

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?
David McEwan

Response
by
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I am honored to have been asked to participate in this historic conference. I am especially pleased to respond to any reflection on “Christlikeness,” a subject that preoccupies all of us. I have not known David McEwan until now, but I am taken by his penetrating insights. I am blessed and encouraged by the series of papers that have been presented to this point.

I. I ESPECIALLY LIKE:

- A. His affirmation of the historic data as reliable. — “We do have his (Christ’s) message, his actions and his relationships from which we can...construct a model.”

The generation just ahead of mine gave up in their quest for “the historical Jesus.” McEwan is not so handicapped. We do have data to help us know – in terms of the ubiquitous WWJD, “What Would Jesus Do,” say, how he might relate, etc. A model that has specific ethical content is especially important in the midst of the current pneumatic movement that focuses on an emotional experience with little, if any, ethical demands. “Christlikeness” provides a model for conduct that is taken from the life of Christ himself.

- B. I also like his choice of a model that is “functional.” — “We were created to function in harmony with the nature God has given us.”

I like that. I do wonder if the “nature” I have been given has been affected by sin so that it may not function as it ought in a variety of relationships. But I like the “functional” model. As he says, “It speaks of a more fruitful paradigm.”

- C. I also find his definition of holiness appealing. “Holiness is functioning in harmony with the nature with which God created us.” — I find these three insights especially helpful as we consider “Christlikeness” as a model for the holy life.

II. I am LESS COMFORTABLE with what appears to me to be some polar distinctions he makes that might not be as “polar” as he infers. I may have misinterpreted, so I will refer to them very briefly.

- A. The first distinction that he submits as “polar” (my term) is “Western World” vs. “The Non-Western World.” The “Western World” is identified as “personal, private, interior, spiritual” as well as “subjective.” A key ethical issue for the western world, he indicates, is alcohol as a beverage. I guess the non-western world is the opposite in all these ways—the assumption being that the world of the Bible is much more like the non-western world. I wonder if this is not an oversimplification. I wonder if every culture has its own paradigm; that is, in its own way, at odds with the message, actions and relationships of Christ.
- B. Then there is the distinction he makes between Faith / Trust vs. Law / Obedience. “Our relationship with God is (then) faith/trust rather than law/obedience.” — As I said earlier, “I like his emphasis on faith/trust.” But are they polar opposites from law/obedience so that we must choose one rather than the other? Does the Garden of Gethsemane have anything to say about the role of painful obedience in the life of Christ?

I am LESS COMFORTABLE with these as polar distinctions.

III. And I WONDER, as this conversation continues, if we need to find AN AGREED UPON DOCTRINE OF SIN.

McEwan includes this definition: 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 OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD AND NEIGHBOR.

As we work toward a fuller definition of sin, I would ask:

- What of “original sin” or “depravity?”
- Have holiness people been right to speak of “the corruption of the nature of all the offspring of Adam?” Manual Constitution Article V
- Does Wesley’s “prevenient grace” fit here somewhere?
- If we acknowledge a “sinful nature” what does that do to the McEwan definition of sin as “ceasing to live according to our nature?” Which nature?

I commend McEwan for presenting this case so well and hope my observations may stimulate further conversation. I especially appreciate his suggestion that we “work ... toward a consensus on ‘the marks of holiness’ that would restore the central Wesleyan value of conference across the whole church and not merely a discussion among a privileged group....”