

RELATING TO CULTURE

Antonie Holleman

Professor, European Nazarene College

I want to start with a personal memory about the beginning years of the Church of the Nazarene in the Netherlands. First, let me set the stage. After a journey of several years, my parents found a spiritual home in the Church of the Nazarene. What attracted them immediately when they were introduced to the church in 1965 was its message of entire sanctification. Three years earlier they had had a life-changing religious experience, which they were unable to define apart from using the words “cross experience.” In their acquaintance with Nazarene doctrine, they sensed that a theological vocabulary was provided that helped them to interpret their previous experience. Following this joyful acquaintance, they sensed God’s call to introduce this message of holiness to the Dutch people. My father gave up his job and became the first pastor of the first Church of the Nazarene in the Netherlands. He did not have any formal theological education, yet was shaped by a high-impact sanctifying experience.

My personal memory is about the sermons of my dad. What I remember are his illustrations and the name of the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard. My father had come across Kierkegaard during his spiritual sojourn, and had become fascinated by his existential approach and his fight against nominal Christianity. Later, my father said about his first years of preaching: “I recognised some patterns in the Bible: everything leads to Calvary, and in the life of all followers of Jesus there is a moment of entire surrender, a moment of dying, in order to arise in a new phase of life. For me this was like a template, which I imposed on Scripture, and which gave me a new understanding. I think that is what appealed to the people during this first period. It provided a new approach to the Gospel and a new understanding of Scripture”.

Now, looking back, and adding my theological education and experience to my memories of those years, I want to share a few thoughts. First, the preaching of my dad was existential, rather than expounding a certain given doctrine. He interpreted Scripture based on his “cross-experience,” and was able to relate it to every day life situations. That is why I can still remember his sermon illustrations; they made sense to me as a young boy.

Second, his emphasis was far more on the entire surrender of the believer than on the entire sanctification as a gift of God, because he was fearful of disappointing people with objective promises that wouldn’t work in the same manner in their lives. This emphasis is, I think, a result of his existential approach, which he recognized in Kierkegaard.

Third, this way of preaching holiness has characterised to a large extent the ministry of the Church of the Nazarene in the Netherlands, and has been a great asset in indigenising the holiness message to a Dutch culture with a strong Calvinistic concept of holiness and an Arminian undercurrent. I believe that this has been an important factor in the growth of the Church of the Nazarene in the Netherlands.

Before I come to my general thesis, let me share another memory. As far as I remember the church in the Netherlands never experienced strong discussions or tensions concerning topics, characteristic of the outspoken theology of the American Holiness Movement. Nor has John Wesley and his theology had a strong presence. And yet, many Dutch Nazarenes are fully aware of the theological identity of our church, although very often official doctrinal formulations had an estranging effect on many of the people. To me, the explanation of this lies in the fact that the preachers and other leaders articulated our teaching on holiness in a way relevant to the Dutch culture. An existential approach in their preaching has prevented an overly dogmatic articulation of our message to which the people could not easily relate.

The underlying assumption in my assessment is a certain view on our tradition and theology. The American Holiness Movement of the 19th century and Methodism of the 18th century, which primarily shaped Nazarene doctrine, were in their time relevant expressions of the goal of holy living in full obedience to Christ. They met a need of many people in society as the growth of both of them illustrates. Wesley counter-balanced the rationalism of his time by acknowledging the experiential side of the faith, and, by focusing on the goal of the Christian life, was able to find a *via media* for a society that was tired of being torn apart by extremes. In a similar way, the American holiness movement read the signs of the times and was able to relate to the people in such a way that its proclamation of holiness was received as a timely and direct message from God. Whenever we have problems with the way these men and women within our tradition articulated the message of holy living, it should not be an accusation against them, but an acknowledgment of the different context in which we live.

It's time I come to my thesis. In order to communicate the message of holiness in a relevant way to the people in our context, we need to follow an existential approach, guided by Scripture. Our goal is that people encounter Christ in their historical context, not just in Scripture or in our doctrine. Too often the speaking of the church is doctrinal; describing what ought to be in general terms, or exegetical; telling what was in the times of the Bible. For me an existential approach means relating to people in their experience so that they recognize the message as making sense in their situation.

This requires that the church develop a threefold dialogue — with Scripture, tradition, and culture. Of these three, we have ignored the one with culture. It is my opinion that we need greater sensitivity for the context in which we minister, and need to have the theological courage to articulate the message in a different, yet culturally relevant way. Tradition, including our doctrinal heritage of holiness, is dynamic, and we should not elevate the formulations of a certain historic period as normative for other periods.

Space does not allow me to develop this thesis further. I hope that my personal memories of church planting in the Netherlands, which was not controlled by tradition, but driven by experience, illustrate the direction of my thinking. To be honest, my thinking on this issue has not fully crystallized. I feel a general discontent with the way we, in the Western world, proclaim holiness to people both in and outside the church. I feel strongly that something needs to change. I developed my thesis in order to express my present thoughts, and to allow others to respond so that we can search and pray together for renewal.