

Response

by

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By the end of Andy Johnson’s paper it is clear that his intention is to loosen the *prescriptive* method by which we hope to lead people into the experience of holiness and sanctification. He is clearly comfortable with the way sanctification has been expressed within the Nazarene tradition, but evidently uncomfortable with the ongoing practice of *prescribing* certain methods by which a person should arrive at the experience of sanctification. He reinforces this claim by pointing out that the concepts of “secondness” and “instantaneousness” are not necessary products of our reading of Scripture, even if they are reasonable and correct interpretations of the Biblical witness.

Where Johnson’s reasoning seems particularly strong is in the flexibility he calls for in the expression of holiness. The diversity of religious experience reported in Scripture seems to reveal a variety of different approaches by which humans enter into the sanctified life. If Johnson can, in fact, establish that even one person in the Bible entered into a life of holiness without the concept of “instantaneousness” he has established that we should use caution when we use *prescriptive* language, which might exclude and alienate someone who comes to experience holiness gradually, with no definitive, sanctifying “instant.”

I would stretch Johnson’s point a bit further. *Prescribing* particular forms of religious experience is a dangerous undertaking indeed. The moment we *prescribe* the ways in which God can work in a person’s life, we have potentially road-blocked the creativity of God, perhaps preventing a person from experiencing God in a new and surprising way. In essence, this denies the possibility that we might actually *learn* from the holiness and sanctification of the “other.” When religious experience is *prescribed* in rigid fashion, the “other” is automatically encompassed and neutralized by the church. Our openness to God’s future must include an openness to God’s presence and voice in the “other.”

The concept of *prescription* is a totalitarian concept; it assumes that the *prescriber* possesses ultimate knowledge within the subject it prescribes, and the “other” is responsible to simply assimilate that knowledge. Our eschatological hope makes this attitude particularly dangerous, since we carry an abiding hope that God is leading creation toward the culmination of God’s Kingdom. By totalizing the “other” we potentially strip the encounter of its potential to reveal the inbreaking presence and newness of God. This attitude stagnates faith and stalls the attempts of God to lead us to a better future. And this is why Johnson points out that the categories of “instantaneousness” and “secondness” ought to be reconsidered as “prescribed” categories. It is his contention that these are legitimate means of arriving at a holiness lifestyle, but should not be cast in iron, preventing people who might be associated with this denomination from experiencing holiness in another fashion.

At the same time we are right to be somewhat cautious. The authority of Scripture gives us at least some way to discern and determine what *is* and what *is not* an authentic expression of Christianity. We certainly have ample reason to doubt the sincere Christian spirituality of one who claims to approach the biblical concept of holiness with hateful disposition, dishonesty, selfish motivations, unethical lifestyle, etc. By all reasonable interpretations, these mannerisms (and many more) bear little resemblance to the Biblical concept of holiness. While the language of *prescription* remains dangerously totalitarian, we are equipped by God’s Word to deny that such lifestyles adequately represent holiness living.

Nonetheless, Johnson appears to have grouped “secondness” and “instantaneousness” in the same category, though these concepts should be dealt with distinctly. The concept of “secondness,” has a stronger basis both logically and Biblically. While stopping short of the language of *prescription*, the category of “secondness” appears to be entirely inoffensive. If holiness and sanctification are to be understood as relational, rather than moral categories, secondness is a logical necessity. A relationship is an ongoing, temporal and historical development, each moment different than the one before. Because of prevenient grace, even the first breath we take cannot be rightfully categorized as “firstness,” because God’s grace has come before it. So for those who believe in God’s prevenient grace, secondness is the story of life. If holiness and sanctification signify a *way of living into God’s future*, rather than a destination for Christian living, then the concept of a *second* or *deeper* movement in relationship to God and others seems logical to the point of absurdity. Regardless of whether we come to the experience of holiness instantaneously or gradually, that movement was inevitably preceded by another movement. In a very real sense, prevenient grace even robs “justification” of its firstness.

The only way the language of “secondness” becomes potentially offensive is if holiness becomes a destination, so that someone might at least contest, “I arrived at justification and sanctification simultaneously.” Since sanctification is best articulated in relational terms, it still remains logically second, since that first moment of justification will be followed by a life of sanctification. How could my second day of loving and living in a relationship with God come before the first? How could my first and my hundredth day of complete commitment to the cross happen simultaneously? The concept of “secondness” is therefore part of the definition of relational sanctification.

Useful (but impractical) at this point would be an exegetical study of biblical examples of holiness, showing that some sense of “secondness” is implied in every Biblical reference to sanctification. This would verify that “secondness” is in fact part of our “hermeneutical lens” when we approach the concept of holiness. We then could conclude that while Johnson correctly reminds us to be cautious about *prescribing* religious experience, the concept of “secondness” appears to be a necessary part of our Biblical definition of the sanctified life.