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Hope: Focusing on the Fundamentals When the Foundations are Falling

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As I contemplate the questions meted out in the theme of hope I wonder what I would say that would make any significant difference? The challenge is to move from the way things are to the way things ought to be. What could I say that would usher in a different perspective that you have not already given thought to?

As I put pen to paper, convinced that the pen is mightier than the sword, threats of war in the Middle East are looming across the globe. Perhaps it is a starting point in answering the question: “What will the Church of the Nazarene be like fifty years from now?” Obviously we are living in extremely uncertain times. Postmodernism will have us believe that there are no absolutes, everything is relative, and nothing is foundational. The Psalmist however asks the question: “If the foundations are being destroyed what shall the righteous do?”

It is intimidating to embark on such an assignment (HOPE) where the parameters are vast and the scope too narrow. One can hardly be conclusive. Numerous issues spring to mind encompassing all aspects of the church from “practices to systematics”. I fear more questions would be raised than I would be able to answer. I choose to mention first issues that may be regarded as ‘disturbing trends’. As stated earlier you may have already given thought to these.

Firstly, is the message of holiness causing us as a church to become exclusive rather than making us distinctive? The experience I had within the Pentecostal churches as a youth led me to think spiritual gifts were the ‘full gospel’. Every service had to be punctuated by ‘prophecy, healing, tongues’ and other exhibitionist gifts. I realised then that when one aspect of theology or doctrine is preferred and emphasised by a church it may lead to a sense of exclusivity. The nation of Israel was a chosen people to be priests to all other nations. That message of “inclusion” entrusted to them

made them messengers of exclusion, setting stringent laws on proselytism and prejudicing other nationalities. It is not uncommon to feel out of place and un-spiritual around people who speak in unintelligible languages and look down upon those who do not exhibit extreme evidence of charismata.

This kind of exclusive attitude I have since learned is not only characteristic of the charismatics or Pentecostals. In similar ways those who preach holiness tend to marginalize all other doctrines or denominations. Having entered into my local congregation about seven years ago I asked the leaders what the doctrine of the Church of the Nazarene was. In chorus like fashion without hesitation they answered: "Holiness unto the Lord is our watch word and song". Most members that I consulted with have had the impression that the Church of the Nazarene is the only church preaching holiness. Has the message that has been entrusted to us left us feeling that everyone else has a 'secondary task'? Have we concluded that we have exclusive rights to the proclamation? Perhaps it needs to be stated that we ought to be distinctive by lifestyle and not exclusive by message.

The second issue in regard to disturbing trends is the issue of the content of the messages that emanate from the pulpit. Some are preaching morality and cloak it as a message on holiness. So long as we preach morality we are dealing with humanity and its behaviour. When we preach holiness we are dealing with God, man, and salvation. Others are preaching legalism and walk away feeling smug that they have "chastised the bride of Christ". In our training and teaching programmes we need a genuine understanding of the concept of holiness. The call is to teach this experience of God's grace under the conviction that it is real and not only an academic exercise.

The third area of concern is the programme driven, production-based church. There are those who equate the value of the scriptures with the programme of the church, or the presence of God with the venue of the meeting. When do church programmes become 'canonised' as church traditions? In as much as there are books on church growth there are seminars that follow the launch of these books. "Seeker sensitivity" is the current buzzword with the many churches that are playing the numbers game. At what point does seeker sensitivity become compromise? Churches have become production based. Churches are deemed successful by the number of people they seat. Assemblies highlight the statistical

reports and figures are proudly displayed. Whether these are true reflections seem insignificant. It is easy to record high figures when we church the church and preach to the converted! What is the Church of the Nazarene's "sense of great commission"? Do we perceive Christ's commission to be about numbers and production only? Or do we perceive it to be about people and their development? A successful church is not judged by its seating capacity but by its sending capacity. What is the sending capacity of the African Church of the Nazarene? Are we just a receiving church or are we a sending church?

The fourth disturbing trend is a condition that has prevailed mainly amongst the evangelical churches. The issue is that of wanting to maintain a sense of political correctness. In most cases it means keeping silent, in some cases it means washing ones hands, and in other cases it means speaking the language of those in power in order to maintain the status quo. This same spirit prevailed during the time of Christ's crucifixion. Pilate could have spoken and acted with authority but he chose to wash his hands instead. In Luke 23:38 the Roman soldiers put a sign over Jesus' head. It was written in the three official languages of the day. Certainly this was their attempt at being politically correct yet they were morally off the mark. In not wanting to cut across the grain the missionary church leaders remained silent about social evils such as the oppressive apartheid regime. While wanting to do the right thing the church missed the opportunity to do the righteous thing. Dr Charles Malik, president of the 13th United Nations General Assembly commented: "The needs of the world are much deeper than political freedom and security, much deeper than social justice and economic development, much deeper than democracy and progress...the deeper needs of the world belong to the sphere of the mind, the heart and the spirit, a sphere to be penetrated with the light and grace of Jesus Christ."¹⁴³

If the above shortfalls of the church and these disturbing trends are going to be remedied then we need to return to the foundations that are laid down in the Bible. The hope for the future must not be confused with wishful thinking. Our hope lies in the foundation of the Word of God. As I mentioned in the opening paragraphs of the paper, the times we live in are uncertain and volatile. We are sure of only one thing - God's Word! We

¹⁴³ United Nations Prayer Breakfast 2002

must adhere to the four foundations of our hope to prevent our church from drifting away from our 'sense of Great Commission'.

The first is eternity. King Solomon wrote in Ecclesiastes: "He put eternity in their hearts..."(NKJV). Humanity in its experience craves quality and perfection and these are usually measured by longevity and durability. Even though we know that moth and rust ultimately wins we still prefer iron to wood, diamond to glass, and leather to plastic. There is an innate desire for something eternal. A funeral notice seldom fails to surprise us, but we respond as though death is an alien concept. C S Lewis illustrates this by saying:

"We are so little reconciled to time that we are even astonished at it. 'My how he's grown', we exclaim or 'How time flies!' as though the universal form of our experience were again and again a novelty. It is as strange as if a fish were repeatedly surprised at the wetness of water and that would be strange unless the fish were destined one day to become a land animal."

The Church of the Nazarene has to primarily proclaim the Good News and that is that God through Christ restored a lost kingdom to humankind; we need *to seek it first* and *keep it* by also seeking its righteousness. This is an eternal kingdom.

The second foundation is holiness. This implies perfection, morality, and divine law. The tragedy of our world is that it does not know where to find direction for holy living. A story is related of a man who daily synchronised his watch with the clock outside the watchmaker's workshop. One day the watchmaker asked him, "Sir, what do you do because you seem to be very time conscious?" The man replied, "I am the timekeeper at the factory just down the road. I get to sound the bell daily at 4 o'clock for the change of shift." The watchmaker responded, "Well, my clock seems to lose its time and I set it daily to the 4 o'clock bell that you sound!"

All too often the world sets a standard that the church imitates and yet the church is called to set a standard that the world ought to live by. Thus far the church may have succeeded somewhat in setting a standard but even a clock that does not work shows the 'correct' time twice a day, but it is not keeping the time. An objective concept of holiness can only exist if God

exists and, because we as a church know this to be true from scripture, reason, experience, and theological tradition we cannot stop, must not stop and will not stop proclaiming HOLINESS. (Not morality in itself nor legalism but holiness.)

The third foundation is accountability. This foundation must exist if there is an established foundation of a holy God. It must also entail confession, remorse, and repentance. The Church of the Nazarene is accountable to God for the message of holiness entrusted to it. The mindset of the world has been altered by modern sciences like psychology. It is of great help when conducted within a moral framework. Left as it has been, it has produced an excuse for sin. Humanity can now 'legitimately' argue that amoral and unprincipled behaviour is a result of sickness and not sin. When this becomes the mindset then the cure lies in the message of entire sanctification. When our 'genetics' are blamed for the sin in our world we take no responsibility. Everything that humankind does wrong then becomes someone else's fault.¹⁴⁴

This is a call for us to be answerable corporately and individually for any action that contravenes God's holy character. The church is called to demonstrate transparency and teach accountability to friends, family, and government, in relationship to God.

The final foundation of hope is compassion. This was the motivation behind Christ's coming. It was compassion that motivated all of His miracles. It was compassion that moved the early church to missions, and compassion remains the hope for the future. If only the world knew this kind of drive. If only disagreements were resolved within the context of the command "love thy neighbour". If only we truly believed that the church is the 'Body of Christ', we would incarnate that Christ-like compassion that opened blind eyes, turned an immoral woman into an evangelist, and brought reconciliation between God and humankind.

AIDS may have no cure but compassion provides hope. Leadership without compassion is an ego trip and leaves no room for relationship. A church where there is only teaching and no fellowship is a school. A church where there is only fellowship and no teaching is a social club. But a church where there is no compassion is no church at all.

¹⁴⁴ Zacarias, Ravi. *If The Foundations Are Destroyed*. 2002. p 26.

The thoughts offered up in this paper are merely catalysts that need a substrate. Any forum reflecting on these thoughts may find them inconclusive but the intention is to spark a reflection on the foundations of our hope.

“I have been driven many times upon my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go. My own wisdom and that of all about me seemed insufficient for the day”(Abraham Lincoln, 16th President of the United States).