

Consumer Versus Commitment Based Congregations in the Church of the Nazarene, 1992-1996: Sociological and Theological Reflections

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As most of you are aware, in 1972 Dean Kelley wrote a groundbreaking book entitled *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing*. In that work he argued that American churches which had a unique sense of calling and mission in the world and which were stricter with regard to demands placed on members (i.e. conservative churches) were growing faster than those with more of an ecumenical spirit and with lower expectations of commitment levels placed on members (i.e. liberal or mainline churches). His intention was to show that distinctiveness and strictness were the variables that made a church stronger and in turn that internal strength was an antecedent to growth.

Kelley's work stirred a great deal of interest and controversy. He is credited with triggering a whole generation of research exploring the variables linked to church growth (and decline) including additional testing of his conservative/liberal church hypotheses. In 1979, Hoge and Roozen edited a volume entitled *Understanding Church Growth and Decline* which represented extensive research in the area. In their work, they reported that contextual factors such as the demographic and socio-economic conditions surrounding churches were primarily responsible for growth and decline rather than distinctiveness or strictness.

Kelley's work stood defrocked until the middle '90's when a researcher by the name of Laurence Iannaccone resurrected Kelley's thesis with new support for the notion that strictness is identified with strength and growth in an article printed in the *American Journal of Sociology*. ("Why Strict Churches Are Strong", March 1994: 1180-1211.) Since then, the debate has been raging.

In fact, the debate has spread from the field of sociology of religion into the study of American church history through the work of Roger Finke and Rodney Stark (*The Churching of America, 1776-1990*; cf. Philip K. Goff, "Spiritual Enrichment and the Bull Market: Balancing the Books of American Religious History," *Religious Studies Review* 22:2 (1996) 106-112). Finke and Stark apply the Kelley hypothesis to the understanding of long-term shifts in religious market share within American denominations. Their data indicate that the "church-sect" process is *the* fundamental dynamic of American church history: "Since at least 1776 the upstart sects have grown as the mainline American denominations have declined. And this trend continues unabated, as new upstarts continue to push to the fore" (p. 237). Finke and Stark invoke rational choice theory to account for such dynamics. Their conclusion mirrors that of Kelley:

Humans want their religion to be sufficiently potent, vivid, and compelling so that it can offer them rewards of great magnitude. People seek a religion that is capable of miracles and that imparts order and sanity to the human condition. The religious organizations that maximize these aspects of religion, however, also demand the highest price in terms of what the individual must do to qualify for these rewards. Moreover, because of the long-term exchange relations that religious organizations require, people are forever paying the costs in the here and now while most of the rewards are to be realized elsewhere and later. As a result, humans

are prone to backslide, to get behind on the payments. . . . Thus, other things being equal, people will always be in favor of a modest reduction in their costs. In this fashion, humans begin to bargain with their churches for lower tension and fewer sacrifices. They usually succeed, both because it is those with the most influence—the clergy and the leading laity—who most desire to lower the level of sacrifice and because each reduction seems so small and engenders widespread approval. No doubt most Methodists were glad to be permitted to go to the circus, just as most Catholics probably welcomed the chance to skip mass from time to time. Thus does the sect–church process ensue.

There comes a point, however, when a religious body has become so worldly that its rewards are few and lacking in plausibility. When hell is gone, can heaven's departure be far behind? Here people begin to switch away. Some are recruited by very high tension movements. Others move into the newest and least secularized mainline firms. Still others abandon all religion. These principles hardly constitute a wheel of karma, but they do seem to reveal the primary feature of our religious history: the mainline bodies are always headed for the sideline. (p. 275)

If Finke and Stark are correct, strictness, with its concomitant demand for commitment, appears as a central, if not *the* central factor in the massive shifts between "religious firms" within American church history.

The Church of the Nazarene has been one of the denominations widely used in the research presumably because of its representative distinctiveness and correspondent growth. To our knowledge, research testing the various hypotheses believed to be related to growth have not been widely explored internally for the church. Therefore, in this project, we have set out to examine the relationships of three variables suggested in the literature, "distinctiveness/strictness", "sense of mission", and "resource commitment" with church growth for congregations in the Church of the Nazarene. Kelley's work suggested the following three hypotheses:

- 1) local churches whose members generally have a high degree of adherence to corporately shared norms and values (rules) will be stronger and exhibit long term growth more than churches whose members have a lower degree of adherence to corporately shared norms and values;
- 2) local churches whose members generally identify with a clear sense of the church's mission in and to the world and commit to that mission through evangelism and/or compassionate ministry will be stronger and exhibit long term growth more than churches whose members do not have a clear sense of the church's mission; and
- 3) local churches whose members generally have a high degree of commitment of time and money will be stronger and exhibit long term growth more than churches with lower degrees of member commitment.

Methodology

In 1994, the Church of the Nazarene distributed its Quadrennial Church Census to all pastors in the United States. Pastors were instructed to give an assessment of their congregation on a variety of church-related issues. In reviewing the instrument, we determined that there were questions on the census form that were reasonably good measures of our hypotheses. The great advantage of being able to use the data was the comprehensive nature of the research cohort (N=3542) besides the fact that the data had already been collected and inputted. With the capable help of Rich Houseal in the Church Growth Office, the data were put into usable form and matched for each church with church membership records for the years 1992–1996. With the additional assistance of Greg Crow (PLNC professor and son of famous sociologist, Dr. Kenneth Crow), the data were analyzed and tested examining correlations between the selected questions and church membership growth.

Results

The questions selected as indicators of the first hypothesis (distinctiveness/strictness) were:

“How strong is this congregation in each of the following traits? Commitment to doctrines of the church. Commitment to the Nazarene denomination.”

On the face of it, these questions measure a commitment and loyalty orientation in the local church. Since the Church of the Nazarene as a whole is judged by “panels of experts” in the literature to be high on distinctiveness (Iannoccone, *AJS*: 1195) we are reasoning that churches in which the pastor assesses the congregation as being committed to the doctrines of the church and loyal to the denomination will be more distinctively “Nazarene”. We also would expect that in pastor’s responses to the questions, loyalty to the denomination and to its doctrine would also be an indicator of strictness (i.e. loyalty to the Church’s distinctive norms and rules).

We suspect that churches are growing (or declining) for a variety of reasons. We did not expect that the strictness hypothesis alone would be sufficient in today’s religious economy to explain church growth. In fact, we have a suspicion that much of the growth being reported in evangelical churches is not so much related to strength and commitment as much as it is to consumer growth. Growth driven by addressing the “felt needs” of the consumer is likely to contribute less to strength of a local congregation because it attracts adherents primarily for self-serving reasons (“what can the church provide me?”) rather than around a commitment orientation (“what is this church’s mission in the world and how am I, as part of the church, called to participate in that mission?”).

In short, is the local church community ultimately defined as a place where the individual congregant’s preferential needs are served or is the church a Kingdom community in which the disciple is called into sacrificial service? In our opinion, arguments that it is both are increasingly difficult to justify in the light of the disparity between consumer and commitment orientations in the local church with the resultant effects of each.

With this in mind, though we suspect that churches are growing for different reasons, over the long run, those that are consumer oriented we expected to be weaker and exhibit more short term growth and then decline while churches oriented more around commitment we expected

to be stronger and show more long-term growth. So, we expected to find a correlation between distinctiveness and growth.

The actual correlations were surprising, that is, surprisingly low. The correlation between the pastor's assessment of the congregation's commitment to church doctrines and local church membership growth over the years 1992-1996 was 0.0538. The correlation between commitment to the Nazarene denomination and growth was 0.0329. No correlation.

The questions selected as measurements for the second hypothesis (identification with the outreach mission of the church) were, How strong is this congregation in each of the following areas?

1. Commitment to mission of the church.
2. Vision for outreach.
3. Evangelism
4. Ministry to the immediate neighborhood.
5. World Missions.

In Hadaway and Marler's response to Iannoccone ("Response to Iannaccone: Is There a Method to this Madness?". *JSSR*, 1996, 35 (3): 217-225), they argue that a congregational commitment to outreach is a stronger predictor of growth than strictness (nearly twice as strong in their model). It is also arguable that commitment to mission is directly associated with strictness and distinctiveness. Part of Kelley's original thesis was that the degree to which a religious group understood itself to be uniquely called of God influenced its ability to call its members to participate in the mission of the group. With a unique calling came a sense of urgency of mission. So, we expected to find that local churches which were more mission oriented would be growing more rapidly than those which were not.

The actual correlations were surprising, that is, surprisingly low. The correlations between the pastor's assessment of the different variables and church membership growth were as follows:

Commitment to the Church	0.1049
Vision for outreach	0.1157
Evangelism	0.1017
Ministry to the immediate neighborhood	0.1122
World Missions	0.0593

Curses, foiled again! No correlation... One more chance.

The questions selected to measure the third hypothesis (resource commitment) were: Thinking of the active adult members of this congregation, what proportion are well described by each of the following?

Thinking of the active adult members of this congregation, what proportion are well described by each of the following? Tithe - Are involved in ministry.

In a soon to be published article by Iannaccone, Olson and Stark, the authors present evidence for the operational dimension of strictness as it relates to church growth. They show that stricter churches are stronger because they ask for and receive greater sacrificial giving of time and money. They then argue that these resources present in stricter churches are causally related to growth. Churches where there is a larger pool of financial and human resources grow faster.

The actual correlations were ... by this time not surprisingly... low. The correlation between the pastor's assessment of the two variables and church membership growth were as follows:

tithe	0.0338
involved in ministry	0.0553

Again, no correlation!

Analysis

With correlations this low, by now we are looking for someone to blame! Can it be that there is no correlation in the Church of the Nazarene between outreach and growth? Between commitment and growth? Surely there must be some mistake!

Let's discuss a couple possibilities. First, the assessment of pastors judging their respective congregations, while being intimately acquainted with their subjects, they probably are not very objective in their views. Any of a number of things could feasibly bias their judgments. We would have hoped with the very large sample size that biases would have evened out. But there is the possibility that structural biases are present.

The second possible explanation has to do with using church membership as a measurement of growth. As churches age, they inevitably accumulate a larger number and percentage of inactive members unless careful attention is given to keeping the membership roll current. In a large sample, it might be expected that many membership lists are not current and contain large numbers of inactive members. For obvious reasons, newer churches are likely to have fewer inactive members on the list (they haven't been given as much time to accumulate dead wood!) Growth, then, as measured on a percentage basis, is likely to be lower for older churches. This may, in fact, be a factor in comparing older main line denominational growth statistics with the newer evangelical churches. The fact that inactive members exist on church rolls contributes "noise" to the data. If a congregation has 100 active members and 100 inactive, then the results of the committed efforts of the 100 active will not show up in church growth percentages as much as if the 100 inactive were not on the rolls.

In light of the research by Iannaccone, Olson and Stark, even changing the statistic to average attendance would not "get at" the key factor. "Church attendance is merely the tip of the resource iceberg. Regular attendance is well and fine, but not to be confused with the surplus resources that an organization needs to thrive. Researchers need to look closer, so that it will be possible to speak not only of the amount of time that members devote to an

organization but also the particular activities they have undertaken." Commitment based congregations should generate a "resource surplus"

Third, Iannaccone and Finke and Stark all persuasively argue that the reason Hoge, Roozen, et. al. did not find much variance of church growth on strictness was because their research was carried out within denominational bodies rather than between or across the board. In his 1996 article, "Reassessing Church Growth: Statistical Pitfalls and their Consequences", Iannaccone argues that variance within religious groups is not sufficient to indicate the dynamics Kelley was suggesting. Even though there is considerable variance with regard to strictness within the Church of the Nazarene, the very fact that people are Nazarenes clusters them together around a certain distinctiveness that separates them generally from the world and from the Presbyterians. The only way that variance shows up is when between group or across group measures are taken into account. In this case, we may have replicated the work of Hoge, Roozen, et. al. in not finding variance with regard to strictness within the Church of the Nazarene, which, however, may not indicate that strictness is unrelated to growth.

For a fourth possibility, we would like to return to the discussion of consumer versus commitment oriented churches. We believe it is conceivable that the lack of correlations between commitment oriented variables and growth means that growth is correlated with something else — namely consumer oriented variables. This would mean that the engine behind growth in the denomination at this point would not be tied so much to loyalty, commitment, mission, personal involvement of members, but rather to churches finding ways to respond to the needs of religious consumers. If so, what would this say about the essential nature of the church itself? Is there the possibility that our need to grow could put pressure on us to adopt means that fundamentally change the nature of the New Testament Church? As Philip Kenneson writes:

"With many local churches viewing other local churches as their competitors, due in part to the consumer mentality that 'church shoppers' evince, many congregations feel enormous pressure to offer an ever expanding variety of programs and services in order to attract and retain customers to their own version of the ecclesial supermarket. The result often looks less like the 'one holy, catholic, and apostolic' church than it does the competing interest groups which fragment American social and political life...In short, the whole marketing orientation that (is)... espoused all but completely denies that the christian life calls for a radical transformation and reorientation of one's whole way of thinking/acting. Instead of assuming that membership in the body of Christ entails far-reaching claims on our lives, the church marketers assume that, at least in principle, the church can be made relevant and desirable to almost anyone if we simply know how to market it effectively. "

("Selling {Out} the Church in the Marketplace of Desire". *Modern Theology* 9:4 October 1993: 338-339)

But is there any support for the notion that much of the growth in our churches is consumer driven rather than oriented around commitment? In the May 1995 ANSR Poll, respondents were asked to indicate how important different factors were for them in their decision to join the church. The list of top priorities was noticeably consumer-driven as a whole. The distinctive commitment characteristic of the denomination, "holiness teaching," appears in the

list in the fifth position, well below the “meaningfulness of sermons” and the “friendliness of the congregation.”

Warm and friendly congregation	57.2
Meaningful sermons	57.2
Impressed by pastor’s character	54.0
Congregation seemed spiritually alive	51.7
Impressed by holiness teaching	44.3
Appreciated youth program	35.4
Appreciated children’s program	35.0
Looking for active Sunday School class	33.3
Congregation had clear sense of purpose	30.0
Children enjoyed congregation activities	28.9

Items like, “I was looking for a church where I could serve” or “I was impressed by how active the church was involved with compassionate ministries” were further down the list. While it is somewhat to be expected that people give consumer-oriented responses to questions regarding why they joined the church, it may also be that the Church of the Nazarene corresponds well to the shift towards a consumerism that seemingly characterizes the current historical situation in American evangelical Christianity.

Conclusion

The above data could be read to disconfirm the Kelley/ Iannaccone thesis in favor of Hoge and others. Yet perhaps it is no surprise that an intradenominational study reproduces other intradenominational studies. Read, however, within the context of broader socio-historical trends of American Christianity, the data may be extremely suggestive in capturing the Church of the Nazarene at a specific point in its history.

Finke and Stark have argued persuasively that the movement from “sect” to “church” is the central axis of American church history. Sectarian movements generate sufficiently coherent social constraints to provide maximum social benefit for their members, as well as socio-religious commitment that provides surplus resources that allow their churches to grow. Yet overtime, through small increments, sects move toward a churchly existence which reduces the perceived difference between the host culture and the sect. This lessening of tension may in the short run increase adherence — vestiges of sectarian commitment without the obstacles of sectarian boundaries. Yet in the long run, historical evidence suggests that such movement leads to emptying the sect-turned-church of its potential to compete in the religious marketplace. “Free-riders,” consumers of rather than contributors to, the church’s resources

"weaken the group's ability to create collective religious goods in that their inactivity devalues both the direct and the promised religious rewards by reducing the 'average' level of commitment." (Finke and Stark, p. 253). Ultimately the church and the society so overlap that the church possesses no distinctiveness that would give persons reason to belong, let alone contribute to it. The mainline becomes the sideline.

Within this broader perspective, the above data suggest that the Church of the Nazarene has moved well into this sect-church cycle including the possibility of moving from a commitment to a consumerist base. While sociologists have historically understood the denomination to be high in 'distinctiveness,' to the degree that a commitment orientation is indicative of distinctness, the above data suggest that this may no longer be the case. The Church of the Nazarene in the USA may have quietly moved from "established sect" status toward a churchly existence with characteristically little tension with the host society.

Current growth, therefore, could be the combination of a consumer orientation with the residual effects of its earlier — rather than contemporary — distinctiveness and its concomitant, commitment. In so doing, the church may be accumulating "free-riders" in this consumerist growth. If so, one may predict that such a consumerist growth would ultimately — and ironically — lead to the decline of the denomination, killed, so to speak, by its own success.

Such contrarian reasoning must remain, at this point, strictly hypothetical, fraught with all the problems that occur when sociologists turn futurologists. The answer will be found only in retrospect, when the data has turned from the province of sociologists of religion to church historians of late twentieth century American Christianity. Nonetheless, the possibility is haunting. After all, it was only a small minority, the foremothers and fathers of the American holiness movement, that correctly saw that the apparent social triumph of American Methodism by 1850 was actually the beginning of its decline.

An Unscientific Theological Postscript

Perhaps it is dangerous combining theological reflections with sociological data, especially data as ambiguous as that found above. Yet the current use of sociological/marketing data to promote a specific theological agenda within the church demands not only questioning of its sociological theory, but also its underlying theology. Given that theological shifts must occur to legitimate the social re-placement of the sect as church, theological reflections must also accompany the social-historical data in order to resist such a re-placement.

The Church of the Nazarene represents a vintage example of American Christianity. Therefore, it easily falls within the sect-church axis that characterizes American Christianity. Yet American Christianity has its own theological distinctives, distinctives which may explain its movement along the sect-church axis.

The doctrine of salvation, the soteriology, of American Christianity, has been highly individualistic, separated from a doctrine of the church, an ecclesiology, from its Puritan inception. In salvation, the covenant of grace, the Puritans understood that the sinner moved from sin to salvation to service; in its federal covenant, God called individual nations (not the

church) to be God's people. (see Harry Stout, *The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England* [New York: Oxford University, 1986], p. 19) Salvation was an individual affair; ecclesiology was replaced by a nationology. The two covenants were distinct, except that the more individuals who experienced salvation increased the righteousness of the nation, thus conferring divine blessing on the nation. Individual salvation, therefore, theologically supported the development of an American civil religion.

These theological commitments, unique in the history of Christianity, became the well from which most Protestant American Christianity has imbibed. Yet these categories also set into motion the sect–church axis analyzed by Finke and Stark. Without an ecclesiology to stand against the society, theological emphases easily moved from individual to societal salvation, especially as a group moved from the margins of society to the center of power.

John Howard Yoder has provided a helpful theological typology to understand these positions (John Howard Yoder, "A People in the World," *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical* [ed. by Michael G. Cartwright; Grand Rapids, William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1994], pp. 65–101). On one side are the spiritualists, the "sect," those who pursue "the true inwardness of faith alone," seeking true Christian assurance "neither supported nor diluted by outward marks" (pp. 69–70), that is, the covenant of grace. On the other side are the "theocratic humanists," the "church." Here, "the word of God, as spoken by the 'prophet' to the whole society, brings about the renewing of the society according to the will of God" (p. 70), that is, the federal covenant. In neither case is the church necessary to salvation — the locus of God's salvation is either in the individual or in the society. Both, therefore, support the society either directly (church, the theocratic humanists) or through privatization (the sect, the spiritualists). No theological checks prevent the movement from one pole to another; the location of God's activity simply moves from the individual to the society, and the church follows this understanding. While the sect–church axis may appear elsewhere in history, it is particularly endemic to American Christianity.

Obviously, the Church of the Nazarene has historically stood on the spiritualist side of Yoder's typology. Socially marginal until recently, the holiness movement understood the primary locus of God's activity to be within the individual. Yet the Wesleyan Anglo–Catholic heritage of the Church of the Nazarene bequeathed it an implicit ecclesiology as well, in which it understood itself as "a glorious church without spot or wrinkle" over against a fallen, sinful "world." In this it shared theological commitments with a third position, a third point on a triangle in Yoder's typology: the believer's church:

Our third type, the believers' church, stands not merely between the other two but over against both of them. With spiritualism it castigates the coldness and the formalism of official theocratic churchdom, but it corrects that formalism not by seeking to have no forms at all, nor by taking refuge in para–churchly forms, but rather by developing those forms that are according to Scripture and that are expressive of the character of the disciples' fellowship.

With the theocratic vision, it rejects the individualism and the elite self–consciousness of the spiritualist. But the social form that it proposes as an alternative to individualism is not the undifferentiated baptized mass of the reformed *corpus chrisitanum* but the covenanted

fellowship enjoyed with others who have pledged themselves to following the same Lord. (p. 72)

This position possesses theological resources, in tying together its doctrine of salvation with ecclesiology, to resist the seemingly inevitable flow from sect to church. The resource ultimately depends upon a doctrine of sanctification of believers which sets the church apart from the world.

Thus at the base of our concern is a theological apologia that connects our sociology with an ecclesiology, and thereby calls the Church of the Nazarene out of the religious consumerism of contemporary American evangelicalism to our holiness roots. Yet we ultimately find these roots, not in individual religious experience, but in the body of Christ, the church, a sociological reality distinct from the "world." Much like Wesley anchored both his doctrine of sanctification and his method of evangelism in the Methodist societies, a distinct, sustainable evangelism, a holiness evangelism, may take place as we call congregations to commitment to the sanctifying Christ within the context of the particular practices of the church that separate it from the world — practices like compassion, reconciliation, concern for the poor, inclusivity of various ethnic groups within specific congregations, the one body of Christ. If we would do so, we would look amazingly like our early Methodist and holiness foremothers and forefathers.

The present consumerism devoid of an adequate Christian ecclesiology that runs American Christianity is theologically and sociologically deadly. God has continually raised up new, faithful movements within God's church, as others face God's judgment and dwindle. Perhaps we might re-tradition ourselves with the resources of our heritage so that we might faithfully serve our Lord and His creation well into the twenty-first century.