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A STRUGGLE FOR IDENTITY

The search for identity is an age-old search. When God called Moses to be the deliverer of his people, his first response was, "Who am I, that I should go unto Pharaoh, and that I should bring forth the children of Israel out of Egypt?" (Exodus 3:11). We are all familiar with the words of David, "What is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him?" (Psalm 8:4).

In his book, Breach of Faith, one of the many studies of Watergate, Theodore H. White speaks of the search for identity by Richard M. Nixon. "New York then for Richard Nixon was money, and comfort, and relaxation. But little satisfaction of the identity-craving he had felt since boyhood. Identity was something beyond the security of money." (Breach of Faith, Theodore H. White, page 101.)

Institutions seek for and must have identity. This is especially true of churches. About fifty years ago several denominations in Canada came together to form the United Church of Canada. It was formed without any stated theological position, uniting on the basis of fellowship alone. Each congregation and each minister was allowed to continue in their particular tradition so when one visited a United Church, Presbyterian doctrine, Methodist doctrine, Congregational doctrine or whatever happened to be

the particular persuasion of that church or pastor might be heard. This soon led to obvious difficulties.

About twenty-five years ago a commission was appointed by the United Church to write a theology for the church. I do not know the full outcome of that commission, but suffice it to say, the United Church leaders saw that it was not sufficient for a church to be organized and continue without a distinguishing doctrine. Mere fellowship is not enough. Of the early disciples it was said, "And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship . . ." (Acts 2:42).

The thesis of this paper is that the Church of the Nazarene may be making a life-time struggle for an identity, the outcome of which will determine whether we will be a leader in Wesleyan evangelical theology and practice or be lost in a hodge-podge of doctrinal ambiguities and procedural uncertainties. Who are we, and what is our main mission in this world?

There was a time when this question was not necessary. We knew who we were. It may have been an over-simplified knowledge but we knew. We were spiritual descendants of John Wesley and, more recently, of the holiness fathers of the late 19th and early 20th century. We were a holiness people.

Our Churches were holiness churches . . .

Our preachers were holiness preachers . . .

Our campmeetings were holiness campmeetings . . .

Our revivals were holiness revivals . . .

Our colleges were holiness colleges.

We had all kinds of epithets thrown at us. We were called "holymen" - narrow, sectarian, and sometimes even cursed and run out of town. But we were not greatly disturbed because we knew who we were. We rejoiced in our faith and sang with joy "I'm so glad that I can say I'm one of them." I wonder if we are that certain today?

A part of this uncertainty, if it does exist, has to do with the day in which we live. It is a day of moral, spiritual and ethical confusion. It was not too long ago that a distinguished President of the United States was calling upon Americans to articulate and understand our national purpose. It had not seemed necessary to do so before.

In moral issues there is great confusion. Not long ago we knew what we meant when we used the words obscenity and pornography but now that we have to define them, we are not quite so sure. Also, we are preaching to people in our churches these days who are not struggling intellectually over Calvinism and Arminianism and some are not even sure that they believe in God. Maybe our day is somewhat like that of the Wesleys.

It may be that because of the low spiritual and moral level of our society, we have omitted a precise emphasis on Bible holiness and have raised up a generation of young people and new Nazarenes from the outside who have no working knowledge of holiness as a second definite work of Grace.

Two incidents occurred recently that disturbed my thinking.

First we had a student revival on our campus when ten of our ministerial students brought the messages. There was great interest by the student body in the singing and preaching of their peers and the altars were filled service after service. However, the thing that disturbed me was that all during that meeting with ten sermons by ten different preachers not one mention was made during the entire week on any theme that was closely related to holiness or entire sanctification as we believe it. And, as far as I can tell, no one came to the altar specifically to be sanctified nor testified after seeking that God had truly sanctified them in that service.

Recently in discussion with the district superintendents of our educational zone, a question was raised by one of the district superintendents regarding the training of our young men. He stated that in their Board of Orders and Relations last assembly when five or six of our young men came before the Board, not one of them was able to give any kind of clear statement regarding the doctrine of entire sanctification. That discussion, by the way, continued in a very wholesome manner and the district superintendents all agreed that it was not just a problem of these young men or our Department of Religion but it was a church-wide problem that they faced in local churches and on the district level everywhere. One district superintendent related dropping into a Sunday school class where the subject was sanctification and that the teacher was so far off theologically that there was not even the slightest connection with what we really believe and teach.

Lest it appear that I am overly judgmental of our Department of Religion or the young men and women previously referred to, I think it should be taken into consideration that all of these are neophyte preachers and in many cases may not have had courses in doctrine that would give them proper theological understanding and terminology. I presume that my theological answers at that stage of life might have been rather fuzzy. However, it does seem that if these young people, most of whom are products of our own local churches and now the College, would have been hearing the message of holiness and sanctification as frequently as they should be hearing it, they would have been a bit more knowledgeable and explicit even on a casual basis than they appeared to be.

It is my opinion that there is and has been a dearth of definite Biblical holiness preaching in our Church over the past two or three decades and that we are now beginning to see the consequences of it. A look back to John Wesley's evaluation of the importance of the precise preaching on holiness is significant.

"Wednesday, August 14 - I preached at Tiverton; and on Thursday went on 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 (the peculiar doctrine committed to our trust), or they spoke of it only in general terms without urging the believers 'to go on into perfection,' and to expect it every moment. And wherever this is not earnestly done, the work of God does not prosper." (Journal, Volume 6, page 120, Epworth Press)

My observation is that we have begun to substitute a number of other things as the hallmark of our Church. We have left a vacuum and other things

have rushed in to fill it. For many years now one could attend various district and even general church gatherings without hearing too much emphasis being made upon our distinguishing doctrine. Our General Superintendents are to be commended for taking one service during the last summer's district assemblies for emphasizing and preaching on second blessing holiness giving people at the district assembly an opportunity to both hear of and seek for the Blessing.

I do not mean to suggest that we should confine our preaching and teaching to traditional theological terms and doctrines. Many of the new usages are scriptural and helpful. Terms such as commitment, discipling, unity of the body and the emphasis in recent years on love all lend themselves to our message of full salvation, but for us they must be hung on the framework of our holiness theology lest they lead to theological aberrations and confusion.

If there has been and is a dearth of holiness preaching in our Church, why is this so? Let me offer a few possible answers.

One, other themes such as a discussion of human relations, sanctified by a scriptural reference, are easier and more popular. I have discovered also that it is much easier to get people to an altar of prayer just to pray over their problems than it is to get them to definitely seek the Lord for a specific need. When the nature of sinfulness is attacked, there is always resistance and controversy. Sin, in any form, does not die easily.

Two, the fact that there has been much unscriptural and foolish preaching on holiness in the past and we don't want to be identified with that.

We could all cite illustrations of this but I think the most ridiculous treatment of this subject and a gospel text I know of was of a Nazarene minister taking the verse "How often would I have gathered thy children together even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings and ye would not." The preacher took the two wings of the chicken and suggested them as an illustration of being both saved and sanctified. That as a chicken had two wings so God has two works of grace and we needed to get under them both. He never bothered to explain how a chick could get under both wings at the same time. This, and many other ridiculous interpretations has caused some to shy away from the truth.

Dr. E. Stanley Jones once said, "The Holy Spirit is not central in our present day Christianity. The emphasis upon the Holy Spirit has been pushed from the main stream of Christianity into the cults. There the teaching has been thrown out of balance, often identified with rampant emotionalism. That queers it. The queer have queered Pentecost for many. And yet the almost entire absence of emphasis upon the Spirit, has impoverished the main stream of Christianity. It often degenerates into a mere humanistic striving to be good."

A third reason why some of us may shy away from preaching on holiness is the failure of many to back up their preaching with consistent

lives. While Wesleyan theology has never claimed human perfection, yet when some preachers of holiness are so obviously guilty of unethical and unchristian attitudes and conduct, the challenge to preach on holiness is weakened.

Added to a dearth on holiness preaching in this struggle for identity is the all too infrequent attempt to integrate our faith with scholarship. Wesleyan theology began in an atmosphere of education and scholarship and cannot be continued in ignorance. There must be a respect for every area of truth. While there are many exceptions there are too many instances of almost total neglect of relating biblical holiness to psychology, philosophy, history, and other areas of truth. Our thanks to our own scholars and those of other denominations who are helping us at this point. One of our number, Dr. John A. Knight, is to be commended for his recent book, "In His Image", which is faithful not only to Wesleyan theology but intellectual honesty.

Another area of concern in our struggle for identity is our drift away from a holistic ministry. "Holistic ministry embraces the gospel with concern and compassion for all the needs of people, knowing with Jesus that evangelism which appears to be concerned with people while ignoring their physical and social need is evangelism without the gospel."

It is significant to note that the early days of the Church of the Nazarene were characterized by a strong social consciousness. The record

reveals that many of these social concerns were dropped after the first dozen years or so. The "social gospel" controversy of the early part of this century probably contributed to this change. It is the opinion of this writer that in order for the holiness message of our Church to be validated, we must return to many of those concerns that address themselves to the needs of the whole man.

What then will be the identification of the Church of the Nazarene twenty-five years from now, fifteen years from now, ten years from now, five years from now - what is it now? Is it a parking lot full of Sunday school buses? Is it the super church? Is it church management? Is it personal evangelism of either the Bill Bright or James Kennedy variety? Is it the counseling room? Is it the open altar? What really is it and what will it be?

Let me suggest that I am not anti-Sunday school bus, anti-super church, anti-church management, anti-personal evangelism, anti-counseling, and anti-open altar. I believe all of these have a proper place in the ongoing of the work of the Church and we will always find new ways to do the work to which God has called us but if these become an end in themselves, they will be a snare rather than an aid. I have always understood the mission of our Church to be to get people gloriously saved and blessedly sanctified and then involved in the work of the Church to do good to the bodies and souls of men.

On May 14, 1768, John Wesley wrote a letter to Charles, his brother, and in it stated,

"I am at my wit's end with regard to two things - the Church and Christian perfection. Unless both you and I stand in the gap in good earnest, the Methodist will drop them both. Talking will not avail. We must do or be borne away. Will you set shoulder-to-shoulder? If so, think deeply upon the matter and tell me what can be done."

One month later, he wrote to Charles again and said,

"But what shall we do? I think it is high time that you and I at least should come to the point. Shall we go on in ascertaining 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.

"What shall we jointly and explicitly maintain, (and recommend to all our preachers) concerning the nature, the time, (now or by and by?) and the manner of it? Instantaneous, or not? I am weary of intestine war; of preachers quoting one of us against the other. At length, let us fix something for good and all; either the same as formerly, or different from it." (Works, Volume XII, pp 135-6, Nazarene Publishing House.)

In August of that same year, Wesley wrote to a Lawrence Coughlan, and in the letter stated,

"Blessed be God, though we set a hundred enthusiasts aside, we are still encompassed with a cloud of witnesses, who have testified, and do testify, in life and in death, that perfection which I have taught these forty years! This perfection cannot be a delusion, unless the Bible be a delusion too; I mean, loving God with all our heart, and our neighbor as ourself." (Journal, Volume V, page 284, Epworth Press)

The Church of the Nazarene is built for holiness preaching. Our doctrine demands it and our polity works best in this atmosphere. We need a rebirth of holiness preaching and teaching.

Our Departments of Religion should become expert in Wesleyan theology. Positive, forthright, definite and able to communicate this to our students and we should not quibble over terminology.

Several years ago, Dr. J. B. Chapman wrote a book on the subject "Holiness Terminology." In the first chapter of that book is the following statement,

"There are those, speaking of the very field in which we are to work in this series, who say, 'We need a new terminology. Our old terminology is unadapted to the present age, and its use brings unnecessary misunderstanding and opposition.' Or they say that the old terminology is inadequate to the new era. But the only way a term can become unacceptable is for it to cease to bear the meaning it once bore or else to be wanting in euphony -- that is, be difficult to pronounce or of unfamiliar sound. But I think as regards the terminology of Bible holiness neither of these legitimate objections holds. Take the word sanctification, for example. That is a euphonious word; it is of unquestioned pedigree; it expressed a very definite idea; and yet it is not a popular word. The objection, therefore, is not legitimate, for the objection is to the import of the word. Men don't like the word because they don't like the idea it bears. Take the word eradication: that is a good word, easy to pronounce, of honorable extraction, and of definite signification. It is unpopular because of what it means, and those who would substitute some other word would escape persecution only until their new word attained a force corresponding to the force this one has already attained, and then they would be right back where they started. Likewise, if the time ever comes when terms like 'the victorious life,' 'a higher state of grace,' and such like terms mean exactly the same thing as being sanctified wholly by the baptism with the Holy Ghost and fire, these gentler terms will be listed as harsh, and there will again be call for a new vocabulary. It is the idea conveyed that makes or breaks a word on the markets of men. And I think it will usually be noted that the call for a new terminology is a call for less definition, rather than for more definition; for new words cannot possibly be as clear and as rich as those which have been aged by the usage of the generations. Old words are better than new, for the reason that they are better understood, whereas the symbolism of the new words require much time for maturing and for enrichment."

Our educational institutions stand in a unique position for the proclamation and clarification of this great depositum of holiness truth.

We could do more to weld our colleges and the rest of the Church together by taking the lead in holiness theology - teaching and preaching - than anything else we could possibly do. We, ourselves, should preach more frequently on this great truth. Perhaps it would do us well to get out our old holiness sermons, dust them off, bring them up-to-date, use some current illustrations and take our place alongside Wesley, Steele, H. C. Morrison, Bresee, Wiley, Williams, Chapman and a host of others in proclaiming holiness, scripturally, intelligently, and fervently - a message of full salvation that is still able to meet the deepest personal and corporate human needs of this and every day.

If we would accept this challenge, we could help protect the Church from theological aberrations and confusion that always occur when truth is neglected or omitted entirely. For, quoting Dr. Chapman again, "doubt feeds on silence and soon festers to become opposition."

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- 1) Do we have an identity problem?
- 2) Is the message of holiness being proclaimed frequently among us?
- 3) Are our departments of Religion giving strong leadership in this area?
- 4) Do we have responsibility for theological leadership?
- 5) What practical things can be done to identify our educational institutions as being true to the holiness witness?

ADDENDUM

to

"A STRUGGLE FOR IDENTITY"

by

L. Guy Nees

The question is often asked, "When and where and by whom did the Church of the Nazarene begin?" "Was it in 1907? 1908? 1895?" "Was it in Chicago? Brooklyn? Nashville? Los Angeles? Pilot Point?" "Was it by Hoople? McClurkan? Reynolds or Bresee?"

I think the best answer is that although there were dates, places and persons who figured prominently in its beginning -- the real start was in the hearts of men and women, called out of the world -- marvelously saved and gloriously sanctified, drawn together in providential ways to proclaim scriptural holiness throughout the land.

One of these most often associated with our beginning was P. F. Bresee. It is true that what he and Dr. Widney called the Church of the Nazarene began in 1895 in Los Angeles but the real beginning was much earlier. Donald P. Brickley tells about it in his book, Man of the Morning.^{*} Brickley traces the life of Bresee from his early years as a boy in New York State to his place at this particular time as a Methodist minister in Iowa in 1868. The section is entitled, "Sanctified While Pastoring at Chariton."

"His religious depression began while he was serving as presiding elder and became serious while he pastored at Chariton. He described this experience to Girvin. 'I had a big load of carnality on hand always, but it had taken the form of anger, and pride, and worldly ambition. At last, however, it took the form of doubt. It seemed as though I doubted everything. I thought it was intellectual, and undertook to answer it. I thought that probably I had gone into the ministry so early in life, that I had never answered the great questions of being, and of God, and of destiny and of sin and the atonement, and I undertook to answer these great questions. I studied hard to

Brickley, Donald P., Man of the Morning, Nazarene Publishing House, 1960, page 73.

so answer them as to settle the problems that filled my mind with doubt. Over and over again, I suppose a thousand times, I built and rebuilt the system of faith, and laid the foundation of revelation, the atonement, the new birth, destiny, and all that, and tried to assure myself of their truth. I would build a pyramid, and walk around about it and say, "It is so, I know it is so. It is in accord with revelation. It is in accord with my intuitions. It is in accord with history and human experience. It is so, and I do not question it." And I would not get through the assertions of my certainty, before the devil or something else, would say, "Suppose it isn't so, after all?" And my doubts would not be any nearer settled than they were before.'

"During the winter protracted meeting at Chariton, Bresee came to the end of his doubt. In his own words he described this experience. 'There came one of those awful, snowy, windy nights, such as blew across the Western plains occasionally, with the thermometer twenty degrees below zero. Not many were out to church that night. I tried hard to preach a little, the best I could. I tried to rally the people to the altar, the few that were there, and went back to the stove, and tried to get somebody to the Lord. I did not find anyone. I turned toward the altar; in some way it seemed to me that this was my time, and I threw myself down across the altar and began to pray for myself. I had come to the point where I seemingly could not go on. My religion did not meet my needs. It seemed as though I could not continue to preach with this awful question of doubt on me, and I prayed and cried to the Lord. I was ignorant of my own condition. I did not understand in reference to carnality. I did not understand in reference to the provisions of the atonement. I neither knew what was the matter with me, nor what would help me. But, in my ignorance, the Lord helped me, drew me and impelled me, and, as I cried to Him that night, He seemed to open heaven on me, and gave me, as I believe, the baptism with the Holy Ghost, though I did not know either what I needed, or what I prayed for.'"

The Church of the Nazarene has its beginning then in the life of a man who was honest enough to face the inward as well as the outward struggle against sin and found complete deliverance in a "second" work of God's divine grace. The church will continue by the same openness and divine discovery whatever the particulars.