

Denominational Identity in Historical Perspective

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George Whitefield's 1741 tour up the American East Coast fanned the flames of the "Great Awakening." Since that awakening revivalistic methods and doctrine became the focus of controversy and division within established religious groups of America. Churches were often divided along the lines of "New Lights and Old Lights," or "New School and Old School." Again in the 1890's revivalism was creating no small stir. This time in the great Methodist church where the battle raged between the "holiness and anti-holiness." Now 150 years later another preacher was fanning the flames of controversy on the West Coast, and soon to be released from his denomination.

On Sunday, October 20, 1895, Rev. P.F. Bresee started a church for the poor in a rented hall in downtown Los Angeles, with eighty-six Methodist followers. This fifty-five year old, former high ranking Methodist clergyman, was now out on his own without the support of the great church. What gave it its popularity and success for the next several decades?

The purpose of this paper is to trace the development of the Church of the Nazarene, 1895 - 1968, and interpret its changing identity. Three historical epoches are used, each based upon major changes in the general leadership of the church. These are as follows:

1895-1923, Formation and Mergers.

1923-1948, Isolationism and Expansionism.

1948-1968, Transition and Bureaucracy.

I. 1895-1923 Formation and Mergers

As this new Nazarene church began to take shape in the fall of 1895, it was more concerned about its mission than its identity. However, the Nazarene's mission was their identity! The first flyer advertising their meetings in Red Man's Hall read as follows:

The Church of the Nazarene is a simple, primitive church, a church of the people and for the people. It has no new doctrines, only the old, old Bible truths. It seeks to discard all superfluous forms and ecclesiasticism and go back to the plain, simple words of Christ. It is not a mission, but a church with a mission. It is a banding together of hearts that have found the peace of God, and which now in their gladness, go out to carry the message of the unsearchable riches of the gospel of Christ to other suffering, discouraged, sin sick souls. Its mission is to everyone upon whom the battle of life has been sore, and to every heart that hungers for cleansing from sin. Come.

It appears obvious from the outset, Bresee's church was focusing on a social ministry as well as holiness evangelism. According to Tom Nees in his doctoral dissertation, *The Holiness Social Ethic and Nazarene Urban Ministry*, this was a continuation of similar work begun by the post-Civil War Holiness movement. In both cases the ministries were responding to the social problems which had developed in the industrial urban areas. He notes:

Holiness churches and their city missions were motivated by the Progressive ideal of saving people from the evils industrialism had brought upon society, while preparing society for the soon-to-come "Christian Century" when America would achieve its destiny of righteousness. Utopianism was shared equally by the advocates of the social gospel and the leaders of the holiness movement. (Nees, 1976)..(page 7)

P.F. Bresee was attempting to resurrect a primitive Wesleyan Church with the holiness message and doctrine and influenced by American utopianism.

What made the early Nazarenes different from the Methodists? Historian Timothy Smith gives five characteristics. First, the government of the church was thoroughly democratic. This action put the power of the church back into the hands of the congregation. Second, the chief aim of the church was to preach holiness to the poor. Third, the disciples of the church depended primarily upon the work of the Holy Spirit. (This meant that a sanctified person would follow a narrow life style.) The historic concepts of the Methodist Discipline were adapted by Dr. Bresee from the "General Rules," and included in the first Nazarene Manual. Fourth, the church creed was brief and made the doctrine of perfect love central. According to Smith, Dr. Bresee's doctrinal policy was "liberality in all matters not, in his view, absolutely essential to salvation" (Smith, 1962). Finally, the Nazarene worship service was to be "joyously free." (page 17)

Rev. Girvin, in his bibliography of Bresee, quotes from an early leaflet produced by the church, which reflects testimony of the spontaneity of the people:

The voice of prayers and hallelujahs trembling on the lips; the shouts of those who conquer, are no infrequent things in the Church of the Nazarene....The presence of the Lord is often so manifest as we are gathered together, that not only do our hearts burn within us, but our tongues are tuned to praise, and triumphant hallelujahs fill the house - to Jesus be all the glory. (Girvin, 1916).(page 124)

According to I.G. Martin, Dr. Bresee always stressed the importance of having "holy enthusiasm" in his worship services. He wanted his people to witness the power and emotional excitement of the presence of the Holy Spirit. "We must have unction; it is the sword that pierces between soul and spirit...it is your endowment of power; you must receive it fresh by the breath of God, or you are nothing: (Martin, 1937)..(pages 18-19)

Within a few years Nazarene churches could be found in major cities along the West Coast. The success of this holiness group and others like it soon became a network across America.

The growth of the church in its formational years was rapid, but this was more the result of its mergers with other holiness sects than garnering new members and churches. In his 1929 doctoral dissertation, *Christian Perfectionism in America*, Merrill Gaddis indicated in a period from 1893 to 1907, twenty-five holiness sects sprang into existence. He indicated their formation began "immediately following the Panic of 1894 and for the next decade: (Gaddis, 1929). The churches might have merged earlier than 1907 had it not been for the independent character of many of the groups. Many holiness people remained in the Methodist church hoping to reform it. J.B. Chapman believed if holiness converts had "proceeded at once to

form one great holiness denomination, they might have begun with over a million members" (Gaddis, 1929)..(page 458)

Bresee's vision of unification began to come into focus in 1906 with a revival he conducted in Chicago. His contacts there led to the merger of his church and H.F. Reynold's New England-based, Association of the Pentecostal Churches in 1907 to form "The Pentecostal Church of the Nazarene." This was followed in September of 1908 by the merger of C.W. Ruth's former group, the Holiness Christian Association of Pennsylvania. The most heralded merger was the Holiness Church of Christ on October 13, 1908 at Pilot Point, Texas. The fifth and sixth groups to join the Nazarenes occurred in 1915, the Pentecostal Mission of Nashville and the Pentecostal Church of Scotland founded by George Sharpe. Finally, in 1923, the Dakota-based Laymen's Holiness Association under the leadership of J.G. Morrison joined the swelling ranks of the young church. By the sixth General Assembly, The Church of the Nazarene, (Pentecostal had been dropped from the official name of the organization in 1919 to avoid confusion with the tongues movement), had grown from 99 churches and 6,198 members in 1907 to 1,304 churches and 50, 631 members in 1923.

Also important to our understanding of this rapid growth is the movements' appeal to members of the Methodist Church. It could be safely assumed that the early Nazarenes viewed themselves as neo-Methodists. In 1912, *Herald of Holiness* editor, B.F. Haynes wrote:

The Pentecostal Church of the Nazarene, in point of doctrine, of experience, of evangelistic activity and missionary belief and endeavor, is Mr. Wesley's legitimate and historic offspring and the direct successor of the Wesleyan movement." (B.F. Haynes, "The World Is My Parish," *Herald of Holiness*, [December 18, 1912]: 3).

Once the momentum of the movement got underway the Nazarenes drew most of their members and doctrine from Methodist religious bodies. J.B. Chapman notes, "...It is likely that more Nazarenes are of Methodist extraction than of any other one denomination...(and) from the standpoint of doctrine and purpose, the church of the Nazarene is Methodistic..." (Chapman, 1926). ..(page 23)

Finally, the formation period was doctrinally apologetic and intensely revivalistic. The defensive position of most sects results from a type of superior self-perception for its legitimacy for existence. The Nazarenes believed they were picking up where the Methodists had left off and they had good reasons to believe this.

Since 1812 the M.E. Church had been fading as a great force in spreading the Wesleyan doctrine of entire sanctification. John Peters records an 1819 commentator on American Methodism stating: "How few and feeble are the efforts of ... ministers of the gospel in particular, to raise the standard of Christian perfection in the Church" (Peters, 1956). However, by 1825 some evangelists, pastors and laypersons revived the teaching and preaching of entire sanctification. The bishops were cordial to this restatement of doctrine. However, by mid-century the Free Methodist and the Wesleyan Methodist churches frightened the denomination with their schisms. Peters believes the doctrine of Christian perfection played a significant part in both schisms. Following the Civil War, many believed the Church was in a backslidden state. In 1867 John Inskip and J.A. Wood, both Methodist clergymen,

helped form The National Camp meeting for the Promotion of Holiness. By 1890 great tensions existed within the Methodist Church between the holiness and non-holiness divisions. Finally the "come-outers," began to leave the denomination in large numbers.

Dr. Bresee was a hard driving Methodist pastor-evangelist who kept his churches in a continual spirit of revival. He grew up in the religious atmosphere of nineteenth century revivalism. The evangelistic work of Charles Finney, Phoebe Palmer, and the holiness Camp meeting movement were his contemporary models of revivalism power. He believed in evangelism and revivals. And because of the success of his intensive evangelistic style, he saw the work of the evangelist as simply swinging "the revival to a higher tide of victory" (Martin, 1937).

Furthermore, Dr. Bresee maintained a strong Wesleyan position of heart purity. Sanctification was a second work of grace. He also encouraged and promoted the National Holiness Camp meeting Association on the Southern California Conference, where he was the presiding elder. Because the bishops were antagonistic to the "Holiness Movement," and no doubt because of his influence among the pastors, Bresee's actions brought him into their disfavor. It was just a matter of time until he was out on his own.

About the time of the formation of The Church of the Nazarene other holiness works also started. However, just drawing members from the Methodist Church did not guarantee these Wesleyan sects triumph. They turned to an old Methodist system of itinerant preachers; thus the holiness evangelists became the vanguards of the new movement. Their courageous efforts took the Wesleyan sects into new and formally dominated Methodist communities. With their primitive Wesleyan message they challenged the religious apathy of the members of the Church. Following this tradition and methodology, early Nazarenes were intensely revivalistic and had in P.F. Bresee, C.B. Jernigan, Seth Rees, Bud Robinson, R.T. Williams, and "Fire Ball Jimmy" Chapman vivid models to follow.

As we can see, the early Nazarenes, believed themselves to be the resurrection of the Methodist Church in the true Wesleyan holiness spirit. Its rate of growth and mergers, gave it a sense of success and divine blessing. The evangelists spearheaded the revivalistic assaults on the communities and became the spiritual heroes and leaders of the movement. Its preachers and deaconesses were activists, focusing their evangelistic and social work on the poorer sections of the urban centers. As long as the spirit of the nation was optimistic, the Nazarenes would believe in the message of their doctrine, "cleansing men's hearts and correcting social wrongs."

II. 1923-1948, Isolationism and Expansionism

By the early 1900's the influence of evangelical revivalism was beginning to wane after more than a century of national prominence. Conservative religion's dominance in America's spiritual life was being challenged from without by evolution, modernism and higher criticism. Within, the church was confronting the problems of secularization and the adjustments of moving from a rural to an urban middle class. The consolidating force confronting this newest challenge became known as Fundamentalism. Although it was fighting on a new front, revivalism was still the chief tool for recruiting members and indoctrinating converts. In the

Post-millennial spirit of the utopian age, many believed the church would usher in the Kingdom of God. However, with the coming of the first World War, the obvious failure of prohibition to reform society, and a theological shift from post to premillennialism, and the death of its founder and other leaders, the Church of the Nazarene moved from the confidence that social reform was possible to an attitude of retrenchment and isolationism (Nees, 1976).

How could the Holiness movement become affected by the Fundamentalist movement? Smith lists three reasons for increasing influence and attachment to the rising star of fundamentalism.

"One was fear. Another was the farmer's feeling of alienation from urban culture. The third was the heightened sense of human tragedy which World War I and its aftermath produced. ...they aroused and inflamed the strains of puritanism and pessimism which in other days had yielded first place to the perfectionist idealism dominant in Wesleyan faith" (Smith, 1962).

Approximately 1917, Nazarene revivalism began to shift its theme from the conversion of all mankind to a premillennialism and the Second coming of Christ focus. (The second edition of the *Waves of Glory* hymnbook demonstrates this move.) It now appeared that only God's supernatural intervention could save the world and society. As the church began to focus on the development and internal workings of the denomination, it also shifted from the dominate influence of Camp meeting evangelists to the influence of evangelistic pastors and educators. As a result the evangelists vanguards of the pioneer days performed as a popular tradition but were no longer seen as popular authority.

As nineteenth century Protestant orthodoxy was being challenged on the national front, another fear began to invade the church. Would the next generation of Nazarene leadership maintain the vision of the founding fathers? The concern of the pioneers was the preservation of the Wesleyan doctrine and lifestyle against the corruption of society and the liberalization of the established churches. As Smith and other church literature suggests, the Nazarenes began to intensify their separation from the world and tighten their control over church institutions and congregations. As American society began to loosen its standards of dress and conduct in the 1920's, the church deepened its isolation and intensified pietism. These became strong forces of culturalization within the denomination.

For example:

Children who on maturing found themselves at odds with the denomination, whether from what they believed was a greater or a lesser spirituality, simply could not be told to line up or get out... Getting out would be a kind of cultural suicide. Already, in this second generation, being a Nazarene was a symbol of belonging which they felt it perilous to break (Smith, 1962).

In order to preserve its identity, The Church of the Nazarene was becoming a subculture with its own set of norms reflecting nineteenth century religious conservatism.

The post-war decade of the twenties proved to be a time of great social upheaval for the nation and for the Nazarene church. The old familiar religious moorings produced by a

dominate Protestant middle class were crumbling. The older leadership, most of whom were former Methodists, were passing the reins of leadership to a younger group of leaders. These new men "had known neither bishops nor councils, nor a church broadly responsible for the welfare of society" (Smith, 1962). The new generation of denominational leaders were "more conservative, sectarian and preoccupied with the internal life of the denomination, including educational and missionary interests" (Nees, 1976). A prevailing attitude of rural conservatism during this era dominated the church. It led the church from the battlefield to the fortress.

In a sampling of six districts, Southern California, Ohio, Indiana, Tennessee, Oklahoma, and Kansas, only one made any obvious reference to the tenets of fundamentalism within its "State of the Church" reports. However, each district, over a period of nearly sixty years had reports on temperance and prohibition. They applauded the passage of the Eighteenth Amendment and decried lax local enforcement of the law. Dr. Stephen White, writing in the February 1926 Adult Sunday School lesson, commented the United States closed the saloons, "but with the closing of the saloon the battle is by no means over. Now the problem becomes one of law observance." (White, ASSL, 1926)

The concept of separateness filled the district reports and the Herald of Holiness up until 1955. Each of the districts seemed to have its own emphasis and message. Southern California as early as 1911 was more concerned with not bringing people into the church in too much of a "hurry." "It is far easier to keep trouble out than to turn it out after it has gained an entrance" (Fifth District Assembly, Southern California District Minutes). In 1926 the Indianapolis District made an impassioned plea for separation from the world by giving a list of offensive clothing: wearing of jewelry, short or gauzy sleeves, low necks, short skirts, knickers, flesh color hosiery, bobbed hair (and) etc. While this was the most extensive listing found, each district gave some admonition on externals from 1920 through 1968.

The essence of the teaching was found in an 1926 adult Sunday School lesson:

Christianity is separate, it is different, it belongs in a class all by itself. One cannot be a Christian and _____. To say yes to Christ is to say no to all others....We must not forget this principle of separation. Rather than being our shame, it is our glory.

The influence of the Fundamentalist's attack on the social gospel also caused Nazarene attitudes to shift to the right. According to both Timothy Smith and Tom Nees, the social gospel was regarded as theological liberalism and began to suffer from a "steadily increasing neglect." By the 1920's, Smith notes, a change is coming to the once socially active church:

Rescue homes and missions disappeared from district programs. Pronouncements on social issues, when made at morals whose real preoccupation was standards of personal behavior among church people. The order of deacons, once a great source of spiritual power in the denomination, declined in both numbers and influence. Even the ancient commitment to prohibitionism was restated in terms of personal rather than social regeneration. (Smith, 1962)..(page 318). Dr. Nees discovered a similar attitude in his research:

After 1919 these committees ("State of the Church and Country" and "Temperance and Prohibition") began to merge and narrow their interests. By the seventh Assembly in 1928,

only three committees remained: Social Welfare and Orphanage, Deaconess, and State of the Church and Public Morals, the latter of which had assumed the interest of the prohibition cause. In 1932 there was just one committee reporting about social welfare or rescue work...The committee on Social Welfare, Orphanage, and Deaconess work continued to function with declining interest until dissolved after the 1948 Assembly. (Nees, 1976)..(page 45)

Dr. Bresee was concerned about materialism and wealth but the second generation of Nazarene leadership was concerned with the protection of orthodoxy.

Between 1933 to 1948 saw many changes on the organization, leadership and development of the church. An intensification of evangelism produced an 82% increase in membership from 1930 to 1940. This figure, however, slowed during the war years of 1940-1944 to 15%.

The population centers of the church continually changed in the early days of expansion. Beginning in the far west, the center of gravity continued to shift toward the Midwest and centered in Indiana and Ohio. These two states soon became the strongest Nazarene area in the entire nation. The strength of this area later spilled over into Kentucky, West Virginia, and Western Pennsylvania. Much of this success was due in part to the strong Methodist influence in this area and the great number of county and state holiness associations.

The spirit of Nazarene expansionism is visible by the number of new churches it established in new countries each year. The numerical growth between 1916 and 1950 was 194,000, and average of 5,700 per year. The churches increased by 2,611 averaging 77 per year. Robert Ingle, in a geographical study, notes:

"...the vigorous territorial expansion of the church (into new counties) would soon begin to wane (by 1950), perhaps due to the geographical saturation of small towns and rural areas which were receptive to Nazarene holiness. Further growth would occur in the place, especially in urbanized areas, which required the church to evangelize to an increasingly urbanized population. (Ingles, 1973).

As we can see, in spite of the stresses of the Great Depression and World War II, the church kept emphasizing its evangelistic role. In 1944, J.B. Chapman concluded that the church was "better organized than ever before, and better able to carry through whatever projects it may deem wise to adopt" (Purkiser, 1983).

The period of reintegration had been a time of internal focus and reaction. In the early stages of this period the surrounding culture changed but church refused and reverted to a Wesleyan pietism. This attitude would dominate the church for the next thirty-five years. It moved away from a Wesleyan social activism of its pioneers and instead wedded the holiness message to personal standards. Being caught in the tide of the modernist debate, the church adopted its own Wesleyan version to avoid some of the radical fundamentalistic positions. While it was growing numerically, those who joined came into a culturally conservative house through an evangelistic door. When the great leaders of R.T. Williams, J.B. Chapman, and H.V. Miller died in the late 1940's, the church was faced with another leadership crisis. The World was becoming more complex, calling for a brave new leadership.

III. 1948-1968, Transition and Bureaucracy

The next two decades would prove to be a tremendous challenge to the Church of the Nazarene. She would face the new forces of cultural change. The advent of the television, post-war prosperity, and a materialistic media blitz, would bring pressure to the point of her standards. The membership growth and expansion of the previous decades would now call for a larger staff at the headquarters. The present facilities were becoming cramped. As the Sunday Schools began to bulge with the "baby boom" kids, soon the colleges, already feeling the impact of the returning GI, would need to meet the demands of a growing student body.

To meet the demands of the growing church in a growing economy, the headquarters began to expand. The cramped office space at the publishing house on Troost Avenue was no longer suited to meet the needs of progress. In the late 1940's the General Board made the decision to move the Headquarters and purchase property at 6401 The Paseo. In 1954 the church completed the Seminary building and the International Headquarters. In 1962 the General Board building was begun as was the Seminary Library in 1966. While the original plan was for the Publishing House to move with the Headquarters staff, it was later decided to remain at the Troost address. In 1968 the church chose to begin two new Junior colleges and a Bible college. To understand the growth of this period one only needs to look at the budget increases. Between 1951 and 1968 the General Budget grew by 404%, the World Mission budget by 423%, the Home Mission 451%, and the General Headquarters by 495%. The latter outstripped the General Budget increases by 91%. This would no doubt indicate the growing Headquarters staff of this period.

Following World War II a subtle but obvious corporate move filtrated into the administrative levels of the church. The leadership style shifted from an evangelistic to a militaristic model. The leadership of Hardy Powers hammered the rather loose confederation of the General Superintendents into a board. It became evident, following the Orval Nease issue in 1944, a corporate unity, such as this, was needed. However, the new leaders coming to Kansas City were not from the ranks of the evangelists and seldom directly from the pastorates. The new leaders were coming through the doors of the educational institutions and the district superintendency. The emphasis was administration and not inspiration, and the top levels of the church moved further from the grass roots. This could only mean the development of a stronger episcopacy and a weaker congregation form of government.

The church faced two issues in the mid-fifties which demonstrated the difficulty the church had in resolving issues radicalism within the church. These issues are still potentially volatile and must constantly be defused.

The first was the secession of Glen Griffith and Louisiana district Superintendent, Elbert Dodd to form the Gible Missionary Church in the fall of 1955. This rupture in the church, while centering on the issue of television and the movies, revealed that the conservative element within the church thought there was a drift toward liberalism. While the church recovered its almost 1,400 members lost by the next General Assembly, this sent a clear signal to the leadership. The General Superintendents shifted right of center and gave more sympathy to conservative concerns.

The second issue was a Pasadena College in 1957. Six faculty members reacted to what they perceived to be strict sectarianism at the administrative level. Their letter read:

We believe that the prevailing philosophy of education in the Church of the Nazarene...tends to encourage in the lives of faculty and students (1) sectarian loyalty, i.e., equating the Kingdom of God with the Church of the Nazarene and the Word with words; (2) conformity in thought and testimony without conviction and consistency in life; (3) mediocrity, stemming at least in part from fear and suspicion for the unusual, the controversial, the new... ; and (4) a pattern of behavior that too often manifests itself in expediency even, occasionally, at the price of principle, ... and deep frustrations in the emotional life (Armstrong, 1958).

The article goes on to express its concern for the lack of scholarship at the school and in so many words, hypocrisy. The six faculty members resigned.

The decade of the fifties could be described as the Nazarene "golden era." It grew by 81,000 members and nearly 1,000 churches. These gains represented the highest totals for any decade in its history since 1908. Since the expansion into new counties was much less, the new churches were added to counties with existing churches. The largest increases were in the metropolitan areas, especially in the far west and interior states. The territorial expansion continues in the south but came to an end in Indiana and Ohio. Nevertheless, Ohio gained 8,000 new members and Indiana 4,000 (Inge, 1973). As the church marched through the sixties, the membership continued to grow but it registered a smaller gain in churches and counties. Ingle feels this was due to the increased size of the churches themselves (Ingle, 1973).

The formation of the New churches had been a relatively steady factor throughout the history of the Nazarenes through 1960. But the Sixties ushered in a new era and the number of churches rose by only 188 during this period. In 1968 the church total was 4,674 which was the highest in history, but during the following two years the total number of organized churches may have reached a leveling off point and that future expansion might require new methods of evangelizing. (Ingles, 1973)

Transition and bureaucracy are inevitabilities for a church moving through the stages of sect to denomination. The larger the church grows and the more it wants to control, the larger its bureaucracy, the stronger its superintendency. The territorial expansionism came to a close and new methods of growth were needed to sustain the growing bureaucracy and overseas missionary program. The issues of conservatism and a secession, even a minor one had shaken the leadership. Identity now appeared to be the hub of the denomination, Kansas City and church government the pearls around its neck. The new models for ministry were the executive administrator, evidence by the growing amount of pressure and demands for budget payments, administrative detail and church growth, in that perceived order.

Summary

If one person could see into the future and see the dangers that lay before the denomination, Dr. R. T. Williams could. He listed eight:

(1) The danger of losing sight of the central theme of holiness as the heart of the Atonement; (2) professionalism; (3) substituting creeds and programs for the presence and power of the Holy Spirit; (4) institutionalism; (5) departmental independency; (6) legalism; (7) over organization and excessive overhead; and (8) failure to maintain a balance between episcopacy and congregationalism. (Purkiser, 1983)

The church has come a long way from the days of four week tent meetings and revivalistic leaders. The noise and excitement is gone also. It is not that these things were or are necessary for us to be a holiness church. One principle, however, is still necessary, men and women of conviction! Bresee was a man of vision, conviction and commitment. If there is one lesson to learn from our past, that was our **Identity**. We need to be committed to our mission, with conviction.

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1. Allan Coppedge ("Entire Sanctification in Early American Methodism, 1812-1835", Wesley Theological Journal, Vol. 13, Spring 1978) argues this is not true, He cites evidence that entire sanctification did not suffer loss in preaching nor experience during this period. Paul Dasset and Melvin Deiters would view this period as a time of softening intensity on the teaching of the doctrine.