

THE CHURCH AS A CHOSEN PEOPLE

OCTOBER 5, 2008

INTRODUCTION

On October 13, 1908, under a large tent pitched on a Texas prairie, a magnificent vision began to form. After days of preaching, prayer, negotiation, and debate, the delegates from churches scattered across the United States of America received a final motion that was voted into adoption. A spirit of celebration gripped the people. They poured out of the tent, marching around it, singing songs, and praising God. Out of many, they had become one.

It was a *message* that brought them together. Fervent proponents of the message of holiness of heart and life in the Wesleyan-Holiness tradition, they represented approximately 10,000 members in their various organizations and congregations. Though relatively small, many of the groups had churches and mission work across the United States and Canada and missionaries in India, Cape Verde, Mexico, and Japan, soon followed by work in Africa and China. Passionately committed to "spreading holiness across the lands," they left Pilot Point, Texas, gripped with a sense of the radical optimism of grace. They were intent on taking the message to all the world.

One hundred years later, the church they launched on that Texas prairie has a membership exceeding 1.6 million people ministering in over 140 languages in 151 world areas. Out of one, we have become many.

That new Body of Believers realized that in their combined efforts, they had strength that none of them had alone. They were committed to the development of a strong sense of identity. They were Nazarenes! They were confident in the leadership of the Holy Spirit. They were intent on compassionate ministry and evangelism. And they were passionate about the message of holiness.

But they were also realistic about the magnitude of their task. The world was soon engaged in The Great War. Resources were strained as a growing denomination struggled to enter opening doors of ministry. Courageous missionaries risked their lives for ministry in a world at war. Global depression brought finances to the breaking point. A young church faced the reality that great growth does not necessarily mean adequate resources. And soon, World War II halted mission work in many nations, with some missionaries captured and held prisoner.

But the church continued to minister and grow. In spite of massive world tensions, churches were planted, schools and hospitals were established, and the church continued its global expansion.

Following World War II, the church in America saw unprecedented growth. Churches were planted by the hundreds, new districts were formed, colleges grew, and Nazarene Bible College in Colorado Springs and Nazarene Theological Seminary in Kansas City were established. The growing church poured people and finances into mission work around the globe. The missionary corps soon numbered over 800 under global contract for a total of over 1,000 including global missionaries, interns, regional missionaries, and volunteers. The list of world areas with Nazarene work soared. So effective was the evangelistic effort worldwide that within the later years of our first century, church membership in other world areas exceeded membership in the United States and Canada.

Throughout the century, the passion that has formed the Church of the Nazarene out of many into one has been to make Christlike disciples in the nations through the message of holiness. The catalyst that united the church in 1908 was the message of holiness. And the hope for the future of this grand experiment in faith and obedience is the message of holiness.

We now are a people scattered around the globe. Passionately engaged in evangelism, discipleship, and ministries of compassion, we are still one people defined by a message.

But this holiness message did not originate with us. And it is not ours to contain.

In his two New Testament letters, Simon Peter, that impetuous and loyal disciple of Jesus, wrote to the Christians scattered across Asia Minor, located in territory that is now in the nation of Turkey. Peter challenged the believers to hold steady in the face of a serious challenge to their stability, their effectiveness, their message.

Peter reminded them of their true identity. They were the New Israel. Through Christ they were related directly to the promises of God in the Old Testament. They were the new people of God. Peter made three important points in his letters.

I. A CHOSEN PEOPLE

First, Peter made it clear to his readers that they did not come to be the people of God on their own initiative. He said that they were a chosen people. They were a grace-formed people. They were not the source of their own existence or of their message. God had called them into being as His people.

In his opening words Peter addressed them as people who had been chosen by God...

1 Peter 1:1-2 (NIV)

[1] Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To God's elect, strangers in the world, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia, [2] who have been **chosen** according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood: (Don't let the word "foreknowledge" throw you. It just means that God has a plan.)

Peter is letting them know that God had so provided for them that they had been brought into being "by the sanctifying work of the Spirit." Remember the word Sanctification means "separation unto God." Later in his letter Peter again mentions this concept of being a chosen people in...

1 Peter 2:9 (NIV)

[9] But you are a **chosen** people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

We will look at some of the other ideas Peter teaches in this passage but it is important to understand that Peter saw the church of Jesus Christ as a chosen people, not a people who had just decided to get together at will. They were together because they had been chosen by Christ.

This choosing is not unique to the believers to whom Peter wrote. This is the common heritage of all God's people throughout the ages. He is the initiator, the originator of our redemption. He has chosen us.

This is a continuation of the plan of God that has its roots firmly planted in the history of the Old Testament, and that plan is always initiated by Almighty God. He chooses the time-lines, the places, and the people He wishes to fulfill His divine will through.

- From the choosing of a perfect sacrifice for sin...

Luke 9:34-36 (NIV)

[34] While he was speaking, a cloud appeared and enveloped them, and they were afraid as they entered the cloud. [35] A voice came from the cloud, saying, "This is my Son, whom I have **chosen**; listen to him." [36] When the voice had spoken, they found that Jesus was alone. The

disciples kept this to themselves, and told no one at that time what they had seen.

- To the choosing of 12 disciples to begin the church...

Acts 1:1-3 (NIV)

[1] In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach [2] until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had **chosen**. [3] After his suffering, he showed himself to these men and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God.

- Then to the choosing of the church that continues on from the disciples down to this very day. In a passage in Ephesians Paul talks extensively about the concept of a continuing chosen people. Notice, not only does he use the words chose and chosen, he uses many other words that are clear indicators that the church is a people who are chosen by God.

Ephesians 1:3-14 (NIV)

[3] Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has **blessed** us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. [4] For he **chose** us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love [5] he predestined us to be **adopted** as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will— [6] to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely **given** us in the One he loves. [7] In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's **grace** [8] that he **lavished** on us with all wisdom and understanding. [9] And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he **purposed** in Christ, [10] to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment—to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.

[11] In him we were also **chosen**, having been predestined according to the **plan** of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, [12] in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. [13] And you also were **included** in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were **marked** in him with a seal, the **promised** Holy Spirit, [14] who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of his glory.

This confidence gives strength and significance to the Centennial Celebration of the Church of the Nazarene. It is our confidence that He has chosen us, has called us into being, and has created us as a people of grace. By His grace and mercy He has enabled our obedience to Jesus Christ and has brought us into a relationship with one another as a covenant community. **We are chosen, not to be separated from the rest of His church, but we are chosen to reach people who could never be reached by any other chosen group. As Nazarenes we must never think of ourselves as a superior people among many. We are a unique member of the larger Body of Christ, a necessary part among many other necessary parts.**

This reality is not ours alone; it is the marvelous heritage of all those who have responded to His initiatives of grace. He has called all people to himself, and we are joined in a covenant community with all who truly name Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.

Do you know this reality? Have you experienced the wonder of God's forgiveness and mercy? You can know Him! That is the heart of our message. You can know Jesus Christ personally, now, today! He invites you to himself through the grace that pours from His heart. Jesus Christ's suffering death is the measure of His love for you. Do you know Him? Would you like to know Him? You may, and you may today. You, too, may become a part of this new people—the people of God! **As He speaks**

to your heart right now – Acknowledge your need of Him. Confess your sins to Him. Turn from those sins! Now! Completely! And trust Him!

II. A HOLY PEOPLE

Second, Peter went on to assert a very significant aspect of this choosing when he said...

1 Peter 2:9 (NIV)

[9] But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a **holy nation**, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

As the nation of Israel camped at Mount Sinai following their deliverance from Egypt, the Lord spoke through Moses: “Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:6).

Peter echoed that bold claim for all believers: “You are . . . a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God” (2:9). Simon Peter staked claim to the heritage of Israel and applied it to the people to whom he wrote. You have been chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit to be obedient to Jesus Christ, he said. This is your heritage. This is your future. You are the holy people of God.

Paul echoed this same concept of being chosen by God to be holy in...

Ephesians 1:4, 13-14 (NIV)

[4] For he **chose us** in him before the creation of the world **to be holy and blameless in his sight**...

[13] And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were **marked** in him **with a seal**, the promised Holy Spirit, [14] who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are **God's possession**—to the praise of his glory.

The holiness to which Peter and Paul called his (their) readers is the heritage to which the Lord has called the Church of the Nazarene. We have made a conscious embrace of the call to holiness. It has been enshrined in our Articles of Faith. It is a passion in our preaching. It is the focus of our living.

This is an obedience of love and compassion, of mercy and acceptance. This is an obedience of rugged resistance to sin in all its forms and resistance to conformity to the world around us.

This is an obedience of radical surrender to the lordship of Jesus Christ, to Spirit-empowered living, to love in depth toward people of every kind. And this is an obedience of active engagement with the needs of people around us.

This wonderful grace of holiness, of entire sanctification, is more than just a theory. This is the deeper life that we Nazarenes (and all Christians) have (been called to live out in our everyday lives). It is the reason we exist. But the question I wish to ask you today is this: Have *you* experienced this marvelous grace? Have you allowed God's Spirit to work in you, to draw you closer to Him, to shape and mold you toward the image of Christ? Have you come to a moment of utter surrender of your will to the sanctifying fullness of the Holy Spirit? He longs to fill you with himself. He longs to purify your heart. He invites you to this moment of surrender. This is His will for you!

Will you seek His fullness? Will you offer your redeemed life to Him in utter release of every other sovereignty in your life? Will you allow Him to be the Lord of your life at the deepest recesses of your soul? Trust Him! Yield to Him! Receive Him! He is longing to fill you with His Spirit!

This is the common heritage of our church (and the requirement for all who are part of the Body of Christ). It is the way we are to live as a covenant community of faith. It is the corporate means by which we as persons are brought into that personal encounter with the holiness of God and His sanctifying power.

III. A SENT PEOPLE

Third, Peter said that we are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people "[that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light](#)" (2:9). We are a sent people.

Ours is not a possession for our own good. We are commissioned to proclaim His mighty acts. Having been chosen, redeemed, transformed, and sanctified, we are also sent. This choosing is not for us alone; it is for the world.

In his second letter Peter made the point abundantly clear: [2 Peter 3:9 \(NIV\)](#) "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance".

It is likely that Jesus told His disciples about the conversation He had with Nicodemus, as recorded in the Gospel of John, chapter three. Peter had obviously come to embrace the passion of Jesus for the lost. The God who loved the world enough to send His one and only Son does not desire that any should perish!

That conviction has motivated the Church of the Nazarene around the globe. We cannot rest while there are any who are yet without Christ. Our mission is a bold and courageous one: To make Christlike disciples in the nations. We are the sent people of God, called to proclaim the riches of His grace to all people everywhere. With the radical optimism of grace motivating us, we go in the power of the Spirit to take the world for Christ.

We are sent. This is our heritage; this is our mission.

CONCLUSION/INVITATION

The Church of the Nazarene faces her next century with spiritual resources gathered over 100 years of global ministry. We have a godly heritage, a magnificent history, and a worldwide ministry. We have every reason to celebrate the faithful service of our people around the world.

We have a biblically based theology and a heritage of godly leaders who have challenged and directed the church with faithfulness. We have a growing network of churches strategically placed for reaching millions of men and women, boys and girls with the life-transforming message of Jesus Christ. And we have a determination to be faithful to our heritage of Wesleyan-Holiness evangelism, teaching and discipling new believers so that they, too, may experience the abundance of God's sanctifying power in and through them.

The next century is ours to claim. We dare not merely celebrate the past successes nor mourn over the missed opportunities. We have this moment to change the world! With the grace and help of God we will continue to be "a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that [we] may declare the praises of him who called [us] out of darkness into his wonderful light" (2:9).

Earlier in this message I asked you two very important questions. One of them related to your relationship with Jesus Christ as your personal Savior. Let me ask you again: Do you know Him? Have you experienced the wonder of becoming His child, forgiven, adopted into His family, and given life that only Jesus can give? If you have not, what better time than today!

To the believers, I want to ask my second question: Have you allowed the Spirit of God to “sanctify you through and through”? Have you experienced the inexpressible joy of knowing that Jesus Christ is the unrivaled Master of your soul? He longs to make you like himself. He longs to fill you with His holy love. He longs to purify your heart of any competing sovereignty. He can do it! And He can do it now! Will you allow Him to do so? Again, I say, what better time than today!

This morning we are going to take communion together. You do not need to be a member of this church to join with us. The only requirement imposed by the New Testament is that you ask Christ to be your personal Savior. If you do not know Him as personal Savior or if you have not allowed the Spirit of God to sanctify you through and through, now is the perfect time to respond to the call of God in your heart. Taking communion is a time of remembering what Christ did for us on the cross, and a time of remembering our acceptance of His sacrifice and our commitment to live out that sacrifice in our own lives. Do you accept His sacrifice? Do you love Him? Do you surrender to Him?

—Jesse C. Middendorf, general superintendent

(Modified by Rev. David G. Bostick)