

## **RE-MINTING CHRISTIAN HOLINESS: OUR GLOBAL OPPORTUNITY**

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Gerhard Ebeling, one of the fathers of modern hermeneutics, once wrote, "The same word can be said to a different time only by being said differently." John Wesley communicated the word about scriptural holiness effectively to 18th century England, but American revivalists had to say it differently in order to convince their fellow-countrymen in the 19th century. I speak out of a British context, where the message of holiness has largely failed to convince most people in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. After 90 years of existence the Church of the Nazarene in our country still has only about 4000 members, and other Wesleyan denominations are also struggling.

Why should this be the case? In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the message of holiness was imported back into Britain by American evangelists, where it met a mixed reaction. On the positive side, groups like the Salvation Army, who worked mainly among the urban poor, found two things particularly effective: the simple clarity of second-blessing crisis-preaching and the emotive power of experience-based testifying. William Booth, who founded the Salvation Army, was above all a pragmatist rather than a theologian and he would use anything that produced results. The Salvationists imitated their American mentors but the message and the methods gradually lost effectiveness.

Those from higher echelons of society and more mainline denominations adapted both message and method to their own cultural and theological context and the Keswick Convention became a rallying-point for a more Anglicised, if not Anglicanised, holiness emphasis. But by the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the Keswick Convention had largely moved away from its holiness roots.

To say then that something radical needs to be done to rediscover holiness in my country in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is not intended as a criticism of many godly predecessors in our Wesleyan-Holiness tradition, but as an honest response to reality. I suspect that in many other world areas represented here there is a similar need. If we Nazarenes hope that this message will impact a multicultural worldwide church in the 21st century, we have no option but to seek biblically-faithful but culturally-relevant new ways of expressing it.

In 1990 my colleagues and I in Manchester began to grapple with this task. We developed a Master's degree in Christian Holiness which tried to re-examine the whole subject right from the beginning. It looked at holiness biblically, theologically, historically, pastorally and in terms of spirituality. It was open to fresh insight from all other Christian traditions - Orthodox, Catholic, Reformed, Anabaptist, Pentecostal/Charismatic - and open to postgraduate students from all denominations.

As the years and the seminars have gone by, we have gained enormously from the experience. Fresh insights have occurred all the time. We have regained confidence in our core doctrine. We have rediscovered the Wesleyan mission to spread the message of scriptural holiness throughout our land and beyond. We have seen God kindle enthusiasm for the message among pastors and teachers in many denominations. We have also striven to make the ideas available to our undergraduates through a final year team-taught BA module.

On the academic front, as an affiliated college of Manchester University we have been permitted to offer PhD degrees in various aspects of Wesleyanism (amongst other things). We have

contributed dictionary articles and chapters of books to Intervarsity Press. We are in negotiations with Paternoster Press about publishing holiness books. The first is already in print - our Principal, Dr McGonigle's own PhD thesis on the Arminianism of John Wesley.

On the church front, one of the big challenges has been to prevent an ever-widening gap developing between ourselves in the college and our district leadership and lay-people. For that reason we began writing at a popular level. Since January 1999 an old British holiness magazine called *The Flame* has allowed us to publish a series of 2000-word magazine articles entitled 'Re-Minting Christian Holiness'. These have allowed us to drip-feed fresh ideas to our people, rather than confronting them with startling new conclusions, and they have been remarkably well-received on the whole. A 90 year-old lady did write to the editor deploring the whole enterprise and my work in particular but she has not been typical. We also preach on holiness weekends in churches and give holiness seminars at district holidays.

It has been a delight to collaborate in a couple of Theology conferences with our colleagues at European Nazarene College in Switzerland and with those on our field who hold postgraduate degrees in Theology. These have resulted in two editions of a new journal *European Explorations in Christian Holiness*, which some of you will hopefully have seen. We have also taught intensive courses on holiness for the Eastern Mediterranean Bible College in Cyprus and in Jordan.

For us the journey of the last twelve years has been exciting and encouraging. For the early years we learned a lot and kept pretty quiet, but through surviving the rigorous scrutiny of external examiners such as Professor I.Howard Marshall and Dean Stephen Smalley we have gained increasing confidence in the validity of our findings. We have always run the risk of being misunderstood as disloyal to the denomination or to the Articles of Faith in the Manual. However, our highest allegiance must always be to the Lord and to his word. If we are faithful to scripture and to the cardinal doctrines of the Christian faith, that is the most loyal service we as educators can offer our church. In our case we have been greatly blessed by the fact that the district superintendent who serves as chairman of our college board of governors has taken the MA in Christian Holiness himself and is now the most loyal supporter we could wish for.

The Bible presents the message of holiness not in a single way but through a variety of models and metaphors. I sometimes think of these as keys of the kingdom. The master metaphor which will serve as key to unlock British hearts and minds to the importance of holy living may be different from the one needed in Asia, Africa or Latin America. Our ultimate aim is to articulate an understanding of Christian Holiness which is sensitive to our British and European contexts and which will galvanise the church. Naturally you are all more than welcome to take advantage of our courses or the resources that we produce but you can't be like David in Saul's armour. You must find your own weapons that suit you, if you are going to win. When we can each preach, teach and live holiness in ways that make sense of the Bible, and that fit our own experience and culture, the Church of the Nazarene will have come of age around the world. I believe that then and only then will we make the impact on our world that we long to see. We commend the re-minting process to you.

(1157 words)

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