

## Some New Days for Christian Holiness

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Thank you for this invitation to share in this conference. It is a great honor to me personally to have been asked. My prayer is that the Holy Spirit would move in our midst in a gentle yet decisive way. Isaiah 11:2 reminds us of the seven-fold gift of the Holy Spirit. This verse was treasured by the ancient exegetes, because it showed yet again that God desires to visit us with his Holy Spirit.

Let us hear the word of the Lord: “A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him.” That is the first gift of the Holy Spirit. It is the Spirit of the *Lord*, the Spirit of the one true God. The Asia-Pacific region is probably the most religious place on earth from the standpoint of having virtually all of the world’s great religious traditions abundantly represented. As we think together about speaking the truth of Christian holiness across this region, we need a criterion of discernment. We need not just any spirit, for there are millions of spirits across this great territory. We need the Spirit of the Lord.

The remaining six gifts of the Holy Spirit are given in the rest of verse two: the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. My years of living in the Philippines have certainly helped me to appreciate more fully those six gifts of the Spirit: wisdom, understanding, counsel, might, knowledge, and the fear of the Lord. Each of these six may prove to be a small window into understanding the respective cultures represented in this room. That is, each culture here represented may have its own view of wisdom, understanding, counsel, might, knowledge, and the fear of the Lord. Views that are different are not necessarily views that are incompatible. One of the great benefits of a conference like this is cross-fertilization. We are all here to learn from one another. We should not expect uniformity, for we come from different places. But we should expect and strive for unity.

It has been claimed that there are only three theological doctrines upon which all Christians everywhere agree in broad outline. The first one is the trinity of God. The Trinity is the Christian understanding of God. The second one is orthodox Christology, that Jesus Christ is fully human as well as fully divine, what might be called the Person of Jesus Christ. The Christian church has never really formulated to everyone’s satisfaction exactly *how* the divine and the human interact within Jesus Christ, but confesses Jesus to be fully and completely human and totally divine. The third area of broad agreement might be called the Work of Jesus Christ. The work that he comes to do is salvific, although there are obviously tremendous disagreements as to the extent and degree of human depravity, and how God’s grace interacts with the human will.

We all have heard, and we all enjoy repeating, words that Phineas F. Bresee learned from someone else, but made his own: *In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity.*

As I envision this conference’s purposes, some of what we are hoping to accomplish is wrapped up in this motto. What are the *essentials* of the doctrine of holiness, upon which all should be agreed? If we put the essentials in Column A and the non-essentials in Column B, how much interchange might there be between the essentials and the non-essentials? Is what is essential at all shaped by the culture in which we find ourselves thinking about and proclaiming this doctrine? Is doctrine that is influenced by culture still “pure” or even true doctrine?

If we agree with the writer John Updike that by its very nature theology must unravel and then be knitted together again, can we even agree that Christian holiness is predicated on a handful of essentials that cannot be negotiated away?

I believe that all Christian theology is a pilgrim theology, a theology on the way, as opposed to a perennial theology that is impervious to change. What Wesley Tracy called the “prairie theology” of American revivalists and holiness preachers may not be the best theology for the Asia-Pacific region, although there are elements of the prairie theology we would not want to discard or abandon without thinking. For one thing, the immediacy of God. I now live in the state of Oklahoma, where the wind comes sweeping down the plain. I do not like the wind, and yet I think if you checked, in the Bible and in Christian tradition, the wind is a more potent symbol of God’s presence than is the lack of wind. A mighty and rushing wind disturbed the world on the Day of Pentecost. Prairie winds symbolize the divine immediacy.

A pilgrim theology often uses the materials it has close at hand. A pilgrim theology might also be called a local or an ethnic theology. The incarnation of God’s eternal Word in Jesus Christ is the strongest foundation for any pilgrim theology. Only Jesus Christ is the Incarnate One, and yet through the prevalence of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of the Lord Jesus Christ may be discerned everywhere.

During my years of teaching in the Philippines I am sure I saw very many examples of a pilgrim theology. Most of the time I was simply too dense to see what was there to be seen. Any pilgrim theology is sacramental in the sense of using outward signs to convey and teach inward and spiritual graces. I am obviously here using *sacramental* to point to an entire theological world perspective, rather than only to specific means of grace the Christian church practices. Thank the Lord that in some parts of the worldwide Church of the Nazarene sacramental renewal is now going forth.

One striking example of an enacted pilgrim theology came from the broad hands of Alofa Nofoa, a Samoan graduate of Asia-Pacific Nazarene Theological Seminary, during one culture night at the seminary. Within a period of three or four minutes, and maybe less, he made a very serviceable basket out of an ordinary, if large, palm branch. From the stuff of everyday life Alofa made something useful.

That is one criterion of any mature holiness theology. Is it useful? By useful we mean nothing less than the Wesleyan definition of “practical divinity,” not useful as in whatever is expedient or easy to accomplish. Useful is what is a good fit with God’s ongoing economy of salvation. Useful is the means of grace. Useful is the bridge between God’s grace and our human nature.

Throughout the Asia-Pacific region, not all of you live in places where there is an abundance of Christian symbols, practices, institutions, or history. Christianity is simply not a part of the recognized landscape in your country. A pilgrim theology needs *true* entries into the local culture, not necessarily a lot of entries. As the Chinese say, one picture is worth ten thousand words. If we use, for example, rice, pan-de-sal, bread, bananas, even natural phenomena such as mountains, lakes, oceans, fields, volcanoes as stepping stones for our pilgrim theologies, we are not thereby worshiping these things. But we are understanding incarnation as something that ultimately graces all of the created realm. We understand that the Holy Spirit has preceded us wherever we go.

Can you theologize after a trip to the market? Or while waiting to catch a jeepney? I believe that our theological method needs to be at least partially a method “from below,” which is only to say that like John Wesley, we must endeavor to become a “folk theologian,” as Albert Outler so well described Wesley. Tracy’s description of a “prairie theology” is a kind of folk theology, common to the middle section of the United States. But there might also be a volcano theology, a rice field theology, an ocean theology.

A folk theologian’s main resource is of course prevenient grace. This is grace that goes before

us and arrives at our intended destination before we have even taken the first step of our journey.

We must put in our time in the library, but perhaps even more importantly, we must put in our time with ordinary people in the ordinary places where they do ordinary things. I earlier made this comparison, and I think it is still valid. Today's practitioner and proclaimer of Christian holiness is no longer like a neat and tidy physician who makes polite hospital rounds in a white coat that never gets spotted or soiled while checking on his patients. Today's proclaimer of holiness works in the emergency room, where there is real blood, mucus, and excrement. In his book, *A Life of Jesus*, the late Japanese Roman Catholic novelist Shusaku Endo takes us to first-century Palestine where insects bite, babies wail, and the Savior of the world is crucified hanging between two thieves. Not so very different from the Tondo district of Manila.

Bob Dylan once sang, "It's easy to see without looking too far . . . that not much is really sacred." Well, Bob Dylan never visited Taiwan, home to more religious statues and shrines per capita than any other place on earth. Bob Dylan never rode a tricycle, jeepney, taxi, or bus in the Philippines, most of which are strung with religious messages.

Across the Asia-Pacific region the gap between the sacred and the secular is not as broad as in the West, and may be non-existent. Dylan's conclusion, "It's easy to see without looking too far . . . that not much is really sacred" is much more true in diagnosing the Western world than in describing most parts of the Asia-Pacific region, although Australia is one of the most secular places on earth.

*Diagnosis* is always crucial. Henri Nouwen reminds us that the original meaning of diagnosis is to know through and through. *Gnosis* means "knowledge" and *dia* means "through and through."

He remarks that the renowned psychiatrist Karl Menninger one time asked a class of psychiatric residents what was the most important part of treating mental patients. After hearing several answers that did not satisfy him, Dr. Menninger said that what was crucial was knowing the patient through and through, or diagnosis. Obviously, each of you knows your culture far better than any outsider ever could. God has granted you discernment into what makes your culture unique, what gives it coherence, shape, and hope.

The doctrine of holiness simply states that through Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, all human beings can share in the life that God intended for us originally. Holiness theology takes very seriously Paul's message to the Corinthians: "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" Renewal and recreation are what God intends for us.

It is a holy God who sanctifies wholly. Holiness people have perhaps not lingered long enough before the holiness of God. We have been too eager to rush ahead to the benefits of what God's sanctifying Spirit can create within us. With the Reformer Philip Melancthon, we have believed that to know Christ is to know Christ's benefits. That is true enough, but benefits can never finally be disjoined from the one who gives them, because any gift is a real and true representation of the one who gives it. How very true that often is for missionaries, because missionaries often receive from native peoples costly gifts and benefits that are given at a great sacrifice to those who give. And that is often a true statement about the giver, that the giver is indeed someone not afraid to sacrifice.

We start our theology of Christian perfection with the holiness of God, but we seldom end there. We end with ourselves as those who have received, with the believer being made Christianly perfect by the Holy Spirit.

*We* are the ones who receive sanctifying grace, but it is the *Holy Spirit* who sanctifies. We cannot and should not attempt to unlink those who are being sanctified from the one who sanctifies, although the natural human drift is toward self-absorption. From beginning to end, God is the sanctifying God. Our theology of sanctification should begin with God, and should end with God.

It has been claimed by some in the United States that the holiness movement is dead. Some who agree with this assessment want to revive the movement in one way or another, while others are sad to see the movement gone, but expect that the Holy Spirit will have something better.

I hope all here today would agree that one definite act of the Holy Spirit in our time is the spread of the gospel outside of the traditional centers of Christendom, a Christendom that probably is now dead. Some estimate as many as 75% of the world's Christians now live in Africa, South and Central America, and Asia.

These places are ripe for receiving the gospel because, as Jesus Christ said, those who are well do not realize their need of him. The wealthy Western world has largely chosen the easy path of secularism over the hard path of righteousness. In *this* time, the Holy Spirit is raising up new peoples in surprising and unexpected ways. The Holy Spirit is working among the poor of the world. That is perhaps the chief grace of the Holy Spirit for our time, to show himself among the poor of the world. In time this showing will lead to a truly indigenized theology, and away from theologies that have been transplanted from foreign and even alien lands.

My own eight years in the Philippines reflected a sort of pilgrimage toward a more indigenized theology. Within the first semester or two I realized that my students should be reading at least some theology written by their own people. Some have radicalized this idea to the point of suggesting that Western theology, written and taught by old and now dead white men, had nothing to teach seminarians who were gathered from across the Asia-Pacific region. While I do not hold that view, I do believe that one main reason we imported so many books from the United States is that evangelical theology around the Asia-Pacific region was and to some degree remains underdeveloped. A conference like this one should at least inspire people to go forth and produce theological works that can be used in the teaching, nurture, and evangelization of their own people.

One time a missionary told me that Tagalog, spoken by millions of Filipinos, lacked a technical theological vocabulary. I think my answer to that, if indeed it is true, would be to encourage Tagalog speakers to work with what they have, within the riches offered by the language. They will likely find that these riches are more than enough to state the truths of entire sanctification and other central teachings in fresh and vital language that will move those who hear and read it. No language on the face of the earth is static. Languages change and develop. Theologians working in Tagalog can begin to develop technical vocabulary as it is needed.

I believe that the Church of the Nazarene as a whole should devote relatively less money to translating works written by American Nazarene theologians, however good those works may be, and relatively more money to training indigenous theologians to the point where they can indeed produce works of indigenous theology, on their own, for their own. The continuing importation of American Nazarene theology around the world, even in translated form, will in the long run impede the growth of a genuinely indigenized theology. Many will want to say that the Church of the Nazarene is not yet ready for a truly indigenized theology. But if not now, when? If not today, when?

If we are committed to the holiness movement, our first concern must be with God the Holy One. It is a dangerous thing to come too close to the Holy God. Moses and other Old Testament heroes of faith were surprised when they looked upon the Holy One of Israel and survived.

Wolfhart Pannenberg reminds us that one of the definitions of holiness in the Bible is the opposition to all that is profane. I think we need to recapture some of that holy otherness of God. We may want to return to Rudolf Otto's great work, *The Idea of the Holy*, where he stresses that the holy is a non-rational idea, a concept that is not contrary to reason, but a truth that is simply not open to traditional rational investigation. We might say that the non-rational, or the *numinous* as Otto calls it, simply runs on a different track than does the rational.

He develops this of course in three related ways. God is *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. God is an overpowering mystery who fascinates us and overwhelms us at the same time, perhaps even attracts and repels us at the same time. Otto says that the fundamental religious attitude is the one displayed by Abraham, who when he appears before God says, “I am only dust and ashes.”

For Rudolf Otto God’s otherness is not necessarily opposed to his moral qualities of faithfulness, mercy, and love, but the otherness is in some ways *prior* to these moral qualities. At least one Nazarene theologian took issue with Otto’s interpretation of God’s holiness in the early parts of the Old Testament, claiming Otto was simply wrong to place God’s otherness before his moral attributes.

The otherness of God translates directly into a healthy respect for what is sacred, or in Christian terms we would rather say “who is sacred.” A central part of the Asian approach to life is respect for the sacred. We see this in the Confucian sense of filial piety. Even Rudolf Otto sensed this yearning for the holy during a journey across Asia. He tells of being overshadowed and overawed by a giant image of the Buddha, although he saw himself as a Christian historian of religions. We do not necessarily need to make the same pilgrimage as Otto to reach his conclusion that the sense of the sacred is very much alive across Asia.

The sacred as respect is abundantly seen in the way elders are honored across this region. During one of my first visits back to the United States, after being more respected by my Asian students than I probably deserved, I briefly stopped by my old school, where I had attended the third and fourth grades. A girl of only twelve or thirteen rudely asked me what time it was, or perhaps for directions to get some place, and when I could not supply what she needed, she abruptly disregarded me, without a word of thanks. I was home again, yet the home I had left was not the home to which I had returned. For in the interim both home and I had changed. By God’s grace I hope I had changed for the better. I was not sure I could say the same about my home.

Any one who enters an unfamiliar place for the first time should first of all show respect. A great mystery should attend our arrival. We should hold our tongues and open our eyes, ears, and hearts. We should not get too familiar with a new place, and we should *never* get too familiar with the Lord God. Take off your sandals, Moses! Come no closer! The place on which you are standing is holy ground (Exodus 3:5).

*Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; The whole earth is full of his glory. The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. And I said: “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!” (Isaiah 6:3-5)*

We know how this story ends. One of the seraphs takes a live coal and touches Isaiah’s lips. The prophet’s guilt and sin are blotted out. When the Lord asks who will go for him, Isaiah resolutely answers, “Here am I; send me!”

It is good to get to the end of the story, but we must not forget how we got there. No angel comes *to us* with a live coal unless we say with Isaiah, “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips.”

In Isaiah 6 we can see how the non-rational moves to the moral. To say “woe is me!” is to recognize with Abraham that before God we are but dust and ashes. It is to recognize our smallness before the Lord. As C.S. Lewis said, when we are truly in God’s presence, we should look upon ourselves as an insect. God’s otherness is never the final word, but I believe we need to speak “woe is me!” from the depths of our hearts before the angel can purify our lips. It is always God who invites himself into our lives, not we who dictate the terms of our knowing God. We often forget this.

We commonly say that the proof of the doctrine of holiness is experiential, which is true enough. However, we seldom go on from there to try to define or illustrate by example what we mean

by experiencing in a religious or spiritual way.

At a minimum, in describing religious experience I think we must say that event and context must come together to form a coherent whole, and if event and context are discrepant or not in harmony, then the experience is less authentic than it might be otherwise.

Let me try to illustrate with two or three examples taken from my time of living in the Philippines. One hot January afternoon I was walking through San Juan when all of a sudden I was hit by a water balloon on my shoulder. It bounced off to the pavement, not bursting, although bursting might have felt good in the tropical heat. Of course I wondered why someone had tossed a water balloon my way, and continued on walking. I soon realized it was the feast day of John the Baptist. How better to celebrate the one who *baptized* than by throwing water around? When I realized this I did not exactly welcome the water that came my way, but did not dread it either.

The many times I watched Filipinos practicing their Roman Catholicism were intensely interesting to me personally, but because I am neither Roman Catholic nor Filipino, these experiences were not as forceful or even as true as they would otherwise have been. Trying to see Pope John Paul II with Doug Flemming in Manila, trekking through Quiapo on Good Friday, walking to Antipolo on Maundy Thursday were all memorable experiences. They were *clarifying* but not *converting* experiences.

A man I highly regard, Hitoshi Fukue, has often reminded me that the thought world of Asians is more cosmocentric than in the West, where the view might be called anthropocentric. For Asians the human element finds its place on a cosmic grid, against a cosmic backdrop.

The doctrine of holiness is called to be theocentric, centered on the Triune God, although in the case of much traditional Nazarene theology it seems to be more anthropocentric. The quality, depth, immediacy, and perhaps frequency of religious experiences may be more important than the God who grants them. The subjective, personal, existential element is never far from the center of Nazarene piety. The personal overwhelms the cosmic and may even overwhelm the divine.

The danger of this sort of piety is that the personal can quickly degenerate into the private. The cosmic framework of Eastern thought seems to me to be a better fit with such classic Christian doctrines and expectations as the sacraments, the church, and the communion of saints.

I believe that holiness theology should therefore not shun or ignore the cosmic to which Eastern thought is naturally drawn. Remember, Christianity started on the western edge of Asia, so in that regard Christianity should share some elements of the Eastern cosmic view. Parts of the New Testament can be read to support a cosmic worldview. To say, as Paul does in 2 Corinthians 5, that “in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself” is a cosmic statement. Traditional holiness theology has said that God sanctifies the world one individual soul at a time. Paul, however, speaks boldly of the entire world. The Acts of the Apostles looks ahead to a time of universal restoration and Colossians chapter one is the classic text for a cosmic Christology.

When John Wesley proclaimed “the whole world is my parish,” he was not thinking cosmically in exactly the same way a Hindu or a Buddhist might. Yet in his own Christian way he was thinking cosmically. In one of the final sermons John Wesley wrote, when he was an old man, he exulted over the possibility of *full and final redemption*, not only for each person, but for the whole of creation. For his sermon “The New Creation,” Wesley chose for his text Revelation 21:5, “Behold, I make all things new.” Here is how he ended this visionary sermon, “And to crown all, there will be a deep, an intimate, an uninterrupted union with God; a constant communion with the Father and his Son Jesus Christ, through the Spirit; a continual enjoyment of the Three-One God, and of all the creatures in him!” (sermon “The New Creation,” section 18).

A cosmic perspective on the doctrine of holiness stresses harmony between the human subject and the universe. Cosmic holiness, as H. Ray Dunning and others have stressed, emphasizes the

importance of four relationships as constituting the holy life. First, of course, is our relationship with God. Our relationships with others, the physical creation, and our own persons are the other three.

While our relationship with the Triune God is the most important of the four, this one relationship can never stand alone. It is only as healthy as the other three relationships. There is here perhaps a rough analogy with the Wesleyan quadrilateral. We all know that Scripture is the chief source of theology, yet Scripture is a dead letter unless examined by God-graced reason, renewed through Spirit-led tradition and lived through Christ-centered experience.

Much Eastern philosophy understands the cosmic as ultimately absorbing the personal. The universe itself is non-personal or possibly even impersonal. For some kinds of Buddhism, the question of God is not even all that important. The idea of God may be one more obstacle or roadblock that stands in the path of complete enlightenment.

Wesleyan holiness theology should be cosmic in the sense of believing in and working toward the restoration of all things. To be a cosmic Christian and a world Christian are one and the same thing. But holiness theology must never be cosmic in the sense of absorbing the individual into an impersonal whole. Knowing the Triune God accentuates our personhood. Eastern cosmological thought may work in the direction of destroying our personhood through diffusion and absorption. However, we must be certain that our ideas of the personal are firmly rooted in the Trinity, and not in secular individualism.

Listen once again to three particular phrases Wesley used to close that sermon: “an uninterrupted union, a constant communion, a continual enjoyment.” Union, communion, and enjoyment are all affirmations more than they are denials and negations. Union, communion, and enjoyment speak first of all of what God wants to give us, rather than of what we have to forsake.

One lingering regret I have after leaving Asia is never having learned to speak Tagalog. The excuses as to why I never studied that language are largely self-justifications. Filipinos were always kind and polite, not embarrassing me with my lack of knowing Tagalog.

Culture is so largely defined by language that it seems impossible for anyone really to know any culture without knowing the language that it uses to express itself. To some degree, of course, language is unspoken, but rather expressed by the ways in which we move our bodies, hold our heads, gesture, even walk. And I do think I came by and by to be able to read Filipinos’ non-verbal language to one degree or another.

One Sunday morning when Judy Pabilando was still Judy Solito, my wife Stephanie and I visited the church that Judy was helping to hold together with her persistence. She started to pray in English, and it was a very good prayer, an expressive prayer, a prayer of hope, faith, and love. But about halfway into her prayer she switched to praying in Tagalog. Now there was not only faith, hope, and love, but urgency, passion, and power.

How can I express this difference that seems so clear in my mind but so difficult to speak? We sense intuitively, but perhaps cannot speak clearly, what it means to be raised to a more true and deep awareness. It has happened to all of us. Call it the difference between praying with an understandable voice and praying with a native voice. Call it the difference between a green banana and a ripe banana. Call it, perhaps, the difference between initial sanctification and entire sanctification.

The relationship between grace and nature is one of the defining criteria for any Christian theology. In one way or another, every doctrine of holiness addresses how grace and nature are to be related to each other. The grace of God, which I think in this case is a virtual synonym for the love and mercy of God, is the one thread that runs throughout the doctrine of Christian perfection. Whether we speak of prevenient grace, justifying grace, sanctifying grace, glorifying grace, or even

sacramental grace, it is still God's undeserved mercy made present to us in Jesus Christ.

In his famous sermon, "The Scripture Way of Salvation," John Wesley seemed to recognize the organic quality of salvation. His text was Ephesians 2:8, "Ye are saved through faith." The salvation promised in this pivotal text "might be extended," Wesley thought, "to the entire work of God, from the first dawning of grace in the soul, till it is consummated in glory."

Any journey is conceived in wholeness, treasured in completeness before it has even started, and yet necessarily undertaken and carried forth in definite steps, even fragments.

Poetically, and for that matter theologically, the reality of Christian perfection has seldom been better expressed than in Charles Wesley's magnificent hymn *Arise, My Soul, Arise*.

The hymn begins by rousing the slumbering soul to shake off its guilty fears, yet this hymn is not primarily about *our need* to be saved. The provision God has made in Jesus Christ is uppermost in this hymn. Jesus Christ lives above, continuing his unfinished priestly intercession for us and for all humankind. Even in his exalted state, the Son of God evidently still bears the five bleeding wounds. These wounds

*pour effectual prayers,  
They strongly speak for me:  
Forgive him, Oh! forgive, they cry,  
Nor let that ransomed sinner die.*

The prayers of God the Son are heard by God the Father. The Holy Spirit who is the bond of love between the Father and the Son "answers to the blood, and tells me I am born of God." The final stanza is the climax:

*My God is reconciled,  
His pard'ning voice I hear;  
He owns me for his child,  
I can no longer fear:  
With confidence I now draw nigh,  
And, Father, Abba, Father, cry!*