

Holiness and Perfect Love

The Church of the Nazarene, the parent denomination of Northwest Nazarene University, came out of what is known as the Wesleyan-Holiness Movement of the late 19th century. This movement was formed primarily out of a strong belief in the theology of “holiness” and “perfect love.” Although these concepts can clearly be found in the Bible, in the early church, and throughout Christian history, they become very specifically expressed by John Wesley in the 18th century.

The theology of holiness is a deep and rich doctrine with wide-spread implications for how we live and how we see the world. Put most simply, we believe that the power of God is greater than the power of sin. God calls us to be holy and empowers us to be holy in this life. It is important, however, to define holiness accurately. In one sense, the holy life implies that sin *is removed*. When we come to Christ, we are forgiven of our sins when we have faith and receive God’s justifying grace. But this is not the only grace we receive.

God also begins the process of sanctification in our lives. In other words, God wants to transform us into who we were really created to be. At the heart of how we are created to be is an ability to love. So, in another sense, the holy life implies that love *is renewed* in us. Thus, holiness is both a taking away (sin) and a giving to (love). Wesley said that God’s love so fills our hearts that there is no room left for rebellious sin. While we will probably miss the mark throughout our lives, the point is that sin no longer reigns in us. We are truly changed by the sanctifying grace of God, so that we can live Christlike lives.

In addition to God’s cleansing grace at our conversion (initial sanctification), and the daily growth into Christlikeness throughout our lives (progressive sanctification), Wesleyan-holiness theology also strongly affirms entire sanctification. Entire sanctification is the place in the Christian life when people surrender everything to God, put any idols aside, and open themselves up to a deeper filling of God’s Spirit. The fruit of entire sanctification is an increased ability to love like Christ. This deeper commitment may be challenged by life events, and thus may need to be renewed or ratified again, but we believe entire sanctification is an extremely important step in the Christian journey.

Perfect love, then, is the love that comes from God’s sanctifying grace. A note on the meaning of “perfect” may be helpful here. When Wesley and the Holiness Movement use the word perfect they do not mean an absolute perfection. Rather, one can define perfection (following Aristotle) as fulfilling the purpose for which something is created. We are created to love; therefore, when we love as God designed us, we are “perfect.” The following points are Wesley’s summary of what perfect love (or Christian perfection) looks like:

1. Christian Perfection means to love God with all one's heart and one's neighbor as oneself;
2. Christian Perfection is to have the mind that is in Christ;
3. Christian Perfection produces the fruits of the Spirit;
4. Christian Perfection is the recovery of the image of God;
5. Christian Perfection brings inward and outward righteousness, sanctity of life issuing from sanctity of heart;
6. Christian Perfection is a work of God, sanctifying the person through and through (from I Thess. 5:23);
7. Christian Perfection begins and is maintained through a person's complete consecration to God;
8. Christian Perfection consists of a person's thoughts, words, and actions directed to God in praise and thanksgiving;
9. Christian Perfection is salvation from all sin.ⁱ

From these points we can see that holiness is best defined as love, and sanctification as the process of receiving God's transforming grace so that we can love. Particularly important to the Movement and the Nazarene denomination is the belief that as God changes our hearts and our character, we are called to love and serve the world, especially the most needy among us.

ⁱ See *On Perfection*, (Jackson) *Works*: IV: 411-423. Most of these characteristics can also be found in Wesley's *Plain Account of Christian Perfection*.