

A Holy Church

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Much of my childhood was spent on the front pew of the Church of the Nazarene in a little lumber town in western Oregon. From my first row vantage point I often witnessed my parents leading worship in various ways. One of my vivid memories is of them singing a duet, a gospel song popular in mid-twentieth century America titled, *"Just Jesus and Me on the Jericho Road."* It never occurred to me as a young boy that it was incongruous not only for that song to be presented as a duet but also that the whole idea of *"Just Jesus and Me"* was antithetical to New Testament discipleship.

At least part of the reason that the error of that idea never dawned on me was that it never dawned on anybody who taught me the Christian way. My family and the congregation that nurtured my mind and heart in the life of Jesus until I was a young man taught me that the supreme concern was my personal relationship with Jesus Christ. I emerged from my childhood a committed Christian, but one who thought of discipleship mostly as *"Just Jesus and Me."*

I have since learned that Christian life is at the heart a community life. I understand that I do not walk this Christian journey alone. I am one member among many members of the body of Christ. In fact I would now assert that my supreme concern is not only for my personal relationship with Jesus Christ, but that I might live as a true Christian within the community of faith so that together we might become an authentic expression of the kingdom of God in this world.

However, eighteen years of pastoral ministry in the Church of the Nazarene have convinced me that the majority of persons in our churches still think of discipleship as mostly a personal and even a private matter. This is illustrated in numerous ways in the contemporary church. There is a common lack of intimacy among God's people. The cultural value of personal rights as supreme is often reflected in the church. There is a kind of "boot straps theology" at work whereby people believe that being reconciled to God is mostly their work. A general lack of self-disclosure and accountability has made the idea of church discipline repulsive and the practice virtually nonexistent.

This rugged individualism impacts every dimension of applied Christianity. In our movement it certainly impacts the way we think about and express the doctrine of holiness. I suggest that we in the Church of the Nazarene have understood and taught the doctrine of holiness mostly in terms of personal piety. We do teach that the whole idea of Christian holiness is rooted in the holiness of God. Little, however, is preached about the holiness of the church. We seem most anxious to move to questions of how the possession of God's holy love makes *me* different. And these differences are most easily traced in qualities of personal character and behavior.

Certainly the grace of entire sanctification is thoroughly personal. A life marked by the very character and spirit of Jesus is personal. But it is not private. The New Testament vision of holiness finds its full meaning only as sanctified persons see themselves essentially as part of

a sanctified church. Jesus' prayer for us is a corporate prayer, "*Sanctify them by the truth*" (John 17:17).¹ Everywhere the New Testament places the idea of a sanctified discipleship squarely within the context of the community of faith. Even as Jesus continues his prayer he says, "*May they . . . be one as we are one*" (John 17:21-22). Jesus expects that the perfect community of the Godhead will be reflected in the community of saints. The letters of Paul to the churches are replete with exhortations toward holiness, calling the people to live together under the lordship of Jesus Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit. (Romans 13:8-10; 15:5-7; 1 Corinthians 1:2; 12:12-13; Galatians 5:16-26; Ephesians 1:1-14; 2:19-22; 4:1 – 5:20; Colossians 3:12-17). Our expressions of holiness doctrine must bear witness to the fact that the *whole* people of God are called to be holy by command and by provision. This is more than a sum of the parts. The Scriptures seem to have in mind more than a simple collection of holy *ones*. There is also a call to the community of faith, for its life together to be characterized by holiness.

We confess together that we believe in "the holy catholic church."² But in what sense is the church holy? Most of us are keenly aware of what H. Ray Dunning calls "the obvious unholiness of the empirical church."³ Much of my daily pastoral work rises from the failure of the community of faith to reflect the character of "a holy nation" (1 Peter 2:9). Nevertheless, I am persuaded that God is not only calling individuals to be holy but he is also calling his church to be holy. The question is, "In what ways is biblical holiness corporate and not individual only?" As catalyst for our conversation I offer four observations on how local congregations can grow in the understanding, experience, and practice of corporate holiness: worship, forgiveness, unity, and service.

First, the worship of local congregations must be firmly rooted in the historic Christian faith. Sadly, many pastors are ordering the worship of the community of faith around pragmatic concerns, or to put it plainly, in what will gather a crowd. I agree with Professor Marva Dawn when she says, "... so many decisions are being based on criteria other than the most essential – namely, that God be the Subject and Object ... of our worship."⁴ Holiness is nothing if not the change of life focus from self to God. The acts of the worshiping community are essential to this understanding and experience.

Here are some particulars in worship that need attention. We need worship that places high priority on the Eucharist, that we might regularly (yes, even weekly) receive grace to live together as Kingdom people. We need worship that is organized around something deeper than self-serving national holidays, but around the story of redemption. We need to recover the appropriateness and importance of corporate confession. How would the church be changed through weekly praying together the *Collect for Purity* or other prayers of confession? "Traditional prayers and worship forms of the church are full of petitions for that holiness without which, the Scripture everywhere declares, no man shall see the Lord."⁵

¹ All Scripture quotations are from the *New International Version* (NIV).

² The Apostles' Creed.

³ H. Ray Dunning, *Grace, Faith, and Holiness*, p. 532.

⁴ Marva J. Dawn, *A Royal 'Waste' of Time: The Splendor of Worshiping God and Being Church for the World.*, p. 8.

⁵ Donna Fletcher-Crow, *Seasons of Prayer: Rediscovering Classic Prayers Through the Christian Calendar*, p. 88.

The second needed focus is on Christian forgiveness. Of course the larger issue is love which is central to the whole idea of holiness, but I put it this way because what most damages authentic corporate holiness is unforgiveness. Christian relationships afford us ample opportunity for real experiences of self-sacrificing love, the essence of holiness. In John's account of the Pentecost event, the risen Jesus says to his disciples after breathing on them, "*Receive the Holy Spirit*" (John 20:22). Then he immediately (textually) speaks of the necessity of forgiveness between them. Forgiveness lies at the very heart of the gospel and at the heart of Christian holiness. If we really believe what we say we believe about holiness then our relationships as brothers and sisters in Christ should not so regularly remain broken by unforgiveness.

The third critical component for corporate holiness is unity. Christian unity is the indisputable sign that the people of God have surrendered their own interests to the Kingdom interest of serving God and neighbor. This kind of unity is an important part of holiness not only within congregations but also in terms of the unity that crosses institutional, national, economic, racial, and gender barriers. Where holiness is active the typical prejudices, discriminations, and suspicions between people are disempowered.

The fourth element is service. Corporate holiness is much more than a group of Christians being pious. It is the community of faith actively serving each other and engaging a broken world with acts of sacrificial love and service. This is the common portrait painted of the earliest Christians in Acts. They "were together" and served each other as a basic expression of their faith (Acts 2:44). Corporate holiness is seen in the church laying down its life for outsiders – for its neighbors. Here is where the holiness ethic of "perfect love" (1 John 4:18) is developed.

There are other ways to challenge the church in its understanding, experience, and practice of corporate holiness. I offer these thoughts as a basis for our reflection and discussion as "the holy catholic church."