

Does Holiness Theology Have a Future?

Henry W. Spaulding II, Ph.D.

Professor, Theology and Philosophy; Trevecca Nazarene University; Nashville, Tennessee
USA

The title of my essay poses a deliberately provocative question, but it is not merely academic. In fact, it is the question, both direct and indirect, posed by each new generation. The future of Nazarene theology is dependent upon its capacity to capture the imagination of this generation. It is my deepest conviction that Nazarene theology does have a future. And as such this means that Nazarene theology is capable of providing a place from which to narrate all of life. This is less the proclamation of self-satisfaction than a call to do the good work of holiness theology.

Many signs suggest the need to do this good work. The current flux in worship within our churches lays bare the depth to which the holiness tradition has been influenced by an experiential-expressive trajectory. If doxology is theology, then the future of holiness theology is linked to its capacity to be enveloped into the triune music (worship). There can be little doubt that a re-narration of holiness must consider a sustained reflection on the importance of “holiness liturgy” and provide resources for it.

Another example of the need for a re-narration of holiness is the current crisis of identity within the holiness tradition itself. Increasingly, the horizon of holiness theology is reduced to fundamentalism and / or charismatic influences. This narrowing of the parameters of theology within our tradition leads many to seek foundation in theological non-negotiables or defining experiences. Holiness theology must resist with all its creative skills the tendency toward monothematic theology. All other courses seem to deny the genius of holiness theology. It leads those within our tradition to take up causes or issues that may differ from their secular counterparts only in name.

Still another example of the challenge before us is the substitution of morality for holiness. We seem to have become content to conclude that the essence of holiness theology is the moral imperative. This mistakenly concludes that talking about holiness is at its deepest level a moral discourse. These issues suggest the challenge and the possibility of a re-narration of holiness.

The future of holiness theology will require a sustained attempt to define an intellectual space for theological reflection in three movements I call beauty, *poiesis*, and vision. These three movements depend on our capacity to do Trinitarian theology.

Beauty. First, a re-narration of holiness requires a reemphasis upon beauty / harmonic peace. Holiness theology is uniquely positioned to recover beauty as a theological conviction. This begins with an understanding of God as beautiful, whole, musical, and holy. It also means that God invites all creation to join in the music of His harmonic peace. Perhaps, holiness theology is aesthetics when viewed through the trinity. Music (harmony) is an apt metaphor for beginning to appreciate beauty and holiness. This understanding arises from the fundamental beauty of creation out of nothing and the unceasing love of God. The worship

of the triune God gives theological warrant to the beauty. It is the unceasing love of God that weaves a musical harmony that invites everything to participate in it. This, in turn, moves us to reflect upon the cosmological implications of holiness theology. The beauty of a triune God — with its capacity to envision wholeness instead of alienation, peace instead of violence — is constitutive of holiness theology's future.

Poiesis. The second movement in a re-narration of holiness theology is *poiesis* or making. *Poiesis* is usually thought of as human making, but in the imagination of holiness theology it should be understood as partaking in the divine life. This denies the merely instrumental or arbitrary understanding of life or holiness and reaches to the possibility of the transcendent. This means that holiness is less about choice than about being wrapped up into the grace of God. Holiness is participation in the triune life of God. This is the paradox and the genius of holiness theology. Until God calls, we are asleep in the illusion of self-sufficiency. Yet until we respond, the benefits of God's call to holiness is unrealized. Holiness is the poetic life that rises in the assurance of God's call to embrace the triune life of God. A conscious reflection on *poiesis* helps us to understand that holiness is not "my" moment or a decision "I" made; it is an opening of one's life to the triune life of God. This means that we begin to see the poetic possibilities of life. *Poiesis* names the possibility of a life woven into the triune life of God in the plenitude of grace and denies the reduction of holiness to choice.

Vision. The third movement in the re-narration of holiness theology is vision. It is to the extent that holiness theology practices the stubborn hope presented by the gift of the Church that it has a future. The capacity to live in the tension between the "already" and the "not yet" is engendered in the practice of Christian community in history. While sin, evil, and death still capture a measure of the imagination, it is the hope presented in the cross that lifts the eyes of the believer. Vision presents a new logic for life, one that is shaped by scripture as it reaches consummation in Jesus and the emergence of the Church. All of this makes a place in our minds and theology for the continuing work of the Spirit; and it is saturated with an eschatological hope that says that human beings can indeed be holy, not just apparently, but actually. Holiness theology's future envisions the eschatological hope of God as it practices that hope in the community of the incarnation, the Church.

Theology, as a disciplined reflection on the forms of life, is rendered more important in light of its capacity to narrate all of life. Do we in this generation have the same faith and courage as our forefathers and foremothers? Can we look as the Church fathers did into a pagan world and dare to believe that it is God's world? Can we refuse to give ontological purchase to any realm other than the one Genesis calls finished (2:1)? Will we believe the words of the Revelation, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them . . ." (21:3)? If we can begin to see these themes, holiness theology has the future that exists in the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen" (Heb 11:1). This is, indeed, to do holiness theology with a strange freshness.