

Biblical and Theological Literacy: Foundational for the Globalization of a Holiness Church

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Globalization is a popular “buzzword” today. It brings happiness to some; bitterness, to others. However, it is beyond question that God calls His people to global service. The biblical writers’ conviction that God wants to reconcile the world to Himself is fundamental to their understanding of salvation-history and the driving force of the early Church’s understanding of global mission. God told Abraham: “...all peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Gen 12:3). Second Isaiah reminded Judah of God’s universal concern: “The Lord will lay bare his holy arm in the sight of all nations, and all the ends of the earth will see the salvation of our God” (52:10). Luke reminds his church of the promise of Christ, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Although the actualization of the globalization of the early Church was complicated by the blind desire of some to remain faithful to the Jewish tradition, the Church has always understood her mission to be global.

As a holiness denomination, the Church of the Nazarene has accepted the responsibility to follow Christ’s mandate to take the gospel to all nations and present Jesus Christ as the way of full salvation. In doing so, we claim to be a global holiness Church. But what is the foundation of our globalization?

If we want to be a global holiness denomination, we cannot ignore the relationship between our outreach programs and our theological identity. Members in all cultures must understand our essential theology and ecclesiology, even though we allow room for multiple approaches to biblical

interpretation, appropriate cultural adaptation, and contextualized application of the holiness message.

Globalization must be pursued in an evolving and engaging dialogue between evangelism and continuing biblical and theological education in all cultures. The North American approach, in which holiness people joined other holiness people to form a holiness denomination, has served as a model for our mission around the world. In North America, new believers are expected to conform to the holiness way of life once they join a congregation. Such a philosophy might be valid in the West, but people in most cultures do not join a church for theological reasons. They are unlikely to change their theological persuasion after joining a local Church, unless they are challenged to do so. New converts do not give up their traditional religious beliefs simply because of their conversion to Christianity, unless they are led and nurtured to do so. If we are to remain faithful to the biblical, theological, and historical roots of our tradition as a global holiness denomination, we must do more than make new converts and welcome believers from other denominations into our fellowship.

First, our globalization as a Church must imply an accurate articulation and a direct proclamation of our theological identity in every culture and language. Our theology, hymnology, and *Manual* cannot be limited to English, Spanish, and French. These languages, while spoken in many countries, are not the heart-languages of the people, especially in formerly colonized cultures. These languages are often business languages that do not deal adequately with people's inner lives. Articulating Wesleyan theology in other cultures will require missionaries to learn the local and national languages. Imagery, such as "whiter than snow" in places where it never snows, must be replaced with local images and symbols that more adequately express our theological identity.

Second, the experience of entire sanctification as a second work of grace must be foundational for a Holiness theology of mission, the catalyst for our outreach, and the fertilizer of our spiritual formation in all cultures. In many cultures, pastors and church leaders have equated

entire sanctification with a list of “Dos and Don’ts.” Too often, this is not accompanied by a personal experience that can be verbalized biblically, theologically, and historically. Such legalistic impositions make these Nazarenes spiritually vulnerable and theologically insecure in the face of other religious groups. The message of entire sanctification must be preached to all and experienced by those who accept it. If our theology of holiness is limited to the rationalizations of a small academic elite, to the exclusion of lay people, holiness will become empty, irrelevant theological jargon — Holiness scholasticism. The experience of entire sanctification must be the equalizer for all Nazarenes in all cultures.

Third, evaluation of the ethical implications of holy living in different cultures must be a part of our theological reflection. Western ethical standards are not always appropriate in other cultures. Consequently, we must struggle to understand a global holiness ethic. We must attempt cross-culturally to differentiate between universal and national, cultural and theological, worship and entertainment, pastoral and managerial issues.

Ancient and contemporary Church history teaches us the unavoidable results of outreach programs without biblical and theological literacy. The early Church in Latin-speaking North Africa, for example, made many converts. Some of our most cherished theological reflections come from North African Christian writers such as Tertullian (145—220), Cyprian (200—258), Lactantius (260—320), and Augustine of Hippo (354—430). But Christianity has lost its ground in North Africa during the last 1,400 years. North Africa had become one of the most hostile areas in the world toward the Christian faith. Why? The early Church did not commit itself to the biblical and theological literacy of the laity. The lay people did not understand the Christian faith in their own language and cultures and were unable to defend their faith during the Islamic invasion.

The Roman Catholic Church and some mainline Protestant denominations have lost a significant number of members and have experienced a crisis of theological identity around the

World during the last 50 years. Why? These Churches have not promoted biblical and theological literacy among the laity. Consequently, Christianity has become for many Catholics an empty syncretistic religion — a faith they cannot defend biblically, theologically, or experientially. But religious groups such as Seventh-Day Adventist, Jehovah's Witness, and Pentecostal churches are growing in membership around the world, in part, because they disciple their converts until they can defend their faith, either on the basis of Scripture or personal experience.

Evangelism without a continuing contextualized biblical and theological education will lead us to expand as a loose Christian organization with no theological identity, but **not** to become a global holiness Church. A global holiness denomination needs to bring people from the margin to the center, listen to our theology articulated in all cultures, and make intentional efforts to foster meaningful theological dialogue between holiness people around the world. Such a dialogue is possible only when there is biblical and theological literacy for everyone everywhere, in a language they can understand.