

Response

By

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Pastor MacMillan and I should get together and compare notes. For my Ph.D. dissertation I studied the ethics of Holiness Churches from 1880 to 1910. Part of my research was a content analysis of the periodicals MacMillan studied, and others. I doubt I studied those two periodicals in as great a detail as he, however. Based on my research and observations, I would offer the following responses to MacMillan’s paper. These are not point-for-point responses, but general reactions to MacMillan’s conclusions.

1. The Church of the Nazarene, even from 1908, represented a merging of different churches and associations of churches across North America. While the *Herald of Holiness* was the official organ of the united body, The *Nazarene Messenger* was the mouthpiece of only one of those merging bodies. Thus, we should be cautious about claiming that this is what all Nazarenes then were like. From our birth, Nazarenes were a diverse group of believers, but united around some core beliefs and experiential realities.
2. In his second observation MacMillan points out that “The church’s ministers and lay people were so confident of their relationship with God that they were actively engaged in making moral decisions for themselves, remarkably independent of the church.” On the one hand, we applaud the founders of the Church of the Nazarene for the courage of their convictions. It is the same stuff from which Martin Luther was made when he stood before the Diet of Worms and refused to recant his beliefs. On the other hand, making decisions “remarkably independent of the church” is not something we should brag about; this is somehow symptomatic of Western individualism. My current African context is teaching me to value community. And so, I chose to understand the decision of the founders of our church to leave their former church associations and to shape their own moral convictions as part of a decision to align (or better, to realign) themselves with the greater Christian community that has existed down through the ages. Rather than being a “split off” from one community, I conceive them as a “return to” a larger community of faith. Rather than being individualists, I see them as “catholic” and “apostolic” in the best sense of those words.
3. I would like to know more specifics about the variety of religious experience that MacMillan says was found in the early COTN. What does he mean by the “Wesley model” of experiencing entire sanctification that became the quasi-official model later?
4. I do not think it is helpful or accurate to say that the early COTN was “apolitical.” The real question is, “Was the early COTN concerned with ‘reforming the nation’?” as Wesley put it. The evidence clearly shows that they were. As a brand new church composed of mainly poor, uneducated people, they did not have the same kind of access to political power as, say, Presbyterians or Methodists. Nonetheless, they sought to effect reform in the ways they could. This showed up primarily in concern for what may appear to us to be issues of strictly personal morality. In many, many ways, however, their moral concerns demonstrated a sophisticated awareness of the systemic nature of sin. That is, they realized that “personal morality” is *not* just personal. They expressed

solidarity with the poor and marginalized of their day in ways that, at times, prefigured what Liberation Theologians have called for decades later. And when opportunity presented itself, they did not hesitate to exercise the political power they had. Although they may have been “apolitical” in terms of the means at their disposal, they were greatly concerned with social reform.

5. Allow me to comment on MacMillan’s fifth observation—that early Nazarenes “readily conceded that visitors were already Christians.” We live today in a world in which far too many people claim to be Christian whose lives show no evidence of it. Nominal Christianity is the plague of the church universal today. Perhaps, it is true that a good holiness message has converting power, but I don’t think we can afford to make the same concession our Nazarene forefathers and mothers made about the spiritual status of those who visit our churches.
6. I agree completely with MacMillan’s observation regarding the early “urban” nature of the church. Most of our COTN founders had considerable expertise in urban evangelism and church planting. I think we must recover that expertise for our church today, or we will make little difference as a denomination in the 21st century. The world is moving to the cities and we must move with it, if we are to accomplish our mission.
7. I appreciate MacMillan’s characterization of what holiness / entire sanctification meant for those who had “entered in” the experience. Holiness made them “happy.” Indeed, it is not coincidental that Hannah Whitall Smith’s classic book on holiness is entitled, *The Christian’s Secret to a Happy Life*. Despite the “do’s and don’ts” they embraced, their burden was not heavy. Any portrait of the holy life that makes it out to be anything less than the most blessed life-style available is a forgery, and a poor one at that. Notice, I did not say that it would be an easy life or without sacrifice. True holiness gladly accepts the cross one is called to bear, but it also finds a way to experience the joy of a life fully devoted to God.

Conclusion:

Thank you, Clair MacMillan, for reminding us of part of our story. Remembering who we once were can help us understand who we now are and shape who we believe God desires us to become.