

A Summary of “A Century of Holiness Theology”

by Rev. Mark R. Quanstrom, Ph.D.

A. Brief Review of “A Century of Holiness Theology”

Timothy L. Smith concluded his history of the first twenty-five years of the Church of the Nazarene, entitled Called Unto Holiness, with a telling comment. He wrote:

The reader, therefore, must evaluate for himself the significance of the men and events which compose the history of the Nazarenes. We shall be content if in telling the story we have provided new and important information upon which thoughtful persons may ponder the meaning of American Christianity, the part played by the small denominational families... and the *relevance of Wesleyan perfectionism to a generation awed by its rediscovery of the deep sinfulness of man.*¹

“A Century of Holiness Theology” (Beacon Hill Press: Kansas City, 2004) can be rightly understood as a footnote to Timothy Smith’s suggestive concluding statement. The way in which the doctrine of entire sanctification has been interpreted and understood in all its variations throughout the century can be interpreted as part of a continuous effort to make “Wesleyan perfectionism” relevant to each successive generation. In particular, the variations in understanding can be understood to have been responses to the apparent and continuing intractability of sin. Thus, and in brief, the book charts the changes in the understanding of the doctrine of entire sanctification in the Church of the Nazarene in the twentieth century; from one of extravagant hope to one of limited expectation.

At the very beginning of the 20th century, the Church of the Nazarene understood its reason for being the proclamation of the possibility of life without sin as a consequence of a second work of grace. This second work of grace was understood very particularly and reflected 19th century holiness orthodoxy. Entire sanctification was an instantaneous second work of grace that eradicated the sinful nature. It was to be identified as the baptism with the Holy Spirit and this baptism of the Holy Spirit which eradicated the sinful nature was occasioned by faith and consecration.

The early understanding of the doctrine reflected the optimistic hopes of American culture at large and described the change effected by entire sanctification in extravagantly promising terms. Early Nazarenes did not only believe that the grace of entire sanctification would so transform human nature that persons would be almost angelic in their dispositions and behaviors, they also believed that this personal transformation would have the inevitable effect of transforming the world. The evidence for such promise could be found in the unions of the fractious holiness groups that were occurring in the first three decades of the twentieth century. Indeed, according to many in the holiness movement at the beginning of the century, holiness was nothing less than the means for ushering in the coming millennium!

As the century wore on however, the very optimistic expectations of entire sanctification became less and less credible in light of the apparently intractable nature of sin. By mid-century, the extravagant promises of the grace of entire sanctification began to be tempered. The radical optimism, which was reflective of an optimistic American culture at large, gradually faded and apologists for the traditional articulation of the doctrine of entire sanctification adjusted definitions in light of a new theological realism.

One of the most common responses of theologians at mid-century was to enlarge the definition of infirmity and restrict the definition of sin. According to theologians like Henry Brockett, W.T. Purkiser and Richard Taylor, sin “properly so called” was nothing short of an intentionally pre-meditated and fully willful act of conscious disobedience. Anything less was defined as “infirmity” and was an inevitable consequence of living in a fallen world and having suffered the personal effects

¹ Smith, Called Unto Holiness, 351

of sin. Theologians at mid-century continued to insist on the possibility of a complete eradication of inbred sin effected by the baptism with the Holy Spirit. There just wasn't as much sin to be eradicated and the infirmities that were left were broadly described. This casuistry led however, to increasing dissatisfaction with traditional formulations of the doctrine.

As a result of such dissatisfaction, the doctrine as formulated by John Wesley in the 18th century began also to be re-examined by holiness scholars within the holiness tradition. A study of his writings revealed that his understanding was divergent from the 19th century American-holiness formulations at important points. Wesley emphasized the gradual aspect of sanctification. Nazarenes placed primary emphasis on the instantaneous nature of the grace. Wesley understood that entire sanctification was most usually a grace visited at the end of a life of discipleship. Nazarenes believed it a grace that was to be received as early as possible in the Christian life. Wesley placed more emphasis on the sovereign will of God concerning when one might be entirely sanctified. Nazarenes held it was necessarily granted when the believer believed for it and made the requisite consecration. And very importantly, Wesley did not equate the baptism with the Holy Spirit with the grace of entire sanctification.

One of the results of this renewal of Wesleyan scholarship was a radical reformulation of the doctrine by holiness theologians Mildred Bangs Wynkoop and H. Ray Dunning. They responded to the increasing incredibility of the traditional understanding of holiness by changing definitions, only more so. For these apologists, nothing less than an entire restatement of the doctrine would suffice to restore it to credibility. They suggested that a "relational" ontology needed to be substituted for the more traditional "substantial" one. This re-conceptualization of the doctrine of holiness, however, necessarily led to divergent emphases which seemed to be more "Wesleyan." Sanctification was understood more as a life-long process instead of as an instantaneous work. Its most decisive moment was the first work of grace and not the second. It was in the first work of grace and not the second that the baptism of the Holy Spirit occurred. Glorious descriptions of what was accomplished by the second work of grace were necessarily precluded. Most importantly, there was no essential difference between an earnest Christian who had not been entirely sanctified and one who had. Entire sanctification was simply an "experience beyond conversion," a part of the process along the way to full salvation.

One of the problems with all these re-definitions (Taylor and Wynkoop for example) was that they effectively emasculated the promise of entire sanctification, at least as it had been understood at the beginning of the century. The promise of a gloriously transformed human nature, so vividly proclaimed by late nineteenth and early twenty-century authors, was missing at the end of the twentieth century. In its place was either a doctrine of entire sanctification that left persons, while not strictly sinful, still very much infirmed, or a doctrine that acknowledged that a gloriously transformed human nature was the result of a lifelong process which included along the way, an experience of entire sanctification.

But it also left the denomination with two (?) contemporaneous and competing definitions of entire sanctification in the Church of the Nazarene. In light of the historical events of the twentieth century which seemed irrevocably to confirm that persons can never hope for complete liberation from sin, of which Timothy Smith teasingly hinted, this was perhaps inevitable. But it certainly challenges the mission of the denomination which, at one time anyway, understood its sole reason for being to consist in the proclamation of the possibility of freedom from sin through a second work of grace resulting in a gloriously transformed human nature.

B. Brief Explanation of Methodology

The method used in discerning how the doctrine was periodically understood was a simple one. At the very beginning, the Pentecostal Church of the Nazarene had established a Ministerial Course of Study to educate its ministers and ensure agreement on the cardinal doctrine. Since 1908, this course

of study has been reviewed approximately every four years and recommendations concerning which books should be added or omitted have been made by book committees appointed to the quadrennial General Assemblies of the church. The books and authors included in the Ministerial Course of Study are used not only for independent study but also in the colleges and seminaries of the Church of the Nazarene. They are therefore, indicative of the “official” teaching of the church and the representative books used in the course of study from 1908 to the present are included in the book as an appendix. “A Century of Holiness Theology” is thus replete with quotes from the primary sources, many of which are no longer available.

Thus, one can read J.A. Wood’s expectation if the church would only embrace the doctrine.

Christian Purity is what the Church needs to qualify her to carry forward her great work of regenerating the world.... The Church numerically ought to duplicate herself every year; and *she would, if she were fully sanctified to God*. Did each member of the Church secure the salvation of *but one soul* a year... in less than seven years the **WORLD WOULD BE CONVERTED, and the millennial glory cover the whole earth.**²

One can read Asbury Lowrey’s description of the effects of the grace of entire sanctification.

Dwelling within us, (the Holy Spirit) becomes a new teacher, a new faculty of discernment, a rich fellowship, a witness, a sanctifier, a producer of holy fruits, and an abiding Comforter. He puts sweetness into our spirits, wisdom and discretion into our ways, pathos and sympathy into our accents, power into our words, melody into our songs, and often a soft beaming light into our faces.³

One can read A.M. Hills’ explanation of how the grace is to be received.

1. Say TO-NIGHT, I MUST BE FILLED WITH THE SPIRIT...
2. I MAY be filled with the Spirit...
3. I WOULD be filled with the Spirit...
4. I SHALL be filled with the Spirit...

Dear reader, such language means INSTANTANEOUS SANCTIFICATION by faith, for you NOW.⁴

One can read of A.M. Hills’ confidence in man’s natural ability to obey God.

Though man is fallen and sadly depraved, so that there is in his nature a strong tendency toward sin, yet does he retain a Godlike attribute of freedom? In every volition of a moral nature, he is free to will the opposite. No decree of God, no chain of causation behind his will, no combination of elements in his constitution, compel his moral acts. The gracious aid of the Holy Spirit is only suasive not necessitating.⁵

One can read H. Orton Wiley’s careful distinctions between purity and maturity.

Purity is the result of a cleansing from the pollution of sin; maturity is due to growth in grace. Purity is accomplished by an instantaneous act; maturity is gradual and progressive, and is always indefinite and relative. When, therefore, we speak of perfect love, we have reference solely to its quality as being unmixed with sin, never to its degree or quantity... A clear comprehension of the difference between purity and

² Wood, Purity and Maturity, 236-237

³ Lowrey, Possibilities of Grace, 131

⁴ Hills, Holiness and Power, 279

⁵ Hills, Fundamental Christian Theology, 234

maturity will prevent confusion, both as to the doctrine and experience of Christian perfection.⁶

One can read of S.S. White's insistence on the use of the particular term "eradication."

Did Wesley believe in the eradication or complete destruction of this... state of sin in which man is born? We believe that the evidence compels one to answer this in the affirmative. Here are a number of phrases which he used in stating what is done when a person is sanctified wholly: purification from sin, a heart that is purified from all sin, deliverance from inward as well as outward sin . . . salvation from all sin, inbred sin or the total corruption of man's nature taken away....⁷

One can read John Wesley's description of how one ought to wait for God's sanctifying grace.

Not in careless indifference or indolent inactivity, but in vigorous 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. And if any man dream of attaining it any other way (yea, or of keeping it when it is attained, when he has received it even in the largest measure), he deceiveth his own soul. It is true, we receive it by simple faith. But God does not, will not, give that faith unless we seek it with all diligence in the way which He hath ordained. This consideration may satisfy those who inquire why so few have received the blessing.⁸

One can read Richard Taylor's distinction between infirmity and sin.

You will come gradually to understand the difference between carnality and humanity.... In Chapter Two we talked about the "believer's failure," and in that discussion we meant *sin*. We described his failure to experience that love for God and man which is the New Testament standard. This failure is rooted in the carnal mind, and is a failure which may be eliminated in the grace of heart holiness. Now we seem to be talking about failure again; only this time we are calling it infirmity, or humanity. It does seem confusing, admittedly, especially when some of the personality faults may seem so similar to those which are seen in unsanctified Christians.... But the Spirit will help us to see that in God's sight - who alone knows the heart perfectly - there is a vast difference....⁹

One can read Mildred Wynkoop's rejection of substantial notions of holiness and sin.

Wesleyan theology rejects the concept of original holiness as an impersonal goodness, in favor of a more biblical idea of holiness which stresses a right personal relationship to God. Holiness, or morality, is never a quality of impersonal substance but the way one reacts to God and to persons. To understand this is to help correct the idea that sin has substance or is a thing which can be - or cannot be - removed as a diseased part of the body. Holiness is not metaphysically conditioned substance, but a proper relationship to God by the Holy Spirit.¹⁰

One can read H. Ray Dunning's distinction between initial and entire sanctification.

⁶ Wiley, Christian Theology, 2:506

⁷ White, Eradication, 38

⁸ Wesley, The Heart of Wesley's Faith, 47 - 48

⁹ Taylor, Life in the Spirit, 165

¹⁰ Wynkoop, A Theology of Love, 177

What then, from this point of view is the difference between new birth and perfect sanctification? Love has already been instilled into the heart of man at new birth. From then on there is a gradual development. This is thought to continue even after the stage of perfect sanctification until the very moment of death - indeed after death too. There is therefore, Wesley thinks, no perfection of degrees, i.e. no perfection of concluded development. The distinction between new birth and entire sanctification seems therefore to be nothing more than a difference of degree in a continuous development.¹¹

One can read Donald Metz' analysis of the state of the church at the end of the last century.

In the last decades of the twentieth century, it is evident there is "a profound disagreement within the denomination" on doctrinal and other essential matters. Several generations of Nazarenes have traveled the royal road of holiness emphasizing Christ-like dynamics, sacrificial service, enthusiastic fellowship, and historic Wesleyan doctrine. Now there is increasing pressure from articulate academicians, pragmatic pastors and vocal laypersons to modify the historic doctrines and reshape the traditional mission which served as the foundation of the denomination's heritage.¹²

And one can read General Superintendent Jim Bond's plea for the church to address this lack of agreement over how best to articulate the doctrine which was the denominations sole reason for being.

My friends, I appeal to you – stay with us! We need you! Help us work through our dilemmas! Help us refocus on our unique mission. Embracing the call means embracing the Church – blemishes, defects, and imperfections all! And vowing by God's grace to remain in the church, always seeking to be positive, constructive and redemptive! Thanks for permitting a churchman to share some thoughts on the role of Nazarene higher education in the fulfillment of the denomination's calling and mission.

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These are just a representative sampling of the documentation from primary sources that can be found in the book as it charts the changes in the understanding of the doctrine of entire sanctification.

In addition to using the books recommended in the Course of Study, attention was paid to the changes made in the denomination's Articles of Faith. In the brief 100 years of the denominations existence, there has not been an Article of Faith that has not been modified to some degree or changed outright. For example, from 1923 to 1928, the denomination had an article of faith entitled "Free Will," which was in harmony with the classical Protestant understanding of total depravity. It read:

The condition of man after the fall of Adam is such that he can not turn and prepare himself, by his own natural strength and works, to faith, and calling upon God; wherefore we have no power to do good works, pleasing and acceptable to God, without the grace of God by Christ assisting us.

In 1928, the article titled "Free Will" was changed to "Free Agency" and it emphasized depravity less and moral responsibility more.

We believe that man's creation in Godlikeness included the ability to choose between right and wrong, and that thus he was made morally responsible; that through the fall of Adam he became depraved so that he can not now turn and prepare himself by his own natural strength and works to faith and calling upon God; but the grace of God through Jesus Christ is freely bestowed upon all men, enabling all who will to turn from sin to

¹¹ Dunning, Grace, Faith and Holiness, 485

¹² Donald S. Metz, Some Crucial Issues in the Church of the Nazarene. (Olathe, KS: Wesleyan Heritage Press, 1994), 1

¹³ Bond, James. "Key Note Address to the 'Faith, Living and Learning Conference.'" June 16, 2001.

righteousness, believe on Jesus Christ for pardon and cleansing from sin, and follow good works pleasing and acceptable in His sight.

The Article of Faith on “Entire Sanctification” has also been modified. From 1928 until 1976, there were no changes. It stated:

We believe that entire sanctification is that act of God, subsequent to regeneration, by which believers are made free from original sin, or depravity, and brought into the state of entire devotement to God, and the holy obedience of love made perfect. It is wrought by the baptism of the Holy Spirit, and comprehends in one experience the cleansing of the heart from sin and the abiding, indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit, empowering the believer for life and service.

Entire sanctification is provided by the blood of Jesus, is wrought instantaneously by faith, preceded by entire consecration; and to this work and state of grace the Holy Spirit bears witness. This experience is also known by various terms representing different phases of the experience, such as “Christian Perfection,” “Perfect Love,” “Heart Purity,” “The Baptism with the Holy Spirit,” “The Fullness of the Blessing,” “Christian Holiness.”

In 1976, two clarifying paragraphs were added.

We believe that there is a marked distinction between a pure heart and a mature character. The former is obtained in an instant, the result of entire sanctification; the latter is the result of growth in grace.

We believe that the grace of entire sanctification includes the impulse to grow in grace. However, this impulse must be consciously nurtured, and careful attention given to the requisites and processes of spiritual development and improvement in Christlikeness of character and personality. Without such purposeful endeavor one’s witness may be impaired and the grace itself frustrated and ultimately lost.

These modifications to the Articles of Faith are instructive and are obviously indicative of the changes in the church’s understanding of her faith. “A Century of Holiness Theology” contains a second appendix which includes the Articles of Faith and the modifications and changes that have been made to them in the history of the denomination.

It should also be noted that the changes in understanding of the doctrine of entire sanctification did not come without much debate and disagreement. Theological discourse is not an impersonal affair. Those who know of our theological history may be aware of some of the conflicts that were engendered by the publication of certain books and by the sense that some were forsaking the traditional formulation of the doctrine. A.M. Hills, for example, desired his systematic theology to have been the official one and rushed his to print before H. Orton Wiley’s. It can be said that not all received Mildred Wynkoop’s “Theology of Love” warmly. H. Ray Dunning’s systematic theology caused controversy well before it was published. The dynamic debate at the 1985 General Assembly, concerning whether or not the word “eradicate” should be retained in the article of faith on “Original Sin” is reported. Where these conflicts are instructive and determinative, they are noted and they help reveal the interest and intensity which has accompanied these changes to our cardinal doctrine.

C. Chapter by Chapter Summary

The first chapter reviews the origins of the denomination and places it in historical and cultural context. The second chapter provides a rather detailed explanation of the doctrine, as the “fathers” of the denomination understood it. As has been noted above, this early explication reflected 19th century holiness orthodoxy and emphasized entire sanctification as an instantaneous second work of grace that eradicated the sinful nature, conditioned only by faith and consecration. Entire sanctification was identified as the baptism with the Holy Spirit and that baptism with the Holy Spirit, according to these

early descriptions, resulted in almost glorified human persons. Representative authors from this period include J.A. Wood, Daniel Steele, A.M. Hills and Asbury Lowrey.

The third chapter is a summary of the theologies of the first two “systematic theologians” of the church, John Miley and A. M. Hills. Particular attention is paid to their understanding of the freedom of the will and their almost complete rejection of total depravity. Changes in the denomination’s Articles of Faith indicate that Miley and Hills were representative of the Church of the Nazarene’s general understanding. This emphasis on a person’s volition would be a recurring theme and in these early years, reflected the incredible optimism of the culture at large.

The fourth chapter is a summary of H. Orton Wiley’s explication of entire sanctification. He warrants a separate chapter because of his singular influence on the church’s understanding of the doctrine of entire sanctification.

The fifth chapter notes a relative change in the explication of the doctrine. The extravagant promises of the grace of entire sanctification were beginning to be understood as unrealistic, in part as a result of the failure of persons to realize those promises. Consequently, the sin that could be eradicated was more narrowly defined and the infirmities that were an inescapable consequence of fallen humanity were more expansively defined. As a result, the promise of entire sanctification was tempered. Persons representative of this trend are Richard Taylor and S.S. White. At the same time, the denomination began to more ardently defend its historic articulation of the doctrine, insisting on the use of particular terminology to define the doctrine.

Chapter six shows that this tendency to define sin more narrowly and define infirmity more expansively continued in the sixth and seventh decades of the twentieth century, as illustrated by W.T. Purkiser’s writings. Qualifications of the doctrine abound, resulting in increasing dissatisfaction with the traditional understanding of the doctrine in the church. This dissatisfaction with the traditional formulation compelled a study of Wesley’s writings, which were understood as divergent from the 19th century formulations at important points. These divergent emphases are noted.

Chapter seven charts the radical reformulation of the doctrine, led by the publication of Mildred Bangs Wynkoop’s “Theology of Love.” H. Ray Dunning’s explication of entire sanctification, as found in “Grace, Faith and Holiness” is also reviewed. These reformulations have resulted in two contemporaneous and competing definitions of entire sanctification in the Church of the Nazarene. Needless to say, this poses a problem for a denomination that understands its primary reason for being the preservation and proclamation of the doctrine of entire sanctification. The final chapter provides no resolution but briefly summarizes the state of the doctrine in the Church of the Nazarene today and the steps the church is taking to address the dilemma.