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The Relevance of Holiness Today

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On our way to church on Sunday mornings we drive past a large building. The hundreds of parked cars indicate that at least a thousand people flock to that church every Sunday. When I arrive at my church with less than 30 people in a building capable of accommodating at least 200, I wonder why we are not attracting the religious crowds. We are not in competition with others, yet the question arises, why is the one church more attractive than the other? Our church has lost several discouraged and disappointed pastors in the past decade. Is it our doctrine? Is holiness still relevant? Is it me? These and more questions demand careful consideration.

There is no doubt that in the Bible, the doctrine of holiness is presented as a perpetual reminder of God's immutable requirement for salvation. It confirms that holiness is relevant to every generation. However, many Christians of various doctrinal persuasions have difficulty in comprehending this particular doctrine. It could be that spiritual truth is restricted to spiritually awakened believers⁹⁷.

The dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus has Jesus saying, "... unless a man is born again, he cannot SEE the kingdom of God."⁹⁸ The Baptist's ministry was an introduction to salvation. Repentance, the necessary precedent to being born again, is symbolised by water baptism. Forgiveness and reconciliation requires repentance but new converts are short-circuited past repentance to salvation. They are emotionally aroused and invited to "accept Christ". The subsequent, emotionally created, addictive adrenalin flow has to be perpetuated throughout their spiritual journey. The intellect is suppressed with ever-increasing emotional emphasis. The psychological and spiritual consequences are sad to behold and we stand by helplessly watching and praying that God will help us break this terrible barrier to ethical holiness.

⁹⁷ 1 Corinthians 2:14;

⁹⁸ John 3:3 (the word "see" is often misquoted as "enter". But see John 3:5).

It has become a challenge in the light of modern science and intellectualism of our time to prove the doctrinal relevance of our convictions. For the modern man the Bible is outdated; it is a primitive document belonging to the past. There is a vague religious concept that good deeds, a sort of humanistic Mother Theresa kind of holiness, will count for ultimate salvation. The disciples of these un-spiritual notions usually seek out churches that are soft on sin and strong on good deeds. For them, moral purity is not possible and holiness is therefore irrelevant. Is the message of entire sanctification still relevant? The same question could be asked of the Bible. Every story, every historical event recorded in the Bible seems to point clearly to this doctrine. Holiness is not an option, nor is it a doctrine reserved for selected people. It is God's plan of salvation for the entire human race!

The Bible clearly states that entrance into the kingdom of God is reserved for the pure in heart⁹⁹. Several New Testament passages confirm the reality of a resident sinful disposition despite the initial spiritual awakening. The testimonies of Christians throughout church history support this phenomenon. Eventually, the spiritually awakened convert will become aware that he still has a spiritual problem for which there is a solution¹⁰⁰. There is a separate and additional work that must be done in the heart of the regenerated Christian. Part of the problem in teaching the second blessing message is that we have been taught that born-again means salvation. If it is true that we are saved at that point in our spiritual progress, then holiness is indeed optional, especially if I am taught that once I am saved, I am always saved (born again). Why then would I want to have any other costly blessing? Would that not constitute a "works religion"?

Holiness, the eradication of the sinful self, is what we Nazarenes have been entrusted with. Even as John the Baptist's ministry was to prepare the way for Jesus, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, so salvation begins with repentance and perpetuates in the experience of entire sanctification. As long as the human race exists, and as long as the Word of God remains, the process of salvation will not change. Entire sanctification as the subsequent (second) work of grace is as relevant today

⁹⁹ e.g. Matthew 1:21; 5:8; Hebrews 12:14; 2 Thessalonians 2:13; etc

¹⁰⁰ Romans 7:21-25

as it always has been in one form or another throughout the ages.

Another reason the relevance of holiness in our modern age has been questioned is due to the unfortunate confusion that reigns within the ranks of holiness denominations. *When the theology of individual sanctification becomes fuzzy and vague, then the experience of those who listen also becomes unclear*¹⁰¹. The emphasis on holy living is stretched between on the one side legalism and, on the other side licentious living. The legalists demand exclusiveness and the licentious, influenced by the “unconditional eternal security” doctrine, allow for compromise.

At the root of the problem is a misconception of sin. Sin can only really be understood as a “wilful transgression of a known law of God”. No other definition of sin clearly fits the contextual passages of New Testament reading.¹⁰² Could it not also be that we lack a clear understanding of the difference between carnality and infirmity? Human weaknesses are erroneously identified as sin, thus invalidating the possibility of being holy. We should be reminded that God does not call for perfection of performance or faultlessness but for blamelessness¹⁰³. The sanctified life is a life of victorious conflict. Skirmishes with old habits sometimes result in momentary defeat but victory belongs to the one who perseveres. Understanding human nature will help us to make allowances for the whole range of infirmities that remain in various forms even after entire sanctification. Holiness does not exclude amoral human imperfections. However, holy living does require self-discipline and self-control to correct these un-Christ-like elements in our behaviour¹⁰⁴. In preaching and teaching holiness, emphasis should concentrate on the fact that entire sanctification purifies the centre of human personality, the heart, by perfectly obliterating every vestige of sin. God perfects that work in response to the regenerated, consecrated soul, earnestly seeking this wonderful blessing¹⁰⁵. My late father, a well-known layman known as “Uncle Clarrie”, after many years of holiness evangelistic preaching often complained about the lack of hunger for holiness among Christians.

¹⁰¹ Metz, Donald S. *Studies in Biblical Holiness* –p 170

¹⁰² Taylor, Richard. *A Right Conception Of Sin*

¹⁰³ Greathouse, William M. *Love Made Perfect* –p 38; Steele, Daniel - an excellent discussion on this subject in *Milestone Papers* Ch 4 pp 33-36.

¹⁰⁴ 2 Corinthians 7:1

¹⁰⁵ Matthew 5:6

The essential faith element in obtaining the blessedness of a purified heart¹⁰⁶ is often clouded by unrealisable expectations. Some honest seekers have been disappointed and discouraged because they sought angelic – or Adam-like perfection. Some have been criticised and even ostracised because of wrong perceptions by their peers or colleagues.

Someone has appropriately coined the phrase, “holiness is better caught than taught”. The doctrine of entire sanctification is often taught as a process. It is held by some that the process continues through good works. A few holiness preachers believe that no person can live without some sin in their hearts. When confronted with the question as to when the final sin will be dealt with, assuming that no sin can enter heaven, they are at a loss for words. Another group of holiness teachers claim a fairly tolerable concept that the born-again believer grows towards the crisis experience by walking in all the available light until he is convicted of his need for the baptism with the Holy Spirit. However, it is more likely that the entirely sanctified will “walk in the light...” rather than the carnal-natured Christian. There is strong evidence for an urgent appeal to every one who calls on the name of Jesus, to seek the experience of heart holiness at the very earliest in his Christian life as possible, lest his procrastination results in a hardening of the heart¹⁰⁷.

Testimonies to the experience of holiness are very rare. After recently inviting Christians to write their testimonies for me to publish in the monthly church bulletin, my wife’s testimony was the only one I received. She told how, after first hearing the message of holiness, she made several visits to the altar. She finally emerged triumphant after a few weeks through accepting the blessing by pure and simple faith. Her subsequent 28 years of life in the Spirit exemplify the truth of her claims to heart purity. I published her testimony in the church bulletin in the hope of attracting more testimonies but without success. Some people who claim the experience clearly stand apart from those who do not testify to being sanctified but it is probably symptomatic of the vagueness in the teaching from pulpit and local Bible studies that many are hesitant about open testimonies to entire sanctification.

¹⁰⁶ Hebrews 4:2

¹⁰⁷ Hebrews 4:7

Our loving holy God, our Creator, longs to be reconciled with His children. God is still relevant in our modern world and so is His wonderful, unchanging Word. Now, more than ever, it is imperative that we get tuned in to God's Word and seek His special anointing to preach salvation through "*the sanctifying work of the Spirit and belief in the truth*"¹⁰⁸ that ensures a salvation that sets men free from sin.

¹⁰⁸108 2 Thessalonians 2:13