

On Hermeneutic Lens and Holiness

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That God calls his people to holiness and can gift them in actuality with a holy character is *not in dispute*. That one can read various NT texts as witnessing to “secondness” and “instantaneousness” and that such a reading can enable people to articulate faithfully what God is doing in their personal lives is also *not in dispute*. The position I argue for briefly here with regard to God’s gift of holiness to his people is that using the hermeneutical lens of “secondness” and “instantaneousness” is not the *only* faithful way for a community to read NT texts that facilitates a context in which God can shape the community into a holy community, i.e., one that is permeated with God’s character / Holy Spirit.

Although the language of “secondness” and “instantaneousness” has deep roots in the history of the Church of the Nazarene, it is being used less frequently by both our clergy and laity. Providing a biblical basis for the usage the terms has been complicated by the fact that neither word actually appears in the Bible. This, in itself, does not mean that the ideas are not present there any more than the fact that the word “Trinity” is not present in the Bible means that that idea isn’t present. Like the use of the word “Trinity” these terms represent a pattern of judgments that has emerged by reflecting on particular biblical texts.

It is arguable that the *widespread* use of this pattern of judgments was generated by an experience of the way that God was working in the lives of individuals in particular social settings such as that of 19th century revivalism. The crisis experience that many had subsequent to their regeneration necessitated the descriptive terms of both “secondness” and instantaneousness in order to adequately convey what God was doing in their lives. In order to make sense of this, they did what Christians (and Jews for that matter) have always done,¹ they went to Scripture and found there testimony to what they understood God to be doing in their own lives, i.e., testimony to a second, definite, instantaneous work of God’s grace in their lives. Such language then was solidified into a pattern of judgments that became, in effect, the hermeneutical lens of choice through which individuals seeking to be shaped into a holy person could read numerous scriptures. In these kinds of interpretive communities, this way of reading the Bible began to generate expectations that went beyond simply *describing* how people *could* experience God’s working in their lives to an exclusive *prescription* as to how one *should* experience it. The question I want to raise here is whether or not this last interpretive move is biblically warranted in light of the changed historical / social context of the American church and in light of the global diversity of the denomination. To be specific, is using the hermeneutical lens of “secondness” and “instantaneousness” the only faithful way for a *community* to read NT texts that facilitates a context in which God can shape that community into a holy community, i.e., one that is permeated with God’s character / Holy Spirit.

It is not possible to explore a wide range of NT texts here, nor even to explore a few texts in depth. Hence, I will concentrate on aspects of 1 Thess 3:10-4:8 and then move to 5:23, the text from which

¹This is analogous to the way that early Christians made sense of what God was doing in their world when God raised one who was crucified as messiah from the dead. They went to scripture and reinterpreted it in light of their experience of God’s working in their world.

we draw the nomenclature of “entire sanctification.” These texts witness to God’s call of his people to holiness / entire sanctification and to God’s ability to gift them in actuality with a holy character. But is *this particular portion of scripture* best read as describing this gift as second and instantaneous? At times, some have used Paul’s prayer in 3:10 that he may return “to complete the deficiencies” in his audience’s faith as an indication that they are lacking an individual experience called “entire sanctification.” But, to press the grammar of the passage, “deficiencies” is plural, not singular as one would expect if the reference is to a particular individual experience. Since this is a community straight out of paganism, living in a culture dominated by Roman imperial ideology, a more persuasive way of reading this text is to presume that Paul hopes to return to Thessalonica in order to continue the process of resocializing them “into a new and distinctively Christian pattern of behavior and practice.”² In his absence, he attempt to continue this process with the language of holiness that follows.

In the prayer-wish that follows in 3:11-13, Paul connects the language of holiness (*en hagiosynē*) with communal practices whose causal agent is the risen Lord. He prays (in v. 12) that *the Lord will cause* his audience to increase and abound *in love toward each other and toward all* just as Paul has concretely abounded in love toward them. That Paul understands love (*agapē*) as concrete *practices*, not as warm feelings, is beyond doubt.³ The reason for the Lord’s action in the community is “in order that your hearts might be established blameless (*amemptous*) in holiness (*en hagiosynē*) . . . at the parousia of our Lord Jesus.” Here it is the *Lord’s action* that opens the community to increase in a specific set of *concrete practices of love* toward each other. Since these are practices that they are *already engaged in* (1:3; 3:6; 4:9-10), the Lord’s action to cause them to increase in the community is portrayed as the continuation of God’s transforming of them into a community of holiness, a community blameless at the eschaton because it is permeated with God’s character / Holy Spirit. Somehow, in the midst of these concrete practices of love, God is depicted as sanctifying the community.

There is a similar pattern of thinking in 4:1-8 although these verses have in view the avoidance of certain practices. Although the particular practices Paul cautions against in vv. 3-7 are not completely clear, they appear to be sexual in nature. What seems clear is that the audience, knowing certain commands Paul has given them, is currently “walking in a way that is pleasing to God” (vv. 1-2). With the word “for” (*gar*), connecting v. 3 with vv. 1-2, Paul says, “For this is the will of God, your sanctification (*hagismos*).” They are currently walking in a particular way, engaging in concrete practices and avoiding others (as detailed in vv. 3-8), practices that they are able to embody or avoid *because of God’s gifting* them with the Holy Spirit (v. 8). It is because God has called them *en hagiasmō* (“into the sphere where God’s sanctification takes place”⁴) that enables them to experience God’s will, i.e., their sanctification. Paul nowhere implies that this audience is engaging in the sexual practices he warns them about in these verses. He portrays these practices as ones that would hinder God’s sanctification, acts committed by individuals that would threaten God’s sanctification of the entire community.⁵

²Charles A. Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians*, NICGNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990) 139.

³Cf. the action language of 1 Cor 13 as well as the paradigmatic understanding of what love means for Paul in Rom 5:8.

⁴Wanamaker’s language, 157.

⁵Cf. Paul’s concerns in 1 Corinthians 5 where sexual immorality within the community is threatening the holiness of the entire community.

In 3:10-4:8 then, Paul's desire is that his audience will continue some of their current concrete practices (acts of love) and increase them and continue avoiding others (i.e., acts of sexual immorality) that threaten the holiness / sanctification of the community. In other words, in the sphere where the Holy Spirit given by God is active, God's sanctifying activity takes place in the midst of particular practices. When we come then to 1 Thess 5:23-24, the only passage in the NT that ever actually uses the language of "entirely sanctify," it is crucial to allow Paul's preceding discourse to shape the way it is read. This is particularly true since this "wish-prayer" functions as a recapitulation of the main themes of the letter and cannot be understood apart from the preceding, particularly 3:11-13. Hence, when Paul says in v. 23, "May the God of peace himself, sanctify (*bagiasai*) you entirely," the aorist infinitive, *bagiasai*,⁶ should be taken as referring to the *whole process* to which Paul has been referring. It is precisely the activity of the risen Lord in 3:12 in causing the audience to "increase and abound in practicing love" that will establish them blameless (*amemptos*) in holiness (*bagiosyne*) at the coming of our Lord." Hence, the following clause (v. 23b) is best taken as explicative of the preceding one and translated as "that is, may your whole spirit, soul, and body be kept blameless (*amemptos*) at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." In v. 24 Paul reminds the audience that their being "entirely sanctified" occurs in the midst of particular practices and is accomplished by God, the one who is faithful and "will do [it]."

What this short paper suggests is *not* that there are no biblical warrants for using the language of "secondness" and "instantaneousness" to enable one to faithfully articulate what God is doing in their personal life. Rather it raises the question as to whether such language ought to function as an exclusive *prescription* as to how one must experience God's sanctifying activity within a community gifted with God's Holy Spirit. I have taken the position that using the hermeneutical lens of "secondness" and "instantaneousness" is not the *only* faithful way for a community to read NT texts that facilitates a context in which God can shape that community into a holy community, i.e., one that is permeated with God's character / Holy Spirit. If this is true, we may find that fresh readings of biblical texts dealing with holiness emerging from the diverse social settings of a global church will rekindle the fire of holiness among us all.

⁶On this common use of the aorist infinitive in wish-prayers, see BDF 337.4.