

North American Nazarene Theology Conference
December 2004, Kansas City, MO

Holy Spirit:
The Essential Characteristics and Parameters of a Nazarene Pneumatology
by Diane Leclerc, Ph.D.

As much as I would love to move directly to the task at hand—namely, to express the essential framework of pneumatology in the Church of the Nazarene, and to clearly define the boundaries of our understanding of the Spirit—methodological considerations stand formidably in my path. I would attempt to sidestep them, but they speak too loudly to ignore; so much so that I fear it would be dangerous for our intended purpose just to jump over them. I suppose I am suggesting that even in this context, with only 3000 words at my disposal, methodology still matters.¹

The dialogical partners given to me for our purposes here are the sixteen Articles of Faith. But immediately the question arises: are the Articles of Faith normative or descriptive for the Church of the Nazarene? Or put more specifically, is the article on the Holy Spirit definitive or dynamic in nature? We are aided by the historical precedents that have shown that Articles can change.

¹ Underlining all methodology is the matter of inclusiveness. It is the hope of this author that our attempts to define the doctrines of the Church of the Nazarene at this conference will be fully recognized as incomplete. We have passed the day when we should presume that a gathering of North Americans can speak for the rest of the world. We stand in desperate need of global voices to nuance our theological assumptions. Any considerations we make should be seen as preliminary.

But it still begs the question, for we must ask, if we as a body do change them, are we doing so because they should change (normatively), or because our theology has changed (descriptively)?² Perhaps more precisely stated, are the Articles an expression of constructive theology or historical theology? What is the place of history (whether historical theology or history of dogma) in our mutual expression of doctrine? What is the significance of the creeds, the Councils, the controversies that led to the subsequent subordination of the Holy Spirit in the West? What is the present significance of the emerging debate over Wesley's indebtedness to Eastern Patristics in his pneumatology, or his understanding of soteriology more generally? Did the American Holiness Movement add significant emphases to our understanding of the Spirit that should be celebrated and re-emphasized as we move forward? Each of these questions³ could delay us significantly, but we move on.

Is there, or should there be, a primary doctrine out of which all others flow? Is there, or should there be a defining theological tenet that guides the relationship and interpenetration of the rest of our theology? To be specific, we might ask: would our pneumatology look different if a Doctrine of God,

² A question that has sociological as well as theological implications is the question that arises out of the reality of very different ideologies within the denomination presently. Nazarene scholars have long identified the infiltration of Fundamentalism into our churches, with its non-Wesleyan presuppositions. Some of us are terrified of this reality. And yet, if it becomes the dominant voice in the future, are our Articles so tenuous that our Wesleyanism could be abandoned. Certainly, we would hope that there are sufficient enough parameters for the essence of who we are to remain. Any yet, what is being done on a practical level to assure this? Are ministers held accountable for what they teach and preach? Are laity being educated regarding our history and our positions, particularly in contrast to Fundamentalism?

³ As could questions regarding metaphysics, or biblical pneumatology, or poststructuralism, etc.

Trinitarian in nature, was this defining tenet, rather than the soteriologically-centric theology we now embrace. There have been anti-sectarian, ecumenical voices among us in recent years, as we more deliberately (and appropriately) connect ourselves with historic Christian faith. On the other hand, there have been other calls (also appropriate) to regain our uniqueness in the midst and muddle of generic evangelicalism. How do these two important messages guide us? What other voices are necessary for us to interpret ourselves?

With all of these concerns, and perhaps countless others, humming in the background, I nevertheless, move forward in a humble attempt to express a theology of the Holy Spirit from a Nazarene perspective. Article Three reads:

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Third Person of the Triune Godhead, that He is ever present and efficiently active in and with the Church of Christ, convincing the world of sin, regenerating those who repent and believe, sanctifying believers, and guiding into all the truth as it is in Jesus.

Influenced by a Wesleyan paradigm, the Church of the Nazarene emphasizes the full personality of the Holy Spirit, rather than subordinating and depersonalizing the Spirit under language such as “the Spirit of Christ.” The Holy Spirit is more than the love between the first two persons of the Trinity, and more than the sum of parts or works; the strength of an Eastern-Wesleyan model (*vis-à-vis*, Western-Reformed) is that it emphasizes the full, “personal” divinity of the Spirit and stresses the essential nature of the Triune God. Thus what is stated in Article One is applied also to the Holy Spirit: The Spirit is

“creative and administrative, holy in nature, attributes, and purpose.” With this firmly in place, the third Article of the Church of the Nazarene goes on to discuss the unique economic expression of this unsubordinated Spirit.⁴ We will continue our considerations with the five activities listed in Article Three, placing them in direct dialogue with the pneumatological references and implications of the other articles.

1. *[The Spirit] is ever present and efficiently active in and with the Church of Christ.*

We are assured that the Holy Spirit is present and active in the Church, continuously and effectively. The relatively recent article on the Church expands on this statement. First of all, it is the Holy Spirit that calls the Church together as the “Body of Christ.” The marks of the Church are spiritual marks, made true only by the presence and activity of the Spirit. It is the work of the Spirit that makes the Church one, or unified. It is a mystery of grace how God can take the great diversity evident in this human institution and unite it in spirit and in purpose. The language of “Body” life is an expression of the interdependence and equality of each participant, called for and enabled by the gracious work of God.

⁴ While supportive of the attempts of feminism to “de-masculinize” the Godhead, I would reject strongly the identification of the Holy Spirit as the “female” expression of God, for if understood in a Western model, it simply serves to re-subordinate femaleness, and thus consequently, women.

Secondly, the Church enjoys the “fellowship” of the Holy Spirit, when the Church expresses its essence and purpose in worship, preaching, the sacraments and ministry; in obedience to Christ, and in mutual accountability. The Holy Spirit is fully immersed in the practices and functions of Church life. The worship of God is aided by the Spirit, and the Spirit’s presence is assured to be in the midst of those gathered in Christ. The whole act of preaching, from text to sermon and delivery, is done by the inspiration, guidance, and presence of the Holy Spirit. Any form of ministry in which the Church invests finds fruit only as the Spirit brings it to fruition. Obedience to Christ is possible through the enabling work of the Spirit. Mutual accountability is more than a human endeavor. It is a means of grace. All means of grace are efficacious through the work of the Spirit, particularly the sacraments. Finally, when the Church demonstrates the redemptive work of Christ in the world, it is done only through the power of the Holy Spirit.

2. *[The Spirit is active] convincing the world of sin.*

God’s prevenient work is synonymous with the Spirit’s activity. Technically for Wesley, the way of salvation begins with God’s free gift of prevenient grace, given from the moment we are born. Prevenient grace is the presence and work of the Holy Spirit. It is prevenient grace that draws us, awakening our souls to the need for God. This grace, as with all grace, can be

resisted. But if it is allowed to do its work, prevenient grace and the presence of the Holy Spirit will bring a person to the place of “awakening.” This is the place where we are convicted and convinced of our own sinfulness and helplessness apart from God. But this convincing work of God does not lead us to despair, for we are also convinced of the hope of our redemption. Conviction and hope, then, are not merely human responses to the Spirit’s prior work, but rather expressions of the Spirit’s imminent work in our hearts as we cooperate with the ever-available grace of God. Our article on repentance (VIII) states that “the Spirit of God gives to all who will repent, the gracious help of penitence of heart and hope of mercy.” A question arises (which will not be answered here) of whether the Spirit can convince not only *an individual* of sin, but also *a people*. Is the Spirit active in raising the *collective* conscience to evil (personal or systemic) in the world? And is there a place for corporate repentance, aided by the Spirit?⁵

3. [*The Spirit is active*] *regenerating those who repent and believe.*

Personal awakening is closely connected to repentance in Wesley’s scheme; and awakening, if responded to, leads to repentance, faith and regeneration. Repentance can be equated with “godly sorrow”—“sorrow” in

⁵ And thus implied, is there a place for denominational confession, such as the confession of the Southern Baptists regarding their position on slavery a hundred years previously? Dare we ask ourselves what the Church of the Nazarene needs to take responsibility for?

the sense that we are convinced of our condition; it is “godly” in the sense that it does not lead to despair but rather to trust in the sufficiency of God. A second meaning of repentance is the actual relinquishing of sin and amending our ways toward God.⁶ It is also crucial to invoke the Spirit when we speak of faith itself, for faith is a gift of God and not a human work. Synergistically enacted, Spirit-aided repentance and faith lead to regeneration. (Of note, we have focused great attention in our tradition on the turning *from* sin implied in repentance. It would serve us well to equally emphasize what we are *turning* toward, what we are repenting to; namely, we are turning *toward love*.)

It is the atoning work of Jesus Christ that makes regeneration possible. But it is also stated directly that the Holy Spirit is active in this regeneration. In Article Nine we delineate the concomitants of salvation as justification, regeneration, and adoption. And yet we explicitly affirm that it is regeneration in which the Spirit participates. Succinctly put, we are made new creations through the work of the Holy Spirit. Regeneration implies more than justification’s forensic meaning (formally wrought by the atonement), and the familial language of adoption as sons and daughters, and co-heirs with Christ. Regeneration implies not only a change in relation to guilt or in our relation to the “family” of God, but also affects a change in nature. Regeneration can be

⁶ It is key for Wesley and Wesleyans that this second aspect of repentance is only possible *after* faith, and only through the assistance of God. Otherwise, we would inappropriately connect salvation to our own efforts at righteousness. It is only grace, through faith, that enables us to repent in this second sense.

correctly linked to “initial sanctification” in the *via salutis*. Holiness is imparted to the regenerated, not just imputed. This work is thus effective through the Spirit’s transformative activity, which begins at New Birth.

We are also explicit when conveying that it is the Spirit that bears witness to our spirit regarding this transformation in nature and relationship. While Wesley himself adapted the doctrine of assurance through his life (finally suggesting that one could lose the witness without losing his or her salvation), in most instances assurance is the subsequent gift given by the Holy Spirit for the purpose of spiritual confidence before God or before one’s own self-doubt. The articles of the Church of the Nazarene suggest that the witness of the Spirit is given again at the moment of entire sanctification. This leads to the fourth activity of the Spirit as found in Article Three.

4. *[The Spirit is active] sanctifying believers.*

Some might argue that this designation glances a necessary Christological focus. But if it is understood that the atoning work of Christ is the source of all grace, the statement that the Spirit “sanctifies believers” can be interpreted as the *application* of Christological grace through the Spirit’s work. It would serve us well here to remind ourselves of our emphasis on the essential Trinity, so as to avoid economic hair-splitting. Sanctification is the work of God in Christ through the Holy Spirit.

Despite the great debate (now “historic”) over the problematic aspects and limitations of the metaphor, “baptism of the Holy Spirit” remains a part of our articles. While Article Ten does list multiple expressions for the experience of entire sanctification, it and Article Five state that entire sanctification and heart cleansing are wrought through baptism with the Holy Spirit, thus clearly making it the more dominant metaphor. Is the language of Spirit baptism an essential part of our identity, or could it be that it is more representative of our attempts to hold on to our (sacred) roots? Is it still relevant, and is it still communicative?⁷

We also claim that through the Spirit “the heart is fully cleansed,” which has recently replaced the word “eradication.” (Persons have remarked that it was quite surprising for the change to be made without huge debate through the process of the change.) Theologically, the word had lost meaning. I would

⁷ There have been scholars and preachers who have seen the 19th century changes as *grand improvements* on Wesley that are to be celebrated and held fast. On the extreme opposite side, there are scholars and preachers who see such changes as a theological *disaster*, and cry for a return to Wesley’s 18th century articulation. There are other scholars and preachers who no doubt stand somewhere in the middle, often confused about the crucial issues, interpretations, and ultimate distinctives of the debate itself. Sides of the debate can be associated with names of scholars who represent them, which has sometime made the articulation of sides “personal.” Certainly, it is important to recognize that the roots of the Church of the Nazarene grow from both sources, Wesley and Holiness. We are a Wesleyan-Holiness denomination. This author’s opinion is that besides taking what is best from both, there is another critical agenda for the denomination today: how to best articulate a theology of holiness for the 21st century. Both the cry “back to Wesley” and “back to the holiness revival” need to be redirected toward the future.

suggest the same could be said of “baptism with the Holy Spirit.”⁸ It would be my hope to see the metaphor be one among many.

The Spirit is also mentioned in Article Ten in its emphases on the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit, the empowering work of the Holy Spirit for life and service, which includes “spiritual development and improvement in Christ-likeness of character and personality.” It is crucial that we maintain these statements. Historically, the higher life movement within Calvinism, as expressed by Finney, Mahan, and Keswickianism, required some type of metamorphosis of their Calvinist theology. How could one maintain the *optimism* implicit in an emphasis on the presence and power of the Holy Spirit and the transformative grace that enables development in Christ-likeness, while holding on to a strictly Reformed theology of depravity, sin, and forensic salvation? They simply do not blend. And yet, with generic evangelicalism and persistent fundamentalism vying for the attention of our people, how do we combat this more pessimistic world view today?

We proclaim our pneumatology, for one. We believe in the immanence of God, through the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. We believe that the Holy Spirit, through the same power that raised Jesus from the dead,

⁸ Perhaps meaning might be restored if the denomination restored its sacramental emphasis. If “baptism with the Holy Spirit” draws upon a deep understanding of the meaning of baptism as a metaphorical comparison for the deeper work of God, then perhaps the de-emphasis and “optionalist” tone of the sacraments generally, and baptism specifically in our denomination can create a disconnect that leads to irrelevancy.

empowers us for life and godliness, for Christ-like character and resolute love. We believe that we can grow in the sanctifying grace of God, being changed from glory to glory, being deepened in our desire and capacity to love God with all our being and our neighbors as ourselves. We do not simply wait for the great escape from this world, but live fully in the here and now as we fulfill the purpose for which we were created, and find ourselves being renewed in the very image of God. Ours is a voice of great hopefulness amidst a type of Christianity that preaches fear and despair as it anticipates a dreadful end. Wesleyan-Holiness folks were initially post-millennialists for a reason. God has not abandoned us or the world, but through the Spirit God is with us still.

5. *[The Spirit is active] guiding into all the truth as it is in Jesus.*

Wesleyan theology is inductive by nature. It is experientially informed. Any declarative statements we might make come from life in God, not from propositional statements to which we then attempt to conform. In other words, we do not state that the Spirit is active guiding into all truth, period. But rather, that the Spirit is guiding into all the truth as it is in Jesus. The implications of the additional phrase are not accidental, but paramount. Truth is not defined in a “modernist” fashion, objectively attained, analyzed, and asserted. Truth is found in a person, and through experiential “knowledge” of this person. For example, for Wesley it is possible to hold to any or all creedal

affirmations, and still not be “right-hearted” or related to the Source of truth for such affirmations. Belief is not an intellectual assent to an agreed upon truth, but deep, courageous trust in the God who saves. And thus, when the Spirit guides us in truth, we are guided to our soteriological understandings and our experience of grace, as we entrust ourselves to God. Our “spiritual senses” inform our theology.

This brings us to our understanding of the inspiration and purpose of Holy Scripture. We believe that the Holy Spirit inspired the original writers of the Canon, and that sufficiently. We believe in the plenary inspiration of Scripture, which entails a rejection of a mechanical or verbal doctrine and absolute inerrancy, and explicitly state that the Bible is perfect in its intention to “reveal God’s will concerning us in things necessary to our salvation.” No articles are to be written that are not biblically supported. Our position has huge implications for the way in which we interpret Scripture. Soteriology once again guides our interpretive moves.⁹

On matters not pertaining to our salvation, we refuse to force our people to embrace a certain position; in speculative, non-essential doctrines

⁹ This can be summarized using Wesley’s concept of the “analogy of faith.” Each passage should be interpreted in light of the whole, and in light of the specific doctrines of: original sin, justification and new birth, and inward and outward holiness. Wesley would not be sidetracked by other issues in finding the meaning and purpose of scripture; although he certainly comments on these other issues, he strongly maintains the purpose of Scripture is God’s revelation to humankind about God’s nature--through Old Testament events and in the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of Christ—and about God’s intention to save and restore us in God’s image, which expresses itself in holiness, perfect love.

(such a creation and eschatology), we allow, even demand liberty of thinking. Unfortunately, this is not emphasized enough. It falls on pastors, I believe, to teach her or his congregation methods that are integral to interpretive integrity. All interpretation of Scripture is to be done in the context of community. It is appropriate to enjoin our people to use a Wesleyan-Holiness lens, while always remaining open, as a community, to the guidance of the Holy Spirit in our doctrinal inclinations.

We not only acknowledge that we depend on the Holy Spirit to guide us theologically, we also confess our absolute dependence on the Holy Spirit's transformation of Scripture, presently, from words to "food." It is the Holy Spirit that opens our hearts to its words in such a way that it becomes for us a vital means of grace.¹⁰

My intentions in the previous pages has been to attempt an interpretive articulation of the Articles of Faith regarding the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, in light of our theological tradition. What I offer below is not only summative, but also imply suggestions for our future as a denomination. (This, of course, is simply one theologian's attempt to begin discussion more broadly.)

¹⁰ A personal note: when I ask my students why they read the Bible, it is often articulated as an act of obedience. It is rare to hear any expression resembling that of spiritual nourishment, or that the Holy Spirit presently inspires our hearts and connect us to God. For them, the Bible has the right answers and tells us what we are supposed to believe. There is little comprehension of spiritual formation gained from Scripture.

Suggestive Statements:

1. *Keeping the gracious activity of God, enabled by the work of the Holy Spirit, at the center of our theology will help to combat the danger of practical Pelagianism on the one hand, and a practical pessimism on the other. A continuing emphasis on the gracious empowerment of the Holy Spirit, soaked with humble optimism should guide our future.*

At times in our denominational past, we have fallen toward the side of legalistic righteousness and practical Pelagianism. Although Spirit language was certainly invoked, a clear understanding of the *gracious* work of God became muddled, and an overemphasis on absolute perfection led us to a dangerous legalistic emphasis. Holiness was defined only as a lack of sin rather than the presence of holy love. On the other hand, and perhaps more recently, a message of pessimism has echoed in our midst. Forgiveness of human sin, with little hope for change or victory, is even now assumed by countless laity. A reemphasis on the empowering grace of God is urgent.

2. *The Holy Spirit enables the liberating work of God, which finds fulfillment in regeneration, sanctification, and holy living through perfect love; an ethos of sacrificial empowerment, saturated with spiritual optimism, should dominate our future.*

We believe that we are new creations in Christ, that the old has passed away, and the new will come. We believe that the Holy Spirit sanctifies

believers, initially, progressively, entirely, and finally. We believe it is more than possible to grow in our ability to express the holy love of God to our neighbors as ourselves, that we grow in our ability to love God with our whole being, and we believe that this infilling of love, through the presence of the Holy Spirit, “excludes sin” (Wesley). This is a liberating work, that heals the dis-ease of sin and empowers us for sacrificial living.¹¹ The Holy Spirit can indeed make our attitudes the same as Christ Jesus, who emptied himself (kenosis) “of all but love.” (Philippians 2; Charles Wesley)

3. The Holy Spirit reminds us of the reality and potentiality of the redemptive work of Christ on earth, through the Church; an ethos of embodied empowerment, drenched with social optimism should inspire our future.

In the words of H. Richard Nieburh, we as a denomination are called to transform culture, not isolate ourselves from it. The wonder of the Wesleyan Revival and the American Holiness Movement was that they were somehow enabled to maintain holiness standards without withdrawing from society; indeed, they were fully engaged in social issues and actually believed they could make a difference as God’s agents of compassion, mercy, and justice in the

¹¹ I would assert that sacrifice without first experiencing the liberating work in God, which gives us a truly renewed self, can reinforce structures of oppression. And yet, a renewed self can then pour out itself in sacrificial living. See my book for elaboration, *Singleness of Heart: Gender, Sin, and Holiness in Historical Perspective* (Scarecrow, 2001).

world.¹² More recently, we have done well on the side of evangelism, missionary work, and even compassionate ministries. And yet when it comes to issues of social justice, particularly as North Americans, we have long forgotten our heritage. A spirit of social conservatism has replaced our passion for engaged, embodied, redemptive work, work that used to arise out of our grace-filled optimism. As we have become a mainly white, suburban church in North America, we hardly have contact with those our denomination was created to touch. This is not a new critique. But the question remains, do we believe that as we depend on the Spirit for gracious empowerment there is hope for real societal change? Or do we simply await our escape from a hopeless “God-forsaken” world? Do we fully understand that God is still omnipresent in the Person of the Holy Spirit, and will not abandon what has been created?

The Holy Spirit, the Third Person of the Trinity, truly is ever present and efficiently active in and with the Church of Christ; the Spirit truly is convincing the world of sin, and regenerating those who repent and believe; the Spirit genuinely sanctifies believers, and guides us into all the truth as it is in Jesus. And the Spirit will guide us to a reclamation of who we are as a denomination; but we also be guided toward what we are to become in the 21st century.

¹² It would serve us well if every Nazarene was required to read Donald Dayton’s book, *Discovering our Evangelical Heritage*, where he traces this incredible involvement of holiness folks in issues such as abolitionism, the rights of women, and advocacy for the poor.

