

Closing Address

Global Theology Conference II

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Simon Vetter is his name. Perhaps he is not a typical individual by most accounts but Simon is a very good illustration of what the church faces today... On the other extreme is Rene. He is also not a typical individual but he represents the same coin... the other side of the coin.

Simon is a well-educated Swiss citizen who lives in San Diego California and who works as a business leadership mentor in places as sophisticated as the financial center in Zurich or as developing as the small business incubators of Lima, Peru. Rene is a Guatemalan physician who grew up in a Nazarene home. Today, he lives in Mexico where he is involved with indigenous communities across Mexico and Central America teaching public health.

I met Simon while traveling back home on a nine-hour flight from Washington to Zurich. One may say that we both had a captive audience... He is just 39, an up-and-coming leadership writer and a disciple of Marshall Goldsmith (a prolific writer in leadership coaching and the co-author of the *Leader of the Future*).

After the formalities of the take-off, we started talking about our respective jobs. Not a deep subject for a conversation but a good ice-breaker: "so, what do you do?" was his typical question. My response did not seem to impress him much but he made a "you-are-one-of-these-huh?" face. As a good business coach, Simon asked the question that most people ask nowadays: So, you are a Christian worker... tell, me, what makes you different from the other Christian groups? What do people in your group believe in?

Got it!!! I thought he was never going to ask. Fortunately, in my travels as a Regional Director I focus significantly on sharing with our leadership the core values of the Church of the Nazarene. Knowing that he was not ready for my three-hour workshop (even though he was a captive listener), I gave him the "ten-seconds elevator version:" We are a Christian, Holiness, and Missional Church, I said. Now, you need to understand that when we talk among ourselves about these core values, we get really excited. I have been excited ever since I read them for the first time, but then again, I am a choir member... But for Simon, they needed more explaining...

So I went on and explained to him what it is to be a Christian church. Very politely but assertively, Simon said: "I know about that. In fact, I grew up a Christian. I was an altar boy in a Catholic church. Does that count?" So, are you THAT kind of a Christian?" See, in our context, in the world we live today, we cannot afford to make blanket statements that sound as we are the only Christians and that we are the only ones with the truth; we cannot afford to tell the world that those other Christians are not good since the average non-Christian does not even get what Christians are all about anyway...

The missional part was easier. He understood that. He said that he had read the history of his church and he understood that whole "missional thing." However, he seemed to make an easy connection between "mission" and "colonization" (perhaps because of his knowledge of the history of Christendom in his continent). As a polite travel companion, however, he did not elaborate but I sensed that he felt quite strongly about it.

But the part that really grabbed his attention was the Holiness part. When I tried to put it in very lay terms so that he could understand that being a holiness church means that we believe that all Christians can and must be like Christ, he finally got it. Wow, he exclaimed: Being like Christ, behaving like Christ, what an ambitious goal! Kudos to you! If you get all Christians (those from the Church I left and those from the Church you are part of) to behave like Christ, you will certainly make a big change in this world...

Simon went to sleep... In the process of our conversation I found out that he is now a follower of Budha, just like his mentor Mr. Goldsmith. But deeply inside he was challenged by the fact that there are Christians out there who believe that it is possible not only to follow Christ but to actually BE like Christ. On the side, Simon also made the comment that it was quite strange that a Christian was actually able to tell him what he believed. For him, it was a first in a long time...

Rene, on the other hand, is a former Nazarene who grew up listening the teachings of the church. He gave up decades ago while he was still a young Nazarene. While attending medical school, he was accused of being a liberal socialist because he dared to suggest that his church opened a medical clinic for the disadvantaged children in the neighborhood. I guess Rene was ahead of his time. Rene, my blood brother, still lives in exile (from the church and from his homeland).

Like Simon, Rene asks me often the same questions about who we are and what makes us different from other groups that claim to know the truth. However, he is still impressed by the fact that Nazarenes, those that he used to worship with, still believe in, and aspire to, live our lives that Christ himself. Simon and Rene are impressed by the fact that there are Christians who believe that it is possible (and imperative) to BE LIKE CHRIST.

In spite of their fascination with our belief that people can actually be like Christ, these men, like many other people, are dissatisfied with and indifferent to Christianity because, in their minds, it has lost its relevance, so much so that they strongly believe that the average Christians do not even know who they are and what do they believe. If I could summarize some of their criticisms on the state of Christianity, they would say the following:

The average Christian cannot articulate his/her basic beliefs and they are no different from the millions of nominal religious people.

The average Christian does not know how to express his/her own story.

There seems to be a lack or coherence between what Christians say and what they do.

Christians are so divided that it is hard to recognize who is really walking on the light...

I am sorry I spent some time introducing this stories about Simon and Rene but they are not the exception any more. Simon and Rene represent the millions of people who are part of this new world that, thanks to globalization and the shrinking of the world resulting from air travel and the internet, is dominated by secularism, relativism, reductionism, and to a great extent, post-modernism. Simon and Rene highlight for us the great challenges that our denomination faces as we move into the next century as a Christian, Holiness, Missional Church. See, the challenges are not necessarily inside our camp. The challenges are out there in a world that increasingly questions the message and the messengers of Christianity. If I can summarize these challenges from my conversation with Simon and my long dialogues with Rene, I could say that, in order to remain relevant, the church must address both the external and the internal challenges that she faces.

In other words, as we move forward, as we look at continue with the prophetic message that we have entrusted with, the church must be able to articulate its belief in a clear, consistent, and practical manner. To do so, Christians must:

Believe what they believe

Be able to plainly articulate what they believe

Be real to what they believe. In other words, walk the talk

Exhibit the unity of the body that Christ prayed for by

Reaffirming its commitment to holism, and

Reaffirming its commitment to unity in the midst of diversity

Interestingly enough, however, these challenges and demands on the church are not new. In order to speak about the future we must look at the past. As Dr. Clive Calver, the former General Secretary of the Evangelical Alliance of the UK used to say, "history repeats itself; it always does because nobody learns from it..." While many of us may feel that the challenges that we face in this important historical juncture are unique of globalization and post-modernism, let me go back to the history of our church and identify the very same

demands on Christianity and the very same challenges for the Christian church.

As we move forward, WE MUST BELIEVE WHAT WE BELIEVE

In his sermons about the failure and defense of Christianity respectively, John Wesley was acutely aware of the challenges of Christianity as it witnessed the peak of the industrial era, with the subsequent emergence of modernity and the enlightenment (I guess, many people would have blamed the state of the church to “modernity” just like many of us seem to blame it on “post-modernity”). For Wesley, Christianity was in such disarray because, in spite of the idea of a progressing Christendom, the plurality of the Christian faith were unable to articulate the faith itself. In his sermon he wrote:

“Do the people in general understand Christianity? Do they conceive what it is? Can they give an intelligible account, either of the speculative or practical part of it? What know they of the very first principles of it? -- of the natural and moral attributes of God; of his particular providence; of the redemption of man; of the offices of Christ; of the operations of the Holy Ghost; of justification; of the new birth; of inward and outward sanctification? ...

...Make a fair inquiry, not only in the country cabins, but in the cities of Cork, Waterford, Limerick; yea, in Dublin itself. How few know what Christianity means! How small a number will you find that have any conception of the analogy of faith! of the connected chain of scripture truths, and their relation to each other—namely, the natural corruption of man; justification by faith; the new birth; inward and outward holiness. It must be acknowledged by all competent judges, who converse freely with their neighbors in these kingdoms, that a vast majority of them know no more of these things than they do of Hebrew or Arabic. And what good can Christianity do to these, who are so totally ignorant of it?”

So, for Wesley, the problem of an irrelevant faith was not primarily the lack of doctrinal coherence but on the systemic failure on Christians to even articulate the most basic beliefs of the apostles, not to mention the more complex intricacies of the doctrine of the Church.

Amazingly, Simon, Rene, and millions of others who have been exposed to a corrupted doctrine of cultural Christianity would argue exactly what Wesley addressed during the important period of history in which mankind was transitioning from the dark ages to the period of modernity and enlightenment. Not much has changed...

Therefore, as we move forward, the Church must foster an environment in which Christians truly believe what they believe. We cannot afford to continue promoting pop-culture Christianity while allowing ourselves to be part of the same culture of relativism and reductionism that we often criticize. The church and its institutions of learning at all levels must go back to the basics and focus on the rudiments of the faith so that the gospel can, again, be presented in its most basic, yet powerful and dramatic form. Sam and the millions of people who are watching Christianity with increasingly scrutinizing eyes demand for us to believe what we believe and know so.

As we move forward, WE MUST AFFIRM AND PLAINLY ARTICULATE OUR DOCTRINE SO THAT THE WORLD GETS IT

How can we help the church affirm and believe what we believe? Here is where theologians and educational institutions play a key role in the life of the church! Any plain account of our belief system is always framed by doctrine. In his sermon on the defense of Christianity, Wesley emphasized the importance of a doctrine that was clear, non-corrupted, and biblically based.

“We have likewise cause to give thanks to the Father of Lights, for that he hath not left himself without witness; but that there are those who now preach the gospel of peace, the truth as it is in Jesus. But how

few are these in comparison of those who adulterate the word of God! How little wholesome food have we for our souls, and what abundance of poison! How few are there that, either in writing or preaching, declare the genuine gospel of Christ, in the simplicity and purity wherewith it is set forth in the venerable records of our own Church! And how are we inclosed on every side with those who, neither knowing the doctrines of our Church, nor the Scriptures, nor the power of God, have found out to themselves inventions wherewith they constantly corrupt others also!”

But Wesley was not only concerned about a doctrine that was biblically sound and Spirit-filled. He also warned the church about the existence of a doctrine that was more based on the cultural and social context than in the admonitions of the scripture itself. While defending Christianity, Wesley admonished the Church against the risk of cultural doctrines that twisted the truths of Scripture and accommodated them to the cultural biases and local expressions of piety and holiness:

“But how does the general stream of writers and Preachers (let me be excused the invidious task of instancing in particular persons) agree with this doctrine? Indeed, not at all. Very few can we find who simply and earnestly enforce it. But very many who write and preach as if Christian holiness, or religion, were a purely negative thing; as if; not to curse or swear, not to lie or slander, not to be a drunkard, a thief; or a whoremonger, not to speak or do evil, was religion enough to entitle a man to heaven! How many, if they go something further than this, describe it only as an outward thing; as if it consisted chiefly, if not wholly, in doing good, (as it is called,) and using the means of grace! Or, should they go a little farther still, yet what do they add to this poor account of religion? Why, perhaps, that a man should be orthodox in his opinions, and have a zeal for the constitution in Church and state. And this is all: This is all the religion they can allow, without degenerating into enthusiasm! So true it is, that the faith of a devil, and the life of a Heathen, make up what most men call a good Christian!”

Therefore, as we move forward, the Church must foster an environment where doctrine is reviewed, evaluated and reaffirmed. Such process, like this historical event, must allow the church to make a distinction between the biblical and the cultural applications of doctrine. It must also reaffirm the doctrine by presenting it as the positive message of the gospel, a message of redemption, regeneration, sanctification, and transformation. It cannot present it as the expression holiness as connected to a specific culture of the world.

III. As we move forward, WE MUST WALK THE TALK

But above all, we must do so by living out what we believe. We cannot afford to be theological Pharisees who can eloquently articulate doctrine but who fail to live it in our own lives. Just as Christian worker in civil-war ravaged Guatemala said in 1985:

“We don’t want the big talkers. We want those who are willing to get their hands muddy, their sandals dusty, their hearts broken, so that the liberating power of Jesus can reach the suffering communities of our country.”

Wesley also addressed that challenge in his defense of Christianity. For Wesley, it is the practice of the doctrine what makes it more relevant than any treaty that the Church may write. The practice of the doctrine is as important as a biblically rooted and plainly articulated doctrine. Wesley added:

“With grief of heart I speak it, and not with joy, that scarcely is the form of godliness seen among us. We are all indeed called to be saints, and the very name of Christians means no less. But who has so much as the appearance? Take any one you meet; take a second, a third, a fourth, or the twentieth. Not one of them has even the appearance of a saint, any more than of an angel. Observe his look, his air, his gesture! Does it breathe nothing but God? Does it bespeak a temple of the Holy Ghost? Observe his conversation; not an hour only, but day-by-day. Can you gather from any outward sign, that God dwells in his heart? that this is an everlasting spirit, who is going to God? Would you imagine that the blood of Christ was shed for that soul, and had purchased everlasting salvation for it; and that God was now

waiting till that salvation should be wrought out with fear and trembling?

Should it be said, "Why, what signifies the practice of godliness?" we readily answer, Nothing, if it be alone. But the absence of the practice signifies much. It infallibly proves the absence of the power. For though the practice may be without the power, yet the power cannot be without the practice. Outward religion may be where inward is not; but if there is none without, there can be none within.

But it may be said, "We have public prayers both morning and evening in all our Colleges." It is true; and it were to be wished that all the members thereof; more especially the elder, those of note and character, would, by constantly attending them, show how sensible they are of the invaluable privilege. But have all who attend them the form of godliness? Before those solemn addresses to God begin, does the behavior of all who are present show that they know before whom they stand? What impression appears to be left on their minds when those holy offices are ended? And even during their continuance, can it be reasonably inferred from the tenor of their outward behavior, that their hearts are earnestly fixed on Him who stands in the midst of them? I much fear, were a Heathen, who understood not our tongue, to come into one of these our assemblies, he would suspect nothing less than that we were pouring out our hearts before the Majesty of heaven and earth. What then shall we say, (if indeed "God is not mocked,") but, "What a man soweth, that also shall he reap?"

Therefore, as we move forward in a world that demands transparency and authenticity, Wesleyan Christians must emphasize the fact that our behavior speaks louder than our words, louder than a well-thought through eschatology, ecclesiology, missiology, theology. Our actions become our witness and not necessarily our words.

IV. As we move forward, WE MUST FOSTER UNITY THE WAY CHRIST PRAYED FOR IT

This conference itself has been crafted under the banner of unity. Unity in the midst of diversity. But how far are we willing to go for the sake of unity? How open are we to embrace our differences and to recognize that many of them are deeper than we would like to admit? Let me suggest two main areas in which the church will be challenged in the future and for which we must remain vigilant so that the highlighting of our differences will not result in the creation of an unnecessarily segregated church.

First, the church needs to continue focusing on the value of holism. The gospel of Christ transforms the whole person and it has the power to transform communities. We cannot afford to dissect our doctrine by emphasizing the temporal over the eternal or vice-versa. Our church must move beyond the dichotomy between a particular gospel and a social gospel as if they were political positions within a denominational spectrum. We know better than that. Our doctrine, rooted on the teachings of Jesus and the life of the early church must firmly embrace a balanced expression of being Christian, holiness, and missional. This balanced expression understands that the transforming power of Christ transforms individuals who, in turn, transform families, neighborhoods, and societies. From this perspective, social transformation and justice are not ends by themselves but the necessary outcome of transformed, sanctified Christians who, following the same image of God, despise injustice, ethnocentrism, and national pride, as much as they despise personal and collective sin. Conversely, ministries to the poor should not be taken as a only means to an end by which we just pay lip service to the issues of our society while we are really seeking for an opportunity to "win souls" with no stomachs.

Wesley strongly advocated for this balance. His numerous works, sermons, and programs focused on the notion that "there is no particular holiness without social holiness." But Wesley did it in such a way that he integrated all the personal dimensions of the minister in the transformational task of the minister. Wesley's lifestyle reflected a commitment to simplicity, frugality, stewardship, and generosity. He lived what he preached. Then, his programs and methods reflected his beliefs. He preached with the same intensity that he helped the immigrants, the poor, and the displaced. Furthermore, Wesley became a voice for the voiceless, an advocate on behalf of the same people he served, and a prophetic voice that judiciously but boldly challenged many unjust and evil structures and practices of his society and his church. In fact, last March 25 was the celebration of the second

centennial of the abolition of slave trade in Britain, a practice that Wesley condemned and against which he wrote a letter to the British parliament.

But Wesley was careful in fostering the balance that he preached about. In spite of his strong commitment to holism, his movement did not intent to split the church of England. He was careful in expressing his concern about the state of affairs while recommending the support to the church that embraced his ministry. I suggest, therefore, that in order for us to avoid the politicization of the debate, the Church must express its unity by embracing the holistic meaning of the mission of God and to avoid the trap of polarizing the gospel.

As we move forward, the Church must work intentionally in embracing its missional ethos by integrating the social and particular dimensions of the gospel with no hierarchy of one over the other. We must embrace a holistic approach to mission that integrates the proclamation and the demonstration of the gospel.

“Integral mission or holistic transformation is the **proclamation and demonstration of the gospel**. It is not simply that evangelism and social involvement are to be done alongside each other. Rather, in integral mission our proclamation has social consequences as we call people to love and repentance in all areas of life. And our social involvement has evangelistic consequences as we bear witness to the transforming grace of Jesus Christ. If we ignore the world we betray the word of God, which sends us out to serve the world. If we ignore the word of God we have nothing to bring to the world. Justice and justification by faith, worship and social transformation, the spiritual and the material, personal change and Shalom belong together. As in the life of Jesus, **being, doing and saying are at the heart of our integral task.**”

Excerpt from the Micah Network Declaration on Integral Mission, Oxford 2001

And finally, the church will show unity by focusing on mission more than on form. A recurrent theme in the “unity in diversity” conversation was the challenge that the church has in defining what is core and who defines it. I propose that this challenge can be addressed when the church focuses on the mission first. While focusing on its mission and its core identity, the church will be able to empower the various expressions of church in such a way that it may even challenge the structures and forms that deliver mission today **and that is ok**.

While doing so, the church must avoid falling into the “trap of the technocracy” that spends more time discussing form at the expense of mission. This may be a game of words but pay close attention to the damage that form causes to unity. Whether it is in English, Spanish, and at least Portuguese, when we insert the word FORM to the word UNITY and we put it right in the middle, UNITY becomes UNIFORMITY. This is the technocrat’s trap and it is not what Christ prayed for. Many problems that we experience today, and which Wesley addressed during his time, are the by-product of a mindset that tends to systematize the expressions of theology in the form of traditions (at the expense of the Christian Tradition). Through history, churches and denominations have fallen prey to the need to standardize traditions, personal biases, political models, and structures in replacement of mission. Many genuine expressions of the body of Christ have been ostracized because they do not fit the technocratic mandate to UNIFORM under the banner or fostering UNITY.

Therefore, as we move forward, the Church must be able to affirm, embrace, and promote its core values and core doctrine in ways that are deliverable to all cultures and all generations in all nations but the Church must also foster and empower the various organic expressions of church to exist within these cultures, generations and nations even at the expense of homogeneity. Since UNITY IS NOT UNIFORMITY, we must strive to foster UNITY in PRINCIPLES while allowing DIVERSITY in form.

Now, I have just jumped one period of history to illustrate the challenges that the church faces today and the similarity of those challenges with the ones that encourage John Wesley to challenge the church to re-assume its prophetic role. But Wesley did not do that in isolation. Wesley did not reinvent the church. Wesley did not institute the church. Therefore, as good as a work as Wesley did, we must take his work and model only as such but not as the infallible model for the church. In fact, I venture to say that Wesley did what he did because he re-encounter the biblical model of the church by visiting the life of the early church as recorded in Scripture.

I will not go to the same level of detail to illustrate what we all know of the actions of the early church that boldly addressed the times they faced but I will list them to you so that we don't re-write history as we move forward. However, it is important to highlight that what Wesley did was not novelty. Wesley just re-discovered the prophetic role that Christ had given to the early church and promoted it during his time. The model that Wesley followed was the same model of the early church:

Because early Christians believed what they believed (Acts 2:47)

Because early Christians persevered in the doctrine of the apostles and understood it

Because early Christians lived out their doctrine, and

Because early Christians maintained the unity as Christ demanded

By reaffirming their commitment to holism (Acts 6:1-6). Here, the church responded to "criticism."

However, when the believers challenged the apostles to reincorporate the service to the tables as part of the holistic expression of mission, the apostles did not become defensive. On the contrary, rather than ostracizing those who demanded the demonstrative dimension of the gospel, the apostles made the bold decision to appoint deacons "to serve the tables" while they devoted themselves to the preaching of the gospel.

By focusing on mission and not on form (Acts 16.) In this critical event in the light of the early church, early Christians chose to focus on the heart of the gospel and not on the peripheral elements of the Jewish tradition. They chose not to impose a cultural doctrine to the new believers but they focused on the essentials of the faith. Furthermore, they did not expect for the gentiles to go on strike to listen to them. The early church "owned" the situation.

Now, as we look at the future, as our church reaffirms its doctrine, as we reaffirm our commitment to a holy living, as we reaffirm our commitment to unity, holistic mission, and prophetic witness, let me remind this audience that we can do it just as Wesley did it and just as the early Church did it only if we focus on Christ, the builder of the Church, the writer of theology, and the model of holy living...

As the apostle Paul wrote to the Philippians...

"If you have any encouragement from being united in Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being likeminded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same of Christ Jesus:

Who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.

And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on the Cross."

As I conclude, let me pray the same prayer that John Wesley prayed as he defended the church towards the future: *"O God, who in all ages hast taught the hearts of thy faithful people, by sending to them the light of thy Holy Spirit; grant us by the same Spirit to have a right judgment in all things, and evermore to rejoice in his holy comfort, through the merits of Jesus Christ our Savior; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the same Spirit, one God, world without end. Amen."*

Dalfsen, The Netherlands, April 3, 2007