

DIALOGUE AND INTER-ECCLESIAL COOPERATION:
AVOIDING THE DANGERS OF SECTARIANISM

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...in regard to that related to the future of our church and its core values. Are there values that are only enunciated but are not a reality in our Church in Ibero-America? Moreover, have we negated something that is part of our good inheritance as a denomination? It is evident that to be the true Church is what defines our scriptural values and to participate in this “being” of the body of Christ is already a divine gift; but to come to be what is affirmed in the Scriptures that we are, to be at the top of said profile, will always be a task and process that requires great effort. Therefore, what we say we are as a denomination in our declarations. Are we incarnating these values and practices? Is there a lack of concern or interest in exercising them? To what is this due? What can we do in a decided way to do what is lacking? (H. Fernando Bullón)¹

INTRODUCTORY HERMENEUTICAL NOTES

To begin this exposition, I want to set the scene where we live and move:

First, the basic distinctives that characterize and identify the Church of the Nazarene are enunciated in the theme of this conference, that is defined as a *Christian people, member of the holiness movement and with a missional character*.² Now then, a fundamental preoccupation I see in this section is of an axiological character. There is serious interest in recuperating our core institutional values to be able to think of our future. These are: to be (Christian identity), and the task (Universal priesthood of all the believers and the attitude towards dialogue and cooperation to be able to exercise its mission) in the extent of Ibero-America. Also, I perceive a pastoral predisposition, through which one aspires to prevent the dangers of sectarianism.

Second, the previous raises questions of crucial importance to avoid such dangers: Where are we as a denomination in our process of openness, dialogue and cooperation with the rest of the Body of Christ? What are the dangers that we are exposed to when we do not observe and act on the trilogy mentioned above in our denominational life? What attitudes and concrete actions should we incorporate in the life of the Church of the Nazarene to open the institution to dialogue and cooperation with different members of the body of Christ?

¹ Letter sent by the coordinator of the papers to the presenters and reactors on April 17, 2004.

² It appears that in Ibero-America the missionological emphasis is placed on Church growth and on the proclamation of the message of holiness. It appears in its discourse and practice, at least from the worldview of the denominational leadership, to focus on these. However, the emerging leadership has been incorporating the philosophy of holistic ministry, which is coherent with the statement of mission that is found in the *Manual* of the Church of the Nazarene (see XI, The Church, p. 32, Article 15, third paragraph). This is, to serve the poor, not as a “hook”, but as a constitutional and normal part of being evangelical and Nazarene.

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Third, to speak of the necessity to “develop an attitude of openness, dialogue and cooperation”³ is laughable given that this is buried deep within and demands such an attitude in the evangelical faith. This should be normal in the life and ministry of the churches who claim to be Christian. From this view I approached this issue as a Nazarene by birth and in heart because I believe that the body of Christ includes the Church of the Nazarene but does not end with her. Therefore, it demands from the same a great effort to locate and recognize herself in a larger framework, the Church of Jesus Christ, the *missio Dei* and his Kingdom. However, I have the impression that dialogue and cooperation with those who are not part of our denomination, is not an ethical imperative or a felt need that characterizes the majority of leaders from diverse denominations. This doesn’t signify that there have not been those who on their own have gone into these areas, as part of their conception, theological coherence and global commitment to the whole body of Christ and its mission.

Fourth, it is worrying that denominations usually act as if they were islands in a society that globalizes and is centered on economic, cultural, military, political and other purposes. However in the religious field it is difficult for us to assume this ethical-spiritual challenge presented by Jesus in John 17. And even more, to assume the mission which is a process of transformation of all that is created. From that, our difficulty to make a relative impact in the society from the churches as H.F. Bullón sets forth:

“...the most ample successes of the evangelical people cannot be given if they do not assume the need to respond to the **ethical imperative in a unifying action**, that in terms of being concerned for reaching the largest social impact has to verified in a **coordinating will**, so that informed, systematic and committed action gives its fruit for the benefit of our nations, the glory of God and the extension of his Kingdom (2003:125).

What is interesting about this affirmation is what Bullón sees as a “ethical imperative”, that clarifies “coordinating will” to be able to correlate with “the impact and transforming success”. Based on this, I affirm that it is difficult for me to perceive with total clarity successes beyond numerical growth (the ethical-religious factor), which do not necessarily correlate with the variable “transformation of the creation”.⁴ This is a pending and obligatory subject that we as leaders have to learn.

Because of this, the author believes they are imperative values and actions of our denominational inheritance that are being lost or at least are not being taken care of. We cannot forget that we are part of a movement that is the result of a process of unification of several groups that saw and felt a similar

³ When speaking of “dialogue and cooperation” I am referring to the sincere openness to converse (dialogue) with other who are not part of “our fold”, but that are part of the Church of Jesus Christ. This includes the healthy and respectful custom of mutual questioning in a constructive spirit and with the purpose of correcting ourselves, to stimulate us and optimize our quality of life and service to Jesus Christ. It assumes an attitude of humility and sincerity to find and perceive in the other the face of Christ. It also assumes that a human being and institution (Church) that need to be respected beyond our cultural, doctrinal, attitudinal and even missionological differences. It also assumes the predisposition to cooperate and serve together in God’s mission without pretensions or feelings of superiority or inferiority; in this way to be able to share resources and projects according to the possibilities to increase our effectiveness and missionological impact.

⁴ The amplification of this analysis of variables that produce impact includes ethical-religious and technical-cultural factors (see Bullón, 2003:111-115).

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purpose, “to recuperate the message and emphasis of the proclamation of a gospel of holiness and attention to the poor”.

What are some of the dangers of sectarianism? There are various dangers that the Church of the Nazarene is exposed to if it does not recuperate its sense of healthy evangelical ecumenism. Some of them are:

1. *The loss of the sense of body and community of Christ—that goes beyond the restrictive sense of the denomination—that leads us along the road of a theological aberration: to be sectarian or partisan in the religious globalization.* The Church of Jesus Christ is only one! (see John 17). This is expressed in a multiplicity of congregations, but it is one only. To see the effect, it is worthwhile to carefully examine the metaphor of “body” used by the apostle Paul and its recognition in the Pauline letters to the Christian communities. He habitually addressed them to the Church in Ephesus, Corinth or other locality. However, this doesn’t signify that there was just one congregation in whatever city, but that **the Church was one**, of course, with multiple congregations. Regarding this point the *Manual* of the Church of the Nazarene (1997) states: “The Church is a historical reality, which organizes itself in culturally conditioned forms; exists both as local congregations and as a universal body...” (*Manual* 1997:32).

Additionally, Paul emphasizes in Ephesians 4:1-6 the foundational vocation of the Church, when he says: “As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. *Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit*—just as you were called to one hope when you were *called*—one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all (Ephesians 4:1-6, emphasis added). Such calling or vocation confronts us with the necessity to recuperate our belonging to the body of Christ that seeks to obey the commandment of unity as a fundamental characteristic of our Christian mission. Because of this, when we talk of the “Great Commandment” and the “Great Commission”, we also have to talk and work towards the “Commandment of Unity”. Consequently, it demands that we make serious efforts to link ourselves with the body of Christ without neglecting our own denomination.

On the other hand, it requires a serious analysis of our participation and contribution to the construction of a **national sense of the Church** in every country where the Church of the Nazarene is represented and ministering.⁵ The evangelical Church in every country is developing efforts to construct a sense of national belonging with the concurrence of denominations, associations, missions and pastoral bodies, which allow us to coordinate the actions for the benefit of the different congregations. This effort is consciously or unconsciously a mechanism that allows us to confront the “religious globalization”, that tries to erase individual and collective (denominational) identities.⁶ In effect, we need to strengthen our sense of the body of Christ and of our reason for being (denominational mission), as our legacy to the same body. Of course, passed through the crucible that protects us from a sectarian and disqualifying spirit. For this, as leaders we must experience a paradigmatic change in our mental

⁵ That certainly a necessary condition to contribute to the transformation of a country. I specifically refer to the sense of self-determination (see Toynbee) or self-government (see R. Allen).

⁶ Some contemporary authors have begun to talk about the post-denominational era (Wagner, 2000:10-13, 20-27; Deiros, 2004, and others). This supposes the loss of spaces and managerial debilitation in the conduction of the being and making of denominations.

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and missional structures. I suggest that we consider the missionology of David Bosch (*Transforming Mission*), the paradigm in effect facing a globalized world: the ecumenism of the church, which has nothing to do with the popular evangelical understanding and phobia of what is ecumenical.

2. *The perpetuation of a sense of isolation from the body of Christ.* In this manner, Nazarene churches could be cultivating a spirit of “lone rangers” and thus, of sectarianism.⁷ This latter has counterproductive effects within the denomination. This attitude is shown not only to “others” (non-Nazarenes) but also those at “home”. In contrast, we would be teaching a double standard of treatment to those who are part of the body of Christ. Of course, this position does not ignore the necessity of a better relationship, more familiarity, with those who belong to the denomination. But this does not mean that we have to live apart, isolated and foreign to those who are part of the body of Christ.

Also, this makes us immune to the currents of theological and missional thought that help us to maintain the principle of “the constant reform of the church”, under Biblical consideration to “retain the good and get rid of the bad”.

3. *The sense of a “holy” self-sufficiency in the denominational leadership impedes the cooperation and dialogue with other churches and leaders.* It is difficult for leaders to see themselves as self-sufficient. It requires maturity to recognize it. Thank the Lord for resources, programs and buildings that the Church of the Nazarene has to help the leadership execute its mission. But we should not forget that they are God’s resources with a missional end. This requires a responsible and holy administration for the edification of the body of Christ⁸ and the extension of its mission in society. In light of what has been shown, I have the impression that underneath our discourse of holiness lies a certain spirit of pride and self-sufficiency in us, the leaders. If this is correct—and I hope I am wrong—we are sustaining a spirit that is contrary to what was expressed earlier in the passage from Ephesians 4:2 that demands that we be “...completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.”

4. *The constant migration and loss of leadership that has vision and commitment with the entire body of Christ is a phenomenon more frequent than we are willing to admit.* There are those who feel and recognize themselves as an intrinsic part of the denomination and the entire Body of Christ. For them, to live in a context that I have described in the prior points, (loss of sense of body and community, perpetuation of a sense of isolation and “holy” self-sufficiency in the denominational leadership) represents a contradiction and nonsense. Important leaders have preferred to emigrate from this context. However, it is time that leadership with the capacity to make decisions look at this problem seriously, to avoid more loss of leaders that could give institutional-denominational strength to the Church of the Nazarene. This assumes the need to take care of the best capital that the Church of the Nazarene has in the different countries, the national leadership.

5. *The inadequate use of the resources provided by the Lord for our churches and denominations impedes us from budgeting them to take maximum advantage of the resources for the growth of the Church of the Nazarene and the body of Christ.* This is especially visible in the field of theological education. More than once we have taught a class to a small group of students in our seminaries and

⁷ Sect understood as “the joining of followers of a religious or ideological faction. Religious or ideological doctrine that differs or makes itself independent of others”. (*Dictionary of the Spanish Language* 2001:533). Also, characterized by a sense of an absolute or exclusive possession of the truth or final revelation.

⁸ ...of which the Church of the Nazarene is a part.

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Biblical institutes. This class could have been taken in another seminary with a magnificent professor, but our jealousy and concern for preserving the “sound” doctrine has impeded us from establishing agreements of cooperation to do such a thing. We have to recognize that “others” have valuable things to teach us. Of course those who take advantage of it are those who have the humility to recognize it.

6. *Doctrinal and theological pride.* There are denominational groups that overestimate their doctrine to the detriment of other denominations, associations or ecclesiastical ministries. We feel we are absolute heirs of “sound doctrine” without recognizing that the same God has also been revealed in and to others. This leads us to develop an exclusionary attitude, through which, we discriminate against or marginalize others or at least we exclude them from our relational map.

Given the dangers that we are exposed to, we will continue with our analysis on how to prevent and correct the wrongs just mentioned. To do this, I propose that we establish a framework of conditions to assure the dialogue and cooperation in the development of our denominational mission.

CONDITIONS FOR DIALOGUE AND COOPERATION

Now is the time to ask ourselves what route we need to follow to articulate this challenge just presented. What are the conditions to construct relationships based on dialogue and cooperation, inspired by our own tradition since the beginning?

1. *The most obvious and fundamental attitude—for what was shown in the section of the dangers of sectarianism—is the openness and humility to understand ourselves* in what Jesus said in the Eucharist: *we are the same* (one church only) *at the Lord’s table.* Also, we are the community of Christ. The church is not ours, it is His. It is necessary to love Christ loving our community. For this reason we need to learn what Bonhoeffer said: “‘Be in Christ’ “which means to ‘be in community’ “(1969:241). Therefore, we need to keenly develop the concept and practice of church, in as much body and community that is monolithically united, solidly intertwined and interdependent. It is necessary to do theological and missionological “re-engineering” about the Church, its mission in the world and in our relationship with other congregations that belong to the body of Christ in as much one Church and community of Christ.

2. *Respect and validation for those who are different, but who preach Christ and endeavor to extend his Kingdom in areas apart from us.* Even if we do not like it, they are also part of the one body and people of God. This assumes ecclesiastical maturity to validate and recognize others in a framework of equality and worth. In this aspect, Jesus gave a tremendous lesson to his disciples when they tried to prohibit other followers, who were not part of their group that preached and ministered among them, because they were not part of their order or group (denomination). They even tried to get Jesus to censure them. But on the contrary, they were reprimanded for their exclusionary conduct.

Based on the previous, and given the narrative time and narrative goal in which we live necessitates that we remember similar stories to recognize and mutually validate ourselves. Of course, paraphrasing John Stott, “without diluting the evangelical” and “Nazarene” spirit.⁹

⁹ This last comment is the author’s.

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3. *Define a basic agenda for developing dialogue and cooperation in virtue of ministerial, theological and missionological affinities.* This demands serious effort to find points in common and to decide to work together in these areas. There are already several significant efforts underway. This type of dialogue has propitiated the Latin American Church Counsel with denominational families. On the other hand, we cannot forget that we are children of the Wesleyan-Methodist movement. Let us begin to strengthen our ties with our theological family. The Church of the Nazarene has already taken a big step when it aligned itself with the Methodist World Council. Although there is much to do, this has been dialogue among theologians, it has not descended to the grass roots level, to the area of pastoral action among the churches in Ibero-America, although I have the impression that some Nazarene congregations are ahead of the denominational average.

4. *We need to flee from the “ghost” of ecumenism, as we were taught to fear by our elders in the faith and in the ministry.* There are groups who name and define themselves by a “crusader” spirit. This anti-ecumenical spirit impedes us from recognizing and integrating ourselves as part of the same Church. The spirit of exclusion that impedes ecclesiastical approaches is part of the struggles between fundamentalists and the social gospel of the 20th century in the United States. But it is not our struggle; we do not have to keep following it. If this word produces hesitation in us due to the pejorative semantic weight that it gives, let us use new vocabulary, but please let us not abandon the cause of ministering together on this earth (*ecumene*).

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