



THESE THINGS I BELIEVE

THE WRITINGS OF WILLIAM M. GREATHOUSE

Compiled and Edited by

H. Ray Dunning^{and} William J. Strickland

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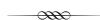
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I

NAZARENE THEOLOGY IN PERSPECTIVE

The following address was given in 1969 at Dr. Greathouse's inauguration as president of Nazarene Theological Seminary. It provides an adequate summary of his understanding of the nature of Nazarene theology. It reflects his vision of how Nazarenes should view their place in the larger Christian faith. We have excerpted those pertinent passages that speak directly to this issue.

THE PREACHING of Christian perfection, with John Wesley as the chief mentor, wooed much of American Christianity during the latter part of the nineteenth century, but in the main, the Methodists were the advocates of this doctrine and experience. Increasingly, the people who espoused this doctrine, which was never meant to be a theological provincialism, found themselves unwelcome in their parent denominations. With *agapeic* hesitation but New Testament poignancy, they formed several small denominations. Three of these pilot projects formed the Church of the Nazarene in 1908—which has since that time welcomed under her wing several other denominations.

Although the denomination's founding fathers established colleges and even so-called universities, along with a few Bible schools, it was not until 1944 that the church decided to establish a graduate school of theology. My subject tonight, as I am formally installed as the seminary's fourth president, is "Nazarene Theology in Perspective."

Let me speak first of the Nazarene theological stance, and say, for one thing, about that stance that it is *catholic*. That is to say, Nazarene theology

stands in the classic tradition of Christian thought. The Church of the Nazarene espouses the Methodist doctrine of entire sanctification and partakes of the Wesleyan spirit. It also adheres closely to the many important biblical and Reformation emphases, which are not distinctive to Wesleyanism. The fifteen articles of its creed draw heavily from the twenty-five articles of Methodism, which were, in turn, basically an abridgment of the thirty-nine articles of the Church of England. Thus, we stand within the classical tradition of the Christian faith.

While the Church of the Nazarene has sometimes been classified sociologically as a sect-type institution that is growing into a denomination, theologically we are not sectarian. The Nazarene *Manual* declares, "The church of God is composed of all spiritually regenerate persons, whose names are written in heaven." It states further,

The Church of the Nazarene is composed of those persons who have voluntarily associated themselves together according to the doctrine and polity of said church, and who seek holy Christian fellowship, the conversion of sinners, the entire sanctification of believers, their upbuilding in holiness, and the simplicity and spiritual power manifest in the primitive New Testament church, together with the preaching of the gospel to every creature.

We thus believe that one is incorporated into the body of Christ by the birth of the Spirit, signed and sealed by water baptism, and that one comes into the Church of the Nazarene by voluntarily associating oneself with a fellowship committed to the special task of promoting New Testament holiness, along with the worldwide preaching of the gospel.

Therefore, while Nazarenes take upon themselves the doctrine and discipline of holiness in their endeavor to realize completeness in Christ, they recognize that not all Christian believers are so persuaded. Positively, they extend the right hand of Christian fellowship to all persons who are in Christ.

Let me say further that Nazarene theology is *conservative*. "Fundamentalist" is a tag commonly attached to any Christian body that takes seriously a particular view of the authority of Scripture. Accordingly, the Church of the Nazarene is sometimes dubbed fundamentalist. Fundamentalism, however, is a historic phenomenon, arising in the first quarter of this century

as a protest against Protestant modernism. Today it represents the radical right of Protestantism, often allied with the radical right in politics. It espouses a view of biblical authority that we may call *biblicism*. As scientism makes a God of science, biblicism tends to make the Bible an idol.

The Nazarene position with reference to biblical authority is more Lutheran than Calvinist. For Luther, Scripture was the cradle for Christ. That is, the primary purpose of the Bible is to preach Christ. Luther's doctrine of Scripture was thus dynamic and soteriological. On the other hand, Calvin stressed the formal side of Scripture as God's written word. Although he balanced this emphasis with the idea of the *testimonium spiritus sancti internum*, Calvin's followers of the radical right have leaned toward a view of authority based on a literalist dogma concerning inspiration, which in turn has created an unnecessary theological struggle among conservatives regarding inerrancy.

Wesleyan thought has historically taken a different tack. Wesley was a preacher and an experiential theologian. In his preface to the *Standard Sermons* he wrote,

I am a spirit come from God and returning to God: just hovering over a great Gulf; til, a few moments hence, I am no more seen; I drop into an unchangeable eternity! I want to know one thing—the way to heaven. . . . God himself has condescended to teach the way: For this very purpose, he came from heaven. He has written it down in a book. O give me that book! At any price, give me the book of God! I have it: Here is knowledge enough for me. Let me be *homo unius libri*. Here then I am, far from the busy ways of man. I sit down alone: Only God is here. In his presence I open, I read his book; for this end, to find the way to heaven.¹

This statement is the throbbing heart of Wesley's theology of the Word; it is God's message concerning the way of salvation.

A word concerning inerrancy or infallibility is appropriate at this point, in view of the current discussion of this topic in conservative circles. During the fundamentalist-modernist controversies of the twenties, the late A. M. Hills wrote the first Nazarene theology, in which he asked, "What is the infallibility we claim for the Bible? It is infallible as regards the purpose for which it was written. It is infallible as a revelation of God's saving love in

Christ for a wicked, lost world. It infallibly guides all honest and willing and seeking souls to Christ, to holiness, and to heaven.”²

This perspective I understand as the Lutheran-Wesleyan-Nazarene doctrine of the Word of God. It is dynamic, as opposed to idolatrous biblicism. It is indeed a conservative position, but it is not fundamentalist. The enlightened Nazarene position seems to be that of open-minded conservatism.

The heart of this conservatism is the answering conviction that our salvation is *sola scriptura* (“by Scripture alone”)—that the living Word of God is the fount of all saving truth. Thus, Nazarene theology “bows to the truth of revelation.”³ The entire Nazarene theological enterprise must be carried on in obedience to God’s word found in Scripture and Christ.

In addition to being catholic in spirit and conservative, Nazarene theology is *evangelical*. We stand solidly with classical Protestantism in asserting that salvation is not only *sola scriptura* but also *sola gratia*, *sola fide* (“by grace alone, through faith alone”). With James Arminius, we ascribe “to grace the commencement, the continuance, and the consummation of all good.”⁴ This grace is not only God’s gracious favor toward us in Christ but also the gracious assistance of the Spirit without which we can neither turn to God to be saved nor persevere in his service. Human beings had fallen away from God as the true end of their existence and are therefore inescapably self-centered. They have neither inclination nor power of themselves to return to God; left to themselves, their only freedom is the freedom to sin. God has not, however, left his creation to itself. Through the atonement, a sufficient measure of grace is given to all persons to enable them to return to God and be saved. If death has come upon all men through the disobedience of one (the first Adam), “so by the righteousness of one [the last Adam] the free gift [of God’s prevenient grace] came upon all . . . unto justification of life” (Rom. 5:18). In Wesley’s words, “The grace or love of God, whence cometh our salvation, is free in all and free for all.”⁵

This concept of universal prevenient grace, as opposed to irresistible grace for the elect, is a distinctly Wesleyan-Arminian contribution to theology. It seeks to preserve the scriptural paradox of divine grace and human freedom. By the free gift of God’s grace, I may respond to God’s proffer of salvation through Christ and find life; but, like the Pharisees, the stoners of

Stephen, I may resist the Holy Ghost and be damned. If I am saved, it is by his free grace; if I am lost, it is by my own willful perversity.

This dual emphasis is the paradox of divine sovereignty and human freedom. Only by holding these apparently contradictory truths can we ascribe to God the rightful glory for our salvation without denying the undeniable fact of our own solemn responsibility before the Almighty. When finite reason tries to resolve the tension between these two poles of revealed truth, it lands theology either in a position of absolute predestination on the one hand or of Pelagian humanism on the other. Would we not do well to leave the matter in paradox, as Scripture does?

In summary, therefore, we may say that the Nazarene stance is catholic (as opposed to sectarian), conservative (as opposed to fundamentalist), and evangelical (as opposed to Pelagian).

Second, let me speak of our distinguishing tenet, Christian perfection. It is our abiding conviction that God raised up the Church of the Nazarene for a special purpose, to bear witness to the grand truth of Christian perfection. The preamble to our Articles of Faith reads,

In order that we may preserve our God-given heritage, the faith once delivered to the saints, especially the doctrine and experience of [entire] sanctification as a second work of grace, and also that we may cooperate effectually with other branches of the church of Jesus Christ in advancing God's kingdom among men, we, the ministers and laymen of the Church of the Nazarene . . . do hereby . . . set forth . . . the Articles of Faith, to wit . . .

Then follow our fifteen articles. That is to say, within the framework of evangelical Protestant faith, we declare that our distinguishing tenet is entire sanctification.

Our cardinal doctrine is not Christian perfection but redemption through Christ in terms of the New Testament kerygma. Within the kerygmatic proclamation, however, we lay special stress upon the fact that "for this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil" (1 John 3:8). We believe that the atonement deals not simply with the fruit but also with the root of sin, not merely with the symptoms of man's moral disease but with the disease itself.

While we accent the work of full redemption, we do not do so in such a way as to place ourselves outside the mainstream of Christian tradition. Our position is not sectarian. In common with historic Christian faith, we believe that sanctification is the other side of the coin of justification, that in its broadest sense it is the total process of moral and spiritual renewal, which begins at the moment of conversion and continues to glorification. With John Wesley, however, we believe that within this process there is a second moment, a distinct and critical stage of Christian faith and life, when by the Holy Spirit God cleanses the believer's heart from the root of sin and perfects the believer in love. This critical act of God we call *entire sanctification*.

In Romans we are reminded that our Christian existence in the Spirit is an existence in the time between the times (that is, in this present time between Pentecost and the Parousia). By the grace of God we may be no longer "in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in" us (Rom. 8:9). But we are still in a body that is unredeemed, and we must suffer the infirmities of the flesh—the radical effects of sin in our bodies and minds, the scars from past sinful living, our prejudices that hinder God's purposes, our neuroses that bring emotional depressions and cause us at times to act out of character, our temperamental idiosyncrasies, our human weariness and fretfulness, and a thousand faults our mortal flesh is heir to. As St. Paul reminds, "We have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us" (2 Cor. 4:7).

A full-orbed doctrine of Christian perfection must place the truth of holiness within the framework of this present age, which is characterized by these infirmities of the flesh. Thus, Paul declares that we have been saved by hope—the hope of that final stroke of sovereign grace that shall bring to consummation that grand work of sanctification that began when we were converted. This complete transformation is the hope of the resurrection. Wesley would agree with the late Karl Barth, who comments on this Romans passage: "If Christianity be not altogether restless eschatology, there remains in it no relationship whatever to Christ."⁶ Thus, Wesleyanism is in perfect accord with "the theology of hope."⁷

I realize that many people scorn such a doctrine of imperfect perfection. To deny, however, the possibility of being filled with the Spirit and know-

ing God's perfect love because we are still finite creatures subject to the limitations of earthly existence, is to miss something that is vital to New Testament Christianity. We therefore subscribe to the Wesleyan paradox of Christian perfection. The full truth is not gained by removing the tension between the two poles (perfect / not yet perfect) but by holding these two truths with equal emphasis. Only thus does the Christian life flower into Christlikeness.

We devoutly believe that God has entrusted to the Church of the Nazarene the grand depositum of this New Testament teaching of heart holiness. If we cease to groan after this perfection in Christ, if we fail to make this emphasis the focus of salvation truth in our preaching, if we do not pay the full price for Pentecost in our individual experience and in the life of the church, we will forfeit our Nazarene birthright and our very reason to exist. Most tragic of all, we will fail God, who commissioned us to spread scriptural holiness over these lands.