

Response to the paper by Dr. Tom Noble for the Nazarene Theology Conference, December 3-5, 2004

I have been struck by the ways in which Dr. Noble has embraced all of the Articles of Faith in his presentation. His “holistic” approach is a tribute both to the nature of our faith and to the breadth of his understanding of the doctrines which define us.

It appears to me that Dr. Noble has worked admirably toward seeking a means of bridging a divide which at times seems so difficult for the church to resolve. In recent years have adopted a series of three “Core Values,” in which we say that we are a Christian people, a Holiness people, and a Missional people. We also claim that “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.”

(MANUAL, p. 5)

However, it seems at times we are not sure what it is we are preserving, and as a result we are somewhat loath to propagate anything at all.

As response to Dr. Noble, I wish first to commend his work as worthy of a far wider reading than this conference. He frames the issues well, and seems to me to provide a basis for a resolution of some of the theological tensions which are at work in the church.

And it also raises some issues that demand much further study and development if we are to “re-mint” our message in such a way that we become compelling evidence of the message we claim is so important to us.

My response will be somewhat disjointed in that I am not critiquing all of the paper in a comprehensive way, since in so many ways I would want merely to applaud it. And yet there are questions that are raised that challenge my thinking in ways I wish to reflect as succinctly as possible.

The foundation for Dr. Noble’s understanding of holiness is in his development of the idea of personhood and the “inter-relationships” of the Trinity. If indeed human beings find their creation in the “image of God” in their participation in intelligent loving relationships after the pattern of those relationships found in the “tri-Personal God,” then the foundation for holiness itself is fundamentally social and relational. It is not possible for the holy life to be whole and healthy, then, if lived individualistically, or in intentional isolation, however moral and upright the life might appear to be. Holiness requires community for its fullest and most healthy expression.

This implies a broader paradigm for understanding the nature of holiness than is held by many. It does not seem to me to demand a different paradigm, but does require a broadening of our understanding of what is intended in the atonement, what the sufferings of Jesus accomplish (both for us and in us) and how we as persons, made in the image of God, are restored to the fullness of that image in the grace of entire sanctification.

If we attain our true humanity only “within the redeemed community (*koinonia*) of the Church,” and if holiness is restoration to community of a kind forfeited in “the fall,” then we must grapple with broadening our understanding both of the nature of “original sin,” and our understanding of the remedy for it. This calls for a reexamination of our common terminologies and uses so that we are able to define the “ontologic” dimensions of original sin. If our very being is deprived of the essential godlikeness in which humankind was initially created, and is therefore depraved, what is the nature of that depravity, and how do we give it sufficient definition that it is an ontologic reality with which the atonement can and must grapple? It must be “real” in the sense that we are “real,” while not having about it a corporeality which attaches itself so interminably to the physical human condition that purity is impossible in this life.

Further, if the nature of holiness is best defined within the context of community, if the corporate nature of both sin and redemption is at the crux of our theology, then we must articulate our understanding of holiness in ways that reflect that context. Perhaps we are now entering an era when we must find new articulations of this concept. We must wrestle with passages that have been familiar but occasionally one dimensional to us and build upon them in order to give new voice, new passion, and new meaning to our theology.

Perhaps this would help us to find greater meaning, for instance, in the cry of Jesus from the cross, “My God, why have you forsaken me?” if the fracturing of community is one

of the most fundamental expressions of sin. Is this what Paul meant when he said that God “made him to be sin (the ultimate alienation) who knew no sin, so that we might become the righteousness of God, (the ultimate restoration to communion)”? At least in this sense it is possible to understand holiness in relational categories.

Dr. Noble emphasizes repeatedly that the origin of holiness is found in God. He, and he alone, is the source. Our desire to be holy persons, our pursuit of the holy life, does not originate in our nobility or in our virtuous longings. “In my hands, no price I bring; but simply to thy cross I cling.”

I am also struck with the necessity, in light of Dr. Noble’s paper, of rearticulating our doctrine of ecclesiology. Our understanding of the Church, spelled out in brief in the most recent addition to our Articles of Faith, must be further studied and expanded upon in our overall articulation of the nature of holiness and the grace of entire sanctification.

The issue of “secondness” has about it the tendency to force us to think in individualistic categories. If we are to defend “subsequence” or “secondness” it must be done with a view toward understanding the corporate nature of sanctification as well as the personal nature of the experience. The Church of the Nazarene has never intended to imply that entire sanctification can be authentically lived in isolation and in individualistic ways. But our understanding of the church has often suffered in our tendency to define “the church” as the organization given substance and form by the IRS as a non-profit entity to

which we make our individual contributions, for which we receive government credit on our income taxes.

While in reality we know it is much, much more than that, we must come to a new level of articulation, of definition, and of participation in the broader and more comprehensive understanding of what it means to be “The Church.”

Since 1908, in the MANUAL of the Church of the Nazarene, we have had a very clear expression of our grasp of the nature of the Church, even before the addition of our Article of Faith on “the Church.” In our Constitution we have we have spoken quite clearly of “The General Church,” (meaning “the Church of God”), “The Churches Severally,” and “the Church of the Nazarene.” The corporate nature of the Church has not escaped us in the formal expressions of our understanding of the church. Perhaps, however, it has been a failure of teaching and preaching that has seemed to allow us such individualistic interpretations of entire sanctification that we so often see our churches fracture, fight, and die, all in the name of some kind of “holiness.” It is crucial that we rediscover our own theology in this area of thought, and find ways to articulate our understanding of holiness and in such a way that it does find relational integrity and concrete expression horizontally and socially as well as vertically and “spiritually.”

Finally, in light of Dr. Noble’s paper I ask, “What is it that unites us as a people?” I believe it is at least a deep conviction, found in the breadth of the Holy Scriptures, that it is possible, in this life, to be a holy person; that our aspiration for holiness, which is a gift

of God, may become appropriation, also as a gift of God. We have a deep longing for the church to nurture and sustain her people, to challenge and enable her people, in holiness and toward holiness, and in fulfillment of the holy mission to which he has called his people.

I have great hope that we will walk our way through the uncertainties. I am confident that we “already-not yet people,” a part of an “already” but at times obviously “not yet” church, are authentically a part of the “already” but “not yet” kingdom. It is in that awareness that we make sometimes tentative claims, but cannot allow ourselves to make such an “uncertain sound” that we have no message and little chance of really changing our world.

Dr. Noble has provided us with thought provoking and beneficial expressions of how we may take the next steps.

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