

# Can We Be Good News People Again?

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*Context: The following paper was presented as a workshop at M25, a missional conference of the Church of the Nazarene, USA/Canada in Kansas City, MO, February 2025. The theme of the conference was evangelism. Digital documents are incapable of capturing tone. Please “hear” the following as a gentle reflection from a lifetime Nazarene on where we have been, where we are, and what we might consider for our future. Our witness to Christ in the world is something that should concern us deeply.*

I begin with profound gratitude for a church that grew me up in the Nazarene Young People’s Society, invited me to pastor a country congregation when I was 15, educated me at Trevecca Nazarene College and Nazarene Theological Seminary, allowed me to serve three wonderful congregations, trusted me to lead her university, published my writings, and offered me platforms like this to influence our denomination. I love the church. And I find myself in the closing chapters of my leadership hoping to help our church get into her future, or better yet, get God’s future into our present. As I live and serve among the college generation, it matters to me that they see the beauty of Christ’s bride and be attracted to it.

In this spirit of gratitude and hope, I want to help us think carefully about our witness to Christ in the world. The question I pose is, “Can we be good news people again?”

As I’ve worked on this paper over the past months, three books have been helpful. They have shaped my thinking and will probably leak through.

1. **Cultural Sanctification: Engaging the World like the Early Church, Stephen O. Presley (Eerdmans Publishing Company).** Presley revisits the relationship between the early church and the Roman Empire of the first centuries. Specifically, he considers how they lived winsome civic lives, cared for the outcasts, prayed for the emperor without worshipping the emperor, and disciplined new converts into a resocialized Christianity.

2. **Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World, Tom Holland.** This book revisits the relationship between the crucified Christ and empires across 2000 years. He finds that the gospel appealed to the lowest of society because it gave them what culture/empire had taken from them – human dignity, worth, community, and belonging. The church took in those that empire had tossed out.
3. **Vanishing Grace: Whatever Happened to the Good News? Philip Yancey, (Zondervan Press).** I found Yancey’s membership in a book club with other thoughtful friends, of whom he was the only believer, to be a faithful reflection of how Christians are perceived today. Suffice it to say that his friends were thoroughly turned off by the current version of Christianity.

I am indebted to these authors for helping me think. I also want to reflect on three movements that have shaped evangelism in the Church of the Nazarene during my lifetime.

1. **The Church Growth movement.** I was introduced to the writing of missionary Donald McGavran during my early years as a pastor in North Carolina. Peter Wagner and John Wimber were the primary spokesmen who came to our North Carolina District to train us in church growth. They espoused the homogeneous unit principle, which stated that the fastest and easiest church growth was evangelism of people who were already like us, similarly cultured neighbors. While true, this movement taught us to do evangelism in the most comfortable confines of our narrowed perspectives. It was a significant step away from our early founders who went straight to the wrong side of the tracks where the hardest converts were waiting. This movement also thrived during the years that we flipped our nose-counting priority from Sunday School to worship attendance. We elevated the crowd showing up for evangelism in public services above the crowd showing up for spiritual formation/discipleship in small group gatherings.
2. **The Seeker Sensitive Movement.** Bill Hybels and the people of Willow Creek church struck an entrepreneurial nerve among Nazarene pastors as they attempted to exegete the world we were living in. They offered the gospel to “seekers” in well-imagined services designed to make converts. Many Nazarene pastors attended the Willow Creek Leadership Conference and decided before their car was back in the garage that they would transition

their congregation to be a seeker-sensitive church. Only a handful of our churches were able to make this transition without significant division. This opened a period of worship wars where our conversation was centered more on music, drama, lighting, technology, and relevance than on the importance of evangelism. Our people were not ready. In the words of one discerning worshipper, “I come here (to the sanctuary) every week to get away from the world, not to have it dramatized before my very eyes.” While this movement was helpful in reminding us that we need to exegete the world into which the gospel is going, it also made us shallower in giving the world mature followers of Jesus whose way of life was inviting. My primary critique of the seeker-sensitive movement is that it identified the wrong seeker. God is the ultimate seeker of the lost and we are called to follow God into the world in search of the lost sheep, coin, and son.

3. **The Rise of Religious Fundamentalism.** Ron Benefiel is our best in-house teacher on the impact of this current movement. This is not just a Nazarene phenomenon; it is a global reality. In times of rapid change, massive technological invention, and loss of tradition, we move quickly from anxiety to fear to anger. And we justify this reaction as a religious defense of the gospel. The energy of a church that once moved outward in compassion and mercy, now moves inward in fence-building, enemy-making, and position defending. We are good enough Bible-quoters to cut and paste supporting texts and thereby justify our defense of the fundamentals. The product of a frightened, angry fundamentalism is anything but good news in the ears of our world.

With the background of these three books and these three movements, let’s examine how we might position our movement in the world. Presley writes in *Cultural Sanctification*:

*Our engagement with culture is not very effective as we have been soundly dismissed as judgmental, arrogant, opinionated cults who, in our anger, just want more power to make people do what we want. We once had a social structure that granted us some limited power to do this – but it was dissolved. Now we are trying to resurrect a religious right, and our strategy is to debate, shame, frighten, name enemies, and justify attack. The proof of the pudding is that almost none of the people we have targeted are stepping*

*into our baptisteries to assume our identity. They're not even stepping inside our gathering. They know us by meme, tweet, and post. And our gospel is, to them, the farthest thing from good news.*

This same judgment comes through loud and clear from Philip Yancey's book club experience as well as his examination of Christianity on the streets.

I would offer an important disclaimer here. I live among Christians in churches and find that this characterization does not fit the majority of believers that I know. I see kindness, generosity, and faithfulness in the silent majority who frequent Nazarene congregations. This gives me hope. But I also believe the silent majority does not know what to do next. The noise from a minority of wounded, angry, loud congregants and ex-congregants has created a caricature that the church cannot avoid addressing. We are labeled by their tweets, posts, and pain. We have challenging work ahead in listening to, confessing to, and healing these who, like the lost coin, were already in the house when their lostness occurred. So, what is going on?

I was taught in the early 1970's by Dr. H. Ray Dunning that there are two biblical narratives that run side by side through scripture. They dance with each other and are woven together into a single tapestry from the first to the last page of Holy Scripture.

**The first narrative is the wisdom story.** It is about creation, order out of chaos, a structured world in which humans can thrive. It offers law, how things work best, consequences for behavior, family structure, justice in the courts, and governmental authority. This gospel of wisdom/order is neat, tidy, structured, boundaried, predictable, and clean. It is the formula for the recreation of Eden, if only we would organize our lives in keeping with the way God intended it to be.

The wisdom story of order is a good story to live in... but it can be distorted. When it goes wrong, we get things like the south in the 1800's when preachers stood in pulpits and declared the superiority of the white race, thus justifying slavery as God's intended order. Even as late as the 1960's, I heard Nazarene preachers suggest similar 'biblical' arguments supporting the segregation of races in the public schools and churches of our southern Mississippi town. Their appeal was to the biblical narrative of order, suggesting that this was God's creative intent from

the beginning. The wisdom/order narrative can go wrong. When it does, we get things like

- patriarchy where women are not meant to preach, teach, or lead men;
- fiscal policy where the security of the wealthy is placed above the dire needs of the vulnerable;
- brands of patriotic nationalism where the hammer comes down on everybody but us.

It is a forceful restructuring of the world around the wants of the ruling class. This twisted version of the biblical narrative puts women, minorities, immigrants, and the poor in their place... because “this is how God intended it to be.”

When the Republican Party seeks to woo the Christian church into its grasp, it uses just enough of the biblical narrative of order, law, structure, and divine intent to seduce us into prioritizing our comforts and securing our advantages. The church of Jesus has demonstrated its vulnerability to this seduction.

Now, before you say a hearty amen or write me off as your enemy, let’s visit the other theological narrative. It is **the narrative of redemption**. This story assumes that there are slaves who need to be freed, like the Israelites in Egypt or the early Christians under Rome. These slaves are oppressed by the powers of empire. This biblical narrative recognizes the corporate presence of sin in the principalities and powers that fuel the empires of our making. Where the wisdom/order narrative is neat, tidy, structured, boundaried, predictable, and clean, the redemption narrative is messy, bloody, unpredictable, unboundaried, unstructured, and unclean. It is as bloody as animal and Son sacrifice. Its primary value is not order but mercy. Mercy goes to the excluded, the powerless, the enslaved, the enemy, and the unclean.

The mercy story is a delightful story to live in, but it can also be distorted. When the political left, the Democratic Party, comes seeking our votes, it speaks the language of the redemption/mercy narrative to draw us in. And we are vulnerable to its causes, its preference for the poor, and the plight of its excluded clientele. This distorted narrative gives us things like social justice rooted in political ideology rather than in the ways of Jesus. We get the manipulation of minorities as our projects rather than seeing them as people to whom we must be reconciled. We end up bowing to identity idolatry where every human must create their own

unique identity rather than being grounded in the belief that our loving Creator tells us who we are in Christ, our image-bearing brother. We get Band-Aid help for human need that never imagines the recipients as very near brothers and sisters. We champion causes whose end is nowhere near the community of the kingdom of God.

These two narratives – wisdom/order and redemption/mercy are both vital parts of our biblical story. They are meant to live in healthy tension with each other. The political powers of our land have co-opted them, twisted them, and pitted them against each other as bitter enemies. The law-and-order crowd and the mercy crowd have dug their trenches, hammered out their platform, selected their leaders, and fueled their followers for a winner-take-all fight for the soul of a nation. The political division we see in America has now invaded the church of Jesus and we have taken sides. Because the other tribe is our enemy, we are blinded by our defensiveness and cannot see the beam in our eyes. This is true to the right and the left.

C. S. Lewis described hell as a flat, gray plain that stretched as far as the eye could see in every direction. People were forever distancing themselves from one another. The business of hell is separation. My concern for the Church of the Nazarene is that we are practicing the business of hell more than reflecting the beauty of the reconciled kingdom of God. As the law/order tribe and the mercy tribe distance themselves from each other under a single tent, one of the two eventually runs out of room and leaves the tent. When that occurs, we have divorced ourselves from one of our two foundational narratives. The watching world sees nothing hopeful in this drama. And I observe a generation of college students, our own sons and daughters, who are weary of this and walk away from faith.

Might I suggest a more beautiful bride for the world to see? A more faithful witness to Jesus? A radical people of grace and beauty? A story of good news in a bad news world?

What if the mercy tribe were to say to the law and order tribe, *“We really need you to help us stay grounded in the historic expression of our faith, to remain accountable to a biblical ethic, to create the institutional structures that enable our ministry to continue across the years, to organize a people who can do more*

*together than apart, to bring wisdom to our processes for the sake of those we serve, to grant us legal wisdom, to care for our retirement and medical needs, to champion and encourage us, and to lift our feeble hands when the work is heavy.”*

*And what if the law and order tribe were to say to the mercy crowd, “We really need you to keep us from walling ourselves in, to convince us that the mission of God to the estranged is more important than the machinery we run, to save us from sitting in judgment on a world that we rarely touch, to help us hear the stories of the people for whom Christ died, to exegete the broken world we live in, to be a prophetic voice that speaks truth to power, to live on the edges of the church where life gets messy, and to guide our resources to the point of human need.”*

Rather than dismissing each other, we would champion the unique work of creating order and structure while offering mercy to the broken. In the words of Reuben Welch, we would recognize that “we really do need each other”. Without this vibrant dance between wisdom and redemption, order and mercy, we are one hand clapping.

As I was working on this paper, our Nazarene leaders gathered in Kansas City for a Leadership Conference. Our session began with our voices lifted to sing. “Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty. Early in the morning our song shall rise to Thee. Holy, holy, holy, **MERCIFUL AND MIGHTY**, God in three persons, blessed trinity.” There it was, in our sacred hymn – the God who is **merciful** to all, the God who is **mighty** to bring order to a world in chaos.

Right about now, I can hear the accusation of overgeneralization. And you would be right. There are many followers of Jesus who exude mercy and are simultaneously engaged in bringing order. These two are not mutually exclusive. I pray that as a university president, I am engaged in both. But my observation is that these two narratives are beginning to distance themselves among us. Whole congregations can be classified as belonging to one tribe over the other.

I think about the ministry of Jesus. He came into a world where the Pharisees were the law-and-order tribe. Their bumper sticker was “Make Judaism Great Again.” Their focus was on orthodoxy, law, God’s prescribed order, hierarchy, and purity/cleanness. When Jesus preached the radical Sermon on the Mount and started befriending the unclean, they declared him a friend of sinners, a glutton and drunkard, unclean, untidy, unstructured, unlawful, and unpredictable. When

Jesus suggested that God might be present to those excluded from the temple, their brick-and-mortar order of holiness, they moved to crucify him. It is interesting that they needed to crawl in bed with the ruling political power to accomplish the deed. Yet, out of the crucifixion of the mercy-giver came the church.

You might think that in this exegesis of Jesus, I am suggesting that he was more mercy than law. I'm not. The weaving of wisdom through the teachings of Jesus is quite substantial. And Jesus often referred to the creating order of God in his responses. Jesus came as the fulfillment of the law, not the abolisher or enemy of it. It should speak loudly to us that the fulfillment of the law looks a lot like mercy.

And this orderliness does not end with the gospels. We see in Acts the structuring of leadership in the church. In Paul's letters we find the household rules. In other pastoral letters, we find a functioning structure of bishops and deacons. We find instructions for believers relating to the powers of the empire. We find offerings supporting the needs of fellow believers. The kind of structuring for effective ministry does not disappear in the face of mercy, it actually finds its function in supporting such mercy.

It seems to me that institutional leaders in the church have most often been selected from the law/order/wisdom side of the tent. I am one of those institutional leaders. We have more authority and power. Our salaries are higher. Our perks are better. Our offices are bigger. Our clout weighs more. In my role as a university president, this seduction has been my greatest temptation. The beast of power is ever nagging me to exercise my office to make things comfortable for myself, to arrange things like I wish them to be, to placate the squeaky wheels who fear the world, and to play to the crowds who prefer a tidy organization. But if I understand the dance of order and mercy, my role is to serve mercy by structuring an organization to support it. This also includes defending and championing the mercy-givers when their mess spills out on the clean church carpet.

So, where do we go from here? How do we bear witness to Christ in this age? What should our witness look like? Can we be good news people again? I offer four suggestions.

(1)

## Exegete the Human Experience

John Wesley said that “every law is a covered promise.” Every command given, every law fingered in stone, every divine order is a gift from God. While a self-sovereign being may bristle at the law of God, there is something in the command that is for their good. It will require that we carefully exegete the human experience alongside the divine command to understand how the law is good news. It will change the tone and approach of our witness.

More than a decade ago, a group of university students called Soul Force organized to support the LGBTQI+ students on Christian college campuses. They travelled from campus to campus to share their thoughts. The response of many campus leaders was to meet them at the front gate with armed security guards and inform them that the campus was private property... and they had not been invited. At this point, the media was called, and the shaming-war began from both sides of the campus gate. When we were informed of the visit to our campus, we requested the date and time of their arrival. At first, they were hesitant to share it. When they asked why we wanted to know, I told them we would reserve parking for their bus and have a meal prepared to share with them. As we gathered in the President’s Dining Room, I asked if one of them would offer grace for our meal. We ate together as Soul Force students, college administrators, and Trevecca student leaders. About 80 of us sat together at round tables. We engaged in conversation. Following the meal, we moved to an auditorium where a joint panel had a long conversation in front of a listening audience. It was respectful, informative, and expressive of the sexual ethic that each group held. Later in the afternoon, we had one-on-one conversations in a different setting. My conversation partner was a female who requested that I address her as “they.” I indicated my interest in how she came to understand herself as they. She explained the different identities that lived together inside her brain and body. We talked about each one. There were five. As we grew comfortably honest, I asked her if the identities ever disagreed with each other. She laughed and told me of times when a tug-o-war had occurred between them. Then I asked if they ever voted on issues and came to a 3-2 majority vote. She told me more stories. I was intrigued by her experiences. Eventually, I asked if these multiple identities wearied her. “Oh, yes! They can be a

handful!" I asked, "Have you ever wished you could wake up in the morning and be one person, hear one voice?" She replied, "Yes, but I don't know how that would be possible." At that point I shared with her that my identity is a gift from Jesus. He tells me who I am. And in a world of competing voices, it is his clear voice that comforts, assures, and guides me. She listened in quietness and then replied, "That would be wonderful." On the way to the bus, she remarked to me, "If most of the Christians that we have met on our tour were like you people, we probably wouldn't need to do this." We gave them a box of sandwiches for their evening journey and prayed blessing over them as they left.

I believe that identity is given us by our creator, and even in the messiness of attractions, desires, organs, hormones, and experiences, there is a God who tells us who we are in Christ. I could have easily lectured her on pronouns and accused her of weaponizing language, but I chose to look for the place in her experience where the way of Jesus could be offered as good news. This is mercy at work. I'm sure some of my brothers and sisters would have preferred that we block the gate, launch into judgment, and stand our ground. The law-and-order side of the tent would have been proud of our "courage." But a young woman heard something that day, and rather than validating her deeply held opinion about Christians, she found a friend who knew Jesus and she even dared to whisper, "That would be wonderful." I hope I planted a good news seed.

(2)

### Take a Confessing Posture

Several years ago, I read the book **Blue Like Jazz** by Don Miller. The tenor of the book oozed with mercy. The following is an excerpt from *Blue Like Jazz* (pgs. 116-125). Don was involved with a small campus ministry program at Reed College, a liberal arts college in Portland, Oregon, with a reputation of not being terribly welcoming of organized religious groups.

*Each year at Reed they have a festival called Ren Fayre. They shut down the campus so students can party. Security keeps the authorities away, and everybody gets pretty drunk and high, and some people get naked. The school brings in White Bird, a medical unit that specializes in treating bad drug trips. The students create special lounges with black lights and television screens to enhance kids' mushroom trips. Some of the Christian*

students in our little group decided this was a pretty good place to come out of the closet, letting everybody know there were a few Christians on campus. Tony the Beat Poet and I were sitting around in my room one afternoon talking about what to do, how to explain who we were to a group of students who, in the past, had expressed hostility toward Christians. Like our friends, we felt like Ren Fayre was the time to do this. I said we should build a confession booth in the middle of campus and paint a sign on it that said, CONFESS YOUR SINS. I said this because I knew a lot of people would be sinning, and Christian spirituality begins by confessing our sins and repenting. I also said it as a joke. But Tony thought it was brilliant. He sat there on my couch with his mind in the clouds, and he was scaring me because, for a second, then for a minute, I actually believed he wanted to do it. "We are not going to do this," I told him. "Oh, we are, Don. We certainly are. We are going to build a confession booth!" We met in Commons – Penny, Nadine, Mitch, Iven, Tony and myself. Tony said I had an idea. They looked at me. I told them I had a stupid idea that we couldn't do without getting attacked. They leaned in. I told them that we should build a confession booth in the middle of campus and paint a sign on it that said, CONFESS YOUR SINS. Penny put her hands over her mouth. Iven laughed. Nadine smiled. "They may very well burn it down," she said. "Okay you guys." Tony gathered everybody's attention. "Here's the catch." He leaned in a little and collected his thoughts. "We are not actually going to accept confessions." We all looked at him in confusion. He continued. "We are going to confess to them. We are going to confess that, as followers of Jesus, we have not been very loving; we have been bitter, and for that we are sorry. We will apologize for the Crusades, we will apologize for those televangelists who steal people's money, we will apologize for neglecting the poor and the lonely, we will ask them to forgive us, and we will tell them that in our selfishness we have misrepresented Jesus on this campus. We will tell people who come into the booth that Jesus loves them." All of us sat there in silence because it was obvious that something beautiful and true had hit the table with a thud. We all thought it was a great idea, and we could see it in each other's eyes. It would feel so good to apologize, to apologize for the Crusades, for Columbus and the genocide he committed in the Bahamas in the name of God, apologize for the missionaries who landed in Mexico and came up through the West

*slaughtering Indians in the name of Christ. I wanted so desperately to say that none of this was Jesus, and I wanted so desperately to apologize for the many ways I had misrepresented the Lord. I could feel that I had betrayed the Lord by judging, by not being willing to love the people He had loved and only giving lip service to issues of human rights. So we set to work on the confession booth throughout the beginning of Ren Fayre, and people looked at us over the first couple of days with both curiosity and amusement. The further along we got on the booth, though, the more I began to wonder if our idea was such a hot one. As we began to put the finishing touches on it, I was in the process of telling Tony that I didn't want to do this. And then someone opened up the curtain and walked in, saying they were our first customer. "What's up, man?" Duder sat himself on the chair with a smile on his face. He said his name was Jake. I shook his hand because I didn't know what to do, really. "So, what is this? I'm supposed to tell you all of the juicy gossip I've done at Ren Fayre, right?" "No." "Okay, then what? What's the game?" he asked. "Not really a game. More of a confession thing." "You want me to confess my sins, right?" "No, that's not what we're doing, really." "What's the deal, man?" "Well, we are a group of Christians here on campus, you know." "I see. Strange place for Christians, but I am listening." "Thanks," I told him. He was being very patient and gracious. "Anyway, there is this group of us, just a few of us who were thinking about the way Christians have sort of wronged people over time. You know, the Crusades, all that stuff..." "Well, I doubt you personally were involved in any of that." "No, I wasn't," I told him. "But the thing is, we are followers of Jesus. And we believe he represented certain ideas that we have not done a good job at representing. He has asked us to represent Him well, and we've failed him in that." "I see," Jake said. "So there is this group of us on campus who wanted to confess to you." "You are confessing to me!" Jake said with a laugh. "Yeah. We are confessing to you. I mean, I am confessing to you." "You're serious." His laugh turned to something of a straight face. I told him I was. He looked at me and told me I didn't have to. I told him I did, and I felt very strongly in that moment that I was supposed to tell Jake that I was sorry for everything. "What are you confessing?" he asked. "Well, there's a lot. I will keep it short. Jesus said to feed the poor and to heal the sick. I have never done very much about that. Jesus said to love those who persecute me. I tend to lash out, especially if I*

*feel threatened. Jesus did not mix His spirituality with politics. I grew up doing that. I know all of this was wrong, and I know that a lot of people will not listen to the words of Christ because people like me, who know Him, carry our own agendas into the conversation rather than just relaying the message Christ wanted to get across. So I've not been a good follower of Jesus. There's a lot more, you know.” “It's all right, man,” Jake said, very tenderly. His eyes were starting to water. “Well,” I said, clearing my throat, “I am sorry for all of that.” “I forgive you,” Jake said. And he meant it. “Thanks,” I told him. He sat there and looked at the floor, then into the fire of a candle. “It's really cool what you guys are doing,” he said. “A lot of people need to hear this.” “I don't know whether to thank you for that or not,” I laughed. “It's worth it,” he said. He shook my hand, and when he left the booth there was somebody else ready to get in. It went like that for a couple of hours. I talked to about thirty people, and Tony took confessions on a picnic table outside the booth. Many people wanted to hug me when we were done. All of the people who visited the booth were grateful and gracious. I was being changed through the process. And I think those who came into the booth were being changed too.*

Could it be that we have taken a loud, arrogant, critical position in the world rather than a humble, confessing posture? A few weeks ago, I suggested in a Facebook post that confession might be an appropriate posture for the church. Within five exchanges, people were calling each other woke, progressive, Christian nationalists, and MAGA-haters... in reaction to the suggestion that we confess. I had to take the post down to limit further damage. We are better than this. And we have a lot to confess:

- Our words on social media that do not reflect Jesus
- Letting the government take the lead on caring for the poor and immigrant rather than seeing this as our calling
- Demeaning humor from our pulpits about the sexual minorities who live among us
- Preferring our protection over that of the most vulnerable
- Funding extravagance while ignoring the poor
- Demonizing our enemies rather than loving them
- Cruelly labeling our brothers and sisters with whom we disagree

This list could get very long. And maybe it needs to. If we believe that bearing witness to Jesus in the world is an act of arrogant condemnation, we have sadly misunderstood the call to discipleship. If we really desire a resurgence of the Holy Spirit among and in us, it will most likely begin with our humble confession that we have not been the people that Jesus called us to be. I predict that the watching world might be awakened to God by such a practice.

(3)

### **More and Better Disciples**

In *Cultural Sanctification*, Presley reflected on the focus of the early church. They did not have an evangelism strategy. They knew nothing of the sinner's prayer or an instantaneous conversion in response to a gospel presentation. I do not discount these, but we may want to rethink how a person is "converted". The primary focus of the early church was to live out the way of Jesus in their city. Through the teachings (didache), they learned the patterns of Jesus. When others became interested in the faith, they were invited to come and observe. They experienced hospitality. They went through a period of examining themselves. They confessed. They entered careful preparation for baptism into the people of God. And then they were resocialized as Christians (our understanding of sanctification). They became the people who cared for the orphan and widow, the poor and outcast. They became brothers and sisters without hierarchical power separating them. They shared a common table. It was their winsome life, their neighbor love, their service to others who drew a world to Jesus. The strength of our witness will never exceed the depth of our discipleship.

(4)

### **The Community of the Peculiar**

Evangelism is more than an individual decision. We are inducting a person into a peculiar community. We are odd. People who live in a "fit-in" world are not particularly fond of being odd. Our way of life is countercultural. Especially now. In our current political culture, mercy is weakness, power is king, money rules, the immigrant is dangerous, minorities must be kept in their place, women are subservient, religion needs a savior to defend its rights, news is twisted truth spoken boldly, and people who think differently are our enemies. And here come

the people of Jesus inviting a world to join us in our odd ways. For us, mercy is holiness, power is entrusted for service, money is to be given away as God directs, the immigrant is our responsibility, minorities are our equal brothers and sisters who have much to teach us, women are gifted in every way that men are, religion lays down its life rather than pursue power, the truth is the truth, and people who think differently are deserving of our respect. The radical way of Jesus is odd.

Rather than embracing our oddity, religion has crawled into bed with political powers to the right and left. The resulting birth from this prostitution is a faith-child that looks nothing like the Christ who suffered and died outside the gates of Jerusalem. If we are odd, let's at least be Jesus-like-odd. Let's live radically, connected to the roots of Jesus. And let's invite the world to come and see what God is up to among us.

Recently, an article in The Atlantic called this the 'anti-social century.' We are isolating ourselves in alarming ways. Even in our homes, we eat in different rooms in front of different technology, sometimes texting each other through two walls. The loneliness that is emerging is resulting in anxiety, depression, and disease. If there was ever a moment for a healthy community that charts a different way of life, this is that day. The people of Jesus are the hope of the world. But if we come across as sniping, griping, enemy-making churches, I doubt there will be a knock on our door.

I was remembering an old Vacation Bible School song the other day. It was an evangelism tune meant to inspire us to evangelize. We sang it with gusto. The lyrics were

One door and only one  
and yet its sides are two.  
I'm on the inside.  
On which side are you?

While there may be a tinge of truth in this, it is horrible in so many ways. It says to a lonely world, "I'm in, you're out. I'm privileged, you're not. I'm included, you're excluded." It places a closed door between us and a lonely world. It fails to locate Jesus among the lost sheep. It locates us as judgmental superiors. And it does not come across as good news to those who hear it. We are called to invite friends to join us on a journey that follows the pathway of Jesus, not to escape into a

protected room of privilege. Can our invitation to join this ‘peculiar people’ be good news in the ears of our neighbors?

The Church of the Nazarene in the USA/Canada is living in a moment of decision. What will our witness to Christ look like in the world? Can we be good news people again? Have we been disciplined by political playbooks to the point of internal division? Is the mercy tribe being asked to exit the tent? Will the law-and-order tribe rethink the entrustment of power? Will the world view us as the answer to its loneliness? Will our peculiarity be winsome? Are we too late and too far gone?

I find myself pondering these questions. My hope leaks. But then I am reminded that we are the followers of a crucified Jesus, three days dead and buried, far past recovery from the cross. And God raised this Jesus to life. I pray for such a resurrection among us. I remain a prisoner of hope, but I also believe that hope begins in a prophetic word that leads to confession, repentance, a love that expels sin, and a resulting Christlikeness. May we be that people.

**May the words of my pen and mouth, the thoughts of my mind, the motives of my heart, and the tone of my spirit be acceptable to you, O God, the merciful and mighty. Amen.**

*Postscript: After I finished typing this on a Saturday, I woke up Sunday morning and read one of my news sources, The Daily Dispatch. Karen Swallow Prior had written an article, The False Battle Between Justice and Mercy, in which she makes the same argument that I have sought to make. She uses the term justice rather than wisdom or order, but it is the same concept of authority to set things right. I would encourage you to read her thoughts. I couldn't have said it better myself.*

<https://thedispatch.com/newsletter/dispatch-faith/justice-mercy-virtues-christianity/>