

“On Hermeneutic Lens and Holiness”
Andy Johnson

Response

Jesse C. Middendorf
General Superintendent, Church of the Nazarene

I take great comfort in Prof. Johnson’s affirmation of the distinguishing tenet of the Church of the Nazarene. His position is clear: “That God call his people to holiness and can gift them in actuality with a holy character is not in dispute.”

I also affirm his position that using the hermeneutical lens of “secondness” and “instantaneousness” is not the only faithful way for the community of faith to read NT texts that facilitate a context in which God can shape the community into a holy community.

However, I do hold that we must be careful not to too quickly relinquish the use of the terms in spite of what appears to be a lessening of their use in the life of the Church. Perhaps, the greater need is to more deeply exegete some of the passages in order to avoid a “proof-texting” that betrays itself in too shallow an interpretation of some of our favorite texts.

Granted, there are other faithful ways to exegete some of our core passages than to demand that they give primary support to our view of the “subsequence” or “secondness” of entire sanctification. However, experience seems to indicate that for many people, the language of secondness and instantaneousness is vital to both comprehending and appropriating the provisions of grace that make such holiness of character possible. For the Wesleyan / Arminian, the pursuit of holiness is not a desirable option or a means to spiritual advantage, but is a part of the order of salvation. The reason we are prone to find the idea of “secondness” in a variety of passages is our deep conviction, born of both experience and our understanding of the wider scope of scripture, that the very nature of redemption for humankind demands it.

So central is this to our stated self-understanding as a denomination (see our “Articles of Faith” and the “Agreed Statement of Belief”) that we must face a serious concern honestly and squarely: That the language of secondness and instantaneousness seems to be used less and less by both clergy and laity should cause us to find ways to reaffirm the validity of such language while at the same time avoiding the tendency to force an interpretation onto passages, which, at best, infer such conviction. While cultural and societal shifts may alter some of the understandings as to how God accomplishes His will for holiness in the hearts and lives of believers, the reality is, God still justifies, regenerates, and adopts, and desires further to restore the marred “Imago Dei.”

Subsequence, or secondness, is founded on far more than the “hermeneutical lens” with which one might view any single passage of scripture. It also demands an experiential lens which acknowledges the ambiguities faced by any who seek to force language and experience to coincide exactly across every language and culture as well as across the societal and historical divide occasioned by the march of time. What is critically important for the

Church of the Nazarene is to avoid defensiveness as we seek more adequate means of expressing, for every new generation, our deeply held convictions regarding entire sanctification or the deeper life, about its “secondness” or its “instantaneousness.” Our reading and interpretation of scripture must always be guided by careful scholarship. But our scholarship must not overlook what the experiences and interpretations of others, through the ages, have taught us.

Therefore, I am not able to relinquish the conviction that the passages under scrutiny by Johnson at least *allow* an interpretation of “secondness.” The nature of what Paul urges on the people of Thessalonica seems to demand a deeper, a more pervasive work in the hearts and lives of the readers. The “will of God” requires that they be “sanctified.” The implication of the increasingly fervent language, and the level of “demand” placed on them, seems not only to suggest aspiration, but appropriation. Paul’s insistence on their being sanctified “through and through” does not allow an easy interpretation that such a state of grace can be entered into merely by “growth in grace.” Human experience, all too painfully, in all cultures, and across all ages in human history, seems to verify the insistence of Wesleyan Arminianism — that you can’t get there on mere human strength and longing.

What Paul calls for is far more than a more “cultured” Christianity. He insists on an inner resource of grace, of “sanctification through and through,” which is possible only through a measure of divine activity in the human heart, and which is not subject to human developmental capabilities. The measure of self-surrender necessary to such a work of grace seems possible only for believers, for the redeemed.

I am encouraged by Johnson’s insistence that the call of God to holiness is not in dispute. I do not differ with his suggestion that the cited passages may not withstand a rigorous examination by someone seeking to “prove” secondness or instantaneousness by reliance on these passages alone. But I would insist that we not discard these passages as though they have no element of the prescriptive in them. It may not be the only faithful way for the community of faith to read the texts in question, but it would seem to be *one* of the ways they may be read.

While we want to protect the integrity of our scholarship within the Wesleyan / Arminian tradition, let us not hesitate to boldly teach and preach that the order of salvation, with the full scope of the redemptive intent of God, demands that we hold firmly to the concept that God wants to do more than justify and regenerate us. He also hungers to sanctify His people, “through and through.”

Perhaps here it is worthwhile for us to remind ourselves that the grace of entire sanctification does not wait for us to discover it. His will is our sanctification. He will do this, if we will allow it. We do not have to “hunt” for holiness. As we walk in the light, holiness will pursue us; will insistently, persistently follow us. He who has called is faithful. “He will do it!”