

Nazarene Identity: Past and Present

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Student understanding of the doctrine of entire sanctification and their own religious experiences indicate the effectiveness of the Church of the Nazarene in passing on its identity and mission to the next generation. This essay compares the formal statements of the Church from early *Manuals* and quadrennial addresses of the General Assembly with student opinions expressed in 150 final and pretest exams that asked students to identify their denomination's identity.

The early formal statements of the Church link entire sanctification with its identity. The 1907 *Manual of the Pentecostal Church of the Nazarene* connects the missional vision of the 1895 Nazarenes with entire sanctification: "These persons were convinced that they were called of God unto holiness, to teach others the doctrine, and to lead them into the experience of entire sanctification." Included in the PCN mission statement are the words "the entire sanctification of believers." In the qualification for ministry section, one requirement is that ministers would be "sanctified wholly by the baptism of the Holy Ghost." The current *Manual* contains similar claims and requirements.

The quadrennial addresses also associate the Church's identity with entire sanctification. Phineas Bresee remarked in the 1907 address in Chicago that the merger occurred because the groups had put aside their differences so that they could more effectively proclaim the holiness message. In his last Quadrennial Address in 1915, Bresee recalled that those who "went out under the stars to preach holiness and gather together a holy people" had laid the foundations "of all of our people declaring in unmistakable terms their belief in entire sanctification and all of our preachers confessing their experience of the blessing, and the constant insistence that all men seek and obtain it." In 1956, the Church claimed to still be loyal to its original purpose, "the entire sanctification of our nature." It also said the "Church of the Nazarene stands for second-blessing holiness."

In the 2001 Quadrennial Address, the General Superintendents identified the Church's "Core Values" as being a Christian church, a holiness church and a missional church. Moreover, it spoke of the need to maintain the Church's formal position on entire sanctification: "The mission of the Church of the Nazarene is to respond to the Great Commission to 'go and make disciples of all nations' with a distinctive emphasis upon entire sanctification and Christian holiness." From the earliest statements of the 1907 merger until the recent General Assembly, the Church in formal statements has linked its identity and mission to the doctrine of entire sanctification.

What is the understanding and religious experiences of current Nazarene university students? Do they recognize entire sanctification as central to the identity and mission of the Church? Do they understand what the doctrine means? Can they explain what it means to someone else? Do their religious experiences conform to the formal teaching of the doctrine? Do they embrace the mission of a holy lifestyle and the experience of entire sanctification? And, would they proclaim this message?

When asked either what the doctrine was that gave the Church of the Nazarene its identity or the belief that most distinguished the Church from other denominations, 19 of 45 students on the pretest failed to make any reference to holiness or entire sanctification. Twenty-three students did list holiness or sanctification, but only 4 students referred to entire sanctification either by name or general concept.

Can the students explain the doctrine? Most have some understanding of spiritual formation, but students have more questions regarding entire sanctification than adequate explanations of the experience. One student remarked, “The idea of entire sanctification is seldom explained clearly to those existing members who have grown up in the church.” A student from a pastor’s home, on his final exam, shared his opinion as to why the Church had raised questions about entire sanctification for his generation: “Interestingly, while we tout this doctrine as being radically distinctive, and fundamental to our denominational unity, we can’t seem to agree upon a definition of what exactly sanctification is. I have seen myself and others wrestle with doubt, fear, legalism, and confusion—in part because of Nazarene leaders’ teachings concerning sanctification. In addition, I have noticed that the off-paper, real life application of the Nazarene definition of holy sanctification does not look very different from that of other denominations who simply preach growth in holiness.”

What can be learned from these students’ religious experiences? In the life of students, entire sanctification often appears to be viewed like an item in a museum. The concept has name recognition, but personal experience is lacking. Few, if any, students in 100 final exams refer to any personal religious experience of entire sanctification. Here are the only testimonies from the pretest: “I did give him control over every thought, feeling and decision,” “I was filled with the Spirit,” “I grabbed on to Jesus with everything I had in me,” and “Just recently I became sanctified.” Ironically, two other students who had a good intellectual understanding of entire sanctification claimed that their own religious experiences contradicted the Church’s teaching. Their experiences confirmed spiritual growth, but rejected entire sanctification as a crisis experience.

Do they embrace the mission of the Church of the Nazarene? Seven students did not know the Church’s mission. Six connected it to some aspect of holiness. Sixteen associated it with evangelism. Many students view the Church much more in terms of an Evangelical church than a Holiness one, and see holiness as, at best, one among many equally important doctrines.

In conclusion, how do today’s Church leaders help the next generation sort out the issues and discover the core values of what it means to be a Holiness denomination? If entire sanctification is at the heart of the Church’s identity and mission, what must be done to increase lay understanding of it and for all of us to experience the reality of the blessing?