

## Our History and His Story

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Moses instructs Israel: “And when your children say to you, ‘What do you mean by this service?’ you shall say, ‘It is the sacrifice of the Lord’s Passover, for he passed over the houses of the people in Egypt, when he slew the Egyptians, but he spared our houses.’ And [responding] the people bowed their heads and worshiped.”

Isaiah quotes Yahweh’s beckoning: “Your ears shall hear a word behind you saying, ‘This is the way, walk in it,’ when you turn to the right or when you turn to the left. Then you will defile your . . . images. You will scatter them as unclean things; you will say to them, ‘Begone!’”

Our Lord offers himself in bread and wine, saying: “Do this in remembrance of me.” “Remember” saturates Scripture, for Scripture points to our God’s redeeming work at every turn in the time and space we know. But this “remembering” surpasses intellectual or emotional recall. It begins in prevenient grace, the constant call of the Holy Spirit to everyone, everywhere, at all times, to be reconciled to God and to each other.

This remembering directs us to worship—“Remember the Sabbath to keep it holy.” This remembering aims to maintain in holiness that which God has sanctified. This remembering directs us to worship—to the appropriation of what God has done for us into “ordinary” life.

Let the life of the Church, then, root in remembering—in proclamation, in nurturing, in sacraments, and in good works. Again, this remembering roots not in us but in the work of the Holy Spirit. Entering the great act of holy remembrance, Eucharist, we confess: “I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of Life.” Christian remembering begins in that lordship and in that gift. And that lordship and that gift point on to the Living Word and to the Written Word.

Remembering through hearing the Word and remembering our particular history as a branch of the one Body of Christ entails *paradosis, traditio*: a handing on to, an infecting with, our own and the next generations as the now long line of generations has infected, infused, affected, and leavened us. We are to hand on not simple recall but grace, not simple remembrance (however reverent) but a call to decision. Insofar as histories of the Church of the Nazarene and Nazarenes bring us to say, “What a great Church!” or “What a great person!” they may have failed. They certainly fail, if they do not bring us to say, “Thank God for this, God’s instrument!” At their best, our histories will first and essentially evoke praise and thanks to God.

Our histories, as histories of a branch of the Body of Christ, should be testimonies, confessions, even where they must report the seamier side of things. Reporting success, they testify that the Spirit has been the Lord and giver of life. Confessing failure, if not

sinfulness, they testify to the forgiveness of sin. Always they should testify to the need for God's grace and the benefits of the Atonement.

Tellers of any part of this story are morally and spiritually obligated to use the story to proclaim the Gospel, within which lies an invitation to confess, to repent and to receive the redeeming grace of Christ. They rehearse the story seeking to infect hearers with that Gospel.

We all know that most tellings of our story have brought us only to say, "What a great church!" or "What a great person!"

We've meant well. And pious outbursts do occur here and there in the tellings. But we have too often aimed our tellings at boosting institution(s) and persons, or we have aimed them at getting folks to do something. A fundamental reason we must raise revisionist questions about our written and oral histories is that our real history, His story, did not find its way into our outlines and researches, our pens and our computers.

To put it positively, this very conference is in the great, on-going re-forming spirit of the Church—"always reforming." Authentic reform reaffirms the central "memory" of the church.

In this light, permit me to propose short responses to four of the issues set out by our consultation's program committee. My responses to the other issues may be extrapolated from the four that follow.

Are we Nazarenes dealing with our true past ["real" vs. "perceived" story]? Response: We have barely touched our "real story," our "true past." Why? Because we tend to take for granted the Gospel side of our story, the Godward side of our story. Our more serious attention goes into the institutional side of that story, forgetting that the real meaning of the institutional side is found in our fidelity to the Gospel side, the Godward side.

Contextual location and memory—Does memory change between Guatemala and Chicago and how does that reflect the life of the church? Response: Empirical histories do differ according to temporal and geographical location. So, the shaping memories differ. But let us reject attempts to make the empirical histories the last word, especially last words that divide. Fundamental to the church is its catholicity. The history of the church in both places named is my history too. The history of the Church in every place belongs to us all, for there is but one real story—the Gospel of God's redeeming love. "One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, etc." We might rephrase the question in word and in deed: Given the differences in memory of life in the church, in all of its variety, how do we express its common remembrance, its common memory, the memory given by the Lord and Giver of the Church's life?

Does globalization / internationalization require a memory? Do we need memory? Response: God has never worked in the abstract but always in the particulars of history. To understand and love God and neighbor unconditionally, I must know particular histories. I yearn to know these particular histories because God has graciously brought me into his marvelously varied family. Can the Body of Christ even talk globally / internationally

without a memory? It is not our business to “form an identity.” The call of God within the great redemptive history, both within Scripture and the continuing life of the Body of Christ (including the Church of the Nazarene), has already given us an identity. Our task, in every age and place, is to express that identity. Our particular identity is defined by our calling to exemplify, teach, and preach a particular facet of that redemptive history—holiness of heart and life. Doing precisely this has already given us a rich history or memory within the wider history of Christ’s Body.

Let’s take up this history, all of it, and give witness to it as a story, a memory, of how God works. Let’s tell the whole story, so that the hearer or reader will praise and glorify God and not simply say, “What a great church!” or “What a great person!”