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What on Earth is Entire Sanctification?

**An Inquiry into the Doctrine as Espoused in the Church of the Nazarene
An Introduction**

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Summation by Professor William Loader

Nature and significance of the research:

Elliott set out to investigate a doctrine or belief which has been central to The Church of the Nazarene. It is the distinctive belief that people need not only to undergo a moment commonly called “conversion” when they enter the Christian faith but also a second moment called “entire sanctification” [“Sanctification” = making or being made holy]. Scholars/pastors have identified a level of confusion within the church about what precisely the doctrine meant and what should be its implications, the latter sometimes interpreted in judgemental and restrictive ways. The thesis set out to clarify the notion itself and to investigate its coherence within the set of beliefs of that church and with the New Testament which it sees as authoritative.

Key findings and their significance:

The investigation identifies the extent of the confusion. The Church's founder, Phineas Bresee, himself, gave inconsistent accounts of his own "entire sanctification". Attempts by Nazarene scholars to explicate "entire sanctification" are shown to expose the problems more than provide solutions, despite claiming coherence with Nazarene tradition and with the New Testament. Elliott also highlights psychological problems of claiming that any human being passes a point where they are no longer vulnerable to doing wrong and the absurdity of claiming that such people only make mistakes. Testing the claimed coherence between the belief and the New Testament writings lead Elliott to demonstrate that statements used to warrant the belief do not so when it is understood in their historical and literary context. There sanctification is seen as a process in which people engage, reflecting growth in maturity and relationship to God, self and others, which is never complete in this life. Elliott found himself questioning what he had first thought he would be rehabilitating. It is mark of his discipline and application that he pursued the issue to the end.

Names and qualifications of supervisors:

1. Dr Nancy Victorin-Vangerud, BBA *Texas*, MA *Scarrit*, MDiv PhD
Vanderbilt (2003)
2. Professor William Loader, BA *Auckland*, BD *Otago*, Dr Theol *Mainz*, FAHA
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Names and qualifications of examiners:

1. Associate Professor Andrew Dutney, BA *Qld*, DipEcumStud PhD
St Andrews, GradCertTerEd *Flin*
2. Dr Michael Parsons, BA, PGCE *Leeds*, MPhil *LondonBibColl*, PhD *Spurgeo*

Summary of Examiners' Comments:

Both examiners recognise a vulnerable journey and praise the courage. Of the substance of the main chapter: “worthwhile, interesting and well –argued” (Parsons); “convincingly argued treatment...was skilfully done and persuasive...most interesting and helpful dissertation” (Dutney). Dutney praises Elliott as the ideal person to pursue the research further through a quantitative survey. Parsons drew attention to the need for further research on the historical issues.

INTRODUCTION

The general assembly of 1907 held in Chicago and constituted of delegates from both the Association of Pentecostal Churches of America and the Church of the Nazarene saw them unite as the Pentecostal Church of the Nazarene. In September 1908, the Pennsylvania Conference of the Holiness Christian Church dissolved itself and united with the Pentecostal Church of the Nazarene. In October 1908, the Holiness Church of Christ united with the Pentecostal Church of the Nazarene. In 1919, the church changed its name to Church of the Nazarene. The leaders were committed to the Arminian-Wesleyan¹ doctrine of salvation. The Church has

¹ James Arminius, a Dutch Protestant Reformer who professed that Jesus made atonement for all. People have the freedom of choice to respond positively or negatively to the free grace of God

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continued to assert and promulgate the Wesleyan doctrine of sanctification, especially that of entire sanctification. The Manual presents the following mission statement:

The mission of the Church of the Nazarene is to respond to the Great Commission of Christ to ‘go and make disciples of all nations’ (Matthew 28:19). The primary objective of the Church of the Nazarene is to advance God’s kingdom by the preservation and propagation of Christian holiness as set forth in the Scriptures.

The critical objectives of the Church of the Nazarene are holy Christian fellowship, the conversion of sinners, the entire sanctification of believers, their upbuilding in holiness, and the simplicity and spiritual power manifest in the primitive New Testament Church, together with the preaching of the gospel to every creature.²

The Manual presents entire sanctification as follows:

offered through the atonement of Jesus. He strongly opposed the Calvinistic thought that we are predestined either to salvation or damnation. John Wesley then expanded on the theology of Arminius, modified the Thirty-nine Articles of Faith of the Church of England, thereby instituting Methodism’s Twenty-five Articles of Faith. Nazarenes, part of the American Holiness Movement, adopted much of Wesley’s affirmation of faith. They continue to emphasize Wesley’s doctrine of entire sanctification.

² *Manual*, 2001-2005, *Church of the Nazarene*, (Kansas City, Mo.: Nazarene Publishing House, 2001), p.24. The *Manual* contains the history, constitution, government and ritual of the church.

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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 a state of entire devotion to God, and the holy obedience of love made perfect. It is wrought by the baptism with 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. This experience is also known by various terms representing its different phases, such as “Christian perfection,” “perfect love,” “heart purity,” “the baptism with the Holy Spirit,” “the fullness of the blessing,” and “Christian holiness.” 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.³

The church believes that it has advanced itself into an era in which it feels better equipped to propagate its distinctive doctrine of entire sanctification. Its commitment to the experience of entire sanctification can be evidenced from its direction that the local churches only elect church officers who profess this

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 30-31.

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experience and whose lives give public testimony to the grace of God that calls believers to a holy life.⁴ As Wesley D. Tracy explains the present situation:

It hasn't always been popular to be a Nazarene. Our doctrines have often been treated with condescending tolerance, even by other Christians. The idea of being pure in heart and life - holy hands and holy hearts - sounds ludicrous to a society fed on neo-Freudian psychology. To the mildly religious and to our Calvinistic friends, entire sanctification sounds insufferably arrogant and sometimes they tell us so. Ever been the brunt of "We don't smoke, we don't chew, and we don't go with girls that do"? True, some of our number have developed the knack of flaunting what we don't do into an art, and all of us get pinched or punched for it. Legalism is one of our predictable vulnerabilities, you know, particularly if our doctrine of sanctification by faith alone gets off-center or misunderstood by the well-meaning. We have learned a lot, as any adolescent denomination would. We have a key contribution to make in the postmodern world.⁵

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

⁵ W. D. Tracy & S. Ingersol, *What is a Nazarene?* (Kansas City, Mo.: Beacon Hill Press, 1998), pp. 4-6. These introductory remarks by Wesley D. Tracy are reflective of theological attacks upon the Church of the Nazarene by its chief opponents (Calvinists) concerning the doctrine of sanctification. In spite of this, he says the church is still the largest denomination in the Wesleyan tradition. Tracy is the retired editor of the *Herald of Holiness*, the official magazine of the denomination that is now called *Holiness Today*. He has served as pastor, professor and writer. He is past president of the Wesleyan Theological Society.

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The vocation of the Church of the Nazarene to preach and teach holiness embraces the call to respond positively to the free grace of God that is appropriated through the atonement of Jesus Christ, a subsequent complete self-surrender through the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit in favour of a Christ-centered life, and a continual growth in grace.

At a National Board meeting of the Church of the Nazarene in Canada during February 2003, the commission assigned to determine the role of the laity in the church of the 21st century, distilled *inter alia*, the following finding:

We are confused and uncertain about the teaching of holiness and urge the Church to teach us and lead us into the experience of entire sanctification as a means of holy living.⁶

The commission's finding is an honest one. It is a call for clarity. Is the commission's finding perhaps representative of the majority of the laity within the global Church of the Nazarene? My interest in this thesis is the confusion and uncertainty surrounding this doctrine. If the denomination is to make a key contribution in this postmodern world, it needs to address this confusion and uncertainty to the extent that it becomes comprehensible to the believers within its domain. Do the times call for simplicity? Has a Biblical theology been cherished that is in danger of losing its practicality?

⁶The Canadian Board co-ordinates and facilitates the national interests of the Canadian Church of the Nazarene. This Commission was led by layman Bill MacPherson. Report circulated to pastors under the leadership of District Superintendent, Ian B. Davidson, Western and Southern Districts, Australia.

The Church of the Nazarene needs constantly to address the apparent confusion and uncertainties. Addressing them must be the ongoing task of its theology. The meaning of the doctrine must be stated for each generation in terms of its own context. The challenge is to examine and evaluate ways of re-appropriating and reinterpreting the doctrine of sanctification so that it remains viable today. This includes addressing such questions as: To what extent does the experience of entire sanctification make one perfect?⁷ What about human frailties - for to be human is to struggle with imperfection of conduct. This research has addressed some important methodological, hermeneutical and Biblical anthropological issues that are intrinsic to the whole network of sanctification. This has been studied in the light of the background that Tracy furnishes:

Like learning to live with a limp, many fine folk among our holiness ranks have quietly given up on ever finding whatever it is that certain people have called the deeper life, entire sanctification, or Christian perfection, and they have settled for a second-class spiritual existence. Many of these folk have tried all the formulas for finding sanctifying grace only to come away empty, discouraged, or even tormented. Some have nearly experienced destabilizing nervous breakdowns trying to struggle into the experience they have heard described as the norm. In confusion and disappointment they have

⁷ I have not tested this in the research, as I did not interview people or actually discern their 'hearts.' I examine the articulation of the theology of perfection, where I consider the meaning and possibilities of perfection.

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withdrawn in a sort of spiritual lack of self-esteem, figuring that there must be something wrong with them. They therefore settle for a permanent second-class citizenship in the kingdom of God. They do all right until the sermon or conversation turns to entire sanctification. At this point they appear nervous, tense, or troubled like someone still trying to overcome an old grief. If you get within a heartbeat of them, you discover an inner sadness that has replaced hope for full salvation.⁸

Tracy does give every indication that confusion, uncertainty and despair surrounds the propagation of the doctrine of sanctification within the Church of the Nazarene. Nazarene scholars are becoming more aware of these confusions, misunderstandings and inappropriate expectations. He does go on to expose two other groups of pilgrims who experience confusion and uncertainty.

Another group of uneasy pilgrims among us is made up of those who have been rushed into a premature profession of sanctifying grace. They testified “by faith” to an experience they thought they were supposed to have and, wanting to do what God and the church expected, they “named it and claimed it.” But, predictably, what they have experienced in their inmost heart is far short of the promises and sales pitches they heard in behalf of the holy life. Some then trivialize a great blessing, seeming to ask, “Is that all there is?” Some in this category come to regard the testimony (which they reluctantly

⁸ Foreword by W. D. Tracy in *Sanctification: A Layman's Guide*, (Kansas City, Mo.: Beacon Hill Press, 1991), p. 7.

but not joyfully give) as a sort of union card required by our fellowship.⁹

Still another group, particularly among the young, have not been nearly so patient with us. When a gap appeared between what was proclaimed and promised and what was observed and experienced they quickly pitched the whole idea over and went to the other churches, or in too many cases dropped out of the Christian fellowship altogether. The younger, "in a hurry" generation may label it all "useless" and look for meaning elsewhere.¹⁰

Tracy does not attribute blame to these three groups of confused and uncertain people but lays blame at the inconsistencies surrounding the communication of the doctrine of sanctification. His is a call to look at the historical background of the church with understanding and at the future with hope. Unless the Church of the Nazarene is deliberate in exploring new ways of re-appropriating or reinterpreting the doctrine of sanctification for today, it may find itself devoid of its distinctive theology and healthy congregations. Confusion comes about when the teaching and preaching of sanctification is "in many areas a whirligig of abstractions or a quagmire of theological jargon. It has, nevertheless, left the very ones to whom the 'grand depositum' of sanctification has been entrusted among those who give the weakest witness to its reality."¹¹ Mere citing of proof texts to explain the doctrine of

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 8

¹¹ *Ibid.*

sanctification is not sufficient. One must consider the greater sphere of biblical and systematic theology so that it becomes an experience that is not abstract but a radical reality for daily living. How is the depth or integrity of this experience discerned? Is it discerned by the church, the elders or the individual? What are the discernable fruit of the entirely sanctified? As J. A. Knight, General Superintendent, emeritus, writes:

It is a myth to assume that all of our pastors and people understand and can articulate fundamental Christian teachings, particularly those surrounding holiness and sanctification. Many can, some cannot. Annually hundreds of men and women are ordained into the ministry of the church and assume pastoral responsibilities and other preaching and teaching assignments. While all of them have fulfilled the requirements of study and experience, significant numbers have only received minimal instruction and practice in the actual articulation of our distinctive doctrine of entire sanctification.¹²

The times call for a deliberate restating of the doctrine of sanctification in contemporary terms. Is the 'plain account' really plain for today? This also involves a re-thinking of the actual teaching methods of the doctrine of sanctification at Nazarene universities, colleges and churches. Difference of opinion among

¹² J. A. Knight, *All Loves Excelling: Proclaiming Our Wesleyan Message*, (Kansas City, Mo.: Beacon Hill Press, 1995), p. 7. Knight is a general superintendent emeritus in the Church of the Nazarene. Prior to assuming this highest elected office in the denomination in 1985, he served with distinction as presidents of Southern Nazarene University and Mount Vernon Nazarene University, editor of the then official magazine *Herald of Holiness*, as well as pastor and professor.

Christians on this topic as well as differing views among ‘holiness proponents’ does indeed add to the confusion that exists among the laity as well as those preachers and teachers who don’t consider themselves theologians but merely rely on their experience of sanctification. Dunning acknowledges this confusion by giving some reasons for its existence:

Many interpreters explain what "happens" in an experience called *entire sanctification* in terms of their personal experience. I read several books and articles by people who professed to be providing a simple explanation of this doctrine and experience. Most of what I found was a description of their own ideal personality traits. What they were doing was seeking to universalize their own experiences, that is, make them the standard for all persons. But there is an endless variety of personalities, and if every one became the standard for every other person, the result would be chaos. The real problem comes with strong, dominant personalities who “steamroll” others with differing temperaments. The unfortunate result is that people either submit to the pressure and become clones or else flee an uncomfortable situation. This may account for many former “holiness people” who are in non-holiness denominations.¹³

Making one's personal experience of entire sanctification the normative experience for others can be misleading and confusing. This has somewhat corroded the

¹³ H. R. Dunning, *Sanctification: A Layman’s Guide*, (Kansas City, Mo.: Beacon Hill Press, 1991), pp. 16-17. Dunning served as chairman of the Department of Religion and Philosophy at the Trevecca Nazarene University. He is a Wesleyan scholar and has written numerous books.

doctrine of sanctification in the Church of the Nazarene. Dunning says that some people have communicated their religious experience of sanctification as the blueprint for everybody else. In one case he was able to recognize his friend's personality type in the description offered for the results of entire sanctification. He also mentions the apparent confusion surrounding the actual usage of the word *sanctification*:

Another reason for the widespread confusion in the contemporary holiness churches is that the term *sanctification* is used in several different ways, both in theology and in the Bible. The truth of sanctification extends well beyond those passages of Scripture that use the specific terms. One cannot point to specific texts that say precisely what we are accustomed to hearing from popular teachers and preachers about the doctrine of sanctification.¹⁴

The doctrinal propositions have to be engaged in contemporary theological language and reflection that must go further than the exact words of the proof texts. As mentioned earlier, this has to be the ongoing task of theology—to state the meaning of the faith for each generation in terms of its own context thereby illuminating the Biblical perspective of sanctification and further enlightening the ‘confused’ within the denomination.

Initially, I approached this research project with the intention of elucidating the doctrine on its own terms. In the process of doing the research I have discovered

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

inconsistencies with the doctrine and so have sought as far as possible to measure the given Nazarene perspectives by their consistency with the Biblical witness. Whilst the Church of the Nazarene has been faithful to the Wesleyan doctrine of sanctification, it needs to consider the challenge of faithfulness to the intent of Scripture raised by its claim to be faithful to the Scriptures.

In Chapter One of my thesis, I studied the historical background of the Church of the Nazarene. It became clear for me that the founders of the Church were intent on preserving the Wesleyan doctrine of sanctification as they understood it, particularly that of entire sanctification. The emphasis on entire sanctification was propagated in an uncompromising way and it seemed to have suited the marginalized of the day. The research has discovered an element of confusion, even with the experiences of Bresee. From this, it does appear that this element of confusion has accompanied the doctrine since its inception. Understanding the church historically has enabled this research project to engage the present confusion.

In Chapter Two, I studied the perspectives of Knight and Dunning. Whilst they attempted to elucidate the doctrine, they did not, in my opinion, overcome the problem of confusion and uncertainty. Some 'problem areas' were discovered that seriously questioned the consistency of the doctrine in the light of Scripture. These scholars place undue emphasis on entire sanctification to the extent that it seriously undermines regeneration. The inconsistencies (which present themselves as complex and ambiguous) have been highlighted and carried forward into Chapter Three for deeper critical engagement.

In Chapter Three, I have attempted to elucidate the problem areas which I have discovered by testing them against Scripture and human experience. I have found that the goal of entire sanctification is to be fulfilled at the second coming (Parousia) of Jesus Christ (1 Thess.5: 23). However, the process of sanctification is to go on until that event takes place (Phil. 1:9-11). Christian maturity in process terms is really the gist of sanctification. Entire sanctification is really glorification. There is justification, regeneration and adoption at the time of conversion with subsequent growth in grace until glorification. There is renewal of holiness in conversion which begins the new life in Christ. Renewal points to ongoing sanctification (Col.3: 9-10 and Rom.12:2). Being renewed is a continuing activity. There is a close link between renewal and transformation.

Having engaged with Knight and Dunning and sharing their desire to clarify the Nazarene doctrine of sanctification, I suggest further directions and pastoral consequences. Firstly, it would be wise on my part to suggest that there may be some perceived weaknesses in my own arguments and I believe that these perceived weaknesses could be further researched. There is room for research in greater depth into the historical background and theology of John Wesley himself beyond Phineas Bresee. Was Bresee actually propagating the theology of John Wesley? Would the outcome have been any different? Only further in depth research could give sound answers to these questions.

Secondly, since Nazarenes view the pastoral ministry as integral for the fulfillment of the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19-20), they need to ask themselves, “What are

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the pastoral consequences of their doctrinal thrust insofar as pastoral ministry is concerned?" What drives this research project is the concern for fellow Nazarene pastors and adherents who may be struggling with the tension between regeneration, continuing sanctification and the moment of entire sanctification.

With due respect to the Church of the Nazarene, I point to further directions and pastoral consequences for the preservation of effective pastoral ministry for this generation and the ones to come. I maintain that the renewal and transformation of individuals, communities and our world require that further directions be considered so as to preserve a holistic Christian identity.

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