

What Can Wesleyan Theology Contribute to the Pastoral Task?

How Should We Preach and Teach Holiness Today?

Samuel M. Powell

The Forward of the Church of the Nazarene's Manual contains the following statements:

The primary objective of the Church of the Nazarene is to advance God's kingdom by the preservation and propagation of Christian holiness as set forth in the Scripture.

The critical objectives of the Church of the Nazarene are "holy Christian fellowship, the conversion of sinners, the entire sanctification of believers, their upbuilding in holiness, and the simplicity and spiritual power manifest in the primitive New Testament Church, together with the preaching of the gospel to every creature."

Our well-defined commission is to preserve and propagate Christian holiness as set forth in the Scriptures, through the conversion of sinners, the reclamation of backsliders, and the entire sanctification of believers.

We can see from these statements that the doctrine and practice of holiness are prominent in the church's understanding of itself and its mission. The Church of the Nazarene regards itself as a continuation of the Methodist revival of the 18th century and the Holiness movement of the 19th century. Holiness was central to both the revival and the movement.

However, the fact that holiness has been an important feature of our tradition does not guarantee that holiness will be a vital component of our preaching and teaching. Every church and every pastor face numerous demands, and it is easy for churches and pastors to devote so much time to these demands that there is no time or energy left for the important work of remembering that for which we stand. Those who provide leadership in the church must continually work to ensure that, amid the necessary busyness of church life, we do not forget

what we are about. But the task of remembering goes beyond the need to preserve our heritage. Remembering is not simply a matter of recollecting what lies in the past. It includes also the attempt to make the past speak to the present as a vital power. The task of recollecting and preserving is an important one. That is why the church needs historians and others with special training in rescuing the past from our forgetfulness. But a past that is merely recollecting will have interest only for the historian. That is why the church needs preachers and teachers who both know the recollecting past and are also skilled in making the past live in the present.

This leads us to two questions: What is the past that we should recollect? and How should we preach and teach holiness today? The first question requires us to look reflectively at the theology of John Wesley and also of the American Holiness movement. The second requires us to think creatively about the meaning of holiness in today's spiritual context.

The Doctrinal Heritage of the Church of the Nazarene:

Holiness in the Thought of John Wesley

The most important point to grasp in trying to understand Wesley's view of holiness is the distinction between inward and outward sin. Outward sin consists in overtly wicked acts like murder, theft, and so on. These are the voluntary transgressions of a known law of God that many Wesleyans think of when asked about sin. Wesley believed that immediately upon conversion (and even before conversion) we can and should cease from these acts.

Inward sin, however, is another matter. He defined inward sin as those evil thoughts, passions, tempers, and affections, such as pride and anger, that persist in the hearts of Christians after conversion. Inward sin, in other words, is Wesley's term for Paul's concept of the flesh, which is opposed to life in the Spirit. The doctrine of holiness pertains to inward sin. Although,

in justification, we are freed from the guilt attaching to inward sin and its power, it continues to exist within us. In Wesley's words, believers

continually feel an heart bent to backsliding; a natural tendency to evil, a proneness to depart from God, and to cleave to the things of earth. They are daily sensible of sin remaining in their heart—pride, self-will, unbelief; and of sin cleaving to all they speak and do, even their best actions and holiest duties.¹

As a result, much of the Christian life, Wesley believed, is about overcoming inward sin. Sin remains but does not reign, and we must not acquiesce in inward sin.

Sanctification for Wesley denotes that act of God by which inward sin is overcome and we become holy. Like virtually every major writer in the Christian tradition, Wesley believed that sanctification is a process that takes time. In particular, it begins at conversion, when we are born again and begin to be renewed in the image of God: "When does inward sanctification begin? In the moment we are justified. The seed of every virtue is then sown in the soul. From that time the believer gradually dies to sin, and grows in grace. Yet sin remains in him; yea, the seed of all sin."² Conversion, then, is an important moment in the life of holiness. In conversion we receive the life of God in the person of the Holy Spirit. In that moment God begins to reverse the long history of sin by recreating us with "the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness" (Eph 4:24). As a result, we increasingly imitate the life of Christ and love more and more takes the place of evil thoughts and passions. Of course, Wesley understood that the life of sanctification is not one of steady progress, for Christians are susceptible to temptation and other problems such as depression. Nonetheless, sanctification describes the work of God in us by which, over time, God fills our hearts with love and crowds out inward sin.

Wesley differed from many in the Christian tradition, however, in asserting that it is

possible, in this life, to bring the process of sanctification to a conclusion. In other words, Wesley came to believe that sanctification could be entire, with the result that evil thoughts, tempers, passions and affections would be entirely replaced by perfect love for God and neighbor. This teaching was and is, to put it mildly, controversial to many within Christianity today.

Wesley had a variety of arguments to support his belief in entire sanctification. He believed, for example, that the Bible taught this doctrine. Passages such as Ezek 29:25 (“I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses”); 2 Cor 7:1 (“Let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and of spirit, making holiness perfect in the fear of God”); and Deut 30:6 (“The Lord your God will circumcise your heart . . . so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul”) in his opinion clearly expound not only the nature of holiness but also the possibility of its completion in this life. Another line of argument rested on the analogy of birth: although birth is a process that takes time, this process does come to a natural conclusion. Analogously, sanctification is a process over time. But it also has a natural completion when inward sin has been entirely replaced by love. What Wesley was arguing against was the view that sanctification comes to completion as one dies and that it cannot be completed before death. Wesley granted that, in fact, most Christians do not become entirely sanctified until death but he strenuously contested the view that entire sanctification is impossible before death. The fact that most are not entirely sanctified until death is, in Wesley’s view, simply a function of their lack of expectation. Having been taught that entire sanctification cannot occur short of death, the typical Christian does not expect it and so does not pursue it. The common teaching about sanctification thus becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Against this common teaching, Wesley asserted the possibility of entire sanctification in the midst of human life. But its possibility does not, he knew, mean that entire sanctification is easily obtained. Wesley set forth two things we must do in order to be entirely sanctified. First, we must engage in spiritual disciplines. We should wait for entire sanctification

in vigorous and universal obedience, in a zealous keeping of all the commandments, in watchfulness and painfulness, in denying ourselves, and taking up our cross daily; as well as in earnest prayer and fasting, and a close attendance on all the ordinances of God. . . . It is good for us to have a piercing sense of [our inner sin], and a vehement desire to be delivered from it.³

How should we wait for the fulfilling of this promise? In universal obedience; in keeping all the commandments; in denying ourselves. . . . These are the general means that God hath ordained. . . . The particular are—prayer, searching the Scripture, communicating [i.e. the Lord's Supper], and fasting.⁴

The traditional word for the result of these practices is mortification. By fasting, self-denial, and other disciplines we mortify or put to death inward sin. Wesley here was affirming the wisdom of the Christian monastic tradition, which developed these disciplines in the quest for spiritual perfection. The second thing that, according to Wesley, we must do to be entirely sanctified is to have faith. We must, in other words, believe not only that God can save us from inward sin but that God has promised to do so. Entire sanctification therefore depends on our trusting in God: "When we begin to believe, then sanctification begins. And as faith increases, holiness increases, till we are created anew."⁵ Consequently, lack of trust results in a delay in becoming entirely sanctified: "If you put it off till tomorrow, you harden your hearts. . . . Believe, therefore, that He is willing to save you to-day. . . . Only believe, and you also will immediately find, 'all things are possible to him that believeth.'"⁶

Of course, Wesley was careful to remind us that entire sanctification is the work of God and not merely the result of human effort. Exercising Christian disciplines and faith is essential

for obtaining entire sanctification but the act itself is the effect of God's grace. In this way, sanctification is the consummation of God's work within us that stretches back to awakening and repentance.

Finally, Wesley believed that, just as God's Spirit bears witness to us that we have become God's children in conversion, so the Spirit testifies to our entire sanctification. By an inward impression God convinces us that the work of sanctification has come to completion. Apart from this direct witness of the Spirit, there is also the fact that our lives exhibit the fruit of the Spirit that Paul enumerated in Gal 5. It was, in short, important for Wesley that we have direct ways of knowing that we have become entirely sanctified.

The Doctrinal Heritage of the Church of the Nazarene:

Holiness in the Theology of the American Holiness Movement

The Church of the Nazarene is not only a product of the theology of Wesley but also of the American Holiness movement. It is important to note, first of all, that numerous streams fed into the Holiness movement and influenced its theology. Because it was a movement and not a denomination, it lacked creedal documents that could fix its teaching and language about holiness. Nonetheless, the movement's theology was coherent enough that we can see where it agreed with Wesley's and where it diverged.

One of the streams that fed into the Holiness movement was, in fact, Wesley and his theology, which exerted an enormous influence on the movement. Another was the theology of Charles Finney (1792-1875). Finney was an evangelist and theologian in the Calvinist tradition. However, he became convinced that the Bible teaches Christian perfection and he became an outstanding figure in 19th century American Christian history. His most distinctive contribution

to the Holiness movement lay in the way he linked Pentecost with entire sanctification.

Although not the first to do so, Finney saw Acts 2's giving of the Spirit as the moment when the disciples were entirely sanctified. In his way, Finney interpreted holiness as the fulfillment of Old Testament promises about the new age of God's kingdom. Entire sanctification, accordingly, came to have in his theology an "eschatological" dimension that it had previously lacked. In other words, holiness was all about the consummation of history. Although standing outside Methodist circles, Finney exerted considerable influence on the emerging Holiness movement, which within a few years had adopted the connection between holiness and Pentecost. The result was that Christian perfection was now understood not only in Christological terms (the imitation of Christ) but also in terms of the Holy Spirit (sanctification meant being filled with the Spirit).

In spite of Finney's contribution to holiness theology, his teaching introduced a couple of problems. First, from the perspective of his theology, it is difficult to see how all Christians can possess the Spirit if entire sanctification means being filled with the Spirit. The logic of this position suggests that Christians do not receive the Spirit until they are entirely sanctified. This is surely not what the New Testament teaches. Second, once entire sanctification is thought of as a rather dramatic Pentecostal event, it becomes natural to place the emphasis on this event and to ignore subtly the moments of life preceding this event. In other words, Wesley's emphasis on the gradual aspect of sanctification, accompanied by spiritual exercises aimed at mortification, becomes relatively unimportant. Sanctification—both gradual and instantaneous—is transformed into the one, instantaneous moment of entire sanctification.

A third important stream feeding into the Holiness movement was Phoebe Palmer (1807-1874). Palmer was a writer, lay Methodist evangelist, and social reformer, who had a large and

lasting influence on the Holiness movement. Although a devout woman, she struggled toward Christian perfection, continually unsatisfied with her progress. In response, she developed a theology of sanctification that proved to be highly popular and influential. It came to be dubbed the “shorter way” because she believed that Wesley’s understanding, based on spiritual discipline as well as faith, made the journey to entire sanctification too long and difficult.

The theology of the “shorter way” was based on a relatively simple approach to sanctification. It emphasized consecration, faith, and testimony. Consecration, in Palmer’s theology, was the act of committing oneself and everything in one’s life to God. The key to sanctification, she believed, was consecrating everything. One had to survey one’s life and commit every aspect to God. Along with consecration went the concept of the altar. Palmer reached back to the Old Testament concept that the holiness of the altar was transferred to anything coming into contact with the altar. When an Israelite offered a sacrifice to God, it would be placed on the altar. In this way the sacrifice became holy and acceptable to God. Palmer drew upon this and argued that our consecration is analogous to Israelites placing sacrifices on the altar. When we consecrate ourselves, we place ourselves on the altar. And like the sacrifice, the act of being placed on the altar makes us holy. Sanctification, therefore, is accomplished by our consecration rather than, as in Wesley’s view, by spiritual disciplines and faith.

One issue that Palmer especially addressed was assurance. Wesley had taught that we became convinced of being entirely sanctified by the direct witness of God’s Spirit to us as well as by our exhibiting the fruit of the Spirit. Palmer’s theology of consecration, however, had to take account of the fact that believers who consecrated themselves fully usually did not immediately receive the witness of the Spirit. Palmer therefore developed the practice of urging

those who had consecrated themselves to accept their entire sanctification as an accomplished fact even in the absence of experiential confirmation. In other words, they were to believe themselves to be entirely sanctified on the basis of biblical promises and their act of consecration. In this way, she conceived of faith as a matter of believing in spite of a lack of evidence, in contrast to Wesley's view of faith as an inward evidence provided by God.

Finally, Palmer placed great emphasis on testifying about one's entire sanctification. Wesley had counseled caution in this regard, for new believers could become discouraged and non-believers would mock someone claiming to have perfect love. Palmer, however, believed that failure to testify was a leading cause of losing one's sanctification. Testimony therefore became a duty and one of the principal means of retaining one's sanctification.

For all of its positives, one unfortunate result of Palmer's theology was to reinforce the tendency to neglect what Wesley called the gradual aspect of sanctification. Like the concept of Pentecost in Finney's theology, the concept of consecration encouraged people to think of sanctification as happening all in an instant. Instead of representing the Christian life as a progressive movement of mortification leading to the perfection of love, Palmer and subsequent holiness writers represented it as a life of struggle that is overcome in an instantaneous act of consecration.

How Should We Preach and Teach Holiness Today?

Having engaged in this exercise of recollecting, what can we say about the other important task, presenting holiness in today's spiritual context?

First, we should acknowledge that the so-called holiness churches are not the only churches that preach holiness. Wesley drew upon many different streams in the Christian

tradition as he preached holiness. He incorporated the writings of theologians of the second, third, and fourth centuries, of Roman Catholic mystics, and of Puritans and Anglicans. There is no need for us to claim that we alone possess the doctrine of holiness. Instead, we believe that God has called us to proclaim the doctrine of holiness with special vigor. We also believe that it is important to proclaim holiness as a real possibility and not merely as an ideal for which to strive. But in doing so, we are simply preaching with a loud voice what other branches of Christianity are also proclaiming less vigorously. Understood thus, we are not competing with other churches. On the contrary, by proclaiming holiness with a loud voice, we are (in the words of the Nazarene Manual), “cooperat[ing] effectually with other branches of the Church of Jesus Christ in advancing God's kingdom.”

Second, we should make full use of the various sources that have fed into the Church of the Nazarene. This means drawing from Wesley (and his brother Charles, the hymn writer) as well as from Finney, Palmer, and the many other writers throughout the centuries who have shed light on the path of holiness. We should feel no embarrassment in using the thoughts of Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Reformed, Anabaptist, Orthodox, Anglican, and other writers. They, like us, are workers in God's vineyard, and many of them have important things to say about holiness.

A way of appreciating this point is to compare a theological tradition like holiness to a river. Many tributaries feed into a great river. The Mississippi, for example, is fed by the Missouri and the Ohio plus many smaller rivers. The Missouri and Ohio, in turn, are fed by numerous other rivers. The holiness tradition is the same. It has two main sources: John Wesley and the American Holiness movement. But these have their own sources. Wesley's thought was fed by (among other things) Puritan theology, Anglican theology, and Roman Catholic mystics. The Holiness movement, as we have seen, was fed by numerous sources, including Finney and

Palmer. Like the Mississippi River, the holiness tradition arises from many streams, each making a contribution. Not surprisingly, these many streams did not all see things in exactly the same way. As a result, this confluence of streams that forms our tradition is not fully coherent. For example, Wesley's teaching emphasized both the gradual and instantaneous aspects of sanctification. Theologians of the Holiness movement believed that we are not sanctified gradually but only instantaneously. Wesley advocated the practice of spiritual disciplines as a means of replacing inward sin with love. The writers of the Holiness movement regarded consecration as the key to becoming holy.

Today's preacher and teacher of holiness does not have to decide between Wesley and the writers of the Holiness movement. Each stream feeding into our tradition has strengths that we can draw upon today. We can look to Wesley for understanding about the importance of spiritual disciplines and the centrality of love. We can find in Palmer's theology the important idea of consecration. Finney's theology reminds us of the eschatological dimension of holiness and the role of the Holy Spirit in sanctification. So, we should acknowledge that the streams that feed into our tradition are numerous and diverse, and we should allow the church to be nourished by all of those streams, without insisting that only one of them can be normative.

Third, we should, however, exercise some critical judgment in our use of thinkers such as Wesley, Palmer, and Finney. As great as their contributions are, none of them is infallible. Although we can learn from all of them, we should recognize that the teachings of each lead to some theological problems. As already noted, the theology of Finney encourages people to think that Christians do not receive the Holy Spirit until entire sanctification. Palmer's theology tends to reduce the importance of spiritual discipline as a means of becoming holy. So, we should make use of these writers, but we should remember that they are *sources* for us and not

authorities. Only the Bible is our authority in these matters.

Put a different way, preaching and teaching today should be sure not to repeat the mistakes of the past. For instance, Finney insisted that the giving of the Spirit narrated in Acts 2 marked the moment when the first disciples were entirely sanctified. In recent years biblical scholars have shown that Finney's interpretation is not so clear. Similarly, Finney had an overly simplistic view of sin and practically denied the doctrine of original sin. The way for contemporary preachers and teachers to avoid these sorts of mistakes is to read, as Wesley did, from a wide variety of sources, confident that there is truth in the collective wisdom of the church through the centuries.

Fourth, holiness preaching and teaching today should emphasize some points that have been neglected. One of these is the *communal* dimension of holiness. The New Testament makes it abundantly clear that the church is holy. The church's holiness rests on its being the body of Christ and the spouse of Christ. For this reason, every member of the church is holy simply by virtue of being incorporated into Christ's body. Of course, each member of Christ's body must actualize that holiness by holy conduct and holy desires. Nonetheless, it is vital to keep in mind this corporate aspect of holiness. Another neglected point pertains to practices. In the past, holiness churches have been well known for the sorts of behaviors that we were against: theater attendance, ballroom dancing, and so on. It is now time for the holiness churches and holiness preaching to become equally well known for the behaviors that we encourage. These include works of love toward our neighbors, especially to those in need; works of justice in the attempt to eradicate social evils; and works of devotion such as prayer and worship. It would be a great achievement if the holiness churches could be known for our zeal for good works, for our commitment to justice, and for the purity of our devotion.

Finally, we should resist the notion that we can achieve a once-and-for-all formulation of the doctrine of holiness. It is important for the church to state its beliefs formally as doctrines, but we should honestly acknowledge that no such formulation is the last word on the subject. Instead, we should regard doctrines as setting out the general parameters within which we in the church will think, speak, write, and teach. These parameters should be thought of as broad enough to embrace the various streams that feed into our tradition, so that Wesley, Palmer, and Finney would all feel welcome as dialogue partners in and faithful members of our tradition.

The Church of the Nazarene is not quite 100 years old. But as we approach our 100th anniversary, let the church's preachers and teachers resolve to become a mature community that recognizes the complexity and depth of the doctrine and practice of holiness. By doing so, and by being faithful to our calling, we can nourish both our church and the larger Christian world.

Recommended Resources:

Bassett, Paul M. and William M. Greathouse. *Exploring Christian Holiness. Vol. 2: The Historical Development.* Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 1985.

Dieter, Melvin E., ed. *The Nineteenth Century Holiness Movement.* Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 1998.

Collins, Kenneth. *The Scripture Way of Salvation: The Heart of John Wesley's Theology.* Abingdon Press, 1997.

Maddox, Randy L. *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology.* Nashville: Kingswood, 1994.

Powell, Samuel M. *Holiness in the 21st Century: Call, Consecration, Obedience Perfected in Love.* San Diego: Point Loma Press, 2004.

Powell, Samuel M. *A Theology of Christian Spirituality*. Nashville: Abingdon, 2005.

-
1. John Wesley, "On Sin in Believers," 3.7 in *The Works of Wesley 2: Wesley's Standard Sermons* (ed. Edward H. Sugden; Grand Rapids: Francis Asbury Press, 1955), 368-369.
 2. John Wesley, Minutes of 8/1/1744, question 1 in *John Wesley* (ed. Albert Outler; New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 152.
 3. John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (Kansas City, Mo.: Beacon Hill, 1971), 62-63.
 4. Wesley, Minutes of 8/1/1744, question 9 in Outler, *John Wesley*, 153.
 5. Wesley, Minutes of 6/26/1744, question 2 in Outler, *John Wesley*, 140.
 6. John Wesley, "Repentance of Believers," 2.3 in Sugden, *Works of Wesley 2*, 392-393.