

Response
by
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In introducing his topic of “A Holy Church,” Rev. Rowell recalls his early Christian training and its emphasis on personal relationship with Jesus. He suggests that this emphasis subordinated the corporate or communal aspect of the faith to the personal. Our teaching of holiness has been mostly in terms of personal piety, he says, whereas the New Testament calls us to a holy life *together*. “In what ways is biblical holiness corporate and not individual only?” In answer to this question, he offers “four observations on how local congregations can grow in the understanding, experience, and practice of corporate holiness: worship, forgiveness, unity, and service.”

My early experiences in the church were very similar to those described by Rowell. As a pastor’s daughter I was very aware of the “unholiness of the empirical church.” I don’t recall hearing specific teaching or preaching on “corporate holiness.” I do remember singing, “‘Tis a Glorious Church without spot or wrinkle” and thinking *not in this life!*

From his experience in pastoral ministry, Rowell says that “the majority of persons in our churches still think of discipleship as mostly a personal and even a private matter.” There is lack of intimacy, personal rights are highly valued, and reconciliation with God comes with human effort. There is a “general lack of self-disclosure and accountability” and it has made “the idea of church discipline repulsive and the practice virtually nonexistent.” What are we doing to encourage this sort of individualism? Our systems are perfectly equipped to achieve the results we are getting.

Does our leadership style model an individualism that somehow diminishes community in the minds of our people? Hierarchical, competitive, authoritarian leadership does not encourage the sharing of our lives together. If our leadership models were more web-like in structure, our reasoning more relational, our teaching more interactive, wouldn’t community more naturally occur?

Could the intensity of our church programming be sending the message that what we *do* together is more important than who we *are* together? The frantic schedule of meetings and activities scarcely leaves time for reflection on how we are doing at being the holy church.

Are we doing something that discourages our people from opening their lives to each other? Have we been open and honest about our own struggles? Maybe like Bonhoeffer says, “The pious fellowship permits no one to be a sinner. So everybody must conceal his sin from himself and from the fellowship. We dare not be sinners. Many Christians are unthinkably horrified when a real sinner is suddenly discovered among the righteous. So we remain alone with our sin, living in lies and hypocrisy” (*Life Together*).

Rowell’s question, “In what ways is biblical holiness corporate and not individual only?” is a

difficult one to answer. It helps me to picture the church as a choir. Individual singers have varying degrees of talent and musicianship. Some are excellent vocalists, while others can just carry a tune. Some are superb musicians, while others cannot read a note. Together, they are buoyed up by each other, leaning on those who are strong and learning from those who are weak. Wrong notes and sloppy cut-offs may be heard. A strong bass voice may shine in a certain passage. A competent choir submits to its leadership and follows the musical notation, but the uniqueness of each voice in combination with others creates beautiful music that no person by herself or himself could accomplish. When we as individual “holy ones” come together, that community “sings” in ways that beautifully reflect the holiness of God.

As my husband and I have visited different churches on our district, it has become apparent that churches somehow express a “personality.” Some are reserved and conservative in their outlook and planning. Others always seem ready to take a risk. Some are consistently supportive of their pastors, others have a history of struggling with theirs. Some are ready to embrace anyone who comes through the doors, others take some time to warm up to strangers. Could this “personality” give us a tangible hook on which to hang this concept of corporate holiness? Does a church with a pleasant “personality” — generous, hospitable, forgiving, loving, hard-working, open, and honest — embody a “holy church”?

When I was a young person, a man in our congregation left his wife of many years for a younger woman. I was devastated. Years later, when I returned to the same church, I discovered he was back, a changed man. When inquiring about it of an old timer, she gave me a serious look and said, “Our church is very forgiving.” While there may be some who remained hardened against that person, the general stance toward him was one of forgiveness. It was a demonstration of the holy church.

In addition to Rowell’s four areas that allow us to grow in understanding, experience, and practice of corporate holiness, I offer two more. One is our response to suffering. I have watched the church grieve the loss of life and respond with hope and love. The comfort and care shown the grieving ones exhibits a holy tenderness. As the church responds to the suffering of her people, the compassion of Christ is seen and experienced. Another is giving. As the church responds to the needs of people in sacrificial giving, she demonstrates the selfless love of Christ.

Sometimes “holy church” seems like an oxymoron. It may be necessary to hold a crown over their collective heads and patiently encourage them to grow into it.