

Part 1

Who Are the Nazarenes?

- They Shared a Dream: The Launching of the Nazarene Movement
- What Nazarenes Believe and Practice

They Shared a Dream: The Launching of the Nazarene Movement

Historical Background

From roots in the Wesleyan revival in eighteenth-century England, the Holiness Movement blossomed in America. Wesleyan-Holiness denominations sprang up in every section of the country. Three such denominations joined in 1907 (in Chicago) and 1908 (in Pilot Point, Texas) to form the Church of the Nazarene. Key leaders were Phineas F. Bresee, C. B. Jernigan, Hiram F. Reynolds, and C. W. Ruth, among others.

Core Beliefs

The dream that drew the founders together was a believers' church in the Wesleyan tradition. This was fleshed out with firm beliefs deeply rooted in orthodox Christianity. Traditional doctrines marked the new Nazarene denomination. These included the inspiration of the Bible, the Holy Trinity, the deity of Christ, and some basic Protestant principles: Scripture as the final rule of Christian faith and practice, salvation by grace alone through faith alone, and the priesthood of all believers.

The Wesleyan doctrine of salvation, including the entire sanctification of believers, became the foundation for theology, worship, evangelism, nurture, service, and church administration.

The new denomination also stressed education, ordination of women, solidarity with the poor, daily holy living that avoided wicked or worldly practices, and a commitment to world evangelization.

The Nazarene founders created a believers' church
rooted firmly in the Wesleyan tradition.



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They Shared a Dream

The Launching of the Nazarene Movement

Nineteenth-century America was a hotbed of religious chaos. False prophets slandered one another and prospered. New religions flourished. Flamboyant spellbinders called themselves evangelists and mesmerized the simple with threats and promises that God, they bellowed, had endorsed. “Farmers became theologians, offbeat village youth became bishops, odd girls became prophets.”¹ The times produced eccentric new religions, such as Mormonism, Christian Science, and Jehovah’s Witnesses.

The Wesleyan-Holiness Movement was not immune to the stresses. It originated in the 1830s through the influence of two Methodists—a minister and a lay woman. Timothy Merritt began publishing *The Guide to Christian Perfection*, a periodical, in Boston. Phoebe Palmer, a Methodist class leader, became the guiding spirit behind the Tuesday Meeting for the Promotion of Holiness at her home in New York City. The Tuesday Meeting exerted a tremendous influence, and Palmer became a public lay speaker, evangelist, and writer. When Merritt retired, she took over his magazine, renamed it *The Guide to Holiness*, and edited it until her death. A new phase in the Wesleyan holiness movement developed after the Civil War, when the National Camp Meeting Association for the

Promotion of Holiness was founded by Methodist ministers at the conclusion of a highly successful camp meeting at Vineland, New Jersey. The association became the primary vehicle for the spread of the Holiness message across America, as it held multiple camp meetings in subsequent years and inspired the creation of dozens of state, county, and local Holiness associations over the land.

The movement was loyal to mainline Methodism for two generations. In its third generation, now divided by lines of race and region, it floundered at the edge of a sectarian snake pit as the twentieth century dawned. Yet from this setting the Church of the Nazarene arose, rooted in orthodox Christianity and guided by a vision.

It originated as a believers' church in the Wesleyan tradition. "Believers' churches" are distinctive. They are voluntary fellowships of those who experience the regenerating power of divine grace. Their members form a covenant before God and with one another and are active in Christian works. They do not allow obvious sin among the clergy and laity to slide; rather, they practice church discipline. They give willingly to the poor and follow a simple pattern of worship. And "they center everything on the Word, prayer, and love."²

For the founders, it was not enough merely to have a believers' church. They wanted a believers' church rooted firmly in the Wesleyan tradition, oriented theologically toward landmark doctrines of original sin, justification and sanctification wrought by grace through faith, and the clear witness of the Spirit to the distinct works of divine grace in our lives.

Francis Asbury, founder of American Methodism, had shared the same dream. In 1784 Methodism had an exceedingly small share of the American religious public, but by 1850 it was the largest denomination in America, its growth driven by great engines of revivalism and dedicated circuit riding preachers. It also fell victim to its own success. It excelled at reaching the unconverted but drew them in faster than it could steep them in Wesleyan doctrine, and its identity slowly changed. Eventually the Nazarene founders stepped aside from Methodism.

Unity in Holiness

The vision for bringing the Church of the Nazarene together was centered in a movement with many leaders. On the Atlantic coast Fred Hillary founded the People's Evangelical Church in Providence, Rhode Island, in 1887. Other New England Holiness congregations soon followed, and the Central Evangelical Holiness Association, a small denomination, organized in 1890.

William Howard Hoople, a sanctified layman, started three congregations in Brooklyn, New York, in 1894 and 1895. The New England and New York groups soon merged and spread along the Eastern seaboard of the United States. Under missions executive Hiram Reynolds, missionaries were sent to India and Cape Verde, and churches were planted in the Canadian province of Nova Scotia. The eastern group was called the Association of Pentecostal Churches of America. (To the Holiness Movement, "Pentecostal" was a synonym for "holiness.")

In the South Robert Lee Harris launched a new church movement in western Tennessee. It soon spread to Arkansas, Missouri, and the plains of west Texas. C. B. Jernigan started another Holiness group a few years later in east Texas. The groups merged in 1904 under the name Holiness Church of Christ. Other key leaders were Mary Lee Cagle and J. B. Chapman.

On the Pacific coast Phineas Bresee started the Church of the Nazarene in Los Angeles in 1895. It soon had congregations in the San Francisco area and spread up and down the west coast of America, then eastward. Bresee's assistant general superintendent was evangelist C. W. Ruth, whose revivals for the National Holiness Association took him to every corner of America.

The unflagging efforts of these founders united these three Holiness denominations and portions of two others at uniting General Assemblies in Chicago (1907), where the East and West came together, and Pilot Point, Texas (1908), where the South joined the united body. Bresee, Reynolds, and E. P. Ellyson were the united

church's first general superintendents. A central publishing company was founded in Kansas City in 1912, along with a weekly paper, *Herald of Holiness* (now *Holiness Today*). Reynolds headed up the missions department, and international cross-cultural missions became one of the church's defining emphases.

A southeastern group founded in Nashville by J. O. McClurkan joined in 1915. So did a denomination in Scotland led by George Sharpe of Glasgow, England. The Nazarenes attracted other Wesleyan-Holiness groups over the years, including groups in Canada, England, Australia, Italy, and Nigeria. Each accession strengthened the Nazarenes as an international body.

The General Board was created to meet annually and provide oversight to church agencies between the General Assemblies, including allocating each general ministry's share of funds.

What distinguished this church from others?

1. It united around the essentials of grace, faith, and salvation through Christ while permitting liberty of thought and action on the modes of baptism, infant and believer's baptism, divine healing, and the various theories about Christ's second coming.

2. Women joined men in its ministry. Women were eligible for every office in the new church. The ordination of women was a common practice in the three major parent bodies, and women were ordained at both uniting General Assemblies. It was no secondary issue. Bresee insisted that a ministry inclusive of women is apostolic, while one that excludes women from ministry is not apostolic.³ The key scripture was Acts 2:16-17. Men and women share in proclaiming the gospel in the church that moves by the power of the Holy Spirit!

3. The new church stood shoulder to shoulder with the poor and broken. Orphanages in North America and India, homes for unwed mothers, rescue missions for alcoholics—these were visible expressions of inward holiness. "We want places so plain that every board will say welcome to the poorest," Bresee wrote from Los Angeles, while half a continent away, Mary Lee Cagle preached to prisoners, Black and white alike, in an Arkansas prison.⁴ The early

Nazarenes listened with their hearts to “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor” (Luke 4:18, KJV). An identification with the Lord’s own mission had led John Wesley to England’s prisons, slums, and mining communities. This was a concern of Nazarene founders too. Disciples of Jesus who follow holiness of heart and life are committed to reconciliation with God and with others. They build a church with a heart for the poor and broken!

4. Early Nazarenes were energized by a vision of worldwide ministry. In 1908 Nazarenes were already ministering in Cape Verde, India, and Japan. They soon did the same in Central and South America, Africa, and China. Evangelism, education, and compassionate ministries were their characteristic methods. Mission stations, preaching points, Bible women, colporteurs, schools, clinics, hospitals, and printing presses were dedicated to the global spread of the Wesleyan-Holiness revival.

The commitment to worldwide ministry led in 1980 to the decision to be a global denomination, rather than to break into national churches as most denominations do. This decision, called internationalization, affirms that national and political boundaries will not determine our denominational footprint and creates a covenant among Christians from many races, nations, and tongues.

5. The Christian college was an essential ingredient of a Wesleyan-Holiness church. The united church began with more colleges than it could support and had to consolidate them. Nazarene communities grew up around these colleges, and some parents moved their families to these communities so that their children could enjoy the benefits of a Nazarene education. As the Church of the Nazarene moved around the world, new colleges and universities were started on other continents.

6. Vital piety. The Nazarene prayer meeting, testimony service, and altar service were among the ways that the concern for personal, vital piety would be communicated to a new generation.

The experience of God's transforming grace lay at the heart of the Nazarene movement.

7. The theology of sanctification was the doctrinal capstone, with an emphasis on the entire sanctification of believers as God's gracious provision for this life. The uniting core was the idea of a believers' church in which God's grace was real in human lives. Justifying and sanctifying grace were central in the experience and thought of the founders, who knew personally the transforming nature of this grace.

Entire sanctification represented a real cleansing—a true grace in this life—that conquers sin. Every other Christian doctrine was somehow related to this one, and no method could be employed that contradicted it. The deep awareness of sin, repentance, the regenerating power of the new birth, life in the Spirit, true Lord's Supper celebration—all were related to entire sanctification.

The second work of grace was the doorway behind which lay rooms of further experience and life. The founders walked through the door and into the rooms.⁵ And if they were still living, they would bid us follow.

8. Commitment to righteous living. Early Nazarenes agreed that holy living is an important part of Christian stewardship and witness. They committed themselves to daily avoid the wicked and worldly. How could one be a true disciple and have a lavish, worldly lifestyle? They adopted John Wesley's three general rules for the Methodist societies and drew up further rules to guide them. They agreed to avoid entertainments, personal habits, vices, dress, and behavior that would conflict with Christian simplicity.

Keeping rules could not save them. But they knew that ethical conduct is important when it comes to stewardship, discipleship, and witness.