the ministry to the poor.

MacMillan's paper should motivate us to raise some critical questions for our present church international and its future:

- 1 How focused is our mission? Is it still our consuming purpose to promote holy living through our words and deeds in our fragmenting world? Are we known in different parts of the world as a holiness church?
- 2 Are we intentionally and intensively involved in guiding our people to become mature Christian leaders? Is character building and development a prime concern and a central motivating factor in our discipleship and leadership forming efforts?
- 3 Do we continue to foster theological creativity in the full spectrum of the life of our church? Does theological freshness and renewal characterize our theological learning centers? Is "our" theology dynamic, relevant, and attentive to the different "voices" within and outside our church around the world?
- 4 Is our church today appropriately politically active through its compassionate concern for those suffering from personal and systemic evil? Does our holiness message move us to engage redemptively in our unholy, dysfunctional world?
- 5 Do we motivate interdenominational fellowship with leaders of other churches? Is our earlier mission to "christianize Christians" still active? Have we outgrown our isolationist and exclusivist tendencies in some parts of the world?
- 6 Can our church organization facilitate revival and the effective fulfillment of our mission? Is our church structure flexible enough to embrace mavericks, cultural diversity, and innovative ways of being led by the Spirit? Does our church structure aid us in selecting the most able and edifying spiritual leaders at all levels? Do we have a compassionate and servant church structure that can discern God's leading?
- 7 Have our ministry styles and strategies been shaped by the overwhelming challenges of the cities?
- 8 Are we still committed to the poor and outcasts of our world? Can the poor and the well off, the culturally different, the bruised sinner from any background find welcome in our churches?
- 9 Does our "laity" play a significant role in the ongoing development and focus of our church? Can we reinterpret Scripture and our ministerial practices to reflect our equality as partners in the Kingdom of God?
- 10 Are denominational resources available to all within the church international? Is literature, higher education, missionary service, and ministry accessible to all?

May the Lord help us to discover ways to be the kind of Church he purposed for us to be in the midst of our present and future world situation.