

The Dilemma of Delimitation Concrete Definition Versus Substitution of the Letter for the Spirit

Ron Benefiel, Ph.D.

It is with a sense of awe and confusion that I embark on the journey of fulfilling my obligation of this project. The awe emerges out of the challenge of the subject matter which seems to me to be so relevant to where we find ourselves in the Church of the Nazarene these days. The confusion is simply not knowing where to begin. So with a sad farewell to the flying toasters on my computer screen which have been such good company for my jumbled brain, I dive in.

Statement of the Problem

O'Dea's institutional dilemma of delimitation begins innocuously enough with the challenge of defining religious ideas. It seems rather evident that as religious groups emerge, they tend to gain at least some of their identity from core religious ideas. These core ideas may be new theological paradigms, new perspectives on traditional notions, or ideas centered on reform, calling a religious movement back to previously held ideas. In many cases, the new religious movement is faced with the challenge of defining exactly what the religious ideas are.

The core ideas themselves may be responded to affectively with a degree of consensus when delivered in an address by a charismatic leader. However, the key concepts must be defined in some detail to ensure a uniform understanding of the core religious ideas. Without this definition the zealous new believers are likely to disperse believing themselves to be unified around a cause only to discover down the road that their understanding of the core religious ideas varies significantly from a person to person. And what could be of even greater concern, without definition of religious ideas, the new religious movement is vulnerable to the infiltration of ideas from the outside or emergence of aberrant ideas from within. As O' Dea points out, "...in history of the Christian church we see continual process in which doctrine is defined in response to interpretations felt to be heretical." So, the critical necessity of the H. Orton Wiley's of any religious movement becomes apparent.

But now the movement is faced with another challenge. Just because the religious ideas are developed into a theological framework is no guarantee that the depth and the complexity of the theological notions will be fully comprehended by the people in the pews. The emergence of orthodoxy may serve as a theological rudder of the theologically educated, but may seem beyond the immediate grasp of the layperson when it comes to application in everyday life. If the religious ideas are really going to be accessible to the masses, they must be spelled out still further. The philosophical and theological must be made thoroughly practical. "I know we are to be holy people, but what does that mean today in the way I talk, look, act, and think?" Enter the necessity of prescriptions—rules.

For any religious group, the process of moving from principle to prescription is rather precarious. At their best, religious principles are universal and timeless. They are true for all people for all time. However, prescriptions are not necessarily universal or timeless. They are

specific applications of the core religious ideas for a people in a given time and place. As an extension of holiness, the principle of modesty can mean many different eras. A General Assembly debate on "mixed bathing" must have seemed incredulous to delegates from Hawaii. Prescriptions in the past forbidding playing with dice because of their association with gambling may appear to be amusing or irrelevant to a group of today's youth gathered around a table engaged in a game of "Trivial Pursuit". Nevertheless, part of the point is that the prescriptions do mean something very important to the people who originally embrace them as an expression of their religious faith and commitment in their time and place. Basic rituals, beliefs and rules become the symbols of core religious ideas lived out in their daily lives. Those rituals, beliefs and rules have meaning for their observers which is, at least initially, integrally tied to their religious faith and commitment.

Now comes the real challenge. O'Dea describes it as "concretization". The layperson may not be able to completely understand the theological intricacies of the core religious ideas, but he or she does understand the prescriptions. With this, there is the danger that the rules will move from the realm of being equated with those principles to the rules will move from the realm of being applications of basic principles to the realm of being equated with those principles. Potentially, in the minds of some of the people, "not going to the show" moves from being an operational definition of holiness for a people in a time and place to a universal principle for all time and all people. It becomes equated with being Christian. As time passes and culture changes, the prescriptions may lose some of its meaning relative to the culture. What was at one time a meaningful symbol of holiness in a given culture, may become more of a revered tradition which while held to tenaciously by some, seems to outsiders, newcomers and youth to be something of an irrelevant artifact. But for many who have a longer history in the religious group, the rules are concretized. They take on a "life of their own". Principle and prescription become one and the same.

A similar process occurs with rituals, symbols and beliefs called "infantalization". Rituals, symbols and beliefs which were originally appropriate representations of core religious ideas also deteriorate. As they take on a life of their own as well, "magic" is introduced to the religious group. Hence tithing, an application of the principle of financial stewardship, can take on magical dimensions such that if one does not tithe, some evil may occur. Or if one tithes double, it may be believed to magically move divine providence in such a way that additional material gain is realized. Praying, "in Jesus name", while it may have its foundation in accepting the authority bestowed on the Church to carry out the work of the Kingdom, may become infantilized to the degree that the words uttered are believed in themselves to increase the chances of the prayer offered to result in a favorable outcome.

The end result is that the understanding and practice of the people may end up being only distantly related, if related at all, to the original core religious ideas. The process of theological definition followed by the need to further make the theological ideas accessible to laypeople through prescriptions compounded by concretization and infantilization produces a gap between the core ideas and the ways they are embraced and lived out in the lives of adherents.

The Church of the Nazarene

The implications for the Church of the Nazarene must be obvious. It seems to me that we fit into the model all too well, especially with regard to the core idea of holiness. We are especially vulnerable because of the seeming complexity of the doctrine. The ways it was sometimes defined in the past apparently served us well in years gone by, but do not appear to be faring as well these days. Many laypeople new to the church seem confused by our efforts to explain the doctrine. Many who have grown up in the church state openly that the way they heard sanctification preached in their youth simply didn't work for them. Many preachers have discarded the traditional language of "second-blessing holiness" preaching. The corresponding rules associated in the past with being sanctified are under heavy scrutiny. Some remain unquestioned while others are generally disregarded, especially by youth and young adults. In the meantime, Nazarene language and rules associated with entire sanctification in past generations remain non-negotiable for a large segment of the church. If O'Dea is correct in his theoretical model, we should not be surprised by such a dilemma. Confusion over the doctrine may not mean that the doctrine is errant or irrelevant, but rather, it may mean the way it is understood and lived out relative to our culture in 1993 may be different from the way it was understood and lived out in 1943 (to say nothing of the different applications called for internationally). Old wineskins may be inadequate for the new flow of wine as it is expressed and released in our world today.

A Further Concern

As the Church of the Nazarene finds itself caught in this dilemma of delimitation, the biggest concern of all may not be the gap experienced by laypeople between core religious ideas and applications for every day life, but even beyond, the implication of this gap as it relates to the basic identity of the church as a whole. If it is true that people are discarding traditional expressions of core religious ideas, isn't it also true that new expressions of those ideas or of *other* religious ideas could emerge to take their place? Is it possible that the Church of the Nazarene is in some sense in search of a new identity? A search which could result either in a re-discovery of its original mission and message as it relates to contemporary society or in the borrowing of the identities of others in the vacuum created by its discarding of that which it deems to be anachronistic. It seems to me that as local churches find themselves somewhat adrift with regard to their mission and message they are adopting several different strategies. Some seem to be borrowing from the charismatic renewal tradition, many in form and some in form and substance. And why not? If it is working in our society, why not learn from the Pentecostal? Others seem to be opting for a neo-fundamentalism with its alignment with right-wing politics and strategies of control and withdrawal. And why not? Certainly the church should be concerned with making the society more Christian. Some seem to be discovering a new identity in compassion, opening food pantries and services for the poor. And why not? After all, isn't it a Scriptural mandate as well as part of our Wesleyan heritage? But the point is, we are a church searching for an identity. And in our search, we are open and vulnerable to ideas and forces both within and beyond our own theological tradition.

The logical question someplace here is why don't our organizational and theological leaders clarify our core religious ideas and fundamental mission in such a way that rallies a church that seems to be struggling with its identity? Let me suggest that I believe they would if they

could. O'Dea points out that with the necessity of theological definitions comes the inevitability of a lay dependence on leadership. When core religious ideas are defined, there still inevitably remains a gap between the theologian and the layman when it comes to understanding the core religious ideas. A major implication of this discrepancy is that laypersons find themselves at the mercy for the theological experts to explain religious dogma. Because the complexity of the theological framework seems to be beyond their theologically untrained minds, they are even vulnerable to the possibilities of giving intellectual assent to the religious ideas as explained by religious leaders without believe the Bible is the Word of God and in the Trinity because it is what we believe as Nazarenes. I accept it, but I can't really explain it to you. It's just what we believe." This may, in fact, have been the case in the past. However, our emphasis on education and our corresponding upward socio-economic mobility may have had the unanticipated result of producing a new generations of pastors and laypersons who are less likely than previous generations to give unquestioned assent to anyone about anything, least of all something as important to them as their core religious beliefs. To our credit, we have produced a generation of critical thinkers. But all of this raises a new dilemma for the church. It may be that we can no longer look to key leaders behind whom everyone is expected or willing or fall in line. Authoritarian leaders trumpeting the way may have been just the ticket for a blue collar church, but the same leaders today might arouse alienation instead of allegiance and resentment rather than respect.

All the while, this discussion must be kept in check by a similar discussion regarding secularization in the church. The sociological tendency for the church to gradually compromise and eventually lose its basic mission and message as it drifts toward the values of the world around it is ever present. An awareness of this tendency with the history of other religious groups serving as a ready reminder of the danger of secularization are ample sources of alarm for those who would hold tenaciously to the methods and prescriptions that were effective symbols and means in the past. But such secularization must not be confused with the past. But such secularization must not be confused with tendency of a religious group to become irrelevant through concretization or removed from its core ideas through definition and infantilization. It must be apparent that each generation and culture has the responsibility to examine and interpret the way its faith is to be lived out in relevant and meaningful ways. If the basic mission and message are understood and embraced, isn't it reasonable to expect that effective means and appropriate prescriptions will emerge? What are the alternatives? Clearly, socialization into antiquated norms or fatalistic resignation to the forces of secularization are unacceptable. Perhaps, after all, our best hope is the rediscovery of faith and practice by every generation and culture as the Holy Spirit brings spiritual renewal to the lives of people. And the role of the church—to be committed to, and to raise its young with an understanding of, and to call the world's attention to, those essential, eternal truths which it understands to be received from God and which have been tested over time by Scripture and experience across generations and cultures.

Recommendations

What we do? Caught on the horns of a dilemma. I'm afraid this paper may be justly criticized for being heavy on stating problems and light on recommending solutions. But such is the nature of a true dilemma. (I'm really just trying to be a good sociologist by being descriptive

rather than prescriptive). Nevertheless, I will try to be true to the assignment by offering my best shot at a direction.

Bottom line—education throughout the church must be committed to the essential Scriptural mission and message inherent within our Wesleyan heritage both theologically and practically. Theological education bears the responsibility and opportunity of introducing future pastors to a sound Biblical theology from a Wesleyan perspective. Immersed in that core curriculum, we should expect students to come away with theological grounding that will inevitably manifest itself in relevant expressions of Biblical Holiness churches across the country and around the world. However, we should not be content with theological education that does not include a strong commitment to the *practical* implications of the Biblical/Wesleyan mission. Students must be introduced to, trained in the context of, immersed in practical models of ministry which exemplify the Biblical / Wesleyan tradition.

Our theological and ministry preparation requirements for Liberal Arts students may need to be reviewed. Certainly, offering opportunities for involvement in mission experiences is a great asset for many of our schools. However, curriculum should be examined to strengthen the theological education of future laity with an eye toward the integration of theological concepts with the relevant and practical issues of every day life. Required courses or other required accountability structures which include involvement in mission should not be ruled out. Opportunities for extended services for college students and young adults need to be further developed.

Other forms of mission involvement, ongoing education and information distribution need to be encouraged. *Work and Witness* and the *Herald of Holiness* are great assets. What should we be doing in the way of continuing education for ministers?

Conclusion

There is much that would pull the Church of the Nazarene away from embracing its core theological and missiological heritage. A dilemma of delimitation on one side and the pull of secularization on the other. At a time when we are vulnerable to outside influences which could penetrate through even to our core identity, we have still this day of opportunity to rediscover and implement a Wesleyan theology and mission which is both Biblical and relevant. Possibly the most necessary and potentially most effective point of intervention is in the education process. An ongoing commitment to a Biblical/Wesleyan theology and world view combined with opportunities to express that commitment in mission experiences in our ministerial preparation, liberal arts education and continuing ed are essential. God help us.