

“Re-Appropriating the Biblical Language of Purity and Cleansing for Holiness”  
by Roger Hahn

**Response**

by

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Roger Hahn’s call to the ongoing pursuit of a full-orbed biblical theology brings helpful insight to the conversation about holiness in the Church of the Nazarene. He aptly notes the problems with theology shaped in a polemical context. The more recent emphasis on a relational understanding of holiness (which has helped to constructively shape my own understanding) risks replacing one imbalanced understanding with another.

The specific corrective that his paper proposes is the recovery of language of purity and cleansing. The extensive use of such language in the context of holiness certainly suggests that such an enterprise is warranted. Affirming the proposal in concept, I defer to our biblical scholars to suggest the content of such a recovery. I would pose one caution, however. Recovery of more biblically faithful language of cleansing and purity will require careful attention to the rich meaning of those biblical concepts. Simplistic reassertion of purification and cleansing themes will not help us be any more biblically faithful.

Hahn’s paper points to a broader issue in his call for a full-orbed biblical theology of holiness. It is here that I would like to focus my brief remarks. The biblical message of holiness deserves a more serious attempt to search “the rich diversity of holiness found in the Scriptures.” This needs to extend beyond recovery of particular expressions of biblical language (like cleansing and purity). Entire sanctification needs to be placed within the broader biblical understanding of holiness.

What God does in the experience of entire sanctification cannot be adequately understood apart from its context within God’s complete work. An understanding of entire sanctification that lacks this broader interpretive context is prone to selective expression. The recovery of a full-orbed biblical understanding of Scripture, as Hahn proposes, cannot be adequately done apart from this kind of effort.

Too much of our discussion of the content of holiness (as entire sanctification) takes place in relative isolation from our understanding of the content of (holiness as) God’s full purpose for humanity. We exegete the experience of entire sanctification from the “inside out.” As a result, we struggle to gain a comprehensive understanding of this experience and its purpose.

The full-orbed biblical theology of holiness Hahn’s paper calls for cannot be realized without a serious consideration of the broad witness of Scripture to the ends toward which God is working in history. The richer understanding of holiness that Borg suggests can be found by connecting holiness with the nature of God will be complemented by an appreciation of the expressed purposes of God in history.

Scripture offers rich resources for such an endeavor. An eschatological perspective gives definition to the ultimate purposes that God is at work to realize in us. Understanding holiness in terms of realized eschatology places the “already” of sanctification in the context of the “not yet” of God’s completed work.

Entire sanctification is a decisive moment in the progress of God’s broader purpose of holiness for us. The character and content of that experience find richer understanding in the context of that purpose. Placing our understanding of entire sanctification within the context of the broader vision of God’s work of holiness helps us to avoid the selective particularization or excessive individualization that has sometimes troubled us. It connects personal religious experience with issues of justice and wholeness, both personal and corporate. The personal experience of entire sanctification cannot be properly understood in isolation from the character of redeemed (holy) creation toward which God is working.

The biblical concept of peace, for example, provides an interpretive context for a richer understanding of what God is doing in our sanctification. Blending the understanding of the disorder and dissolution that God cleanses us from and the creative order that is the product of God’s transforming work (what we are cleansed “to”) results in a dynamic and rich picture of holiness. The biblical witness provides extensive description of the “end” of God’s work in history. Issues of reconciliation, justice and healing are clear, along with images of moral purity and personal wholeness.

As long as our understanding of holiness focuses on the personal experience of sanctification, we will struggle to achieve a full-orbed biblical theology of holiness that is faithful to the whole biblical witness. On the other hand, a full-orbed biblical theology of holiness that is formed by the complete biblical witness provides a meaningful context in which to understand the character of entire sanctification.

Scripture provides a rich source for the understanding of what God is doing in history, the character of holiness that he is producing. Hahn’s proposal that we “mine” more broadly in the language of purity and cleansing is a beginning, but not the end of the story.