

THE ROLE OF DOCTRINE IN ECCLESIAL IDENTITY

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Who are those Nazarenes? While that question may be harder to answer now than it used to be, there is still an answer that resonates strongly with many who own that label. Nazarenes are holiness folk. From the start of our movement, one of the things that has given the Church of the Nazarene its identity and coherence has been the affirmation of the doctrine of holiness and a fairly consistent presentation about what that meant...until recently.

In the last few decades, the doctrine of holiness has lost its force as identity marker for the people called Nazarenes, and this has caused a lot of us great distress. Denominational leaders have urged its recovery, but it is not clear that the average Nazarene churchgoer can articulate the concept well or that you could tell a Nazarene from a non-Nazarene by the way he or she behaves in the world. Lots of people know how we used to talk about and act out holiness, but most of them don't find that way of talking or behaving very helpful any more.

This identity crisis invites us to ask some important questions about the role that doctrinal affirmations play in the identity of a denomination. Is a church defined by its theological affirmations? How do such affirmations shape ecclesial identity, and how should they? For the next few moments, I would like to explore some ideas that might help us answer those questions. I will begin by offering a model of thinking about identity that I have found helpful over the years. That model will then suggest two helpful lines of inquiry concerning the way doctrine serves ecclesial identity, and we will explore each of those in turn, tracing out as we go a few concrete suggestions about what this means for the Church of the Nazarene today.

Identity Constructs and the Three "B"s

Our identities, both individual and corporate, arise out of a complex interrelationship between what we think, what we do, and the way we relate to others. Thus, one way of looking at identity is as a triangle of three "B"s: belief, behavior and belonging. Each of these components is conceptually independent from the others, but in practice we experience their interworking as a seamless whole. Behavior is always influenced by and influences both belief and belonging, which always mutually affect each other. For example, someone who really enjoys playing basketball and spends a lot of time on it (a behavior) might join a league so that she can play with others on a team (a belonging) and learn something new about the game (a

belief), which then goes on to influence how she relates to other members of the team (belonging again) and how she performs on the court (behavior again). So, the basic framework is much tidier than real life tends to be, but it still gives us some good handles for thinking about identity and the various factors that shape it. In particular, when we ask questions about the role of belief in our individual and corporate identity, this model invites us to think about that question by asking two others: how does belief interact with behavior and how does it relate to belonging.

When it comes to the Church, this identity construct of “the Three B’s” is often framed in terms of orthopraxy (right behavior), orthodoxy (right belief), and what we usually refer to as “fellowship” or “communion” (“ortho-koinonia,” perhaps?). While all three necessarily work together to forge an ecclesial identity, different Christian groups often find themselves naturally resonating with one of these identity markers over the other two. Stereotypically, we think of high church traditions emphasizing belonging, liberal traditions emphasizing behavior (at least of the social justice kind), and conservative traditions as emphasizing belief. The Church of the Nazarene, at least in its official pronouncements, explicitly owns the role of all three of these features of ecclesial identity in our statement of our “core values.” We seem to affirm the idea of being “Christian” as a belonging term, making sure folks know we belong to the historic stream of the Christian faith and are not some cult or new group. “Holiness” makes the most sense as a believing term, owning up to the fact that we emphasize things like sanctification as part and parcel of who we are. And we prioritize those actions that are characterized as “Missional” as the kind of behavior we feel most becomes us. Of course, various Nazarenes will emphasize one or the other of these at various times, but it would be hard these days to stand up and say, “I’m a Nazarene, but I think missions is nonsense,” or “I’m good with being a Nazarene, but we should stop talking about holiness.”

However, despite the fact that we officially endorse the role of belief, behavior and belonging, we have to admit that these three can, at times, come into conflict. As we deliberately or inadvertently prioritize one identity marker over the other two, tensions—if not outright contradictions—inevitably arise between them. If our prioritized beliefs do not cohere with our behavior, a problem we usually label hypocrisy, then our identity will be unstable until those two are re-aligned by either a modification of belief or of behavior. Few among us would disagree, I think, that one reason for the decline in holiness belief is a lack of behavior that would uphold that belief. However, if we only affirm those things that are *already* in line with what we do, we

have little impetus to change what we do and thus rob ourselves of possibilities of growth. Thus, the relationship between belief and behavior, particularly on the matter of the doctrine of holiness for our church, needs some deeper exploration.

Likewise, people naturally congregate with (i.e., find their belonging with) those who think like them, and so a lack of agreement on identity-weighted concerns will compromise the unity of any group. Anecdotally, most of us know folks who have left the Church of the Nazarene because they no longer felt they belonged with folks they didn't agree with. However, we've all lived long enough to know that our sense of belonging does not wholly rise and fall on mutual agreement on all matters. Anyone who's been married for any length of time would tell you that deep belonging is still compatible with serious disagreement. And so we will also need to spend some time figuring out what it is about beliefs that draw people together and what it is about them that splits them apart. As we examine each of these tensions—the belief-behavior tension and the belief-belonging tension—in turn, we will see that the issues arise when belief becomes a static reality but they can be resolved by understanding belief as a dynamic one.

Belief and Behavior: The Challenge of Hypocrisy

The idea of integrity is intuitive to most people. Our basic moral wiring includes the idea that affirming one thing but doing another is not good. We are, thus, very bothered by hypocrisy in others, and we prefer not to recognize it in ourselves (cf. Matt 7:3-5). When forced to confront the mismatch between our actions and our words, we experience great cognitive dissonance until we can adjust either our beliefs or our behaviors accordingly (or figure out how to hide the conflict again). So, the general idea that our behaviors should line up with our beliefs seems uncontroversial.

Interestingly enough, however, we give a different priority to belief and behavior, depending on how we look at their interaction. On the one hand, we recognize that “Actions speak louder than words,” and so we give priority to people's implicitly enacted beliefs over ones that are merely verbally affirmed when determining what they *really* believe. However, we don't think that we should merely change our belief to match our behavior when the two don't coincide. Imagine someone who says, “I believe that smoking is harmful to me, but I still smoke; so I probably should just give up the belief that smoking is harmful to me so that my actions and my words will match.” That strikes us all wrong because we want our beliefs to be more than

subjective rationalizations of our behavior. We'd like our beliefs to be objectively true, upheld by some external process of justification. So, even though our actions may say more about what we *actually* believe (a descriptive matter), we want our beliefs to be anchored in reality so that we have a sense of how we *ought to* behave (which is a prescriptive matter). Recognizing this descriptive/prescriptive duality between behavior and belief helps us to think about the role that doctrinal affirmations (like holiness) should play in our ecclesial identity. There are two implications here that are worth the time to draw out.

First of all, because action asserts belief more strongly than words do, only those beliefs we act on actually function as identity markers. Static beliefs that make no difference to our dynamic behavior don't do much. Suppose we agree that Pluto is a dwarf planet. Not much behavior can be motivated by that belief, so our agreement isn't likely to unite us as a group. Likewise, affirming an idea of holiness that only involves a "spiritual" change in the state of our soul but makes no difference to the way we live is useless. For the doctrine of holiness to be an identity marker, it must describe empirical ways in which those who believe it will live differently from those who don't.

We Nazarenes used to understand this. Our forbearers believed that holiness demanded a certain separation, so they expected those who held holiness beliefs to be separate. This separateness was marked out by what they wore, where they would and wouldn't go, and what they would and wouldn't drink. We can argue whether or not these were the *right* behaviors to uphold, but these belief-based behaviors created an identity for our movement. As those distinctive behaviors were lost, so, too, was the identity force of the belief that drove them. When nothing distinguishes the activity of one who believes in holiness from one who does not, the doctrine means nothing to who we are.

The same is true for other facets of holiness. If you say holiness means love and you claim to be holy, but I can't tell that you are any more loving than anyone else, then I cannot believe your claim matters. This is the hypocrisy problem. For too many people for too many years, affirmations of holiness did not result in empirically demonstrable changes in behavior. And so, naturally, they lost their identity weight. If we want that weight back, we will have to re-enact what holiness means. We will have to clearly articulate the behavior consequences of our belief in holiness and then live those consequences out. If we mean separateness, then we have to articulate what that means. If we mean moral purity, we have to describe what that looks like. If

we mean abounding love, then such love should be obvious to anyone watching us. To put it practically, we Nazarenes need to own again as a community our Covenant of Christian Discipleship. Otherwise, our belief in holiness is meaningless.

A second implication of the descriptive/prescriptive duality described above is this. If the proper role of belief in identity is at least in part prescriptive, we will always find ourselves speaking more truth than we have yet lived out. Our beliefs need to push our behaviors forward for those beliefs to matter. If lying *is* wrong, I have to affirm that even if I know myself to be sometimes a liar. The only things that keep this from being hypocrisy are, first, a continuous humble confession of the gap between where I am and where I need to be, and second, an earnest desire to close that gap.

This is as true for a belief like holiness as it is for anything else. Holiness can only function as an identity marker for us if it pushes us beyond what we already do and if we are always willing to confess where we fall short. Somewhere in the history of the Church of the Nazarene's proclamation of holiness, the link between holiness and humility was lost. Where that link was lost, holiness became an descriptive fact ("I am holy") rather than an prescriptive invitation ("I need to become more holy"). When that happened, holiness lost any credibility it could have had. However, if we recognize the prescriptive nature of our doctrinal beliefs, we are free to affirm the fact that we are still moving toward them. There is real progress; that's what makes holiness attractive to people. But progress is different from accomplishment. Thus, our belief in holiness drives our identity through our behavior not because we have already arrived but precisely because we know there is so much more we can be.

So, examining the link between belief and belonging leads us to see that doctrinal affirmations can foster ecclesial identity when they result in actions of an ever-more deepening nature, when they articulate a goal that we can constantly strive toward. This recognition of the dynamic nature of belief coheres nicely with what we see in the interaction between belief and belonging, a matter to which we will now turn our attention.

Belief and Belonging: Boundaries vs. Trajectories

Like the link between belief and behavior, the link between belief and belonging is intuitive to most of us, and we recognize that the interaction runs both ways. We naturally feel at home with those who share our identity-weighted beliefs, even to the point of seeking such

groups out. We also recognize that our pattern of belief often arises out of the group that we belong to. So, we may affiliate ourselves with a particular political party (a belonging) because we agree with their stance on the issues that we find important. However, if you ask children about their opinions on a political issue and get any answer at all, it is likely to be the same one that their parents would have given. Belief leads to belonging, and belonging leads to belief, the weight of each depending on the circumstances. That seems pretty straightforward.

When we translate this concern into a concern about the role of doctrine in ecclesial identity, we notice that people tend to gravitate to churches whose doctrine they agree with, but only if those doctrines are already a part of their own religious identity. Otherwise, people end up agreeing with the doctrines of the groups to which they already belong. Chances are, if you grow up in a Calvinist church, you will believe Calvinist doctrine. If that matters to you, and you move to a new location, you are likely to seek out a similarly-minded group for your new church home. Different doctrines are also given different identity weight by different traditions. To be a Southern Baptist in Arkansas in the United States often demands a certain view of Scripture, but views of Scripture may carry little identity weight among Russian Orthodox believers in Moscow.

The list of identity-weighted beliefs is often laid out articles of faith and in catechisms, sets of defined questions with predetermined answers that serve to identify the doctrinal boundary lines of an ecclesial community. Those wishing to join from the outside must affirm these articles of faith, usually in a membership ritual where those catechism questions are asked. We have just such a ritual in the Church of the Nazarene, and like all such rituals, the questions are designed to be answered with simple affirmations like “I do” or “I will.” One is either inside or outside the community’s boundary lines. It’s a yes-no question.

While there are important claims that distinguish Christian belief away from that of other religions, doctrine is more complex than a set of yes-no questions. Both my Baptist brother and I would answer “yes” to the question “Is Scripture inspired by God,” but I suspect that those “yeses” are not equivalent. Likewise, if you were to ask a relational holiness thinker and an American Holiness thinker, “Do you believe in holiness,” you might get a “yes” from both of them, at which point they might give each other wary looks, wondering if the other person really believed in holiness the *right* way. One could, of course, narrow the question and say “Do you believe in a second, definite work of grace that instantaneously cleanses an individual from the

guilt and power of original sin?” That might not result in the same answer, but it would result in a much tighter boundary line around the community, leaving those inside to think of themselves as the *true believers* who must then either dismiss or convert those who stand outside. In fact, the history of the Protestant movement since the sixteenth century demonstrates a pattern of ever narrowing boundary lines of doctrinal identity along with ever narrowing communities of belonging. If that’s how doctrines are *supposed* to function as identity markers for the Church, then we need to give up the idea that the Church is *one*, holy, catholic and apostolic.

There is another option, however. Instead of boundary lines, doctrines could connect to belonging and serve ecclesial identity as trajectories, or orienting concerns. If one thinks of an identity group as a circle, this would place doctrine as the center of gravity rather than as the boundary line. Centering doctrinal affirmations are not yes-no questions but ones that admit various degrees of orientation or engagement. Consider the way fans of a professional sports team create a sense of belonging for themselves out of what they believe about their team. While the question “Are you a fan of Manchester United?” might distinguish one from fans of other teams, it doesn’t do much to build belonging among ManU fans. Belonging questions are those like, “What are our chances of winning the Premiership this year? What do you think of our new striker? Can we beat Liverpool this weekend?” The mere asking of these kinds of questions engages ManU fans in a common conversation anchored in their love for their team, even they don’t agree on all the answers.

The doctrine of holiness is ideally suited to provide this kind of belonging-reinforcing, trajectory of belief. We care about holiness and want to ask questions like, “Just how far can we be free of sin? Does holiness mean freedom from temptation, too? Is original sin done away with? Is holiness a crisis or a process?” Here, the doctrine of holiness provides a trajectory for a conversation, which actually thrives on differences of opinion and need not at all to be threatened by them. All we need for this kind of unity is an agreement on the basic orientation—we care about holiness—and a general agreement on what counts as a good answer—i.e., something scriptural, experiential, anchored in the tradition, and reasonable. One only need imagine two ManU fans taking opposite sides on a discussion about their new manager and heatedly arguing their points to see how what unites them in belonging—their love for their team and what they think is important for the game—is far stronger than their disagreements over belief. So, too,

strong arguments about holiness can actually be productive in a group that decides that this is one of its strong, doctrinal orienting concerns.

This does not mean there are no boundary lines in doctrine. There will have to be if we want our doctrines to be truth claims and not just things to talk about. If you say Jesus was not God Incarnate, you do stand outside the historic Christian community. Likewise, if we all agree to pursue something that turns out to be false, the belonging fostered by such a belief might not be a good one. Boundaries are still important but more to protect us from error than from each other. Of course, we might still have some noisy debates about what those errors are, but that's because we are all commonly oriented toward truth, and so the right belief-belonging dynamic is still in play.

Conclusion

In conclusion, then, doctrinal affirmations can foster ecclesial identity, but not as abstract ideas or artificial boundary lines. They function positively when they orient a group toward common action and a common conversation. The doctrine of holiness has great potential in this regard. If we can reinvigorate our discussions about the practical consequences of holiness for our day and age and clearly lay out the orienting concerns of the doctrine without pushing for a narrowly defined orthodoxy, then we Nazarenes could once again be seen as “holiness folk” in a way that binds us together and—perhaps even more importantly—makes others want to join in, too.