

A CHURCH WITH THE SOUL OF THE AMERICAN HOLINESS MOVEMENT¹
A NORTH AMERICAN PERSPECTIVE

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The historical statement in the *Manual* of the Church of the Nazarene begins exactly where it should begin: by declaring in clear terms that the Church of the Nazarene understands itself to be “a branch of the ‘one, holy, universal, and apostolic’ church and has sought to be faithful to it.”² It further clarifies that its history begins with the “history of the people of God recorded in the Old and New Testaments,” and that it “includes that same history as it has extended from the days of the apostles to our own.”³ It affirms the essential unity of Nazarenes with “the people of God through the ages, those redeemed through Jesus Christ *in whatever expression* of the one church they may be found.”⁴

This is a large, inclusive statement of Nazarene identity. Who are Nazarenes? We are part of the historic people of God, the church of Jesus Christ, the “one, holy, universal and apostolic” church. This is precisely where Nazarenes should begin in addressing the matters of who and what we are, who and what we have been, and who and what we aspire to be in the future. However, our statement of unity with the church catholic also includes an indication of why there is a separate Nazarene “branch” on the Christian “tree:” “the Church of the Nazarene has *responded to its special calling to proclaim the doctrine and experience of entire sanctification.*”⁵ That is, the Church of the Nazarene believes that it was called into being to give clear and definite witness to an aspect of the Christian Gospel that, at the time of its

¹ This title is inspired by the title of a classic essay (which was itself inspired by a quip of G.K. Chesterton) by historian Sidney Mead, analyzing religion in America, which appeared first as a journal article, and later in book form as part of a collection of essays. See Sidney E. Mead, “The ‘Nation with the Soul of a Church’” in *Church History*, vol. 36, 03, September, 1967, 262-283 and Sidney E. Mead, *The Nation with the Soul of a Church* (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1975).

² See *Manual*, 2009-2013, p. 14.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid. Emphasis added.

⁵ Ibid. Emphasis added.

founding as a distinct “branch” of the church of Jesus Christ, appeared to be largely neglected by the existing expressions of the church catholic.

Since the founding of the Church of the Nazarene near the beginning of the 20th century, Nazarenes have sometimes emphasized their “special calling” – which they claim is the very reason for which they exist – more than their unity with the historic church. At other times, the affirmation of unity and inclusivity has been sounded more loudly.⁶ One could argue that in the first few generations of Nazarene history the sense of “special calling” was predominant. This was, after all, what Nazarenes believed accounted for their very existence as a distinctive “branch” of the Church of Jesus Christ. Nazarenes existed in order to preach, teach, and live out “holiness” as expressed in the doctrine of entire sanctification. What was most important to Nazarenes was what made them “special” and distinctive and justified their separate existence.

In more recent times, however (as reflected in a revised *Manual* historical statement in 1989, and other developments), Nazarenes have begun to reflect more deeply on the common elements they share with all Christians throughout history, and to affirm these elements as no less important than Nazarene “denominational distinctives” – indeed, as of *primary* importance in identifying the fundamental identity of the Church of the Nazarene. Many factors have played into this, not the least of which is Nazarene “success” in building a “global” church with more than two million members during the past century. As the church has grown numerically and expanded geographically into scores of different cultures, it has been pushed to ask itself if it is primarily a 19th century North American religious movement with a particular slant on Christian truth – or, if it is something more than that.

⁶ The current “Historical Statement” did not enter the *Manual* until 1989. Previous historical statements emphasized the 19th century origins of the church in the American Holiness Movement and the special circumstances of several (mainly American) groups that united in the early 20th century to form the foundation for the church. Compare the *Manual of the Church of the Nazarene, 1989* (Kansas City, MO: Nazarene Publishing House, 1989), 15-25 and the *Manual of the Church of the Nazarene, 1985* (Kansas City, MO: Nazarene Publishing House, 1985), 15-20. In addition to anchoring the Church of the Nazarene firmly in the bedrock of Christian history, the new statement in 1989 also significantly enlarged the place of non-North Americans in the historical narrative.

At a theoretical level, it is quite obvious that the Church of the Nazarene is indeed something more than a “19th century North American religious movement with a particular slant on Christian truth.” Those inclined to reflect on such matters affirm without hesitation that the roots of the Church of the Nazarene drive deep into the soil of Christian tradition. The Church of the Nazarene is first and foremost “Christian” – and only then “Holiness” or “Wesleyan” or “Protestant.” And yet, at a practical level such an important theoretical acknowledgement may – or may not – mark and shape the actual life of the church in its various forms (e.g., local congregations, districts, regions, and “general church” structures).

This paper assumes that efforts to anchor Nazarene identity in the broad historical Christian tradition are more adequate than those that focus primarily on 19th century American “holiness” and Wesleyan roots. However, it also recognizes the vital importance of the American, holiness, and Wesleyan roots in shaping who and what Nazarenes have actually been, or attempted to be, during their first century of existence. This paper proposes, in fact, that employing an interpretive lens which has been extremely useful in understanding the history of the American Holiness Movement is equally useful in analyzing the historical trajectory of the Church of the Nazarene during its first century, helping to significantly illuminate what the Church of the Nazarene “has been.”⁷

Historian Melvin E. Dieter in his classic study of the American Holiness Movement, *The Holiness Revival of the Nineteenth Century*, provided this interpretive lens.⁸ In this book Dieter wrote that the “holiness revival” (which in time produced independent “holiness churches,” including the Church of the Nazarene) resulted from a “meeting of the American mind, prevailing revivalism, and Wesleyan perfectionism.”⁹ It is my contention that the these “ingredients” in the holiness revival were fully evident in the new churches which it produced,

⁷ The most comprehensive general narrative of the history of the Church of the Nazarene is Floyd Cunningham, Stan Ingersol, Harold E. Raser, David P. Whitelaw, *Our Watchword and Song: the Centennial History of the Church of the Nazarene* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2009).

⁸ Melvin E. Dieter, *the Holiness Revival of the Nineteenth Century* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1996).

⁹ Dieter, *the Holiness Revival*, 3.

and that these ingredients were the primary influences that shaped the thought and practice of these churches – particularly the Church of the Nazarene – during the greater part of the 20th century. That is, I contend that we can best understand the historical trajectory of the Church of the Nazarene by viewing it through the lens provided by Dieter for the Holiness Movement as a whole. This paper attempts to identify, at least in a preliminary way, some important matters for reflection that emerge from such an exercise.

“THE AMERICAN MIND”

“The American mind” is the first constituent element in the Holiness Movement of the 19th century that Dieter identifies. This is more than accidental: it is an indication that Dieter finds the “American character” of the Holiness Movement to color everything else. Dieter, unfortunately, does not provide a succinct definition of “the American mind” anywhere in his book, but it is fairly easy to draw out some of its chief characteristics from his overall discussion of the Holiness Movement.

For one thing, the “American mind” refers simply to the way Americans in the nineteenth century had come to think about Christianity and religion as a result of their (relatively brief) three hundred years in the so-called “New World.”¹⁰ Highlights of this (to mid-19th century) included: early and enduring religious diversity (although largely contained within a broadly “Protestant” framework until the mid-19th century); a belief in the “exceptionalism” of America (inherited especially from the English-American Puritans who saw themselves as “God’s New Israel,” led by God to their “Promised Land” [America] in order to constitute a “Holy People” whose example and influence would revitalize the Christian church, and the entire world); undertaking an unprecedented “experiment” in religious freedom and toleration after the

¹⁰ Useful explorations of the unique “American religious experience” which over time shaped “Old World” religious traditions into “American” denominations are: Jon Butler, Grant Wacker and Randall Balmer, *Religion in American Life: A Short History* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); Sidney E. Mead, *The Lively Experiment: the Shaping of Christianity in America* (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1963); Mark A. Noll, *The Old Religion in a New World: the History of North American Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2002); Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989).

American War for Independence (1776-1783), which rejected the idea of a “national church,” made religious freedom an essential element of American law, and created an essentially secular political framework for the new nation (which generally embraced, but secularized the Puritan concept of American “exceptionalism”); the profound impact of revivals and “revivalism” – manifested strikingly in the Great Awakening (mid-18th century) and Second Great Awakening (early 19th century); a steady proliferation of religious movements and churches, especially in connection with the Great Awakening, the War for Independence, and the Second Great Awakening; the evolution of the “denominational” system and denominational concept of the church -- which provides a pragmatic framework for dealing with religious diversity -- (Sidney Mead, in *the Lively Experiment*, dates the formative stages of this development as occurring mainly between 1780 and 1850).¹¹ All of this, and more, helped to form the “American mind” with respect to religion.

But, of course, the “American mind” was not simply concerned with religion. From the experience of migration, the encounter with the European Enlightenment and its thinkers in the late 17th and 18th centuries just as the “colonies” were beginning to develop a “national” consciousness, successful rebellion against British domination, the creation of a new nation, literally building the physical, political, legal, economic, educational, and other infrastructure of western civilization from the ground up in a new place, creating community in a “wilderness,” and emerging in several short centuries as a significant player among the nations on the world stage, Americans acquired a number of distinctive traits of mind.

Prominent among these traits were: a suspicion of hierarchical authority and a preference for democratic or participatory forms of authority; preferring the judgment of the “common person” to that of “elites;” a focus on the present and future, with a tendency to deny any positive formative value to history or “tradition;” a preference for decisive, definite action and impatience with process, reflection, and speculation; a practical, “pragmatic” approach to most everything – establishing the value of something primarily on the basis of whether or not it

¹¹ Mead, “Denominationalism: the Shape of Protestantism in America,” in *the Lively Experiment*, 103-133.

has a clear practical application;¹² and a readiness – even eagerness – to innovate whenever the opportunity arises. According to Dieter, this “American Mind” – sketched very broadly above – was the overarching feature of the Holiness Revival of the 19th century.

“PREVAILING REVIVALISM”

The Holiness Movement was born during the heyday of “revivalism” in America. And it was no accident that the first significant organization to emerge from the movement was the “National Camp Meeting Association for the Promotion of Holiness,” founded in 1867. Its original purpose was to promote entire sanctification through the methodology of revivalistic camp meetings and “protracted meetings,” and it became the model for all subsequent holiness organizations, a number of which had developed into holiness “churches” by the end of the 19th century.

In one respect revivalism was a feature of the “American mind” as it was shaped by the distinctive historical experience of religion in the “New World,” as noted above. In another respect, however, it is defining characteristic of 19th century American religion. Revivalism sprang from the Great Awakening of the 18th century and the Second Great Awakening of the early 19th century. From analyzing these religious “awakenings” (which seemed to most people to have begun more or less spontaneously, initiated by the Holy Spirit), religious leaders developed a methodology that they believed could endlessly reproduce awakenings – or “revivals.”¹³

¹² “Pragmatism” may refer simply to a broad approach to life. However, it may also of course refer to a formal philosophical movement conceived in the United States in the late 19th century by thinkers such as Charles Sanders Pierce (1839-1914) and William James (1842-1910) and further developed in the 20th century by John Dewey (1859-1952) and others. See Morton Gabriel White, *Pragmatism and the American Mind: Essays and Reviews in Philosophy and Intellectual History* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1973).

¹³ There are many useful studies of awakenings and revivals in America. Some of the best are William Warren Sweet, *Revivalism in America: Its Origin, Growth, and Decline* (New York, NY: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1944); William G. McLoughlin, *Modern Revivalism: Charles Grandison Finney to Billy Graham* (New York, NY: the Ronald Press, 1959); Timothy L. Smith,

The classical expression of “revivalism,” a book called *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, was published in 1835 by Charles G. Finney.¹⁴ In his book, Finney outlined the basic principles of revivalism as he had discovered, practiced, and refined them during eleven years as a traveling evangelist. He believed that these principles rested on divine spiritual “laws” that were just as definite and dependable as any observable laws of nature (cf. the influence of the Enlightenment on American thought). In a since-often-quoted statement, Finney set forth his understanding of the “laws” of revivals: “A revival is not a miracle . . . it consists entirely in the right exercise of the powers of nature. It is a purely philosophical [i.e. scientific] result of the right use of means . . . as much so as any effect produced by the application of means.”¹⁵ Finney argued that if the right “means” were employed in the right way, the certain result would be a revival, or religious awakening. The American churches quickly recognized the value of this new methodology. If they could create revivals almost at will, they would control a powerful means of making converts to Christianity, and recruiting church members in the highly competitive system of American denominationalism. Revivals and awakenings could also be a useful tool for spreading Christian influence throughout the United States, which had elected not to establish Christianity in any of its forms as its “national” religion, and which had embraced a “secular” national Constitution and political structure. Revivalism thus became the engine of American “denominationalism” as it took its distinctive shape in the first half of the 19th century.

“WESLEYAN PERFECTIONISM”

This topic hardly needs comment. The “Holiness Movement” existed to promote Christian holiness, as expressed in the doctrine of entire sanctification, full sanctification, or Christian perfection, as taught most notably by John Wesley in the 18th century, and perpetuated into the 19th century by Wesley’s “Methodist” followers. The “Holiness Movement” began with Christians who were concerned that the doctrine of entire sanctification or Christian perfection

Revivalism and Social Reform in Mid-Nineteenth Century America (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1957).

¹⁴ See the critical edition edited and with an introduction by William G. McLoughlin, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960).

¹⁵ *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, 13.

was being forgotten or neglected in Methodist churches in the United States. Whether or not it was truly Wesley's doctrine which the Holiness Movement (and the churches that grew from it) promoted has of course been hotly debated. But whether or not it was, the Holiness Movement always understood its mission as the propagation of holiness of heart and life as articulated most clearly and persuasively by John Wesley and his Methodists. Thus, "Wesleyan perfectionism," however apprehended and interpreted, was the theological and experiential heart of the Holiness Movement.

Thus, the three elements (American Mind, revivalism, Wesleyan Perfectionism) met and blended in dynamic and creative ways to shape the Holiness Revival, or Holiness Movement of the 19th century. Wesleyan perfectionism was its heart, but Wesleyan perfectionism understood and interpreted within the context of nineteenth century American Christianity and culture. The movement's chief theologian and most visible spokesperson, Phoebe Palmer (1807-1874), exemplifies the "American" and "revivalistic" way of appropriating Wesley in her well-known simplified, clear and definite "shorter way" to the blessing of entire sanctification and Christian perfection. So too one can trace the guiding hand of revivalism in the founding of the National Camp Meeting Association for the Promotion of Holiness in 1867 and all subsequent organizations to promote holiness, almost all of which began originally in order to conduct holiness "revivals," and then over time expanded their activities, sometimes evolving into churches (or "missions"). In fact, the tendency of the Holiness Movement to produce organizational offspring – the various independent "holiness churches" that had come into being by the end of the 19th century – is itself typical of the freewheeling American religious and cultural environment in which the Holiness Movement developed. Movements to reform church and society, new religious movements seeking to "restore" neglected elements of primitive Christianity, and new "churches" given space by the American denominational system and inspired by the American impatience with process and preference for decisive, definite action and pragmatic innovation were a major feature of 19th century America.

This was the world in which the Church of the Nazarene came into existence. It was a product of the American Holiness Movement. It was convinced that it had a "special calling" and a reason for separating from the many already-existing denominations in the United States.

It existed, as one of its chief founders said, “Simply because it is needed.”¹⁶ It carried from the beginning an evangelistic-revivalistic zeal to aggressively spread its message of “full salvation.”

From the beginning the Church of the Nazarene carried the Holiness Movement’s “DNA” – American mind, prevailing revivalism, and Wesleyan Perfectionism. I propose that its “heredity” largely shaped the trajectory of its development through most of the 20th century, evident in such traits as:

- Its sense of “special calling” (necessary justification for one’s place within the American denominational system)
- Its fervor for revivalism and “evangelistic outreach” (American revivalism)
- its deep commitment to “missions”/“world evangelism” (the Puritan and American sense of “exceptionalism” and special mission to the world -- wedded of course to commitment to fidelity to the “Great Commission”)
- Its tendency to “innovate” on matters of organization or polity (generally exhibiting a bias toward “democratic” forms of organization, but also deeply concerned about “efficiency” and “consensus” – reflecting American democratic political structures, as well as pragmatism)

These, and many other traits too numerous to examine here, all testify to the origins of the Church of the Nazarene.

However, experience and “nurture” as well as heredity also affect the growth and development of human beings, and so it is with institutions. The Church of the Nazarene has encountered many “worlds” during its first one hundred years, which have demanded of it candid appraisal of itself, its past, and its future direction. This has occurred especially during the second half of the 20th century as the church has grown exponentially outside of North America as well as significantly expanded its work among diverse ethnic and racial groups in North America.¹⁷ In this period of growth and expanded global presence, what is it we should think about ourselves as Nazarenes? What we have been is fairly clear. What we shall be is our greatest challenge, and our greatest opportunity, as we move into God’s future.

¹⁶ Phineas F. Bresee in the *Nazarene Messenger*, August 18, 1904, 6.

¹⁷ See Cunningham, et al., *Our Watchword and Song*, especially 378-618.