

“ Re-Appropriating The Language of Purity and Cleansing For Holiness”
Roger Hahn

Response

by

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Theology must speak a language that is understandable and meaningful to its time. Some scholars see this as theology's main task. However, another challenge facing theologians is to do so while remaining faithful both to the original biblical language and to the community of faith. As a result, some theologians tend to move closer to one extreme, while others move toward the other. Wesley helps us at this point. All theologizing needs to be done in the light of the Wesleyan quadrilateral of Scripture, reason, tradition, and experience — with superiority given to fidelity to Scriptural teaching.

Dr. Hahn has correctly spotted an area of tension between the two challenges that face theologians seeking a balance in our teaching about holiness. However, some remarks need to be made in response to Hahn's paper as we attempt to remain faithful to Scripture and to the other points of the quadrilateral, and do the theologian's task of speaking the truth in a meaningful way.

First, Hahn seems to favor the use of certain terms over such other terms as Christlikeness, progress, and growth. But these are also Biblical terms that are used on some occasions when Scripture speaks about holiness. Romans 8:29; Philippians 2:5; and 1 Peter 3:19, among others, are examples of the usage of this language in the Scriptures. However, this is not to exclude the language of purity and cleansing, but rather to stress that both languages are biblical.

The language of ritual purity and cleansing dominates O.T. teaching. There is little talk of growth or divine likeness, since the total “otherness” of God dominates the O.T., and since the example of Christ was as yet unknown. However such limitations should not mold our understanding of biblical holiness in a major way, because most scholarship reads the O.T. through the spectacles of the New, a position I affirm. After all, the Apostles interpreted the O.T. in the light of Christ's fulfillment. Acceptance of this concept eliminates much of the debate, because ritual purity and cleansing find their completion and final expression in the New Testament's understanding of what it means to be morally pure and clean. Jesus' coming transformed much of the O.T.'s understanding about purity and cleansing. His teaching about the importance of a clean heart, in contrast to that of the body, seems to have certain implications for O.T. ritual, which focused more on the human body.

On the other hand, there is still the need to emphasize the polemical nature of doctrine. Issues move with the advances of history. Those aspects of holiness that needed to be emphasized at one stage of the growth of the Wesleyan movement may no longer be as decisive as they once were. But in the extremely cultural diverse the Church of the Nazarene, what no longer needs to be emphasized in one part, may be extremely important in another world area. The polemical aspects of the doctrine of holiness are still very much needed in the Middle-East today. We are still in a battle, not only with

Muslims, but also with other evangelical groups, that requires the ethical and ritualistic language of the O.T.

A closer look at the Scriptures show that much, if not most, of the teachings of Jesus and the Apostles and the early centuries of the Christian Church came as a result of polemical situations. Many questioners came to Jesus not to learn from him, but to argue and challenge His teaching. As they debated, they quoted O.T. passages and Rabbinic interpretations. Jesus' responses became the basic material of Christian teachings and doctrines. Thus, much of His teaching about true holiness and cleansing came out of polemical discussion as well (Matthew 12:22-37; 15:1-20).

Looking at the development of many Christian doctrines one cannot avoid seeing the polemical context in which they developed and came to clear expression. A good example is the doctrine of Christ. Because of controversies with Arius, Apollinarius, and Nestorius, the doctrine of Christ reached the shape and expression we have today.

The real challenge we face today is to maintain a balance between the biblical teaching about holiness — along with tradition, experience, and reason — in the modern context in which we live and which we are called to address. Any over-emphasis on one side might lead to an imbalance in our theological understanding of holiness. It is easy maintaining balance, but that is what makes theology a continuous and enjoyable task.