

Building a Fresh European Understanding of Holiness

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This conference was designed to encourage us to think creatively and respond to ideas without the strictures and undue caution which can sometimes mar these events. It seems to me that the timing of the conference has been most appropriate for a number of reasons.

- There is an encouraging growth in interest in Christian holiness outside the confines of the so-called holiness movement. Renewal in so many churches has stimulated a hunger for holiness centred in God which outlasts individual-centred experience.
- Conversely, anecdotal evidence suggests that there is a serious deficiency in the understanding of scriptural holiness in our own denomination. This is particularly noteworthy amongst our young people; but it is matched by a worrying confusion even in the ranks of our clergy.
- The gap between the confessional expression of Christian holiness in our denomination and the work of theologians and biblical scholars, indirectly noted a generation ago by Professor M B Wynkoop, is only slowly closing. Sadly, the language of Christian holiness has all too often become a mere shibboleth, or, in G B Caird's language, a dead metaphor.
- The gap between the proclamation of what the experience of entire sanctification should be like and the reality, again noted by Professor Wynkoop, has not been closed. Consequently, when individual experience does not match the conventional model, the whole notion of entire sanctification can be 'brought into disrepute' or even rejected.
- Finally, we are all conscious of the need for our understanding of Christian holiness to be, and be seen to be, emerging from the intersection of the gospel announced in holy scripture and the highly secularised societies of Europe.

This conference, therefore, has come at a time when we realise that issues need to be addressed in ways which are biblically sound and theologically coherent; ecclesiological responsible and culturally

relevant. These are, of course, not exclusively European issues. But all of us here who are European citizens or who are called to minister in Europe have the opportunity and, hence, the duty to make our own contribution to the advancement of the gospel in our European home.

Some years ago, the Dutch-American scholar, J C Beker, in his search for the coherent centre of Pauline theology, introduced the notion of contingency and coherence. His brilliant analysis of Pauline theology is well known. My interest here is not an exposition of Beker! But I am particularly taken by the importance of the contingency-coherency axis in all theological reflection and application. As I see it, our task, as scholars and teachers, as preachers and missionaries, falls along this axis. In sum, we are *responsible* for a continual re-examination of the coherent centre of our faith and for the continual re-application of it in the contingent circumstances in which we all live and carry out our mission. It is along that axis that we wrestle with ideas and their application; it is with this axis in mind that I make my comments this morning.

In this process, two dangers are to be avoided. First, we must not give such veneration to our forebears that their work assumes the status of holy writ. And this applies even to the work of the blessed John! Equally, we must not reject out of hand the work of past generations of scholars within our tradition. Rather, we have a duty to be engaged with the past, fully acknowledging the debt we owe to it but also very conscious of its contingent character.

All of us must also approach the task with humility, knowing that our work is also contingent. Indeed, in our assessment of the past, we need to be aware of the possibility that our current best ideas may also prove to be wrong in the light of further reflection. Certainly, our own expression of our theology will require re-visiting, again and again.

With these caveats, then, what are some of the issues which may well be important as we seek to shape an authentic European understanding of Christian holiness?

Biblical and theological issues

Although it is certainly possible to address these issues separately, putting them together in itself signals a way forward. In our anxiety to be specialists in these discrete disciplines, the dialogue which ought to take place between them has too often been muted. I am very conscious of the distinct methodologies of our disciplines but I am equally convinced of the need for biblical studies which are attune to the theological context in which we conduct our research and which informs our conclusions. Similarly, a theology which is removed from its biblical moorings is in danger of becoming mere philosophical speculation at the mercy of current (or ancient) fashion.

Biblical scholarship in particular has changed in the past three decades. The insights of contemporary literary criticism as applied to scripture coupled with the significant advances in recovering the roots of Christianity in the world of Second Temple Judaism have been almost revolutionary. Meanwhile, some of the best theologians in our tradition have moved beyond the paradigm of scholasticism into fresh thinking which is in dialogue with the past but not imprisoned by it.

If Christian holiness is indeed a biblical doctrine, then, as Professor T A Noble has shown, it must be integrated with the great theological doctrines of the church. Wesley correctly perceived that the central point of scripture is the question of *soteriology*, of which Christian holiness is but a part. Clearly, models are already in place for understanding '*God, Man and Salvation*'. But there are aspects of each of these doctrines which need to be re-visited in the light of modern biblical scholarship. Is the God of the scholastics and the philosophers really the God of Abraham and Jesus? Bearing in mind that scripture itself bears witness to the unfathomable being of God in contingent language and in metaphors, are there aspects of our 'theos-ology' (properly, theology) which owe more to Aristotle and Kant than to Moses and Mark?

Our understanding of humanity and the human condition is also ripe for re-visitation. This is a complex issue with several interlocking aspects. Perhaps the one which most exercises scholars in our tradition is what one of our past scholars called 'a right conception of sin.' Most of us struggle with the problem of sin in the life of holy people. From Wesley onwards, our response has usually been to define sin as 'a wilful act against the known will of God'. But this has proved to be unsatisfactory.

Such a constrictive definition is difficult to sustain from scripture. And in practice it has led some of our number into the error of 'sinless perfection-ism'. It remains a most intractable problem for our best thinkers.

Scholars in the holiness movement have been nibbling at the edges of this issue for over two decades now, addressing this specific problem as well as the related problem of systemic evil. But what if the very framework of our understanding were flawed? What if our conception of sin owed more to what Krister Stendahl called 'the introspective conscience of the West' than to the prophets or Paul? What if the whole paradigm of the human condition, from Augustine onwards, has been wrong-headed? His understanding of original sin has dominated Western thought in all its many branches, both Catholic and Protestant. Hence, most biblical scholars and theologians in the West has seen Romans 7 as the normal Christian existence. This position has proved very difficult to shift, *given the usual Western perspective on the human condition*. Here is an area where dialogue with the text of scripture and the Eastern rite might again prove helpful to us.

E P Sanders argued that Paul's theology moves from solution to plight. Even if scripture has a Christological centre, a clear understanding of the human condition is critical for our understanding of salvation itself. Soteriology must address the whole interaction between our doctrine of God, and our doctrine of creation, between Trinity and the *imago dei*. If God the Trinity is understood as 'being-in-communion' and humans were created in the image of God, then salvation understood as the renewal-restoration of the marred image of God in humanity should not be seen as primarily individualistic or forensic, but rather as personal and relational. If God is understood monistically, an individualistic I-Thou model of salvation may be defensible. But if God is Trinity, then the personal-relational models of salvation is the more coherent. Here one begins to see the scale of the issues to be addressed: our contingent western expression of salvation as individualistic may well have distorted the coherent biblical centre of the doctrine of salvation and of Christian holiness as well as neglecting the Trinity as the starting point in our understanding of God.

The combination of an individualistic understanding of salvation in general and Christian holiness in particular with its corresponding Augustinian picture of original sin may be especially post-Enlightenment.

But this combination may have had its precursor in the division between the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church. The Orthodox emphasis upon the Holy Trinity together with its willingness to take seriously the notion of participation in the divine nature, incorporation into the 'perichoresis' or mutual indwelling of the Holy Trinity in the here and now yields a picture of Christian holiness different from the Catholic tradition with its much more pessimistic view of the human condition. Hence, in Western Christianity, holiness generally came to be understood as a possibility in this life, but was limited to a few exceptional individuals. But perhaps our understanding of Christian holiness should start with the corporate people of God, rather than the isolated individual. How important could some of these insights be to a fresh vision of Christian holiness? Here again, I think the interaction of our theologians with biblical scholarship on the one hand, and with the Greek Fathers and the Eastern rite on the other may prove most fruitful. Indeed, can it be merely coincidental that John Wesley seemed to be so well read in the Greek Fathers and that some of our more creative theologians conducted their PhD research in the same area?

But that is not to dismiss the riches of our heritage in western Christianity. With our deep historical perspective in Europe (so obvious to those of us who are Europeans by choice not by birth), we need to set the distinctive features of our own understanding of Christian holiness against a backdrop of twenty centuries of Christian thought on holiness. Divergent points need to be subjected to careful biblical and theological scrutiny, so that the best features of all may be appropriated, not merely on the level of theology but also in determining which spiritual practices across the spectrum of Christian piety have been found, and may still be found, conducive to producing holiness of life.

If, then, soteriology is essentially personal and relational in orientation, it follows that the holiness tradition must give far greater attention to *ecclesiology*. Our very existence is firmly rooted in God's call of a people to be 'a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people' (1 Peter 2:9). Two of the discussion papers in this conference have built upon this biblical call. Its implications are vast, for if we have this holy calling, as a denomination we have a responsibility not only *to proclaim* but also *to model* Christian holiness in the world, not just personally but corporately, not only in mission but in worship, not only in personal piety but in institutional righteousness and justice. In our

western emphasis on individual piety, we have all but neglected the concept that our corporate piety is more than the sum total of our individuals. But if we understand more clearly the importance of the body of Christ, there are implications for our worship. Not least, it seems to me, is the likelihood that the sacrament of holy communion will assume a far greater place in our worship as a corporate means of grace in which God meets us as his gathered people in an extraordinary way. There are, of course, enormous pastoral implications stemming from this corporate sense of holiness, not only in church discipline but in the care of the weak, the restoration of the fallen, the nurturing of the immature and the attention to the communal life of the congregation as well.

God's present purpose for his created order can only be understood properly in the light of his ultimate purposes. Here we need to reflect again on *eschatology*. Indeed, sustained attention to Jesus the Jew requires us to re-think our eschatological views to bring them more into conformity to his life and teaching. My sense of the situation in Europe is that we are not so bound up with the charts and maps to the future which plague conservatism in North America and infect our brothers and sisters there. That means that the work we have to do in this area is not subject to the same doctrinaire limitations.

In my judgement, here is an area where we can make one of our most significant contributions to the wider body of Christ. We need to proclaim and defend an eschatology which refuses to distort the biblically sound and theologically coherent balance between a realised eschatology rooted and grounded in the finished work of Christ on the cross and the future hope of the created order based upon the first-fruit of Christ's resurrection.

In terms of our specific proclamation of Christian holiness, an emphasis on the optimism of grace issues from our view concerning the *present* reality of the kingdom of God, the *present* Lordship of Christ in the church as well as in the believer and the *present* experience of the Spirit in the people of God. These were, and remain, the unmistakable signs that the last days arrived in the coming of Christ and the outpouring of the Spirit.

But present experience is only the first-fruit, the guarantee that God's ultimate good purposes will be accomplished. There is a 'not yet' to our eschatology – clearly manifest when we open our eyes to the created

order. We still live in mortal flesh, subject to decay, vulnerable to temptation and participants in a world still in the grip of sin. Thus, to live as the holy people of God is also to live as a kingdom of priests in this world, being incarnate in it. The reality of the life of the church lived in the power of the resurrection is tempered by the fact that this is but the first-fruit of God's ultimate good purposes for his entire created order. We, like all of creation, eagerly await that consummation when we shall all be part of the ultimate victory of God who will be all in all.

Denominational and Missiological Issues

To address a second set of issues under a separate heading is to open myself to the charge that I wish to consider these issues as purely organisational matters, divorced from biblical and theological foundations. But that would be a false conclusion. If we would be true to scripture and the best in theology the fundamental definition of our church has to be *theological*, as part of the body of Christ, rather than *organisational*, following business models of restructuring and management. The implications of this re-definition are far-reaching: most importantly, decisions will be made, not because they reflect sound business practice, but because they model the holiness and righteousness of God to the watching world. Our communal practice, our structures and our policies should flow out of who we are: part of the people of God, called to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. Confession and forgiveness, justice and mercy, integrity and steadfastness should be our hallmarks, not the standards of the corporate boardroom and the practices of ruthless management. *"The kings of the Gentiles exercise Lordship over them. ...But not so with you; rather let the greatest among you become as the servant, and the leader as one who serves."*

Of course, we aren't very good at confession, either individually or corporately, for a variety of rather dubious reasons. But we ought to be, for we have much to confess. We participate daily in the wicked systems of our world, often without protest. Indeed, instead of being agents of social transformation, we have all too often found ourselves amongst those defending or excusing injustice. But even within the community of believers, we have failed lamentably in so many ways to model God's holiness before the world. Racism still lurks unchallenged in our congregations. Our pathetic excuses concerning our woeful failure to nurture and support women in ministry are so transparent that anyone can

see that we really just don't care enough to act. Can any of us who have had the privilege of teaching in our colleges not have shared the pain of gifted female students whose call from God is relativised or dismissed, who have been placed in the most difficult circumstances or, in recent years, encouraged to become deacons? (C S Cowles', *A Woman's Place*, should be mandatory reading for every male amongst us.) Were it not for the shining example of Dr J B van Beek, I suspect that our European record would be one of the worst in the denomination for support of women in leadership. Ought we to be surprised if our church is weak and ineffectual when we 'fail to discern the body' (1 Cor 11:29) as Paul reminds us? Wouldn't it be wonderful if the European legacy to the Church of the Nazarene was rooting out racism and demonstrating in deed as well as in word, our commitment to righteousness and equality in our treatment of men and women in ministry? But until righteousness and justice do prevail in our midst, confession and repentance ought to be the order of the day. *Let justice roll down like water, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream* (Amos 5:24).

If these are issues for the denomination as a whole in Europe, they apply equally to the denomination's two educational institutions. Our colleges must be more than centres of excellence in education which teach Christian holiness, where individual lecturers profess Christian holiness and where they maintain their piety with the utmost scrupulousness. If holiness is the genesis of our corporate life, then everything we do should enhance our communal witness before our students and our constituency to the way the holy people of God ought to live in the world. And, with the greatest respect, the same biblical and theological foundations need to govern everything that happens in the Eurasia Regional Office, on our fields and districts and in each local congregation. All of us in leadership positions are particularly vulnerable to the subtle temptation to think in terms of power and influence rather than weakness and service.

A second point needs to be addressed as we seek to articulate the doctrine of Christian holiness afresh in our European home. Ought our proclamation of the doctrine be modelled on the paradigm of the *19th Century American Holiness Movement* or on that of *John Wesley*? In some senses, these two models have co-existed in a somewhat uneasy accommodation in the Church of the Nazarene since its inception. But insofar as we are thinking of the future, I suggest that the more appropriate direction for our development is a *modified Wesleyan* model.

In Wesley's view, the new covenant offered in Christ enabled the fulfilment of the Great Commandments, now, in the life of the believer. This is part of the eschatological already. Here, in particular, the influence of the 19th century American Holiness Movement with its emphasis on rigid sequence and human experience may prove to be less than helpful, probably contributing significantly to the two gaps noted earlier by Wynkoop. One should not underestimate the importance of the contingent expression of the 19th Century Holiness Movement in preserving the holiness heritage. It could be argued that it was crucial in the survival of the teaching of Christian holiness in the face of its decreasing importance for American Methodism. That contingent expression was important. However, it is worth asking whether future historians of the holiness tradition, while acknowledging the vital place of the American Holiness Movement, might also argue that ultimately it proved to be a theological cul-de-sac from which a critical and reflective return to John Wesley saved the Holiness Movement

Although we do not start with a blank slate, if this issue does need to be addressed, we are well placed to do so for at least four reasons. First, we are blessed in our denomination in Europe with a Wesley scholar of premier quality whose expertise may be invaluable. Second, we have two educational institutions in Europe whose *raison d'être* is to proclaim and model a biblically sound and culturally relevant doctrine of Christian holiness. Dare we short-circuit or by-pass the education these institutions provide in the interest of short-term denominational or personal expediencies? Third, there are Europeans virtually unknown in our circles who have reflected deeply on Christian holiness. They are an extremely important resource as we seek to enhance our understanding and to demonstrate that Christian holiness is an authentic part of our European theological heritage. Klaus Arnold's work on Jellinghaus is only the tip of the iceberg, one suspects. The Keswick movement has been very important in preserving the emphasis upon the deeper life of the believer. We also have much to learn from Puritanism and Pietism; we have also to guard against its legacy of legalism and withdrawal from the world. When seen in connection with our dialogue with eastern Christianity, this third point gains significance. Finally, distance from the heartland of the Church of the Nazarene in America has distinct disadvantages. But it occasionally allows us to engage in discussions which might be less welcome there.

The third issue has already been touched upon, namely, *our place in the historic body of Christ*. We live in mature societies with a sense of history. Our view of the church is also affected by that perspective. Sometimes we worship in buildings where Christ has been proclaimed for hundreds of years. We are part of that countless host of Christians who have celebrated the Lord's Supper, have sung praises to God and offered prayers. This sense of the longevity of the church is humbling and challenging at the same time. We have much to learn from the past and we would be wise if we spent far more time listening and learning, even learning from those groups whose form of worship seems to us to be quite alien. We engage with others, not from a sense either of weakness or superiority, but from one of conviction that we have something to learn from and something to contribute to our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Finally, the Church of the Nazarene in Europe must face up to the crucial issue of how it wishes to address the problem of holiness *micro-ethics* and *macro-ethics*. And it is at this point where I see leadership, perhaps especially for some of us who came originally from conservative parts of North America, struggling most to come to terms with what is actually the coherent centre of the holiness ethic and what are its contingent expressions in Europe. A generation ago, the headline micro-ethical issue was attendance at the cinema. Young people in particular are still asking some very hard questions about details of personal piety which seem to occupy a disproportionate place in the Church of the Nazarene ethos. Perhaps here more than anywhere else the denomination seems to be alienated from its European cultural context. (To be sure, the Church of the Nazarene in Northern Ireland and parts of Scotland would be, if anything, more keen on micro-ethical rules than parts of North America, at least amongst some of the leadership.)

The same applies in the area of macro-ethics. Although there are European Nazarenes who enthusiastically embrace the values most clearly reflected in the neo-conservative, right-wing marriage of politics and religion in the USA (and parts of Anglo-Saxon Europe), this cannot be viewed as the coherent centre of a holiness ethic and certainly not its contingent expression in Europe. Indeed, social ethics and social transformation must be at the very centre of an emphasis in Christian holiness which takes seriously God's call of a holy people to model his concern for the entire created order. The sanctification of militarism,

unfettered capitalism, environmental exploitation, and the accumulation of private wealth especially in the West needs to be questioned in the light of scripture. Ironically, the unbounded secularism of European cultures may well give an greater opportunity for these issues to be addressed from a Christian perspective than is the case in America where the right-wing agenda combined with religious conservatism, is almost a civic religion. But before we begin to congratulate ourselves on the sophistication of our European cultures, one need only mention latent racism, religious bigotry of ancient origin and resurgent nationalism to demonstrate the folly of any sense of superiority.

This conference has raised a host of issues. It has faced them with openness, courage and creativity. Further reflection is needed on most of them. It has two foci: the first is God's call of a holy people to be his agents and model in a lost and broken world. The second is, quite simply, what Paul calls 'the Law of Christ'. Old Testament and New Testament agree on this dual focus. Jesus said as much and John Wesley agreed. Here, then, is our coherent centre to Christian holiness. Could we ask for a better starting point for building a fresh European understanding of Christian holiness?