

Response

SHALL WE GO ON PREACHING ENTIRE SANCTIFICATION?

by

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For 21st century Nazarenes to answer this question with a strong, positive affirmation, we must be clear with regard to our motivation and our goal. We desire to be faithful to our theological heritage, both to the Wesleyan roots of our tradition, and to the identity that we claim as a denomination. But neither preserving our tradition, nor sustaining our institutional existence, has sufficient motivational power to transform a verbal “yes” to our question into the reality of a living commitment.

A major component of John Wesley’s continuing appeal was, and is, his method for reading and understanding scripture, or more specifically, scripture’s words regarding the call to a holy life. Wesley’s seriousness about scripture, and the manner in which scripture formed and informed his pursuit of holiness, can be a helpful guide for us. We can be guided in two fundamental ways by Wesley’s way of giving attention to scripture.

First of all, what some among us have called the “substance” of holiness, Wesley clearly found in scripture. He was sure that scripture clearly articulated the quality and character of the life of holiness. Scripture’s affirmations became the motivating force for his whole-hearted quest to know God’s “hallowing” work in his life. Scripture brought conviction for his failures, and (just as importantly) positive challenge to think and act on the faith that what scripture so clearly described was the goal of God’s saving work in Christ. Wesley became utterly convinced that God purposed ultimately to transform sinful human beings into the image of Christ. Scripture had clearly revealed this through its witness to Christ.

We must begin to listen anew to what scripture says, particularly what it says about God’s call to a holy life. We must allow the scripture to capture our hearts and imaginations to such an extent that we are able to understand who we are only in the terms of the Bible’s narrative of God and God’s people. The images, themes, aspirations, commands, prayers, praises, and testimonies found throughout the Bible must become ours. We must hear God speaking to us. Our problem is that we think we already know what God is saying to us from the pages of scripture. We have diminished the Bible’s power over us by handling it as hardly more than a convenient and predictable “how to” book for success in life. We must change our perceptions and presuppositions regarding the Bible. We must begin to treat it like that which our own Articles of Faith affirm it to be: the declaration of all things necessary to our salvation. Scripture must be for us the means of our encounter with the living God, and we must come to the Bible for that reason and that reason only.

Wesley’s way of giving attention to scripture may guide us in a second way, a way that is related directly to the issue of the “secondness” of entire sanctification. In his *Plain Account of Christian Perfection* Wesley asked whether there was any scriptural basis for believers to expect to be delivered

from all sin prior to death. He answered the question by pointing to specific biblical promises, assertions, prayers, commands, and examples that supported that expectation. Wesley was convinced that God's Word, did not "play games" with those whom it addressed. God would never promise or command, nor would God prompt an apostle to pray for his converts, something that had no possibility of being fulfilled. On the basis of scripture Wesley was profoundly optimistic concerning the possibilities of God's grace in human lives.

Can we be that optimistic? Does the whole tenor of scripture say to us that God is able and willing to not only forgive us (which we need), but to also transform us (which we need just as much)? Can we not draw the clear inference, as Wesley did, from so very many places in the New Testament epistles, that God may be trusted to transform and renew us into the image of Christ in this life? Can we dare to believe this? We must do exactly that in order to actualize our affirmative answer to the question of this paper.

So then, we should find motivation and clarity of purpose in our pursuit of the holy life from a renewed and living commitment to the power and authority of scripture. Additional motivation and clearer vision may come from another quarter. We need to recognize in new and more profound ways the corporate identity we share in the body of Christ, the church. If we give the sort of attention to scripture called for above, we will already be on the way to a deepened sense of the social / communal dimensions of the call to holiness.

Many of us have quoted Wesley's affirmation that there is no holiness but social holiness. The scriptural call to holiness is the call to be in relatedness to one another. It is the call to be responsible for and accountable to one another. It is to live out Christlikeness in our relationships with one another. We affirm in our church *Manual* that we come together as a group of believers because we have heard God's call to be holy, and thus we commit to one another that we are going to pursue that goal together. In other words, we have found identity together in church as those who take seriously what God says about transforming us through transforming our relationships.

What we are talking about is our identity. We must be moved, because of what we hear in scripture, to think and act intentionally with regard to how our corporate identity is formed. Everything we do together – worship, praise, compassion, discipleship, evangelism – contributes to the formation of our identity. We must be formed into communities of God's holy people by the intentional reflection upon and celebration of all that God graciously purposes to accomplish in us.