

Response to Paper Written by Diane Leclerc, Ph.D
“The Essential Characteristics and Parameters of a Nazarene Pneumatology

Respondent: Samuel Vassel, D.Min.

I found this paper to be delightful, didactic but also disturbing.

The Delightful Elements

I was delighted by the papers appropriate concern with methodology. I believe this concern was reflected throughout the paper, as it sought to maintain the integrity of a historic Wesleyan - Holiness interpretive posture, while implicitly being very cautious about presuming an exclusive North American, (white, male?) hegemonic set of assumptions as its normative theological index. Her first foot note states:

“...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. “

I was encouraged by the essential humility reflected in that statement and that pervaded the work.

The questions raised about the nature and the function of the articles were timely, in that, while I have a grave concern for the protection by the articles of the tradition from theological subversion (therefore in that sense them being “normative”), I am also concerned that the articles themselves, be available for scrutiny in light of scripture and the historic Christian faith (and therefore in that sense be open to change).

Leclerc is not content with “Wesleyan scholasticism”, in which the only creative impulse open to the contemporary Nazarene theologian, is to say in a new way only that which has been articulated in the past, either by Wesley or the American Holiness movement as the pathway for the future. She fittingly foot notes in this regard (page 8)

“...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 to be redirected to the future”.

The Didactic Elements

In our anxiety to practically disciple the church to express the ideals of our faith tradition that of being the Holy people of the Holy God in hope of a Holy world, Pastors encounter occupational hazards to which this paper offers useful teaching correctives.

Some of these “pit falls”, to which the paper addresses itself as I experience them in my pastoral task are in relation to:

1) *The subordination issue*

There is a constant danger of devaluing the personhood, sovereignty and priority of the Holy Spirit in the pursuit of “doing” church.

2) *The issue of Homogeneity.* If, as Leclerc points out, the church is the

“Body of Christ”, called into being by the Spirit and identifiable by the “marks” of the Spirit’s presence and activity, and if these “marks” include the essential features of “body life” i.e. unity in diversity, “interdependence and equanimity”,

then the validity of those human institutions called “church” in which these vital “marks” of the Spirit are absent is implicitly questioned.

Are we deceived? Some institutions that we think of as “church” are perhaps not church at all but are fraudulent hoaxes instead, as there is no evidence of diversity in them. Their homogeneity is in no way reflective of ‘body life’. Or, are we disobedient? The Holy Spirit may be initiating and directing expressions of diversity in the “body of Christ”, which are being resisted by the institutional church in preference of socio-cultural conveniences. (Remember that both the Spirit and grace may be resisted). The institutional church may be rebelliously insisting on conforming to the world’s system, instead of obediently having a transformed mind.

- 3) *The issue of the priority and pervasiveness of grace* in the face of the pragmatic pastoral urge to be moralistic in ministry (confident in human effort) and legalistic in discipleship (promoting self righteousness).
- 4) *The issue of the conscientizing presence of the Spirit.* Leclerc points to the idea that the dynamic convicting function of the Spirit operating “in the world” seems to include both the individual as well as the cooperate institution of the church in its perview. This is an exciting corrective to an individualistic orientation towards conviction of the spirit and opens the possibility for corporate repentance.

- 5) The issue of pessimism - There is a pastoral temptation to hopelessness in the face of the real failures in holiness evident in the lives of the well intended faithful. This is exasperated by competing popular theological assumptions in generic evangelicalism that seems to plausibly rationalize these “realities”. Leclerc’s most emphatic declaration of 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” is indeed a corrective to fear and despair. She asserts that “God has not abandoned us or the world but through the Spirit, God is with us still”.

This didactic element seems to be particularly instructive in the face of incipient popular fundamentalism and its assumptions found in generic evangelicalism and of insidious Pelagianism and pragmatic legalism often found in local Holiness congregations. The Wesleyan Holiness interpretative lens is an adequate safe guard against these dangers.

The Disturbing Element

I was deeply satisfied with the treatment given to the convincing, regenerating, sanctifying and guiding activity of the Spirit in this paper. I was disturbed however, that there seemed to have been no where in the 3rd. article, nor in the other articles with which the paper was in dialogue, to explore the specific liberating activity of the Spirit in any detail.

As we look at “The Essential Characteristics and **Parameters** of a Nazarene Pneumatology”, the concerns raised by liberation theology and in some sense addressed by charismatic ecclesiology cannot be marginalized - certainly not from the point of view of an urban Pastor.

If the Church of the Nazarene is to be truly a global church, not simply a church of and for suburban white North Americans, we must consider that most of the people in the world today are found in the urban centers of the developed world and in the countries of the developing world (demographically the two-thirds world). These people face on a daily basis the oppression of the demonic powers manifested in their political relations, family life, economic realities, educational experiences, and in their religio/cultural engagements.

If this is the real situation in our contemporary world, it demands from us as Nazarenes that we reopen the dialogue with Mr. Wesley in light of scripture, as to his concept of the “analogy of faith”. If there is a primary doctrine or set of doctrines out of which others flow, is it enough for this set to be “original sin; justification and new birth; and inward and outward holiness?” Is the Bible from Geneses to Revelation not pervasively concerned with human liberation from demonic powers? Was not the Exodus event that formed the people of God in the Old Testament, liberation from the demonic powers manifested in Pharaoh and his armies? Is not the “salvation and restoration into the image of God expressed in holiness and perfect love”, so pivotal in the Wesleyan interpretive lens, intrinsically and inextricably concerned with human liberation from demonic powers? Did not Jesus share our humanity “so that by his death he might

destroy him who holds the power to death and free all those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.” Did not Christ in his triumphant mission lead captivity captive and give gifts to men? Is it possible to isolate liberation from a soteriologically-centric theology such as ours?

If scripture is examined, would we find that the mission and ministry of Jesus “anointed by the Spirit” cannot be understood apart from the signs of the in-breaking presence of God’s reign. These signs are:

- a) Preaching of good news to the poor
- b) the proclaiming of freedom for prisoners
- c) restoring of sight to the blind
- d) the releasing of the oppressed
- e) the proclaiming of the year of God’s favor ie- Eschatological Jubilee.

Isn’t Jubilee Theology informing the Bible’s understanding of the events of the day of Pentecost when the Spirit came and the church as “Jubilee Community” was inaugurated as a counter-culture and the reversal of Babel? Is not the concept of the in-breaking of the kingdom of God the integrative center of the New Testament and isn’t this kingdom essentially one of righteousness (justice), peace and joy in the Holy Spirit? As you can see, I am disturbed by the preponderance of these questions in my mind against the background of the palpable absence of any direct address both in the 3rd. article and in this seminal discussion of it in dialogue with the other articles of the church. I am convinced with the Apostle Paul that where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty and that our “analogy of faith” should include “liberation from demonic powers.”

The church in the power of the Spirit, must then as an expression of the kingdom of God be prepared to name the demonic powers. Unmask them, engage them and be, through the Spirit an agent of liberation from them.

If this liberating activity of the Spirit is excluded from the statement and discussion of the “Essential Characteristics and Parameters of a Nazarene Pneumatology”, we Nazarenes may end up in the words of Martin Luther “defending where the devil is not attacking” and thereby becoming unwittingly “allies of the devil”.

The Spirit’s presence is signaled by the generation of a prophetic community (Joel 2; Acts 2). If however, the liberating activity of the Spirit is undervalued, the prophetic presence of the church in the power of the Spirit will be compromised. In the face of demonic oppression in its variegated forms, we will be complicit – false prophets (unwittingly assisting the demonic), or complacent – irrelevant prophets (concerned only with the private, the inner and the other world) or confused - cautious prophets (ineffectively speaking and acting only in the safety of political correctness and veiled ambiguity).

I look forward to the time when the 3rd. article, in response to the liberation needs of the 21st Century will read:

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, guiding into all truth as it is in Jesus ***and liberating people from all forms of demonic powers as a sign of the in-breaking of the kingdom of God.***