

Nazarene Archives

WHAT KIND OF CHURCH DID THE EARLIEST NAZARENES ACTUALLY WANT?

by Charles Edwin Jones

Dr. Bresee and other former Methodists who founded the Church of the Nazarene desired more than a reformed Methodist church where holiness would be preached. If such had been their goal, they needed only to unite with the Free Methodists or the Wesleyan Methodists, both of whom trace their origins to before the Civil War.

From the mid-1890s future Nazarene leaders from the West, East, and South, cast out and squeezed out

of denominational churches in increasing numbers, desired something much more elusive and difficult to attain. They sought a Spirit-led church in which revival fires with attendant Pentecostal glory never dimmed. So successful were they, in Bresee's Los Angeles-based fellowship at least, that in 1903 he observed,

There prevails among us everywhere the deep conviction that the dispensational truth is that Jesus

It had been my long-cherished desire to have a place in the heart of the city, which could be made a center of holy fire, and where the gospel could be preached to the poor.

P. F. Bresee

Christ baptizes with the Holy Ghost, cleansing, filling, and empowering, and that when He thus comes, He convinces of sin, of righteousness, and of judgment; and that the conflict with the powers of darkness is brought on, to the glory of our conquering Christ. The result is that our people live, mostly, in the Pentecostal glory, and souls are continually added to the company of the redeemed and bloodwashed (Girvin, p. 200).

This report, made at the Eighth Annual Assembly, witnessed to the deep dependence on the Holy Spirit of Bresee and his followers in their attempts to evangelize those neglected by the fashionable churches of their day. Because the larger movement with which Bresee's group united in so few years shared its sense of the immediacy of the Spirit's direction, the story of the formative years of the Church of the Nazarene in Los Angeles requires retelling.

In 1894 Phineas Franklin Bresee, a veteran of 37 years in the Methodist ministry, accepted location, thereby forfeiting conference membership in the Methodist church. Denied a supernumerary relationship which would have allowed him to retain his previous status, Bresee then joined T. P. Ferguson and his wife, Manie (author of "Blessed Quietness"), at the new Peniel Hall, an every-night mission in downtown Los Angeles. Bresee's proposal to transform the Peniel operation into an independent church met a cool reception from his colleagues. The following summer while preaching in a state holiness association camp meeting at Bennett, Neb., he received notice of his termination at Peniel. Again "out under the stars," he determined to launch "not a mission, but a church with a mission" of the type he had proposed unsuccessfully to the Fergusons.

Bresee was out of a job. He was not, however, without family and friends with both money and influence. His devoted children, a physician and the proprietors of Bresee Brothers, a furniture and undertaking establishment, came to their father's aid. Even more significant were affluent supporters he had gathered as pastor and presiding elder in Iowa and southern California. (The clergy of the Church of the Nazarene in California was to include many who once had held membership in Methodist conferences in Iowa.)

Bresee, in 1888, had commanded an annual salary of \$4,350 as pastor of the First Methodist Episcopal

Church of Pasadena (in 1890 the national average salary for ministers was \$794). Many of his prosperous friends followed him into independency. Among these were Dr. Joseph P. Widney, wealthy physician, former president of the University of Southern California, and fellow worker at Peniel Hall; Judge W. S. Knott, his talented wife, Lucy, and sister-in-law, Alice P. Baldwin; and Leslie F. Gay, businessman and lay member of the National Association for the Promotion of Holiness. They in turn were joined at this time or shortly afterward by Mary J. Willard, former Episcopalian, and her wealthy friend, Col. Blanton Duncan; Gardner Howland, retired paper manufacturer; and Michael Everley Whistler, an elderly physician.

Eighty-six people stood with Drs. Bresee and Widney at the front of the rented Red Men's Hall at 317 South Main Street on October 20, 1895, and formed the Church of the Nazarene. Other like-minded groups stood together in halls, rented churches, and tents in Spokane, Wash.; Dallas; Nashville; Pittsburgh; Brooklyn; Haverhill, Mass.; Chicago; and Kansas City during the next two decades and pledged undying loyalty to God and one another in the holy way.

The founders of these "centers of fire" set out to minister to common people in "neglected" areas of the cities. What I. G. Martin, composer of "The Eastern Gate," said of the founder in Los Angeles might well be said of the pioneer workers in other cities. "His call," said Martin, "was not to a floating class—here today and gone tomorrow—but to a more organized form of work among the common people who had homes and families, and who needed a church home" (Martin, pp. 11-12).

"The songs of praise and shouts of triumph" of the congregation proved so "distasteful" to the owner of the first building that before Thanksgiving they had been forced to relocate. They occupied another hall on North Main near Spring Street.


The following spring, the congregation was again forced to move. Riding in his buggy one day on Grand Avenue, Bresee saw a church building under construction and was reminded that it was but one of several then being built in that section of the city. Reining the horse to a standstill, he prayed, "Oh, Lord, there is plenty of money seemingly for great churches out in this part of the city. I would that Thou wouldst give me some

money to make a place for the Church of the Nazarene." It seemed the Lord then said to him, "I have given myself to you," which, said Bresee, gave assurance that with the Lord, "we have all things" (Girvin, p. 106).

The strategy that then emerged in the minds of Dr. Bresee and others was to lease a lot and build a temporary structure. A parcel was secured on Los Angeles Street between 5th and 6th, and construction began on the simple board tabernacle that later generations affectionately called "The Glory Barn." A personal loan co-signed by leading members of the congregation provided materials, while the congregation (which included a few carpenters) supplied most of the labor.

Considerations expressed in the planning of this tabernacle underline purposes and motivations of the founders in Los Angeles and elsewhere. Even before joining the Fergusons at Peniel Hall, Bresee recalled, "It had long been my cherished desire to have a place in the heart of the city which could be made a center of holy fire, and where the gospel could be preached to the poor." The socioeconomic status of present and prospective members (they were mostly "poor") was taken into account. Seated with about 400 chairs, the tabernacle was "plain and cheap, to save from financial burdens," and so arranged "that everything should say 'welcome to the poor.'" There he could "keep a red hot center of fire, and work the edges" (Martin, pp. 16-17).

A large number of outsiders testified to the success of the Church of the Nazarene in Los Angeles. Evangelist Henry Clay Morrison, editor of the *Pentecostal Herald*, who preached there 11 days in January, 1899, regarded the work there as a demonstration "that a church ought to be able to have a revival the year 'round."

After only three years of existence, membership stood at between 700 and 800. Although, said Morrison, "The most remarkable liberty" existed, "we saw nothing offensive to good sanctified taste. The people look upon a service as a comparative failure if some soul is not saved." Conveniently located, the "tabernacle, though a cheap frame structure, is excellently adapted to the purposes for which it is designed." "The people," the evangelist continued, "are perfectly satisfied with their place of worship, as their chief end is not the accumulation of masses of brick and mortar, but the salvation of lost men about them everywhere. Without doubt the times are ripe in all our large cities for just such churches as the Nazarene in Los Angeles" (*Pentecostal Herald*, 11 [Jan. 25, 1899]: 8). Three years later an article from the *Midland Methodist* reprinted in the *Nazarene Messenger* declared that although "lawyers, doctors, scientists, businessmen, men and women of education and refinement" had been gathered into its membership, this church was "emphatically" dedicated to the "salvation" of the poor (*Nazarene Messenger*, 6 [June 12, 1902]: 7). In a church for the poor, everything should say, "Welcome to the poor." 

THOSE EARLY NAZARENES CARED

*Compassionate Ministries
of the Nazarenes*

by J. Fred Parker

Dr. Phineas F. Bresee said the newly born Church of the Nazarene "selects as its special field of labor the portions of the cities from which they [the old-line churches] are drifting away." He further said, "The Church of the Nazarene is a simple, primitive church, a church of the people and for the people. . . . It is not a mission, but a church with a mission."

Underscoring this, Dr. Timothy Smith, in his history of the Church of the Nazarene, *Called unto Holiness*, states: "The chief aim of the church was to preach holiness to the poor. This fact is evident from every page of the literature which they published. . . . The first *Manual* announced the church's determination to win the lost through the agency of city missions, evangelistic services, house-to-house visitation, caring for the poor, comforting the dying" (pp. 113-14). No more positive statement of social concern could be made.

Reflecting this concern was the setting apart of deaconesses for Christian service. There were five in Bresee's original church. Their tasks included distribution of clothing to the poor and medical assistance to the ill.