

## **THE EXPERIENCE OF SANCTIFICATION AND CHRISTIAN AUTHENTICITY**

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The Christian life is essentially defined starting from the experiences that begin on a personal level, and with their practice become communal. Nazarenes recognize two essential experiences: conversion and sanctification; both occur in the intimacy of the relationship between the individual and God. In this paper I will approach the theme of the experience of sanctification and its Christian authenticity. Before I do this, allow me to review part of the doctrinal statement from the Board of General Superintendents:

We believe that holiness in the life of the believer is the result of both a crisis experience and a lifelong process. Following regeneration, the Spirit of our Lord draws us by grace to the full consecration of our lives to Him. Then, in the divine act of entire sanctification, also called the baptism with the Holy Spirit, He cleanses us from original sin and indwells us with His holy presence. He perfects us in love, enables us to live in moral uprightness, and empowers us to serve!<sup>1</sup>

As we know and accept, in the experience of entire sanctification, the Holy Spirit purifies by faith our hearts from evil desires, from all injustice and all pride, and at the same time, gives the sanctified Christian a righteous heart, that loves God and his neighbor. John Wesley identified entire sanctification as the perfection of love "...that banishes all fear, all such fear as hath torment; the fear of the wrath of God, the fear of hell; the fear of the devil, and, in particular, the fear of death".<sup>2</sup> Christian perfection is a perfection of love, poured into the heart by the Holy Spirit.

In my opinion, such doctrinal declarations need a question: Is the experience of entire sanctification authentic? There are elements that ratify and give witness to it, such as the Scriptures, tradition, experience, the fruit and testimony of the community.

First, both the doctrine of entire sanctification and the evidences of the life of holiness are firmly rooted in the Scriptures, and proclaimed throughout its pages: "holiness beats in prophecy, roars in the law, murmurs in the narratives, whispers in the promises, pleads in the prayers, radiates in poetry, resounds in the Psalms, mumbles in the types, shines in the images, enunciates in the language and burns in the spirit of the entire system, from the Alpha to the Omega, from the beginning to the end".<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> International Church of the Nazarene, *Christian, Holiness, Missional: Core Values*, 7.

<sup>2</sup> John Wesley, "The Way to the Kingdom", *Sermons*, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books House, 1986), 80.

<sup>3</sup> William M. Greathouse, *Desde los apóstoles hasta Wesley* (Kansas City: CNP), 15.

### *The Experience of Sanctification... (Gabriel López)*

Second, tradition. The doctrine of holiness is Biblical and has been taught by the Apostolic Fathers, Church Fathers, through the mystics, Holiness churches, the Methodist Church and the Church of the Nazarene. There is no doubt about its authenticity and veracity.

Third, experience. Every Christian person that has been sanctified is aware of his or her past, and how the Holy Spirit has given victory over these. They have experienced the growth and development of Agape, showing a great passion to obey God and take delight in doing his will. However, even when there is an individual experience one must stress the unity of the Spirit in the context and towards a corporative perfection in accordance with Ephesians 4:1-16.

Fourth, by their fruits. The person who has been sanctified and made perfect in love has been freed from a feeling of sinful self-sufficiency, he or she is now poor in spirit: is humble, is simple, is pure, is patient, loves God and his neighbor as himself, has power to witness and to resist evil. This is a vertical interchange between the love of God and man, but it also in a horizontal expression of man with his neighbor. The love that is expressed in horizontal form implies responsibility, since Christian love is practical and is expressed in a practical ethic that governs all social relations. Total stewardship, as in ethical relations with our neighbors is not presented as a list of rigid obligations, but as the active expression of the spring of love in the heart. The sense of responsibility is found the fact that God, through his grace, trains and helps so that one can respond to his demands. It can be affirmed that salvation is, in all of its facets, is truly God's gift, but a gift that calls us to respond and accept our responsibility that his grace demands. These fruits are visible through the character of a person, and the community of faith gives witness to this.

Fifth, the witness of the community. The community of faith gives witness to the experience of sanctification and to its fruits (Acts 2:43-47; 4:32-35; 10:45; 15:8-9). Paul was very clear in that a holy person is not judged by the abundance of gifts that he has, but for his lifestyle of love and justice (1 Corinthians 13). Harper, quoting John Wesley, affirms that "Ye Christians are the 'light of the world' with regard to your tempers and actions. Your holiness makes you as conspicuous as the sun in the midst of heaven. As you cannot go out the world, so neither can ye stay in it without appearing to all mankind. Sure it is, that a secret, unobserved religion, cannot be the religion of Jesus Christ. Whatever religion can be concealed, is not Christianity."<sup>4</sup>

The authenticity of the experience of entire sanctification is beyond doubt. However, with respect to the practical life of the sanctified, questions arise that put in doubt the authenticity of that experience, since the Biblical principles, "by their fruits you shall know them" and "every good tree bears good fruit", are validated in community life.

The problem that arises between the experience and community witness is not recent, as John Wesley in his sermon he preached in the Oxford University in 1774 questions the life style of the city dwellers in the following terms:

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<sup>4</sup> John Wesley, "Sermon on the Mount-IV", *Sermons*, Vol. I (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books House, 1986), 302.

*The Experience of Sanctification... (Gabriel López)*

May it not be one of the consequences of this, that so many of you are a generation of triflers; triflers with God, with one another, and with your own souls?... What religion are you of? Even the talk of Christianity, ye cannot, will not bear... For, indeed, what probability, what possibility rather, (speaking after the manner of men), is there that Christianity, scriptural Christianity, should be again the religion of this place? that all orders of men among us should speak and live as men “filled with the Holy Ghost?” By whom should this Christianity be restored?...Are you desirous it should be restored? And do ye not count your fortune, liberty, life dear unto yourselves, so ye may be instrumental in the restoring of it ?”<sup>5</sup>

It becomes evident that personal and communal testimony takes away credibility of the experience of sanctification when conflicts such as these occur: the notorious lack of influence of sanctified believers in relation to a righteous and just life in a society lacking in these; the existence of double purposes or intentions in the believers who claim the experience of sanctification; the daily life of believers without the ethical values of the Kingdom of God; and the recent divisionism in the church at all levels.

The situation just mentioned makes it necessary to ask ourselves: Have we understood well the doctrine of entire sanctification? Do we have a clear concept of sin? Could it be that those who proclaim the doctrine of entire sanctification are just transmitters of an inheritance? Where have we failed?

Before this tension there is a need to raise proposals that bring with them the search for solutions: (1) To do a new re-reading of the doctrine and life of holiness from the Wesleyan tradition, within a context of an identity crisis, to avoid reducing the theology of holiness to fundamentalism, to the Charismatic and influences and to antinomianism; (2) Emphasize as much as in preaching as in teaching the necessity not to only promote the doctrine of entire sanctification, but to also be a depository of said experience, since it is the type of life that the Holy Scriptures demand of all believers; (3) Promote discipleship programs, which tend to consolidate the life of holiness in those who have testified to having the experience of entire sanctification.

We hope that the Church of the Nazarene will continue on ahead with proclaiming a Biblical and orthodox holiness theology. May the life of holiness that we practice and live be like that of Christ. That we fix our eyes on Christ and that we follow him step by step. We consider ourselves not only custodians of a glorious inheritance, but as people that desire to affirm and perpetuate a life of scriptural holiness in our lives.

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<sup>5</sup>John Wesley, “Scriptural Christianity”, *Sermons*, Vol. I (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books House, 1986), 51-52.