

Response

by

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The Church of the Nazarene seeks to proclaim the experience of holiness as a vital, available, and current dimension of the sanctified life. To this end, it is critically important, as Hahn suggests, that we preach a full-orbed theology of holiness. But we must also communicate our understanding of holiness in terms that resonate meaningfully with those facing the realities of our present world. Only as we articulate and communicate the holiness message clearly and relevantly will holiness remain a vital, accessible experience. Otherwise, it will be justly relegated by the world to the dustbin of historical religious experiences.

Perhaps recent discussions of holiness use terms such as Christlikeness and progress and growth in a relational context because such language connects more fully with today's congregations. That does not rule out the discussion of cleansing and ritual purity and separation from the world. It does, however, put a heavy burden on theologians to discuss this dimension of holiness in a fully accessible and realistic way. It is a pressing responsibility of theologians not only to move beyond polemics, but also to communicate creatively and cooperatively a comprehensive view of holiness. We must not fail in our mission to articulate holiness intelligibly to the 21st century.

To this end, several questions come to mind. What do we mean when we talk about ritual purity, cleansing, and separation from the world? How can we connect the concept of purity with the economy of our daily lives? Rituals usually occur in the context of communities. How do we incorporate community into this concept of ritual purity? How is this to be incorporated into our worship as a community? What forms would it take today?

How do we convey the nature of the cleansing experience? This has always been a particularly thorny issue. What is cleansed and how does this interact with human agency and divine grace? Is cleansing a singular event or a continual process? If Christ and sin cannot coexist peacefully within a person, are we asserting that the cleansing is a permanent removal of sin? Or, are we proclaiming only a sensitization to the effects of sin, which drives us to seek forgiveness, grace, and mercy as we live in union with Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit? If someone has been cleansed, what might render that person unclean? Does cleansing imply an inability to sin or a greater ability to recognize sin and seek God's grace for deliverance and victory?

Hahn's references to separation from the world also call for clarification. This has been another difficult issue throughout the history of the Church of the Nazarene. What are we saying when we talk about separation from the world? Are we referring to separation from some "uncleanness" that exists in the world or separation from the world itself? In the 21st century, is separation from the world possible or even desirable? In a global

environment where we are bound to each other and impacted by each other, what kind of separation is possible and desirable?

Hahn suggests that Leviticus 19 provides an example of a strong sense of purity and separation. But it also speaks of the communal context in which life must be lived. The Priestly writers' instructions to love one's neighbor as oneself catapult us into the mix of community. Holiness as described in Leviticus 19 is experienced within the contexts of relationships within families and the larger community, both of which reflect the heights and depths of persons and needs.

These contexts confront us dramatically with the effects of sin in the world. What does separation from the world look like? Does it demand that we flee from those who suffer from the ravages of sin? Is it not our calling to seek peace and wholeness for those who are broken? If we are to appropriate separation language, we must be particularly careful how we define separation. We cannot flee populations in need, pursuing a separation that leaves us isolated. The example of Jesus' table fellowship reminds us that our arms need to be reaching out in love rather than wrapped around our own bodies for protection. We do not, however, need to join broken populations in participating in the causes of their brokenness. We may participate in the healing of people while sustaining our union with Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit. We may encounter the world without succumbing to it — engaging the world rather than separating from it.

The Church of the Nazarene has a vitally important global mission. The message of holiness is a potentially life-giving one for this new century. We must find the language to articulate clearly the complexity of the depth and the hope of holiness. Each word we choose to link with the experience of holiness must be carefully defined and connected with the reality of everyday experience. The cost of miscommunication is too great. Our terms — whether purity, cleansing, and separation from the world or Christlikeness, progress, and growth — must bear up to the standard of clarity. We have a world to engage with a powerful message. The task is before us.