

CORE VALUES: RESTORING RELIGIOUS CAPITAL IN THE CHURCH OF THE NAZARENE

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The primary purpose of this essay is to explore the potential of the Core Values statement for restoring religious capital in the Church of the Nazarene. Each year the Association of Nazarene Sociologists and Researchers explores various sociological approaches for understanding religious life. This year's theme, "Religious Capital: Increasing Gains and Reducing Losses," may offer us an opportunity to gain insight into the nature of religious change exhibited in the identity concerns facing the Church of the Nazarene. This essay divides into three sections. The first offers an interpretation of the Core Values statement in light of the theoretical framework of "religious capital." The second section offers empirical data regarding the effectiveness of the core values statements for the production of religious capital.¹ The final section is more exploratory and hypothetical. It asks what might be the potential of the core values for restoring religious capital in the denomination.

Core Values and Religious Capital

I take the core values statement² to be the attempt by a religious organization to reinforce its identity in the midst of diversity and fragmentation.³ The core values statement affirms that

¹The primary social research methodology used is the qualitative in-depth interview.

²I will not rehearse here the development of the core values statement. For such a review see Ron Benefiel's reflective paper entitled, "Cultivating Community Through Core Values and Commitment," (2000).

³This is a fundamental assumption of this paper and will not be explicitly argued. For support of this view see the following ANSR papers: Kenneth E. Crow, and Rich Houseal, "Cultivating Community in a Diverse

Nazarenes are "a Christian people," "a Holiness people," and "a Missional people" and it then elaborates on these three values to a certain degree. The theoretical framework informing the core values statement derives largely from sect-church theory, and was most cogently expressed by Ron Benefiel in his "Cultivating Community Through Core Values and Commitment" in which he reflected on the genesis of the core values statement. Benefiel's primary assumption is that social organizations, in this case a religious denomination, "must hold in common certain shared ideas, values and norms in order to be a community."⁴ According to this theoretical model, these shared values, then, are crucial for the development of social cohesion and the perpetuation of the social organization over time. He writes, "the internal solidarity or intensity of their sense of community is dependent upon the degree to which these shared ideas, values and norms are compelling and effective in calling people to commitment – commitment to the values themselves and to one another around those values."⁵ Without these core values Christian community is substantially undermined.

Benefiel attributes the current need to articulate core values to the effects of changing "socio-economic realities" within the Church of the Nazarene. Increasing upward socio-economic mobility of substantial numbers of its members has resulted in a loss of tension with the broader society, so that members are less inclined to hold beliefs and to engage in practices that stand in opposition to that society. He articulates classic sect-church theory when he writes:

As people are converted and come into the fellowship of the church, they become better citizens and better stewards of their money and time. In turn, they become better employees and, over time, are promoted in their jobs more frequently. With more money, they are less marginalized and more able to access prestige, position and power in

Denomination; "Ron Johnston, "Crisis of Confidence in Authority and Denomination;" Philip N. LaFountain, "Tradition and Modernity: Nazarene Identity in a Reflexive Age;" and, Ron Benefiel, "An Empirical Study of the Church of the Nazarene."

⁴Ron Benefiel, "Cultivating Community Through Core Values and Commitment." 1.

⁵Ibid., 2.

the dominant society. Social standing and esteem are now available not from the group alone, but increasingly from the external social world. In the meantime, if education is valued by the group, it is also more accessible with upward mobility. An emphasis on education within a sect group early on will speed its upward mobility. With increased education comes increased questioning of authority and rationalization of absolutes. Theological beliefs are looked at in more complex terms. Greater appreciation and tolerance toward other groups grows. Shared norms diminish as prescriptions give way to principles, which are more diverse in their application. The end result is a lack of uniformity of normative behavior and theological doctrine. Further, increased questioning of authority makes it more difficult for leadership to call the membership to common commitments.⁶

For Benefiel this model explains a great deal of the current dilemma of identity facing the Church of the Nazarene.

If we were to frame these issues in rational choice theory, we might suggest that the current identity dilemma facing the Church of the Nazarene is the result of the difficulty of producing and retaining religious capital. Rational choice theory depicts religious participants as rational actors making decisions that maximize value. That is, rational actors make religious choices through the “subjective weighing of anticipated rewards and costs.”⁷ Rational actors, then, make decisions to maximize rewards and reduce costs. In daily decisions about religion, people generally make religious choices to conserve religious capital.

Religious capital, according to Roger Finke, refers to “the degree of mastery of and attachment to a particular religious culture.”⁸ The key ideas here are “mastery of” and “attachment to.” Religious capital is enhanced when individuals understand and are able to utilize the religious resources available to them. In addition, religious capital is enhanced when individuals develop emotional bonds with the religious group. Finke and Stark suggest that “the

⁶Benefiel, "Cultivating Community Through Core Values," 3.

⁷Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 85.

⁸Roger Finke, “Spiritual Capital: Definitions, Applications, and New Frontiers,” A paper prepared for the Templeton Foundation’s Spiritual Capital planning meeting, October 10-11, 2003.

effects of religious activities such as prayer, rituals, miracles, and mystical experiences build up over a lifetime, not only increasing confidence in the truth of a religion, but strengthening emotional ties to a specific bundle of religious culture.”⁹ This is religious capital. Loss of religious capital means that denominations have difficulty sustaining individuals with sufficient mastery of its culture and who fail to bond emotionally with the religious tradition. The effect is that it is easier for those rational actors to make religious choices either to transfer religious capital, or who have insufficient religious capital to cause them to remain connected to a particular religious culture.

Core Values and the Contemporary Church

Nearly a decade ago the proponents of the core values statement asked whether Nazarenes, especially North American Nazarenes, were able and willing to fully embrace the commitments to which the core values called them. This next section attempts to offer a preliminary answer to that query. While some quantitative research is available through ANSR Polls that address the social impact of the core values in the Church of the Nazarene,¹⁰ this section relies on in-depth interviews of three Nazarene pastors.¹¹ The primary concern was to ascertain how pastors responded to and appropriated the Core Values statement for the promotion of denominational identity, and the development of community and religious vitality in local congregations. The local pastor plays a central role in the promulgation of denominational identity in the local congregation, therefore understanding the attitude and

⁹Stark and Finke, *Acts of Faith*, 120-1.

¹⁰Little research is available, but see recent ANSR Poll.

¹¹For details on the selection process and the questions asked see Appendix A.

response of pastors to the core values statement is a critical factor in understanding the social impact of those core values on the development of religious capital.

Pastor's responses to the core values statement revealed three general areas of concern: difficulty appropriating the core values within local settings, questions about how the core values are expressed and promoted by denominational leadership, and uncertainty about the value of what they perceive to be generalized, quasi-abstract notions of religious belief and practice for day-to-day life of the congregation and pastoral work.

The three pastors randomly selected for this study had been in ministry for over 20 years. Each pastor was involved not only in ministry in the local congregation, but also active on their district in substantial ways, whether on the leadership team, attending district functions, or involved in summer camps and evangelistic endeavors. Thus, each had significant contact with denominational concerns and rationale for the core values statements.

In general, all three pastors were sympathetic with the denominational concern over identity. They, and many lay Nazarenes in their congregations, have a more or less vague sense that the church today has significant questions about who it is and what it believes, and that the most poignant questions relate to the denomination's understanding of holiness. The pastors themselves have questions about what they believe about central doctrines of the church such as entire sanctification.

The primary question facing these pastors was how to use the core values statement in the local church. While all the pastors remembered receiving the core values statement either in the mail, or at a district function, only one of the three pastors interviewed had actually appropriated the core values statements in the local church. And, the pastor that did confessed an uncertainty about how to use the statements. His basic strategy was to present the core values in sermonic

form. He preached a series of three sermons, one on each of the core values, over three Sundays. To assist members with understanding and remembering the core values he handed out copies to each family. This pastor confessed, however, that once the sermon series was finished there was little if any follow-up and no attempt to reinforcement the core values in the minds of church members.

When the other two pastors were asked why they had not utilized the core values statement in preaching or teaching they were noticeably apologetic, but defended themselves by suggesting that they saw no "immediate application." Following the initial review of the material, they had placed it in a file and had simply forgotten about it. Underlying this, however, were their general comments to the effect that it was not likely that the core values statement would do much to invigorate a languishing denominational identity.

When asked whether they had read the material themselves these two pastors responded that they had not looked at it very seriously, but had only given it "a once over." They had intended to "get back to it," but that never happened. One pastor had thought about asking a lay leader to "spear head" the emphasis, but had not gotten around to doing that.

All the pastors expressed a skepticism about the effectiveness of "top down" leadership on such things as fundamental as basic beliefs and practices. The emotional and psychological distance these pastors felt from this particular denominational concern was striking. One pastor responded, "I have so many other immediate concerns that it seems like denominational identity often isn't even on the radar screen." Another pastor, maybe a bit more tensely, quipped, "The denomination creates these so-called "core values" without my input and I'm supposed to find a way to implement them?" Primarily concerned with the immediate needs of pastoral life, these

pastors found it difficult to connect emotionally with the more general, denominational concerns with core identity on an ongoing basis.

Another concern arising out of the interviews was the sense that the core values articulated were "too general" and somewhat "ambiguous." Considering each of the three aspects of the core values - Christian, Holiness, and Missional - one pastor, not the pastor who preached on the core values, argued that stating that Nazarenes were Christian was too obvious and that to affirm that Nazarenes are "Holiness" fails to offer the specificity needed to say exactly how we are holiness. He argued that the problem is that we don't know what we mean by "Holiness," although he had very specific ideas about what he thought holiness meant. The language of "Missional" also raised some questions. Did it refer to the fact that the Nazarene church sends out missionaries, or did it refer to the sense that Nazarenes have a sense of purpose or intention? One pastor concluded that it probably meant both. Another pastor commented that he felt that the church was more "missional" in the past than it is today.

Of course these comments by these pastors may be more perception than reality. The core values statement, to be fair, offers a fair amount of detail explicating each of the core values. It is not, could not be, and was not intended to be a theological dissertation elucidating in detail each of these values. Yet, since pastors are an important link between the local congregation and the denomination, it is important to understand how they think about these issues.

Benefiel writes, "Having a core values statement is, of course, no guarantee at all that the stated core values will generally be embraced as core, or even at all." The findings are not entirely encouraging regarding the social impact of the core values statement. Only one out of three pastors had actively engaged the material and made some attempt to integrate it into the life

of the congregation. Other research, broader in scope, and more representative of churches in the denomination may reveal a more optimistic result. Yet, at least one question arises out of this research: what do we think the core values statement can do for denominational cohesion? Can the core values statement contribute to the formation of religious capital and how might this happen?

Core Values and the Potential for Religious Capital

This final section is more exploratory and hypothetical and asks whether and how the core values statement can function to restore religious capital. Rational choice theory, I think, offers insight into the relationship between core values and a renewal of religious capital.

Let us return to rational choice theory and religious capital. According to Stark and Finke in *Acts of Faith*, rational choice depicts individuals as rational actors who maximize value and weigh cost and benefit. How does this relate to social solidarity and commitment? First, higher tension groups, those that have high costs and high rewards, tend to retain members and maintain vitality, that is, they are able to produce significant amounts of religious capital. Those that lower tension with the broader culture do not.

If we posit that the sect-church model says something quite true about the Church of the Nazarene, then we might ask how this trend might be reversed. Stark and Finke offer insights into this in a later chapter of *Acts of Faith*. They offer three propositions that pertain to this situation:

If secular rewards of religious vocations decline, then religious rewards must play an increasing part in the motivation of those who pursue such vocations.

To the extent that religious rewards motivate ecclesiastics, they will prefer a relatively higher level of tension for the group.

Initial shifts toward higher tension will primarily occur at the congregational level and will be reflected at the denominational level as a cumulative result of congregational shifts.¹²

According to these propositions a reversal of the sect-church scenario presupposes individuals who find greater satisfaction from religious rewards than secular rewards and who are relatively comfortable with a measure of tension with the broader culture. In addition, a reversal of sect-church trajectory is as much a bottom-up movement as it is a top-down movement.

What does this say about the core values statement? There are three possibilities. First, the core values should accentuate the tension between the religious group and the broader culture. That is it must define how the religious group is not the world and vice versa. Second, the core values should highlight the religious rewards affirmed by the group, rewards which can only be obtained by supernatural means. And, third, the core values statement should articulate a high reward, high cost religious life. To the extent that the core values statements satisfies these conditions the possibilities of the core values statement to enhance religious capital are greatly improved.

¹²See Stark and Finke, *Acts of Faith*, 262-3.

APPENDIX A

Explanation of Research and In-depth Interview Questions

The pastors chosen for this social research had previously been selected for a study on "Nazarene Identity," the result of which I present in my doctoral dissertation, "Nazarene Identity: Engaging Practical Reason." Since I had already selected these pastors at random from a pool of churches which met my research criteria, such as size of congregation, demographic characteristics, and pastoral tenure, I included questions about core values along with the questions for Nazarene identity. I asked the pastors the following open-ended questions:

1. What is your Christian story and what are your basic theological beliefs?
2. Are you familiar with the denominational statements on core values and how did you come to hear about them?
3. What is your opinion of the core values and do you think they can be helpful in clarifying Nazarene identity?
4. How did you respond to the denomination's concern to share the core values with your congregation? Did you implement them in any way?
5. What do you think is the result, if any, of implementing the core values in your church?

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