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Ecclesiology of Major Holiness and Pentecostal Churches

Who See Themselves in the Wesleyan Tradition

Though there are hundreds of small holiness and pentecostal denominations which came out of Methodist, holiness and pentecostal revivals in nineteenth and early twentieth century America, these notes will deal with the larger groups only.

First, there are the holiness denominations which separated from the Methodist Episcopal Church prior to the Civil War. They are the Wesleyan Church and the Free Methodist Church.

The Wesleyan Church derives from a merger between The Wesleyan Methodist Church and the Pilgrim Holiness Church in 1868. The present denomination has approximately 96,000 members in the United States. It is committed to the Wesleyan teaching on full sanctification in a "second blessing" after conversion and teaches members to seek this second work of grace. It expects its members to disavow the use, sale, manufacture of tobacco and alcoholic beverages, and to refrain from membership in secret societies. The original reasons for separation of the Wesleyan Methodist Church under the leadership of Orange Scott (1843) had to do with adherence to abolitionist principles over against a softening of anti-slavery sentiments in the Methodist Episcopal Church. The Pilgrim Holiness Church began in 1922 as a product of the National Holiness Association movement.

The present Wesleyan Church continues to see itself as an elite community of purity separated from the world and other worldly churches. Entry into the church is by adult conversion, confession of sin, profession of faith and acceptance of water baptism in obedience to the command of Christ.

The Free Methodist Church which organized in 1860 came out of a class struggle between rural and urban values, and the commitment to keep the "old Methodist ways" of second blessing emphasis and holiness of life. Entrance into the church is by way of adult conversion. Entire sanctification is sought, adherence to the General Rules of Wesley is demanded, and membership in secret societies is forbidden. There are approximately 75,000 members in the United States.

A second category of holiness denominations arose out of the holiness revivals, camp meetings and associations which were popular in the second half of the 19th century. Methodists emphasizing holiness experience and doctrine in the holiness associations were gradually alienated from their parent bodies, the Methodist Episcopal Churches, North and South. Finally convinced they had no

place in the Methodist Churches, and determined to form primitive Wesleyan churches committed to holiness teaching and behavior, these groups 'swarmed' in the 1880's and '90s to found separate denominations.

The Church of the Nazarene was one such conglomerate of holiness groups which organized in 1907-08. Entrance into the Church of the Nazarene is by conversion-regeneration which is followed by adult baptism as an act of obedience. Baptism is spoken of as a sacrament, but primary stress is given to it as a sign of adult profession of faith. Infant baptism is permitted but seldom practiced. Baptism for infants is not seen as a means of grace. Rebaptism of adults is granted on request if they "do not remember" their infant baptism. The Church has also emphasized the General Rules and urged regenerate members to press on to full sanctification in a second blessing experience. There are about 455,000 members in the U.S.A. The Church of the Nazarene is considered "the right wing of the holiness movement."

Another kind of holiness group with some roots in Wesleyan perfectionism are denominations of the Church of God movement. Characterized by an anti-denominational bias and a call to restore the New Testament church in a unity movement of all true Christians, these churches are both holiness and pentecostal.

The Church of God (Anderson, Indiana) was organized by Daniel Warner about 1880 as a "reformation movement" soliciting true Christians to "come out" of their Babylonian captivity in the various antisciptural sects to spiritual fellowship with Christ and each other which would constitute a sufficient bond as the body of Christ. No membership rolls are kept, no creeds are used, and leaders are supposedly designated by the Holy Spirit--a thocratic form of church government. Warner's ideal was the possible identity between the "visible and invisible" church. His second chief theological emphasis was "entire sanctification" and the employment of a strict asceticism. Fifty percent of its early adherents were from six Methodist denominations. Daniel Warner combined the "restoration of the primitive church" as a non-denomination, ideas promulgated by Alexander Campbell a generation earlier, and the Wesleyan stress on the second blessing of perfection. Only God can admit humans to His Church by the divine work of rebirth. Baptism by immersion, the Lord's Supper and foot washing are observed as ordinances. Some 177,000 members are reported in the United States.

The Salvation Army which began in England has carried this minimizing of the sacraments as means of grace to the logical conclusion. The Army discontinued the use of sacraments. Entrance and progress in the Army-Church is by the

direct, immediate conversion and sanctification of the individual. Charisms for church office and glossolalia are rejected.

A further extension of the Wesleyan dynamic of the Holy Spirit making Christians within the body of the church is represented by several pentecostal churches. About half of the pentecostal churches add a third blessing in addition to sanctification as important for Christian fulfillment. Called a "Baptism in the Spirit" it is marked by the gift of tongues, though other charisms are also encouraged. The remaining fifty percent of the pentecostal churches teach that sanctification is included in the initial regeneration of justification, hence the "Baptism in the Spirit" is understood as a second work of grace needed. This latter group, including the Assemblies of God, have Baptist rather than Methodist roots.

The Pentecostal-Holiness Church, the black Church of God in Christ and the Church of God of Cleveland, Tennessee may be considered a part of the Wesleyan tradition, advocates of the third blessing.

The Pentecostal-Holiness Church (1898), given academic visibility by Vinson Synan's writings, considers itself within a logical extension of the Wesleyan focus on the work of the Holy Spirit in Christian life and community. Indeed, Synan, a son of Bishop and Mrs. Joseph A. Synan of the Pentecostal Holiness Church, believes the holiness and pentecostal movements are essentially a Methodist phenomena.¹ Others would see origins of pentecostalism in the English Keswick movement and the Oberlin School of Theology which combined Charles Grandison Finney with Asa Mahan's perfectionism. With a polity like the Methodists, more tolerant of other churches, and less certain that it alone represents primitive Christianity, the Pentecostal Holiness Church stresses the "three blessing" model of Christian development. A separation from the world in personal piety and behavior practiced is required of members. Entry into the Church is by adult repentance and a baptism of obedience. The Pentecostal Holiness Church lists some 86,000 in its membership.

The black Church of God in Christ was organized by Charles Mason in 1897. Mason and his church in Memphis, Tennessee had originally been of the holiness type. But after a visit to the interracial Azusa Street revival in Los Angeles where he received the "gift of tongues," Mason returned to add a "third blessing" to his denomination. Holiness is considered a prerequisite to salvation; ordinances include baptism by immersion, the Lord's Supper, and foot washing. 425,000 members are listed in the United States.

¹Synan, Vinson, Holiness-Pentecostal Movement in the United States. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdsmaus, 1971, p. 13. See also Frederick Bruner's A Theology of the Holy Spirit. Grand Rapids: Eerdsmaus, 1970, p. 44.

The Church of God, Original, of Cleveland, Tennessee numbers 427,701 members in the U. S. by a 1981 report. The Church stresses three works of grace, an ascetic rule of life believed to be biblical and separating members from the world. Services of infant dedication are practiced but adult baptism by immersion is normative as an ordinance like the Lord's Supper to signify a believer's obedience to the Lord's command. Foot washing is encouraged for all members at least once a year. Members may be expelled from the Church if they bring reproach on their local congregation and inactives are removed by a congregational vote. The Church of God, Original, does not see itself to be an exclusive sect, but a New Testament Church along side other Christian communities.

Generalizations on Ecclesiology

These holiness and pentecostal churches out of the Wesleyan tradition have several features in common.

1. All of them believe that the perceptible experience of regeneration is only a beginning of the Christian's life and entry into the Body of Christ. Sanctification as a second blessing of the Holy Spirit cleanses from sin and fills the vacuum with the inpouring of "love divine." Pentecostals see a "Baptism in the Holy Spirit" as a third step in God's plan to empower the individual church with "gifts" of witness and service.

2. All of these groups minimize the sacraments, the mediated work of the Spirit, in contrast to the immediate, perceptible experiences of the Spirit's work as mentioned above. Sacraments, if that term is used, are really ordinances of obedience after the baptist theology and practice. The Salvation Army takes the logical step of eliminating water baptism and holy communion altogether.

3. The holiness-pentecostal communions have thought of themselves as churches of saints, separated from the world by remarkable demonstrations of the Spirit and by an intramundane world-denying asceticism. Some of these groups have thought of themselves as a restoration of the primitive New Testament Church, or of the early Methodist societies, classes and bands.

4. One can also see a certain anti-ecclesiastical populism expressed against the political machinations of the mainline churches which repudiated them. A tension between rural and urban values, a class struggle between lower economic and middle class identities is a part of the development of these holiness-pentecostal churches. But within a few decades of their founding many of these groups have abandoned welfare and evangelistic work among the poor, sought statistical success, and joined other denominations in the pursuit of middle class status and values.

The gap between principle and practice in the United Methodist Church should lead us to expect that clergy and laity in the holiness-pentecostal churches do not live up to all the theological and behavioral standards enunciated by their legislative bodies and books of discipline.