

USA / CANADA NAZARENE THEOLOGY CONFERENCE
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ENDNOTE: “HOLY PEOPLE”

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I think the only thing more scary than speaking in University chapel is trying to represent the words, and thoughts, and attitudes of a group like this – and trying to do that between 11:00 p.m. and 1:00 a.m. But here goes!

The second three major papers we heard in this conference focused our attention on significant dimensions of the theme Holy People. Stephen Green called our attention to our practices in the church, that are formative of our identity and our life. Tom Noble reminded us that we must hold together the communal and the individual dimensions of what it means to be a holy people. And he gave us a marvelous example of holistic theology, as I said to the small group that I was in, he showed us what it is like to think of five things at once. Andy Johnson and Phil Hamner reminded us of the mission and the telos toward which God’s holy call is leading not only human beings but also all creation, and of the joyous opportunity we have of entering into that mission.

So I come to ask us, “Where do we go from here?” What are the implications of these things that we have heard, that we have read, and of the evaluations that we have given? What do we do with them? What have we accomplished in these, approximately, two days? On the way over this morning, two of my colleagues pointed out something to me that I had not thought of. What they meant was that, in terms of theology conferences, probably this one is unique. Here we heard for the first time a General Superintendent say that the Manual needed to be revised, after that General Superintendent had admitted to the fact that he had not practiced what the Manual said! [laughter out loud]

I think we have seen in this conference, as Al Truesdale has already mentioned, **a concerted effort toward doing theology both for the church and as the church.** I think we have seen college teachers / university teachers move down from what may have been considered in former times an imperious attitude or a stance of superiority, moving down to walking alongside our brothers and sisters in the church. And of committing to thinking carefully and clearly in terms of how theology applies and is lived out in life. We have seen pastors in this conference, as well as laypersons, being engaged in the theological conversation. And we have emphasized the important role that pastors have as the articulators of the theological basis of our church's life and practice. I submit to you that this is a profound accomplishment and transformation. It has not always been that way. I have Al Truesdale's agreement that I can say what I am about to say, a little anecdote, historically. Nineteen sixty-nine – seventy was my first year as a Nazarene Seminary student. That was Al Truesdale's senior year. He was student body president. During that academic year there was a Nazarene Theology Conference in Kansas City. I remember a conversation that I sort of stopped and listened to, I think in the second-floor hallway. A couple of had cornered Al and were chastising him for not working to get Nazarene Seminary students admitted to the theology conference, so that we could hear what was being talked about. And what I am about to tell you, you probably will not believe, but I heard it! Al Truesdale said, "That's not our place. We have no business hearing that. I don't even want to be there." [laughter out loud – Truesdale, "Can I go to the altar now?"] I submit to you, things have changed in these thirty-five years.

We are doing theology for the church and as the church, together. And as Al has already said, we need to celebrate that, and we need to continue that. And we need to continue that in some very significant ways, if we are going to be not only the teachers, but also the practitioners of what it means to be a Holy People where we live, where we participate in the church. **We must go even**

further, and give up what I choose to characterize as a “hermeneutic of suspicion.” Now typically, we apply that to the understanding of biblical texts – at least some critical traditions of biblical scholarship characterize their approach with that phrase. But I use that phrase to characterize our inter-relationships with one another, and our tendency, back where we live, to always think the worst of anybody, if we hear anything about what they have said, or how they have lived, or what they have done, or what their influence is. We need to all repent of that “hermeneutic of suspicion,” if we are to be the holy people of God. We need to be done with the fear of ideas. We need to be done with the kind of idea that we have imbibed from the surrounding culture, the idea or orientation that you can characterize as “conspiracy theory.” We need, rather, to adopt a “hermeneutic of trust.” Trusting one another, loving one another. We can talk about the things we have talked about, and we can read very eloquently written papers, and listen to very passionate presentations. But how do we live together – pastors, laity, professors, and overseers – in the church? We all need to adopt an attitude of humility. And I will say for those of us who stand in the classroom, if in the past we have exhibited in any way, or our collective group has exhibited in any way, an attitude of arrogance, we need to repent and apologize, and embrace anyone and everyone whose hearts and lives we may have wounded or injured. And if I could ask, I would ask also that the people in my church – where I worship, where I go and hear the Word preached, where I join in fellowship in celebrating what God has done for us – if I could ask of pastor and laity in that church to also reach out to those of us who stand in the classroom. And I would ask that all of us, instead of talking about somebody, would simply go and talk to that somebody, and thus act in ways consistent with the instruction of Scripture and the words of Jesus, and consistent with the General Rules of the Church of the Nazarene, that say we are to refrain from certain evil practices, including gossip. This is what it means to do theology as the church, to not simply talk and write and debate. But it means to be submitted to the authority of God through the church,

submitted to one another, expressive of the very nature of the holy God who has for a holy covenant people, of whom we are part. The old-timers used to say, “It’s not how high you jump, it’s how straight you walk when you hit the ground.” I would adapt that to say it’s not how straight you think, its how consistently you live, that is the test of who we are as a holy people.

I think this conference, secondly, says to us we are working to rediscover and restore our own communal heritage. We have talked a lot about the community. We have talked a lot about the forming nature of the community of faith. In our tradition we have statements in our church polity and constitution, and in our commitments to church membership, that identify us as a community of people who, together, are seeking to perfect holiness of heart and life, to use one phrase exactly as it is stated in the Manual. The Church of the Nazarene was conceived originally as a group of people who commit to working together to respond to God’s call, and God’s provision to liberate humankind from the power, and the rule, and the reality of sin. If you read the beginning of the General Rules, if you read elements of the ritual of church membership, you see that those communal dimensions are there. Now you can read them in another way, and I am afraid that we have probably read them in that other way. We have read them, probably, with the idea, “Well, that means all the ‘Dos’ and the ‘Don’ts,’ and that is kind of ‘legalistic’.”

But there is a deeper reality there, that I think we are on the verge of rediscovering. For, you see, this that we have been talking about, the reality and idea of embodied holiness, not simply an internal experience but a lived-out life, that was really what the church was about in its origin. And that is really what the General Rules are about, and that is what the Agreed Statement of Belief is about – embodying, living out, being very concrete in the kinds of things, the qualities of life, the behaviors, the activities, the positive actions – and by the way, in the General Rules, the positive list is far longer

than the negative list. That list includes all of those things that we talk about as compassionate ministry. It is there.

So we are only discovering, and rediscovering, and re-appropriating that which has been our tradition all along – embodied holiness. Now as we rediscover and re-appropriate that tradition, perhaps we need to come up with some new articulations, some new ways of saying, “Here is how, collectively, we commit to living together as the holy people of God.” And we should embrace that, for it is the necessary outcome of the fact that the church exists trans-generationally over time. Society, culture, the world around us, changes. We need to change, not to adapt to that world, but to address clearly how that world impacts the way Christlikeness is formed in all of us, and how we live out that Christlikeness where we are, in the generation of which we are a part. So, **we are rediscovering and re-appropriating our communal heritage.**

The third thing I see that we have accomplished and that we need to carry further is the idea of listening to God’s story in a communal setting. What we have heard during these two days has been what I would call identity formation – identity formation through reading, through praying, through embodying who we see God to be, in the Scriptures. Now that is not speculative theology, that is very practical theology.

As I have read papers and listened to comments, and as I have read the summaries of the group discussions, I have been reminded, in a way, of my own heritage. I grew up in eastern Oklahoma, southeastern Oklahoma, with my maternal grandparents, basically, at least psychologically and emotionally, feeling as a misfit. I went to a Nazarene vacation Bible school in my hometown, at the age of nine. Those people welcomed me. I wasn’t strange, I wasn’t different. They welcomed me and loved me. Moved away, with my grandparents, from our hometown, for about a year and a half. When I heard that we were moving back, the first thought in my mind was, “I’m going back to that

Nazarene vacation Bible school.” That May, I did and at the age of eleven was offered the opportunity to give my heart and life to Jesus Christ.

And that congregation, that church, those people, became the formative reality of my whole life. It didn’t matter who I was with my own family. It didn’t matter who I was at school. It didn’t matter – any of those other things. What mattered was I had found a place where I was told, and I dared to believe, that God loved me. Now, you look at that church, it’s unremarkable in some ways, but yet very remarkable. Those people were not theologically clever. They simply lived as the holy people of God. And the times we spent together were the decisive times of their lives. They lived out, and I caught from them – it was never said to me, but I simply caught from them – that here is where we learn who we are. And we learn who we are in relationship to God. And that is what matters. Nothing else matters, really. And we gather together – three times a week, four times a week, in ten-day revivals – we gather together to reaffirm who we are, to worship the God who has loved us, and to seek to bring others into that fellowship.

What am I talking about? What we must do to carry the truth and reality of what we have talked about and heard in this conference out into the life of our church. We must, as teachers and pastors, and superintendents, work to see that our students and our congregations are influenced, empowered, authorized, identified primarily, preeminently by these relationships that we have together before God. As a department chairman I wrestle with that, working with colleagues that are sensitive to those very issues. We see the need to mentor, to lead, to form, to have students not simply learn with their minds but also live from their hearts. But we recognize also, we cannot do all of that, for in the classroom we are not the church, we are not the congregation. So, it has become increasingly clear to all of us where I live and work, that we have to have an interlocking partnership, an interlocking commitment between university faculty and congregations and pastors. The students at our school

need that ecclesial environment where, together with the people of God, they hear the Word, they live out the task and mission, they respond to the vocation. Listening to God's story communally is really what it is all about. There was a paragraph out of the discussion notes from Small Group 18 that I want to read.

We believe that a major part of our struggle with identity as a denomination is not formed primarily from theological diversity but out of a diversity in practices. Much of what we have heard has argued that a form of sacramentality must be reborn for us. This seems to be a recognition that *we are "practiced" into our theology rather than argued into our practices.* [Italics mine.]

We need to take that and think about it and act upon it. Being formed by listening to God's story communally is all about the practices we do together in the church. And those practices do indeed lead us into theological affirmation. We don't, through theological argument, produce the practices of the holy life. That is to get it backwards.

Fourth, and finally, we have been challenged to see the importance, as the holy people of God, of engaging the world in the Name and with the nature of Christ. One participant in my small group said it this way: "I have learned in the varied cultural settings where I have ministered that sinners don't really need to be told that they are sinners, they need to be told that there is hope." And if we are the holy people of God, embodying the very reality of God's holy love, that will influence the way we interact with the wider world, the way we carry out mission, the way we reach out to include other people. I remember, again from my home church – actually, it was before I was even a part of it – but I remember vividly hearing my grandmother talk about the fact that the owner-operator of the local tavern went to that Nazarene church, and prayed at that altar, and got saved. I can take you back there to eastern Oklahoma, over to the county seat. I can take you to a nursing home where that man is waiting God to finally take him home to heaven. That church did not persuade that man to give his heart and life and Jesus Christ by lecturing him, by telling him the use of alcohol was

sinful and the selling of it was worse. They persuaded him, they influenced him, they created the possibility for the gospel to grasp his life by simply saying to him, “God’s love says to you, ‘Life can be better than this.’”

What would happen if we lived out the love of Christ in our world? Something that I have said in the Sunday school class I teach, and in Wednesday night service with the senior adults is this: If we live this as we deal with or bear witness to those who are in significant stress times and crisis times of their lives, it could eventuate, it could produce something quite astounding. Instead of devoting time, money, and efforts to a political campaign to make abortion illegal, we might rather give ourselves and our efforts and our money to walking alongside those who are in the midst of the crisis of an unwanted pregnancy, expressing to them the very love of God that reaches out to them. They don’t have to be told that they are in a difficult situation. They don’t have to be told that what they have done and the way they have lived is really wrecking their lives. They know that. What they need to hear is a message of hope, a message of help, that God provides for them, that God is made available to them – His caring, supporting, redeeming, forgiving, transforming love. And the only way they will that is if you or I or our brothers and sisters live that out with them.

Now that is just an example: How do we reach out to the world, simply by telling them they are sinners? Well, they are. But I dare say, yes, most of them know that. The thing that is converting, the thing that is gripping, is to hear in the midst of a wrecked, broken human life that there is a God who loves, who heals, who transforms. That is how, as the holy people of God, we need to **engage the world in the Name and with the nature of Christ.**

I have debated in my mind about doing what I now want to do. The words that I am going to now present to you are not mine. They come from the summary of the discussion in Small Group 18. As I read through all of that sheaf of papers, this page and a half summary gripped my heart and

expressed, I was convinced, the truth that we have looked at, that we have honored, as we have thought about the meaning of being the holy people of God. The recorder for Group 18, Bruce Oldham, summarized it in these words.

The nature of the church is an outflow of the nature of God as love, a community formed by the reality of the Trinity. It is the church through which full salvation – justification, sanctification, and holy living – is brought out through the relationship of God to the faith community. The life of the church embodies the ongoing Story of God in our world, a continuation of the biblical narrative in living form. Yet it is true that much of the formation of our congregants is being influenced through interactions outside of direct contact with Scripture within the community. Our task is to bring scripture to the forefront and lead them into a living encounter with God through the Word. What edifies is not just “hanging out with each other,” but being formed together in holiness by the Scriptures.

We regard the pastor not only as prophet and priest, but also as intentional shaper of the community with an inward commitment and an outward focus. The question of methods arises – what we are doing in worship in service, in programs, in pastoral care, in evangelism – so that lost people encounter God through an encounter with His people.

We must be careful not to turn non-believers into projects of evangelism. We tend to postpone fellowship until after conversion, not realizing that it is that very fellowship that draws non-believers into the community of faith. Past generations have experienced regeneration, then came into the church. But a postmodern generation, longing for relationship, will look for relationships through which they can experience truth before committing themselves to it. If we build a relationship in order to share faith, then we don't have a genuine relationship. We must love for the joy of loving others, and trust that proclaiming the gospel will flow out of our love in God-guided ways.

Unfortunately our people tend to believe they have to “have it all down” in their faith and their ability to share it before they venture into the world as a believer. Yet it is in their attempting to talk that they move from the babbling of an infant into one who is able to articulate the faith of the community outside of the church.

Wesleyanism affirms that the vision and doctrine of holiness cannot be separated from life and participation within a small group. Today's church often embraces the message yet strips away Wesley's methodology. How can we commit to intimacy characteristic of the Body of Christ when the church is just one more social gathering within a busy life? While house church movements are experiencing a revival based on the need for fellowship, our churches are characterized by crowded loneliness and busy lives that cannot seem to slow down for the Word of God. We must re-think how we can interact with our people through the practices we use to spiritually form them. Many churches do not have an intentional curriculum for ongoing discipleship (beyond an assimilation model that is linear and plays out). WE must re-think how we allow our people to interact together with the truth they hear and not limit response to the Word to either an alter call or nothing.

What are the essentials of belief in our stream of the kingdom that make our church what it is? What is our common ground and where may we disagree and still function in community? Where does the authority of the church lie, how does authority function within the church, and who defines the authority? How does subjection to the community of faith shape our function within the academy? Who is involved in the decisions regarding essentials such as the articles of faith of the church, and what role do scholars play in the corporate community at large? Does trust characterize or convict our relationship to the authority of the church? How vulnerable are we will to be in allowing for criticism and dialogue regarding our theological positions and methods?

Just as pastors may evaluate the success of their church by false means, we who stand in the classroom may judge our contribution by how many more academics are espoused in their students. The temptations of arrogance and suspicion must be avoided in the interactions of the classroom and the congregation, church leaders and church scholars, and within leadership sectors of the various emphases and ministries of the church.

Strong, committed, and redemptive relationships among the various roles of the church must characterize a holy church intent on producing holy persons among its members. It will take intentional commitments of time and openness to each other to arrive there together.

We not only talk about the holy people of God. Wwe all, in our response to the gospel, in our work of ministry, must be the holy people of God.