

Response

By

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History clarifies our identity and reason for existence as a people. But, since our early days, we have changed. The church has spread geographically and culturally. Social contexts are different. What can we still learn from our early history? Were there any transcending marks so rooted in our calling and identity that recovering them would revitalize the church today?

History corrects our notions of who we think we are and what we think we are about, and we appropriate it with particular purposes in mind. Timothy Smith used history to correct misperceptions about the church common in the late 1950s. He showed that holiness, in its mid-nineteenth century context, had little to do with individual mysticism and moralism. He demonstrated, instead, unexpected connections between holiness and women's rights, abolition and urban reform. The social gospel, he demonstrated, had roots in revivalism. What Nazarenes heard, when they read Smith, was that our heritage bent us close to some of the leading social and political reforms of history.

Smith's history of our own early days corrected the misperception that the Church of the Nazarene was a movement of the economically disadvantaged. Though they protested "worldliness," early Nazarenes were common people endeavoring to create a church. They were indebted to the broad streams and not the small eddies of Christianity. Though Smith showed that at the beginning we were more "churchly" than sectarian, he rejected the categories of "church" and "sect" as they pertained to denominationalism. *Called Unto Holiness* refuted H. Richard Niebhuur's thesis that all "churches" begin as "sects." Smith corrected misconceptions that we were a rural movement. Furthermore, first generation Nazarenes were not, Smith showed, Fundamentalists. Later, there was a Fundamentalist "leavening" (as Paul Bassett was to put it) through the rise of premillennialist Southerners, and through the coming in of people such as J. G. Morrison, who left Methodism almost as much because of its Modernism as because of the Church of the Nazarene's holiness emphasis. Smith also rebutted the idea of dissenters such as Glenn Griffith, that Bresee and other founders were legalists. Smith described, instead, the roots of our legalism in the Holiness Church of Christ, and the second generation's attempt to prove itself loyal to the pioneers by out-doing them in both "tempo" and rules. Implicitly, Smith was justifying our taking a moderate position on rules and was calling the third generation back to the first's concern for marginalized people, cities, and society.

Most of Clair MacMillan's findings echo and reinforce Smith's points. (Compare, for instance, the characteristics that Smith gives for Bresee's Church of the Nazarene on pages 112 to 121 of *Called Unto Holiness*.) MacMillan's point about the maturity of the leaders buttresses the idea that we began more "churchly" than "sectarian," and explains how the first generation could pass away so quickly, between 1914 and 1918, less than a decade after Pilot Point. MacMillan's second point about the

confidence placed in ministers and lay people to make moral decisions for themselves reinforces Smith's point about legalism coming later. MacMillan helps us to see, as we make entertainment a matter of individual conscience rather than rules, that we are not breaking with the past and becoming liberal or modern, but, instead, returning to some original impulses about the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Like Smith, MacMillan notes the urban orientation of the Church, and the happiness of early Nazarenes in their holy walk.

MacMillan's point about the church becoming "counter-revivalist" corresponds to Smith's sense of the irony about the first generation's church building leading to the second generation's sectarianism. When members "came out" of the old churches, the holiness message lost the best means it had of "Christianizing Christianity" (Bresee's phrase) and had to concentrate on making sure that it itself remained revived. Revivals served this purpose, MacMillan believes. (The implicit question in this day of declining revivalism is: Are there other ways to save the church from ecclesiocentricity?)

The theological diversity that MacMillan sees in the church's official publications is significant. There was room, in these early days, for various voices. Perhaps MacMillan's point in remembering this is to contrast later periods in the history of the *Herald of Holiness* and NPH publications, when theological differences went unrecognized or were suppressed. The first generation handled diversity well. People committed themselves to the essentials, and had charity for those who disagreed on theological non-essentials. They could be totally committed to building a denomination with holiness as its center, and remain diverse.

At the same time, the church did not try to "be everything to everyone" (MacMillan's point 8). It was not "market-driven." The single-mindedness of the church reflected the National Holiness Association's instructions to its registered evangelists not to major on millennialism, healing or other side issues. As MacMillan says (point 5), holiness primarily was the "attraction" to others of the "religious fellowship" Nazarenes offered. We tried to be what we felt we were raised up by God to be.

Though MacMillan calls the church's interest in society "apolitical" or "politically aloof," the remarkable thing to me of these early years is that there were lively reports and discussions in the church's magazines of current events and social issues. "Apolitical" did not translate into uncaring concern for society.

MacMillan answers the question, what were our original characteristics? Having asked that question, we go on to ask: Are we demonstrating, or, even, should we still demonstrate those same characteristics?