

WHAT ABOUT THE “SECONDNESS” OF ENTIRE SANCTIFICATION?

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A quarter of a millennium ago, John Wesley raised a question with his brother Charles that must be faced candidly by every generation of holiness people: “Shall we go on asserting perfection against all the world? Or shall we quietly let it drop? We really must do one or the other, and I apprehend, the sooner, the better.”¹

Wesley’s question has poignant relevance for 21st century Nazarenes. Amid the religious pluralism of our post-modern era, there are signs that we are adrift in a sea of theological illiteracy, marginalization, and uncertainty. We are being tossed to and fro by the tides and currents of an indistinctive and generic evangelicalism, an invasive and spurious fundamentalism, and a seductive and destructive liberalism.

These incessant and subtle forces have their greatest consequences in the local church. Our pastors and laypeople are in the front lines of our struggle to maintain theological identity. I fear that many of these people are in a doctrinal fog as to Nazarene beliefs. This is demonstrated by the second- or even third-generation Nazarenes who relocate to another city and select their new church home on the basis of which best addresses their needs. They give the appearance of chameleons whose theology can be easily adapted to accommodate any denomination. One’s doctrinal beliefs are apparently of secondary importance.

This is very troubling! Theologically literate pastors and laypeople are not an ideal or luxury but an absolute essential in propagating the message and mission of the Church of the Nazarene. And they must not only be cognitively aware but also spiritually alive, enfleshing the theology we proclaim.

In this process the pastor’s role is pivotal. This is reflected in an entry in Wesley’s journal:

I preached at Tiverton and on Thursday went to Launceston. Here I found the plain reason why the work of God had gained no ground in this circuit all year. The preachers had given up the Methodist testimony. Either they did not speak of perfection at all or they spoke of it only in general terms without urging the believers to “go on unto perfection” and to expect it every moment. And wherever this is not earnestly done, the work of God does not prosper.²

This demonstrates the critical function of the pastor in the theological life and thought of the church.

Allow me to advance the issue of our theological malaise to another level. If we have doctrinal confusion among our pastors, then we must ask hard questions of the people who are charged with the responsibility of ministerial preparation, such as those of us gathered here in Guatemala City. Here in this nonthreatening, nonaccusatory context, we must unite in mind and spirit to candidly ask hard questions and begin to prayerfully seek Christ-honoring resolutions as we seek to recapture the very soul of our church.

Some of our most exacting questions obviously focus on Article of Faith X on Entire Sanctification. My particular concerns relate to the “subsequentness” and “secondness” of the experience of entire sanctification and how they are currently understood and taught. I feel duty-bound to raise the question: Is our emphasis on entire sanctification forthright and unambiguous in the classroom?

Hopefully we all agree that this is essential in ensuring that our theological mission is realized. If “secondness” and “subsequentness” are not taught clearly and with conviction, it results in uncertain proclamation in the pulpit. If the pastor has doubts regarding the “how” and “when” of entire sanctification, will this not reduce his/her holiness emphasis almost exclusively to process? Ultimately, does this not erode one’s conviction regarding the “what” and “why” of Article of Faith X? Does this not marginalize the holiness message and ultimately contribute to our theological malaise?

I do not presume to make our lack of emphasis on “secondness” the reason for our current theological dilemma. Wesley, of course, viewed Christian perfection as both instantaneous and gradual, and he intentionally sought to maintain a proper, healthy balance between the two. Balance must also and always be our pursuit.

In spite of Wesley’s desire for balance, I suspect that his followers have tended to operate at either of the two extremes: instantaneousness or process. Over the years the pendulum has swung from pole to pole—and it continues to do so today! Intuitively I perceive that our current emphasis is on process to the neglect of crisis. If this is true, then I’m forced to ask the question: What do we more than others, specifically those of other theological traditions who are increasingly stressing holiness, Christlikeness, and Spirit-filled lives without any second work of grace in their theology? Are we being influenced by them? Are we willing to disregard this theological distinctive? If so, it is a major departure from our understanding and proclamation over the past 100 years.

I acknowledge that the case for “instantaneousness” is questionable if we seek its substantiation solely from the Scriptures. This was stated clearly by Wesley:

In what manner does God work this entire, this universal change in the soul of the believer? . . . Does he work it gradually, by slow degree? Or instantaneously, in a moment? . . . The Scriptures are silent upon the subject; because the point is not determined—at least in express terms—in any part of the Oracles of God. Every man, therefore, may abound in his own sense, provided he will allow the same liberty to his neighbor; provided he will not be angry at those who differ from his opinion, or entertain hard thoughts concerning them. Permit me likewise to add one thing more. Be the change instantaneous or gradual, see that you never rest ‘til it is wrought in your own soul, if you desire to dwell with God in glory.”³

We must learn afresh from Wesley that the essence of the holy life (the “what”) is more important than whether one experiences it instantaneously or gradually (the “how” and “when”). It was his passion to bring people into the holy life (“See that you never rest ‘til it is wrought in your own soul”) which we must recapture.

I believe this can best be done with a continuous call for believers to make a whole-life commitment, exercise faith, and experience the Pentecostal outpouring of the Holy Spirit in purity and power. For us Nazarenes, we have historically believed that this “is obtained in an instant, the result of entire sanctification.”⁴ It is time for us to reaffirm this important aspect of our theology and restate it in the most plausible manner from our primary sources: tradition, reason, experience, and Scripture.

NOTES

¹ *The Works of John Wesley*, Vol. XII (Grand Rapids: Zondervan) p. 136.

² *Ibid.*, Vol IV, p. 83.

³ *Ibid.*, Vol. VI, p. 490.

⁴ Church of the Nazarene *Manual*, paragraph 14.