

CHRISTLIKENESS: TO WHAT EXTENT IS THIS A DEFINABLE AND USEFUL MODEL OF THE HOLY LIFE FOR THE CHURCH OF THE NAZARENE IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY?

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For Western Christianity, 'being like Christ' has become one of the standard ways of describing the holy life. The unstated assumption is that this is a universal, timeless model easily comprehended by people in every age and culture. We read the biblical descriptions through our cultural lens, with its focus on the individual and a set of qualities that are essentially personal, private, interior and spiritual. Experientially, the Spirit then 'bears witness' to the presence of such qualities, enabling the person to testify to this state of grace. Furthermore, the Christlike life is often described in terms of certain observable behaviours (for example, not drinking alcohol as a beverage) to which moral values have been attached; therefore the moral/ethical quality that is most valued in a Christian's life is obedience to the commands of God. Unfortunately, this keeps us in a perpetual debate with Reformed churches over the definition of sin, the degree to which we can be free from it and the extent to which we can 'keep the law'. To the degree that we keep the parameters of the debate within the context of the legal framework of guilt, the penal substitutionary theory of the atonement and justification, we fail to address the issues raised by cultural frameworks outside of Western Christianity.

The fact that the majority of our present church members are not Western Christians makes it all the more important that we carefully consider the matter of cultural readings of the Scripture and the paradigms we use to explicate our theological stance. The issue is complicated by the fact that the Western church is increasingly having to deal with both a post-modern and a post-Christian environment and this is much more advanced in some Western countries than in others. The unstated assumption in our Special Rules is that it is a fairly straightforward matter to uncover the 'timeless biblical principles' that we then apply to 'contemporary society'; in this way we fulfil our responsibility to 'particularize the Christian life so as to lead to a holiness ethic'. We allow for cultural adaptations 'approved by the Board of General Superintendents' but at the moment they all come from the particular culture that has largely shaped the 'picture' of the holy life currently set out in the Manual. While we acknowledge that a holy life may look differently in different cultural settings, the 'viewpoint' (intended or not) is primarily from the USA. For example, the statement in 35.5 that all public schools are prohibited by law from teaching Christianity; this is true in the USA but not so in many other countries of the world. The term 'Christlike' may look different in other cultures because they 'see' a different picture in the Bible from the one we see in the West. It would not be helpful in maintaining a single denomination worldwide if we could not substantially agree on our 'picture' of a holy life.

While we do not have complete access to the interior life of Christ, we do have his message, his actions and his relationships from which we can attempt to construct a model that is not simply based on subjective experience. The life of Jesus Christ demonstrates what it means to live in relationship with God and with other people, and that this relationship with other

persons was an essential condition of the relationship with God. The common ‘moral-obedient’ view of holiness in the West, where obedience forms the basis of our personal relationship with God, may be increasingly problematic as the church becomes increasingly non-Western. A more fruitful paradigm with which to work could be the ‘functional model’.¹ That is, we were created to function (to think and act) in harmony with the nature God has given to us and this is primarily demonstrated through our relationships. The essence of our relationship with God is then faith/trust rather than law/obedience, so that holiness (Christlikeness) is functioning in harmony with the nature with which God created us. Sin results from the choice to cease to live according to our nature (trusting God’s goodness and faithfulness), bringing about the distortion and destruction of all of our relationships with God and neighbour. Sin and holiness are not primarily private, interior realities but public and relational realities; we need to remember that the Ten Commandments are structured around relationships (God and ‘neighbour’) and not our interior life. Law/obedience can then be removed as the defining paradigm of human existence, while acknowledging its role to uncover our dysfunctionality and to make it plain that we cannot correct this utilising our own resources. This would allow us to explore potentially more useful biblical metaphors that would resonate with a wider range of cultures, such as ‘reconciliation’ and ‘new creation’.

A functional model of Christlikeness, with its key emphasis on relationships, returns us to the centrality of the doctrine of the Trinity in Christian theological reflection. Genuine relationship is understood through reflecting on the way that the persons of the Trinity relate to each other and to the whole of Creation. Jesus Christ is the concrete demonstration of how this works out in a specific human life in a specific culture and time. We are then invited to be ‘in Christ’ as a new creation and thus able to participate in the life and relationships of the Triune God. We, in turn, model this graciously restored ‘functionality’ in our culture and time through our participation in the life of the church and ministry to the world. Holiness is then relationship-based and community-shaped; it is a holistic experience that takes seriously our time and culture-specific reality. The qualities of a holy life are then evaluated by the judgement of the Spirit-led community, whether this is at local church, district, region or the general church level. This maintains the role of the physical community as a place of wisdom and discernment and therefore essential to the life of holiness. Working towards a consensus on the ‘marks’ of holiness would then restore the central Wesleyan value of ‘conference’ across the whole church and not merely a discussion among a privileged group from any one culture who make decisions for the rest of the church.

¹ Donald L. Alexander, *The Pursuit of Godliness: Sanctification in Christological Perspective* (New York: University Press of America, 1999), see especially 34-47.