10

Corporate Holiness in the Trinity and Creation

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"You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy" (Leviticus 19:2).

These words are of paramount importance for the Church of the Nazarene and moreover for the universal Christian church abroad. Though these words have often been viewed as a divine imperative calling Yahweh's people to a godly indicative, it may be beneficial to understand them as a verbal expression of created and restored human reality. That is to say, Yahweh is recapitulating created reality post-fall. Once we were created in the *imago dei* (image of God - Genesis 1:26) and the reality of this 'image' and 'likeness' was that we shared in the characteristics and attributes of our Creator. Having come from the Holy One, we ourselves were holy. God does not create anything that is not pure and perfect for how can perfection spring up imperfection or how can pure goodness produce anything but the like? As it was in the beginning, the irrefutable reality is that apart from God nothing can be holy and whatever or whoever stands in the presence of God is made holy (cf. Isaiah 6:1ff). Therefore when Yahweh tells Moses to utter the words of Leviticus 19:2 to the 'Sons of Israel,' Yahweh's purpose is to restore His people to their created reality. He desired for Israel to be holy and that was integrally dependant upon an intimate relationship with the Creator which was expressed through very ethical, moral, and practical means.

In the same way, when we read these words of Yahweh, we must come to understand that this is not a command but rather an invitation to be reunited with our Creator; it is a call to become what we were created to be, i.e., holy. But what are the ethical, moral, and practical means by which we might evidence this holy relationship with our Creator? The answer to this question will, in essence, answer the very pressing question, "How are we to live holy lives?"

While the influence of Western civilization has led to an individualistic understanding of holiness, nevertheless, this view is not congruent with the

Hebrew worldview from whence our own traditions are wrought. In a groundbreaking work, H Wheeler Robison brought to light and crystallized the reality of *Corporate Personality in Ancient Israel*.[90] This concept is not a new one; rather, it has been in existence since the creation and is widespread throughout the scriptures. It is very likely that Israel's perception grew out of her understanding of human creation. In both of the creation accounts of Genesis 1 and 2, it becomes clear that humanity was created either in community (Genesis 1:27) or in need of community (Genesis 2:20b). Of the former, Dietrich Bonhoeffer brings to light the 'corporate personality' of humanity when he writes: "Man is free for man, *Male and Female he created them*. Man is not alone, he is in duality and it is in this dependence on the other that his creatureliness consists."[91]

This communal reality is reflective of the Godhead. Since the church's beginning, she has always held the tri-communal reality of God: *una substantia – tres personae* (one substance – three persons). As a community, the Godhead does not act independently. That is to say, the Father does not act in contradiction to the Son or the Son in contradiction to the Holy Spirit. This truth is lucidly visible in Jesus' words at Gethsemane, "Father, if Thou art willing, remove this cup from me; yet not my will, but Thine be done" (Luke 22:42). Jesus would not subvert the way of the cross for it was the Father's will, and the Father would not carry out His will if not for the Son's willing submission. This expression of the divine interdependency of the three persons of the Godhead exemplifies the aspects of solidarity that are essential to their unified activity.

If this tri-communal reality is fundamental to the very nature of God then it is not a far stretch to understand how human existence came to be inherently communal. It becomes lucid that wrapped up in the *imago dei* (Genesis 1:26) is the creation of a creature that is like its Creator; as God exists in community so God creates His creation with this same

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[90] Robinson, H Wheeler. *Corporate Personality in Ancient Israel* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1981 Second Edition). In this short exposition, Robinson shows through the scriptures how the Hebrew mind always understood the individual in terms of the group. While individuality became prevalent in the time of the prophets, the individual could never be separated from the whole and, in fact, always acted for the good of the whole.

[91] Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Creation and Fall, Temptation: Two Biblical Studies* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1959), 38.

propensity.[92] We have been created in God's image and therefore we long to be in 'community' with God. Yet, the paradox is that this divine communion takes place through earthly fellowship with God's own people. Thus, in our daily living in relationship with and for the other, we enter into a divine relationship with the triune God, and in so doing; we are made holy by being in God's presence, i.e. relationship with God. The ethical, moral, and practical means by which we live holy lives comes via our relationship to others and especially Christ's Body (cf. Matthew 5-7, 25:34-40, 1 John 4:20-21).

It can then be said that the call to holiness is a call to live out our lives in Christian community. In living for the other we are free to die to self and in dying to self we are able to love God wholeheartedly. Through God's grace and wisdom, God has provided a tangible and concrete means by which we might understand what it means to be holy and how to live this holiness out; Jesus Christ is that example. Through faith in Christ we simultaneously enter into both a divine relationship with the triune God and at the very same time a divine relationship with the *communio sanctorum* (communion of saints), both past and present. "Just as faith is confessed through speaking, so also is it confessed through life *in* the fellowship of believers. In this sense, faith *means* entering into *communio*, *communio* with the triune God and with other Christians."[93] And learning to live in solidarity with these new communities is the pursuit of holiness. The individual is made holy as he or she works toward corporate holiness because in so doing the individual truly begins to be human taking on the *imago dei* in which he or she has been created. Having been created in the triune God's image we are not fully human until we begin to resemble God's image and this divine image is one of communal holiness.

A cultural example of such a divine phenomenon can be viewed in the African understanding of *ubuntu*.[94] The concept, in essence, embodies everything good and is in antithesis to any and all forms of evil. To do

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[92] Much of this thought is owed to Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), see especially Part II.

[93] Ibid. 173f.

[94] I am indebted to my African brother in the Lord Dr Enoch Litswele, Assistant to the Regional Director for the Africa Region Church of the Nazarene. Most of my understanding of *ubuntu*, comes from dialogue with Dr Litswele.

good ultimately means to live for the good of the community. In so doing, the individual secures harmony among his or her ancestors and can therefore be understood to be fully human, i.e. living in community with a long line of ancestors coming both before and after.[95] The general ideals of *ubuntu* are embodied in Christianity and the West would do good to seek understanding from her African siblings. "Malusi Mpumlwana regards *ubuntu* as the African equivalent of the biblical notion of 'the image of God.'"[96] In this we see the connection between the 'corporate personality' and the tri-communal reality in whose image we have been made.

With this concrete example from the African culture I now offer a charge to live out a Christian understanding of *ubuntu*, and in so doing, to become fully human, i.e. to become what we were created to be, those in God's own image. When we as Christians commit ourselves to living in solidarity with God's people then we will ultimately solidify our relationship with the triune God and in so doing we will be made holy. Holiness is therefore intrinsically tied to our created nature and this nature finds holiness in simultaneous relationship with the triune God and the people created by this God. The charge of Leviticus 19:2 is therefore a charge for godly community. It may be that those of African heritage are better equipped to live out this image. If this be the case, then the Christian Church of Africa has the great responsibility of being a living example of holiness to her Western siblings.

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[95] Pato, Luke Lungile. "Being Fully Human: From the Perspective of African Culture and Spirituality," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 97 (March 1997): 53-61.

[96] Quoted in, Russel Botman, "Who is 'Jesus Christ as Community" for us Today?: The Quest for Community: A Challenge to Theology in SA," *Journal of Theology for South Africa* 97 (March 1997): 30-38.