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URBAN BEGINNINGS

"Neither the origin nor the subsequent history of the Church of the Nazarene can be understood without a knowledge of the two holiness traditions, urban and rural. . . . To balance them one against the other has been the task of Nazarene churchmanship ever since the union at Pilot Point in 1908."

—Timothy L. Smith

Early Christianity in the Greco-Roman cities of the Roman Empire was primarily an urban movement that introduced men and women, rich and poor, slave and free, to Jesus Christ. For the first hundred years, the impact of Christianity in rural areas was minimal compared to the effect in cities. In *Cities of God*, Rodney Stark demonstrates through scientific data and statistical analysis that the early rise and spread of Christianity was an urban phenomenon, accomplished through ordinary Christians living out their faith in Christian communities. He observes, "The original meaning of the word 'pagan' (*paganus*) was 'rural person,' or more colloquially 'country hick.' It came to have religious meaning because after Christianity had triumphed in the cities, most of the rural people remained unconverted."[1]

The reason for this urban emphasis was strategic. The apostle Paul was a city person whose ministry strategy, according to Stark, was focused completely on planting city churches. There is no biblical or extrabiblical record of Paul ever

1 Rodney Stark, *Cities of God: The Real Story of How Christianity Became an Urban Movement and Conquered Rome* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), 2.

preaching or teaching outside a city. "Pauline Christianity was entirely urban. In that respect, it stood on the growing edge of the Christian movement, for it was in the cities of the Roman Empire that Christianity, though born in the village of Palestine, had its greatest successes until well after Constantine."[2] While the contribution of missionaries like Paul was vital to the growth of early Christian communities, Stark suggests that conversions happened most often and most rapidly through the close social networks and relationships of ordinary urban Christians.

The objectives of such a concentrated focus in the cities were obvious. Cities were more densely populated than rural areas. Ramsay MacMullen estimates that the average population density in cities of the Roman Empire may have approached 200 per acre—an equivalent to modern Western cities found only in industrial slums.[3] Cities were places where political and cultural power resided, and due to the fact that they were most often the first destination of immigrants seeking a fresh start, cities were also cosmopolitan. This factor led cities to be more flexible than country hamlets, more open to change. First-century cities were linked together by Roman highways and trade routes, and became the economic engines whereby people could buy, sell, market, and trade. Urbanization became more than a choice of where one would live; it was a way to survive. Truly, "urbanization became the means of Hellenization."[4]

Within twenty years of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, Christianity was transformed from a relatively small and exclusive faith in rural Galilee to an urban missionary movement reaching to the largest, most influential cultural centers in the Roman Empire. The mission of the first Christians was conceived from start to finish as an urban strategy.[5] It could be argued that the Christian faith eventually gained the attention of the broader expanse of society precisely *because* it captured the heart of the cities.

In further historical research of the early church, Rodney Stark offers a profound case for Christianity's success in the urban areas: "To cities filled with the homeless and impoverished, Christianity offered charity as well as

2 Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983), 8.

3 Ramsay MacMullen, *Roman Social Relations: 50 B.C. to A.D. 284* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1974), 28–56.

4 Meeks, *The First Urban Christians*, 11.

5 Meeks, *The First Urban Christians*, 10.

hope. To cities filled with newcomers and strangers, Christianity offered an immediate basis for attachments. To cities filled with widows and orphans, Christianity provided a new and expanded sense of family. To cities torn by violent ethnic strife, Christianity offered a new basis for social solidarity . . . [for what Christians] brought was not simply an urban movement, but *a new culture."*[6]

These were not the only spiritual factors at work in the first century that account for the impact of the first Christian movement, but the fact remains that any church with the goal of making Christlike disciples in the nations should go where the most potential converts can be found. This mission is not license to neglect the suburban, extra-urban, rural, or other populations, for all are in need of Christ. Nonetheless, it is necessary to underscore, and history bears it out, that "all ambitious missionary movements are, or soon become, urban."[7] While Stark's conclusions that the early success of propagating Christianity was primarily in cities, and then moved to rural areas, the vast majority of Nazarene work today is in the rural and suburban contexts. Yet that is not how the Church of the Nazarene began—it began in the city.

Phineas Bresee and the First Nazarenes

The Church of the Nazarene was born as a progeny of the Wesleyan Revival of the eighteenth century and the American Holiness Movement of the nineteenth century. From these various streams of Holiness teaching and practice, perfect love and human suffering were inextricably linked together. Holiness was both the motivation for compassion and the remedy for human misery.

Thus, holiness-minded people were inexorably drawn to the urban poor. Dissatisfied with internal dissensions, overly controlling ecclesiastical hierarchies, and controversies over doctrinal differences, Holiness leaders and laities turned their focus and energy toward those whom they deemed neglected at best, and forgotten at worst. Setting aside ecclesial boundaries, urban congregations from multiple theological backgrounds labored together to "precipitate a national Pentecost which they hoped would baptize America in the Holy Spirit and in some mystic

6 Stark, *Cities of God*, 162. Emphasis added.
7 Stark, *Cities of God*, 25.

manner destroy the evils of slavery, poverty, and greed."[8] Driven by postmillennial eschatology, utopian dreams for a Christian century and a national vision for "Christianizing Christianity" seemed within the grasp of Holiness churches.[9]

These parallel streams of holiness-minded churches converged in the late nineteenth century to form the National Camp Meeting Association for the Promotion of Holiness. The intermingling of Wesleyan-Arminian theology, Methodist polity, and evangelical revivalism from a variety of denominational traditions made for a curious concoction of camp-meeting-styled Wesleyanism. As a result of this unusual blend, just twenty years before the Church of the Nazarene was officially established, several distinct groups were being formed. Timothy Smith comments on these dissimilar groups' composition: "One, largely rural, was more emotionally demonstrative, emphasized rigid standards of dress and behavior, and often scorned ecclesiastical discipline. The other was urban, intellectual, and somewhat less zealous about outward standards of holiness."[10] Smith's observation cannot be understated.

When the founders of the Church of the Nazarene merged three separate denominations into one, each group originated from a different geographical region of the United States. The Association of Pentecostal Churches of America was from the east, the Holiness Church of Christ was from the south and southwest, and the Church of the Nazarene was from the west.[11] While each denomination shared common interests in the sanctified life and holiness evangelism, their other emphases were remarkably varied. "The East Coast Nazarenes worked among immigrant groups, most notably Cape Verdeans. West Coast Nazarenes reached out to inner city poor, the Japanese immigrants in the orange groves, indigenous and immigrant Mexicans, and Chinese-Americans."[12] One emphasized the sacraments and education. Another emphasized enthusiastic worship and the avoidance of worldliness. Still another emphasized social work and a desire

8 Timothy L. Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform in Mid-19th-Century America* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1957), 62.

9 Harold E. Raser, "'Christianizing Christianity': The Holiness Movement As a Church, *the* Church, or No Church at All?" Published by the Church of the Nazarene, n.d., https://www.usacanadaregion.org/sites/usacanadaregion.org/files/Roots/Resources/Christianizing%20Christianity%20by%20Harold%20Raser.pdf.

10 Smith, *Called unto Holiness*, 435.

11 Stan Ingersol, *Past and Prospect: The Promise of Nazarene History* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2014), 21.

12 Ingersol, *Past and Prospect*, 10.

to build a center of holy fire that would evangelize the cities of the nation.[13] Ultimately, the early Nazarenes were attempting to weave together three separate ideological perspectives.

Because these early differences were emphatically evident, Nazarene historians document modifications of missional focus that have taken place through generational shifts over the past hundred years, particularly in relation to social change.

The first generation, those who had doggedly defended holiness during the late nineteenth century, considered Christ, to use H. Richard Niebuhr's classification, as the Transformer of culture. *The first generation's orientation was urban.* The chief early centers of the church that became Nazarene were in such cities as Brooklyn, Los Angeles, Nashville, and Glasgow. The leaders—including Bresee, Reynolds, A. M. Hills, B. F. Haynes, John T. Benson, and George Sharpe—had come out of established denominations[14] and possessed a sense of custodianship for culture. Their concerns for society were deep. They built rescue missions and homes for unwed mothers and pushed forward the temperance movement.[15]

"The second generation of Nazarenes, by contrast, was *rural* in orientation."[16] Prominent leaders during this period, such as R. T. Williams and J. B. Chapman, had an early connection with Bresee but were raised in ecclesiastical settings that were defined by the rural ethos of revivalism and camp meetings. Their perspective fit Niebuhr's classification of Christ against culture, leading to a wave of Nazarenes withdrawing from mainstream culture.

Following the path of many in post-World War II America, the third generation of Nazarenes began to move into newly created suburbs on the outskirts of declining central city cores.[17] Although more will be said about the impact of the rise of suburbia on the Church of the Nazarene's engagement with urban areas, an underlying inspiration for suburbs grew out of Victorian "ideals of domestic

13 Smith, *Called unto Holiness*, 52.

14 Bresee and Reynolds: Methodist Episcopal Church; Haynes and Benson: Methodist Episcopal Church, South; Sharpe: Methodist Episcopal Church, Congregationalist.

15 Floyd Cunningham, ed., Stan Ingersol, Harold E. Raser, and David P. Whitelaw, *Our Watchword and Song: The Centennial History of the Church of the Nazarene* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2009), 10–11. Emphasis added.

16 Cunningham et al., *Our Watchword and Song*, 11. Emphasis added. Mainline churches were located primarily in urban areas.

17 Cunningham et al., *Our Watchword and Song*, 11.

purity"[18] and as an escape from the moral entrapments of the decaying urban life. Nazarene historians have identified this era in the Church of the Nazarene as Niebuhr's classification of Christ being "*of* culture."[19]

Articulating Nazarene history through the lens of Niebuhr's classifications of how ecclesiastical bodies deal with cultural change is helpful to understanding the denomination because it stresses the missional accent of either centripetal or centrifugal flow in each generation.[20] A Christ-transforming-culture model—the primary worldview of first-generation Nazarenes—emphasizes hands-on action to reform society and human flourishing. A Christ-against-culture model—the primary worldview of second-generation Nazarenes—sees culture more negatively and tends to emphasize withdrawal from society, even to the point of creating countercultural enclaves. A Christ-*of*-culture model—the primary worldview of third-generation Nazarenes—attempts to hold the two previous approaches in balance, yet begins to move toward accommodation of civil religion. While Niebuhr did not categorize any group exclusively into one model, the distinctions are telling. Worldview determines vision; vision determines mission; mission determines strategy.

The move from the Christ-transforming model to the Christ-against-culture model represented a major shift in focus. Early Nazarenes focused their holiness evangelism and compassionate ministries in urban areas such as Boston, Los Angeles, Chicago, and Nashville. The earliest international missionary work in India and Japan centered on cities such as Calcutta (now Kolkata) and Tokyo. Conversely, the second generation of leaders had southern roots and were more aligned with revivalistic techniques, such as transportable tents with sawdust floors in small, rural towns. While the differences were not matters of right or wrong, the difference in missional strategy was dramatic. In this period, "the church shifted attention from Tokyo to Kyoto and from Calcutta to Buldana, and, in America, from the cities to the Midwestern farm belt."[21]

This shift was a significant departure from the vision of the early Nazarenes, particularly those from the American northeast and west. At the dawn of the

18 Harvie M. Conn and Manuel Ortiz, *Urban Ministry: The Kingdom, the City, and the People of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2001), 69–70.

19 Cunningham et al., *Our Watchword and Song*, 11. Emphasis added.

20 Centripetal flow is directed inward toward the center. Centrifugal flow is directed outward from the center.

21 Cunningham et al., *Our Watchword and Song*, 346.

twentieth century cities were growing rapidly, bringing with them the associated aspects of compact urban environments: overcrowding, unemployment, pollution, poverty, corruption, and crime.[22] While many urban congregations were escaping the cities, the Holiness associations saw these raw urban conditions as an open door to reach desperate, broken, and—in many cases—spiritually open people with the gospel.

Bresee believed the conditions were ripe for perfect love and Christlike ministry to the lowest levels of society. His disappointment with the Methodist Episcopal Church—for what he believed was a disregard for the poor and disenfranchised—prompted him to do the unthinkable: request a relocation away from a prestigious assignment to work with a rescue mission in downtown Los Angeles. There would be no return for Bresee. Even though his initial foray into the complexities and injustices of the city proved difficult, Bresee had tapped into his God-given passion and divine calling—a missional commitment of holiness evangelism to the toiling masses of the world.[23]

He did not set out to begin a church, but when Bresee and his followers officially organized themselves on October 20, 1895, they knew their providential purpose. "They professed a definite sense of divine calling. They intended to be a church, not a mission or association. They were committed to the doctrine of entire sanctification as a second definite work of divine grace. And, finally, they believed that they had a special mission to the urban poor."[24]

They would call themselves the Church of the Nazarene, associated by name and affiliation with the ministry of Jesus to the outcast, marginalized, forgotten, and displaced people of the world. Bresee and those first Nazarenes were "convinced that the *special* calling of the Church of the Nazarene was *first* to plant 'centers of holy flame' in the great cities of America."[25] The phrase "centers of holy flame" denoted a calling especially to the urban core and "wherever also may be found waste places and souls seeking pardon and cleansing from sin."[26]

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22 "Rise of Industrial America, 1876–1900: City Life in the Late 19th Century," Library of Congress, http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/presentationsandactivities/presentations/timeline/riseind/city/.

23 Early Nazarenes were purposeful in their use of the word "toiling." They identified it as a descriptive symbol of Jesus's ministry to the poor and distressed of the world: "the toiling, lowly mission of Christ and [thus] the mission of Christ's followers." Cunningham et al., *Our Watchword and Song*, 101.

24 Cunningham et al., *Our Watchword and Song*, 100.

25 Cunningham et al., *Our Watchword and Song*, 107.

26 Cunningham et al., *Our Watchword and Song*, 100.

But all of that began to change, and change rapidly. Such change is the subject of the next chapter.

A Church for the City
Los Angeles First Church of the Nazarene

The church that began in 1895 in the Glory Barn of Los Angeles is still thriving today, carrying on Phineas F. Bresee's vision and legacy. In 1960, the then predominantly white congregation moved to a thriving area of the city, five miles from downtown. But by 1980, the neighborhood had begun to change drastically, and the church's leaders decided to stay and change *with* the neighborhood. In 1992 the second flashpoint of the L.A. riots happened just two blocks from the church, and a majority of businesses and homeowners left the area. When the church still stayed, it signaled to the remaining community that the congregation and its pastors really wanted to work for the well-being of the neighborhood.

Rev. Dr. Michael Mata served as part of the pastoral team from 1980 until 1997 and, after devoting himself to twenty years of urban ministry education, is now serving again as associate pastor for community engagement. In fact, the current lead pastor of the English-speaking congregation, Rev. Josue Tiguila, was a student in Mata's youth group. Mata has witnessed tremendous change in the neighborhood over the last forty years since the majority population is Latino[27] immigrants, primarily from Central America, with Korean-American residents and business owners and, now, an established Bangladeshi community.

Comprising five different language/cultural congregations, L.A. First reflects the diversity of its surroundings. Its congregations include English-speaking, Spanish-speaking, Filipino, Korean (with most having been born in Korea but raised in the U.S.), and the only North Korean congregation in the United States. Combined, these congregations currently average 350 in weekly attendance, but more than one thousand people come through the church doors on a weekly basis to receive services from congregational volunteers and collaborating partners who offer meals, nursing care, and youth development programs. As part of their commitment to being responsible for the well-being of their community, Mata

27 Any references to the Latino community in this book should be understood as inclusive of all, regardless of gender.

serves on the Mayor's Interfaith Task Force, which deals with issues of housing, job development, immigration, and climate change.

Looking back on these last four decades, Mata recognizes the church's commitment to shared values as what has guided them to have a consistent presence in a changing community. "We need to be 'fringe-centric,'" he said. "We have to be focused on the well-being of the people at the fringes; this is not an upward-mobile journey." With that perspective, the pastors and congregation are able to care for the well-being of the church's neighbors, regardless of where congregants live. But, in this densely populated area of the city, most congregants are neighbors, and neighbors often become congregants.

For Reflection or Discussion

1. Is there any part of the Nazarene origins story that is new or surprising to you? If so, what is it, and why?
2. Imagine if some of the founding Nazarenes moved into your city right now. In what area do you think they would start a church? What are the critical issues in your city, and which ones do you think they would give themselves to?
3. H. Richard Niebuhr offered three models for understanding the intersection of church and culture: Christ transforming culture; Christ against culture; and Christ of culture. How do you see each of these models of thought and action at work in your own church and/or city?

City Practice
Learning Your History

Do you know how and when your denomination came to your city, or to the city nearest you? If not, do some work of exploration and discovery to learn the story. The central offices for your denomination should have statistical records and other information; you can also interview elder parishioners and retired clergy in your area. Who began the work of your denomination in your city, when, and why? How has it grown and/or changed since then? If no one else has done so, write out the narrative history of the denomination for your area. Consider how your current church and/or your future plans are connected to this history, whether building on existing foundations or redeeming past mistakes.