

ARTICLES OF FAITH AND JESUS' VICTORY OVER SATAN

Missiological Implications

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The most important theological document of the Church of the Nazarene is the Articles of Faith. As good Wesleyans we expect them to be true to Scripture, church tradition, reason and experience. Unfortunately many Nazarenes find them to be inadequate, for there are very significant areas of their spiritual experience that are not addressed by this theological document.

“Can you come quickly? My neighbor’s house is haunted and we need your help.” It is 11 pm and Pastor Michael is called by one of his congregation to visit a friend’s home. Every night at 12 o’clock exactly, they hear noises of people walking around on the roof of their house. Sometimes people are heard knocking at the door but when they open the door—no one is there. Then there is a horrible smell of blood and death that floods the house in the middle of the night. There are reports that during a recent civil war many people were murdered in that same house. The pastor looks at this watch. It is getting close to midnight. Fortunately Michael had been in classes at Bible College that had prepared him to handle situations like this. He opens his Bible and tells of the power of Jesus over demons. He prays and asks God to demonstrate his powers. He commands the powers of evil to leave the house and not to return. The people are frightened as the clock strikes 12. There is silence. No scary footsteps. The peace of God fills their hearts and minds and they relax for the first time in weeks. Unfortunately many Nazarene pastors have not been trained how to handles situations like this.

I was a young missionary involved in church planting. One morning one of the new converts was standing at the door looking quite worried. I invited him in and he told his story. “My father came to our house last night?” “Oh! Which father?” I inquired. “You know. The one we buried last week!” he replied. That was not the answer I was expecting. Why did he come? Will he come back again? What should we do?

So many questions—where were the answers? I pulled a big theology textbook down off the shelf. Surely in the 700+ pages written by three outstanding Nazarene theologians there would be some answers. Sorry. They were not even aware of the questions, and it certainly had no answers.

Fijian divers go into shark-infested waters with no apparent protection and fearlessly hand-feed 14 foot long ferocious Tiger sharks. Tourists are awestruck. What is the secret? Why do the sharks not eat them? They say that Dakuwanga, the powerful shark god of Fiji, protects them. Yet these same divers claim to be Christians.

In resorts around Fiji, tourist watch in amazement as Fijians walk barefoot over scorching hot rocks. They feel no effect of the fire at all. They also have the ability to heal people who are badly burned by simply laying on their hands. The power comes from the traditional god of their

island. With the income from the tourist industry they are able to bring development to their island homes and build a larger church. They see no conflict between the traditional gods and the God of the Bible. How should the church address such issues?

Soli was the traditional priest of a Fijian village which had a large Christian church. It was his responsibility to deal with the village spirits and gods. If a person became demonized, he would be called on to present an offering of kava drink to the spirit and respectfully entreat it to leave. The Church of the Nazarene came to his village and Soli accepted Christ as his savior. He learned that Jesus, through his death and resurrection, has defeated all the powers of evil. How could he relate his Christian faith to his role of village priest? How would he deal with the village gods if they attacked someone? One night a woman began screaming because of a demonic attack. They called Soli to come quickly. But instead of the traditional drink offering to appease the spirit, he brought his Bible. He led the people in prayer and commanded the spirit to leave. The spirit left and the villagers were amazed.

These stories show that the spirit world is alive and active. Recently I taught folk religions at APNTS and found that similar beliefs exist in all areas of our region. These beliefs are also on the increase in Western countries. The Harry Potter books about a fictional twelve year old boy's adventures in witchcraft and wizardry are taking the world by storm. The author J.K. Rowling has quadrupled her personal fortune in the past two years and is now one of the richest women in Britain.¹ In the secular west, New Age philosophies and even witchcraft are big business and increasingly popular. Is the church ready for this radical change in people's worldview.

Unfortunately many Western conservative evangelicals, Nazarenes included, largely ignore the spirit world. In this paper I will be focusing on the Good News that Jesus defeated Satan and all the powers of evil through his death on the cross and demonstrated his victory by his resurrection. I will also be looking at why this important doctrine has been largely ignored in Western Churches including the Church of the Nazarene. I will address the implications of this failure and the reasons why we should make alterations to the Articles of Faith so that is included in the future.

An Indigenous Church

The Church of the Nazarene began as an indigenous American church. It was self-supporting, self-propagating and self-governing from the very beginning. It was an indigenous church with an international vision. The general superintendents, at that time, were national leaders rather than international leaders. The general assembly was a national assembly and the general board looked after national interests. It should be noted that after a few years Canada and Britain, who shared a similar cultural background, became participants in the organizational structure of the church.

The Church of the Nazarene also gave considerable attention to what some have called the "Fourth Self"—namely self-expression². The church compiled its own hymnbooks, and worship

style. It hammered out its own theological statements and general and special rules. It developed its own theological institutions to train its leaders in holiness theology and it developed a widespread publishing ministry to spread the message of holiness. Its theology was based on Scripture, reason, experience, and church tradition especially that of Wesley. Its theology was developed in the cultural context of North America, which inevitably influenced the shape and nature of the churches theology.

The Church of the Nazarene has moved from being an indigenous American church to a global church. But a global church also needs to be an indigenous church in each country. Every Nazarene wants to feel that his church is not a foreign import but a church that is his or her spiritual home.

The Articles of Faith in a Global Church

The Articles of Faith³ are the official definitive doctrinal statements of the Church and represent Nazarene theology in a nutshell. They are the most widely translated theological statement of our church. Theology courses are built around the Articles of Faith. Catechisms are designed to cover them, and membership classes are organized so that the new members are introduced to the essentials of the faith.

Unlike the North American church who hammered out the Articles of Faith in numerous discussions in District Assemblies and General Assemblies, the Asia Pacific church has inherited the Articles of Faith. They were exported to us neatly packaged and ready to serve. But if we are truly equal partners in a global church then it is our privilege and duty to study them, examine them and perhaps even improve them. We must do this for although God is supra cultural, theology is culturally conditioned.

Theology is culturally conditioned.

There is one God and one Bible. But our understanding of God and of the Bible is conditioned to a large extent by our own personal experience and by our cultural background, especially our worldview. Our worldview acts like a filter that highlights certain truths while minimizing others. One of the strengths of being a global church is, that as we come together as equal partners, we help each other see aspects of God, his love, and his wonderful plan of a salvation that perhaps, we would not have otherwise recognized.

The Western worldview, places a great emphasis upon the individual. It has emphasized the importance of a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and personal ethical morality as being an essential aspect of holiness. We have all benefited from that important emphasis.

The Western worldview however is naturalistic and materialistic. That has its benefits, for people who subscribe to the Western scientific worldview are responsible for much of the

technological development that the world enjoys today. At the same time Westerners on the whole are very ignorant of the world that exists outside the realm of time and space: the unseen world or the spirit world.

In the Middle Ages, Europe thought of the world as existing in two sections: the creator and his creation. Angels and demons were part of creation and very much a part of this worldview. From the 10th century onwards there was a sharp division made between spirit and matter, mind and body. In this worldview, spirits such as angels and demons were moved to the supernatural category and human and other material beings to the natural world, which were controlled by laws of nature.

This division began to widen and by the 19th century belief in angels, demons, witchcraft, magic, evil eye, began to die out. Science dealt with the natural world and religion was left to deal with the supernatural. Religion was based on faith rooted in personal opinions, visions and inner feelings. Science sought order in natural laws. As scientific knowledge increased, the domain of the supernatural became smaller and smaller. In time, the “unseen world” of spirits, magic, curses and blessings were rejected as “fairy tales.” Protestant missionaries like other Westerners were deeply affected by this worldview. They introduced schools and hospitals, and taught about germs and microbes, the importance of cleanliness and how to prevent sickness. However, when nationals spoke about evil spirits, they were often dismissed as superstition rather than claiming the victory of Christ over them⁴.

The theologians, educators, and missionaries of the Church of the Nazarene have come out of this worldview. That is probably the main reason why the Articles of Faith makes no mention of the spirit world, there are no references to Satan, and no reference at all to Christ’s victory over the powers of evil. Many people of the non-Western world find that the Articles of Faith are inadequate for they do not address some of the most pressing theological questions that they are facing in their daily lives.

We claim to be biblical and Christ-centered in our theology yet it appears that the Western naturalistic worldview has influenced Nazarene theology a lot more than we would care to admit. Wiley’s theology gives thirteen out of 1686 pages to deal with angels, demons and Satan.⁵ Wiley is not atypical. Most Western theologians show a similar attitude. Systematic Theology by Charles Hodge (1871:637-648) has only 11 pages out of 1380 to cover the realm of angels, demons, Satan, and the problem of evil.⁶ Christian Theology by Millard Erikson, (1983:433-451) gives 18 pages out of 1250⁷.

Clinton Arnold argues that there is a conflict between two different worldviews and that these differing worldviews affect people’s theology. According to Arnold, there is no doubt at all that the people of the first century, including the apostle Paul and the other New Testament writers, believed in evil spirits. The problem is that “the modern scientific worldview stands in direct contradiction to the first century worldview and also the biblical worldview.”⁸ He calls the

academic community “to rethink the part of the Western worldview that denies the actual existence of spirits, demons, and supernatural powers”⁹

As part of his argument, Arnold points out that while the West denies the reality of evil spirits, they do remain an integral part of the worldviews of most other cultures. He adds that Christians from other parts of the world “often express disappointment that the Western church has not been able to help them develop a Christian perspective on the realm of the spirits”¹⁰

The spirit world is of great significance in Scripture. The serpent appears in the third chapter of Genesis and is done away with in Revelation 20 just two pages before the end. Jesus came to “destroy the works of the devil.” Jesus referred to this evil personality with the following terms: Satan, the devil, the evil one, and the ruler of this world. He referred to Satan as Beelzebub -- the prince of demons. Jesus said that hell was prepared for the devil and his angels (Mt 25:41). Jesus said Satan was a murderer and a liar (John 8:44). He is also a thief who steals the word of God to prevent it from taking root in peoples lives. Jesus healed a woman, and announced that she had been bound by Satan for 18 years (Luke 13:16), he cast out demons as a regular part of his ministry, yet Western theology has largely ignored this area of his ministry. The Bible does not say, “*Ignore* the devil and he will flee from you. It says, “*Resist* the devil and he will flee from you (James 4:7).” This implies that we should acknowledge his existence, understand his strategy and know how to deal with him.

Missiological Implications

Incomplete Gospel and Inadequate Savior

When we fail to deal theologically with the unseen world, then people perceive the Savior to be inadequate and our gospel to be incomplete.

Evangelical churches have done a great job of presenting Jesus as a Savior who forgives sin and who has prepared for us an eternal home in heaven. That is good news, but for millions of people their most pressing concerns are related to the power of sorcery, witchcraft, demons and vengeful ancestral spirits here and now. Jesus is a Savior from sin and the giver of eternal life, but is he greater than witchcraft? Can he break powerful evil curses? Can he deliver from demonic bondage now? How does he relate to the ancestors and the spirits of the dead? Is Jesus able to meet the everyday spiritual issues that threaten them?

Christ’s victory over the powers of evil is great news and many people feel this to be the heart of the Gospel. When we as a church do not emphasize this, we are failing to present the good news in its fullness, and instead we are preaching an abbreviated or inadequate gospel. We are certainly not proclaiming full salvation but partial salvation. We have told people that Jesus can save from sin, but is he also able to redeem from the power of sorcery, witchcraft, demons and vengeful ancestral spirits?

Some African evangelicals have spoken out on this issue. Keith Ferdinando says that Western missionaries whose theology was shaped by their naturalistic worldview are partially responsible for some of the weakness in African Christianity. Ferdinando says, “the domain of spirits and occult activity played relatively little active part in the worldview of nineteenth and twentieth century missionaries. . . . Consequently they were often blind to a significant area of spiritual reality, and therefore unsympathetic to the beliefs of their hearers, even when those beliefs coincided with biblical truths.”¹¹ He acknowledges that many of the early missionaries doubtless believed in the objective existence of Satan and demons, but did not believe that demons and sorcerers could physically harm humans. He argues that the neglect of demonology has had serious consequences for the church in Africa. “The consequent failure therefore to respond to traditional, and still dominant, fears of physical aggression by spirits and sorcerers means that the Christian faith has often been perceived to *be inadequate, indeed irrelevant, in the face of basic issues of life and death*”¹² (1996:131 emphasis added).

Another African scholar, Osadolor Imasogie writes: “Many African Christians perceived the “God “ of Christianity as a “stranger-God,” the God of the white man, who is unfamiliar with the local spiritual problems. To these Africans, Christianity was of no practical use in times of existential crisis. It seemed much more reasonable to them to revert to traditional practices when faced with serious situations unfamiliar to the God of the white man, who is unfamiliar with the local spiritual problems.”¹³ He also says, “Any authentic Savior must be capable of destroying the cause of his fears and anxieties. . . . No religion can be relevant to a people if it neglects any area of their total experience as perceived by them.”¹⁴

Paul Ebhomielen is likewise concerned that Christianity has “generally proved inadequate to meet the existential problems in the lives of most professing African Christians, thereby making it necessary for them to revert to old solutions to meet life’s crises by appeals to spirits, demons and ancestors.” He says that this is because “the Western style presentation of Christianity . . . has not sufficiently grappled with the African worldview.”¹⁵

We must ask if the church has been any more successful in dealing with the Asian worldviews and the worldview of the Pacific islanders?

If the church does not present an adequate Savior then people, Christians included, will look elsewhere for help.

Split-level (Syncretistic) Christianity

An imported Western theology may be orthodox, biblical, and Christ centered but still be inadequate. If the gospel we present does not emphasize Christ’s victory over the powers of evil, it can easily result in a weak syncretistic church.

Jaime Bulatao (1966:2) of the Philippines coined the phrase “split-level Christianity” to describe the situation where people hold two mutually contradictory beliefs at the same time.¹⁶

This has been a widespread problem in the Catholic Church, but many evangelical churches suffer from the same problem. Sometimes Western missionaries have dismissed the unseen world as being “mere superstition,” and have told the new Christians “You are Christians now – forget that silly nonsense.” The result is that the nationals no longer mention the topic, in the presence of the missionary. A conspiracy of silence develops. The missionary feels he has solved the problem because no one ever mentions it again. Unfortunately the fear remains, but since the Gospel apparently does not address the issue and has no answers, the only apparent alternative for the national is to go back to the witch doctor for he understands. The Christian does not feel good about doing it, but he needs help, and the “white man’s God” appears to be no more helpful or understanding than the missionary himself.

Some missionaries have taken the attitude that Jesus defeated Satan at the cross, and therefore Satan is no longer a problem. Some have dismissed Satan as being a dog without teeth—makes a lot of noise but is unable to harm us. If that is the case then why did Jesus pray that God would protect us from the evil one (John 17:15)? Paul said we were in a battle, and told us to put on the whole armour of God so that we can win the battle (Ephesians 6:12). Both Peter and James told us to resist the devil. Peter said that Satan is a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour. All of these indicate that Satan is alive, active and dangerous and we must be prepared to do battle and defeat him.

The spirit world must be taken seriously. Promoting a non-contextualized Western form of Christianity will lead to syncretism just as definitely as an uncritical acceptance of folk religious beliefs and practices will lead to syncretism. When the gospel is not contextualized, old beliefs and customs do not die out. Because they are not consciously dealt with, they go underground and become part of the Christian’s hidden culture.

High Turnover of Membership

Part of our high turnover of membership may be because we do not have a theology that deals with spiritual power and which meets people’s needs.

We do a good job of evangelism and year after year in most of our districts we see new members being added to the church. Unfortunately we also see a large group of people leaving the church. Obviously there are many reasons why people leave the church, but one reason is unmet expectations. The people simply did not find what they were looking for. Many people are looking for spiritual power to help them in their daily lives. We preach of a God who saves from sin and emphasize the power of the Holy Spirit to live a godly moral life, and that is wonderful. But people ask, “Is God interested in a sick goat, the need for rain on the gardens? Can God help with school exams? Is God able to break the curse of a witch? Pastor, will you pray for God’s blessing on my new car?”

Many people do not divide their world into natural and supernatural or physical/spiritual as Westerners do. All of life is spiritual. The supernatural influences all of life. Religion is not a compartment of their lives, but rather it is the glue that holds life together. If God is all-powerful, then they want to see that power displayed in visible ways. They are looking for a God who is involved in the nitty-gritty of everyday life. They want a God who heals sickness, helps them find jobs, delivers from the fear of sorcery, and so on. If this is not found in our churches, they will look elsewhere. Some may secretly go to spiritists and traditional healers, but others will go to churches that have a much greater emphasis on spiritual power. People do not go to Pentecostal churches because they are attracted by speaking in tongues, but because they have a theology that deals with demons, curses, and healing. Many Pentecostal pastors are not afraid to come and cleanse a house of evil spirits, or pray for God's blessing on a truck, bicycle, or a student preparing for exams. Sometimes our fear of Pentecostalism has frightened us away from claiming our proper inheritance of "Holiness and Power."

Inadequate Theology

A contextualized theology, that deals directly and specifically with the spirit world in all of its dimensions is very important, because this is where Western theology is so lacking.

Western theology especially systematic theology has concentrated on helping individuals find peace with God, forgiveness of sins and the hope of eternal life in heaven. When we take a narrative approach to theology and look at the cosmic story we find that salvation is much more than helping individuals find peace with God. God is seeking to redeem a world. The problem is not just sin, but also death and the devil. All three are inter-related. Unfortunately Western theology has often ignored the villain (Satan) and so has lost a lot of the drama from the story.

If there is no villain there will be no conflict
 If there is no conflict there can be no victory
 If there is no victory there can be no celebration.

I think there are two main reasons why we are weak in our eschatology. One is that we have become tired of speculative eschatology with its charts and diagrams and speculative timetables that constantly need to be revised.

The other reason is that we have largely ignored the devil and Jesus victory over Satan. The second coming is the consummation of the battle, the final defeat of the evil one, the victory march and coronation of the king. Unfortunately our Articles of Faith make no reference at all to Jesus victory over Satan in reference to the Second coming. If we ignore the unseen spirit world, then we have largely lost the heart of the wonderful drama of redemption.

Merely condemning traditional beliefs as superstitious and primitive, will not help people. It will lead only to a "conspiracy of silence" in which people no longer talk about these beliefs and problems because they know that the missionary does not understand.¹⁷

Textbooks and Theological Education

Christ's victory over the principalities and powers needs to be emphasized in our theological textbooks and our theological education.

It is important that the Articles of Faith make mention of Christ's victory over Satan and the evil powers of this world so that this emphasis may be included in training for church membership and also theological education. At the moment the church is still very dependent upon Western textbooks, which are obviously written from a Western perspective. Since approximately 50% of all Nazarenes live in non-Western countries we must give up our dependency upon Western writers. It is important that we have theological books that address the spirit world in a significant way.

Lack of Practical Holiness

People who live in the fear of sorcery and witchcraft and who from time to time feel pressured to appease vengeful ancestral spirits are not living a life of holiness.

The first of the Ten Commandments says, "You shall have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:3). If our church people put out offerings to appease the ancestors, call on the spirits of the dead, or go to traditional healers and/or mediums to break curses, then we are far from being a holiness church. If our people live in the fear of sorcery and witchcraft then they are not enjoying full and free salvation.

The Nazarene Manual says, "The primary objective of the Church of the Nazarene is to advance God's kingdom by the preservation and propagation of Christian holiness as set forth in the Scriptures."¹⁸ We want people to live holy lives. Then it is very important that they are convinced that Jesus has won the victory over Satan and all the powers of darkness, and that they can participate and enjoy the results of that victory.

Only those who are totally committed to Jesus Christ will ever be filled with the Holy Spirit and be able to live the life of holiness. But people must be convinced that Jesus offers full salvation from sin, death and the devil. They must have confidence that Jesus is greater than all the powers of witchcraft, sorcery and demonic bondage. Only then will they present themselves as a living sacrifice that is holy and acceptable to him.

Our doctrine of holiness must deal with the spirit world or it will not satisfy the needs of thousands of people who call themselves Nazarenes.

Action is Necessary

This conference of theologians and educators from across the region can make a significant difference. We can send a resolution from this conference to the Regional Advisory Council recommending a change to the Articles of Faith. From there it can go to General Assembly. It can also go from here to the District Assemblies across the region and they can approve and send our recommendation to the General Assembly.

I think the best way to adjust the Articles of Faith would be to add a short section to the Article II on "Jesus Christ."

The second paragraph reads,

We believe that Jesus Christ died for our sins, and that He truly arose from the dead and took again His body with all things appertaining to the perfection of man's nature, wherewith he ascended into heaven and is there engaged in intercession for us.

Change this to read:

*We believe that Jesus Christ <died for our sins> **lived a sinless life of perfect obedience, died a sacrificial death and in so doing defeated Satan and all the powers of evil**, and that He truly arose from the dead and took again His body with all things appertaining to the perfection of man's nature, wherewith he ascended into heaven and is there engaged in intercession for us.*

(Additional scriptural reference to be added would be Colossians 2:15).

We can recommend that article XV be changed to read:

*We believe that the Lord Jesus Christ will come again; **Satan shall be totally defeated and Jesus shall take his rightful place as King of Kings**. We who are alive at his coming shall not precede them that are asleep in Christ Jesus; but that, if we are abiding in Him, we shall be caught up with the risen saints to meet the Lord in the air, so that we shall ever be with the Lord.*

We have a wonderful opportunity to make a difference. I am requesting this conference to draft a recommendation to the Regional Advisory Council and to the District Assemblies across the region.

Neville Bartle

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