

A HOLY CHURCH

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The basic assumption of this essay is that something is terribly wrong with the church in the North American context. A part of this basic assumption is that this something has and is influencing the churches that are a part of the Wesleyan-Holiness Tradition. What makes this assumption so spellbinding is that in the last thirty plus years there has been an explosion in the number of mega churches in North America. During this period of time, multitudes of books have been written concerning the subject of pastoral leadership, church growth, and ministry programs. There has never been a time when ministerial resources have been so readily available for pastors and other servants as they are today. Workshops and seminars on developing and marketing the church's ministries are proliferated all across the land. Worship innovations are being practiced by many, if not most, congregations. With all of this work on ecclesial practices, why would the basic assumption of this paper be that there is something terribly wrong with the church in the North American context?

I would love to take the next ten pages of this essay to joust with my favorite wind mills, but I believe there is something much more basic at stake for the church in North America. The symptoms of what is at stake can be seen in congregants hopping from local church to local church, in the lack of loyalty to any theological tradition, in the inability of congregants to sustain promissory relationships over a lifetime, in the worship wars that have ravaged a majority of congregations, in the bifurcation of the lives of congregants into the sacred and the secular, in manic attempt to make church interesting, in the loss of biblical literacy, and in the inability to interpret the world Christianly. These symptoms have caused a flurry of activity to place band aids upon the various sores on Christ's body.

What is this deep problem with the church today in North America? I am becoming more and more convinced that it is the inability of congregants to understand themselves as ecclesial shaped persons rather than persons formed by other communities of discourse. By this I mean that personal identity is being shaped more and more by a variety of social enclaves that the congregant participates in rather than the church. North American Christians are losing any sense of what it means to be a holy people of God. The church seems at a loss in facilitating its communal life and identity; therefore it seems to have lost its voice in being a truthful witness of the Gospel. Listen to the second century witness in The Epistle to Diognetus concerning the church in the world:

The Christians cannot be distinguished from other people by country, or language or the customs they observe. For they neither inhabit cities of their own, nor employ a peculiar form of speech, nor lead a life which is marked out by any singularity...They dwell in their own countries, but only as aliens. As citizens, they share in all things with others, and yet endure all things as foreigners. Every foreign land is to them as their native land, and every land of their birth is as a foreign land to them. They marry, as do all others. They beget children, but they do not cast away their offspring. They have a common table, but not a common bed. They are ‘in the flesh,’ but they do not ‘live according to the flesh.’ They pass their days upon the earth, but they are citizens of heaven. They obey the prescribed laws, and at the same time surpass the laws by their own lives. They love all men, and are persecuted by all...They are poor, yet make many rich; they are lacking of all things, and yet they live in abundance of all; they are dishonored, and yet in their very dishonor they are glorified...They are assailed by the Jews as foreigners, and are persecuted by the Greeks; yet those who hate them are unable to assign any reason for their hatred.”¹

This picture of the early Christians is one that is not concerned with building a nation, or race, or city, but with being a holy nation with its own type of “politics” and “grammar” and “hope. These early Christians understood their life together as community governed by the politics of Jesus. So what are these politics and how do we practice this holy life in communion?

It is this aspect of communal holiness that I want to explore in this essay. What does it mean to call the people of God a “spiritual house, a holy priesthood, a holy nation?”² Although there are many dimensions of these concepts that we can explore, what I would like to explore is what kind of criteria do we use to describe the church as holy, and what practices are essential that allow the church to live out of and toward holiness.

Is there a **criterion** that we can use to convey the church as holy? Many people want to limit their understanding of Christian holiness to commitment. Some would say that if people individually or communally are committed to God then are they holy. There is no doubt that commitment to God forms a significant component to holy living, but commitment alone is an insufficient

¹ See *The Epistle of Mathetes to Diognetus* Chapter V – “The Manners of the Christians”.

² See 1 Peter 2:4-12

criterion for Christian holiness. Examples of complete commitment to God that does not reflect Christian holiness can be seen in radical Islamic terrorists. No one can question the complete commitment to God of an Islamic terrorist, yet every Christian intuition we have would say that this commitment does not resemble Christian holiness. Many other examples can be taken from the church's own history. The crusades, the inquisitions, the thirty years war, and numerous other examples of a desire for purity coupled with deep commitment to God show that commitment and a desire for purity are not enough to be the defining criteria for Christian holiness.

What makes Christian holiness unique is a specific vision of God that Christians share universally. When Christians describe who God is we start with Jesus. He is the image of the invisible God who lived among us, ate with us, healed us, taught us, and embraced us. This Jesus is God's image and our good news destiny.

The church is called to be the social embodiment of Jesus Christ in the world today. We are to continue his work. Our purpose is to be his purpose. Anything less than the identity of Jesus Christ is not an adequate criterion for Christian holiness, and this would also include the holiness of his body, the church.

The question that we now turn to is what is necessary to embody Jesus Christ in our world. I want to suggest that the **practices** necessary for communal and personal holiness will all participate in allowing the mind of Christ to be in and among his people. It is the presence of the Triune God in and among us that informs and enables us to work out our own salvation in fear and trembling. I want to propose that there are three essential communal practices that the church must participate in if we are to know the mind of Christ. These practices are: reading scripture in community (discerning God and the world rightly), praying the scripture in community (communing with God and making God the sole subject of worship), and embodying the scripture in community (participating in the person and purpose of God in the world).

There is a strange silence of the Bible in the common life of our congregations these days. The Bible, at most, becomes a footnote in our preaching, teaching, counseling, and administrative practices of the church. When I say footnote I mean what Hans Frei is referring to when he describes "The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative." We have moved away from discovering the purpose and presence of the Triune God witnessed to in the scriptures, and we have substituted the agenda and purposes of this age. We look to management theory and therapy

models to determine the shape and agenda for our lives, sermons, and church programming.³ We footnote the purposes and models of this world by running to our concordances in an attempt to validate the agendas of the gods of this world. We have failed to read consistently, contextually, and communally the old, old stories of the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and the God who is revealing himself in Jesus our Lord. Therefore, we fail to see the purpose and presence of God and his kingdom. In the remaining portion of this essay I want to explore these three communal practices of reading, praying, and embodying the scripture.

The first of these practices is **reading the scriptures in communion**. Before we can know how to read the scriptures in communion, we must come to understand what it means to be in communion. I am using the concept of communion in a triangulation of relatedness or friendship. I mean by this that Christian relatedness is friendship with the Triune God, one another, and open friendship for the sake of the world.⁴ This kind of community of friends is never formed by the initiative of marketers, but by the “call of God.” It is the free grace of God in Christ enabled by the Holy Spirit to call out and together a peculiar people, a holy nation, and a royal priesthood. Christian communion is the fulfillment of the High Priestly Prayer of Jesus in John 17. Christian participation in the Triune God graciously opens our lives up to one another so that we are participating in one another. This communion is described as oneness of the Spirit and singularity of the Body. It is the grace of God that forms a community of friends capable to sharing life together for the sake of the world. If the communion of friends is not open to the world, then it proves itself incapable of being described as Christian, and only becomes another religious enclave.⁵ Christian community is always open friendship for the sake of the world. Our world is loved to the end by the Crucified God, and this love is demonstrated in the Body of Christ.

The purpose for reading the scriptures in communion is not to gain a storehouse of biblical data, but to train our eyes to discern the Triune God in

³ A very important study of how the traditions of individualism have shaped in destructive ways the American ethos is Robert Bellah’s *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. In this wonderful text Bellah and associates narrate the North American context as being shaped by practices that revolve around management theory and therapy models. When these models are taken over by the church they can at best create collections of consumers, and not committed communities of faith.

⁴ There is much that could and should be said concerning our participation in the Triune God and allows for the concept of friendship in this paper. Further reading on this subject can be found in the work of J. Moltmann, Paul S. Fiddes, and Miroslav Volf.

⁵ This claim is warranted by the Pauline conviction that the community formed through baptism in Christ is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female; for all are one in Christ Jesus. (see Galatians 3:25ff)

the world. In other words, we read the scriptures together in order to interpret life christianly. I see two daunting problems ahead of us as we attempt to christianly read the scriptures. The first of these problems is seen in our desire as biblical scholars and theologians to read the scriptures exclusively through an historical-critical lens. I am not calling for a pre-historical/critical method of reading the scriptures, but what I am calling for is a theological reading of the scriptures. I mean by this a discerning of the character of God interpreted through the Christian canon. Who is God in this text, and how is God understood in light of the entire canon? Where is this God discerned in our world, and how are we called to respond to God's gracious activity? It will take the best of historical studies to prepare the church for this reading of scripture, but this preparation is not the goal of reading the scriptures christianly.

The second daunting problem can be described in the phrase, "the eclipse of biblical narrative." The way I am using Hans Frei's phrase is to describe the loss of the narrative logic of the Bible. The narrative logic has its own "universe of discourse," or to use the phrase of George Lindbeck, the Bible swallows the universe. The majority of pastors and congregants come to the scriptures with a narrative logic already in hand. Their universe of discourse finds its narrative logic in myths that give legitimacy and power to liberal democracy and consumer driven capitalism. All of these myths are dependant upon the system of dominance to sustain the powers that control our lives. Is there any wonder that many a congregant says after a biblically shaped sermon, "that was a good sermon pastor, but in the real world..." The scriptures are seen as an intrusion of make believe into a hard world of reality. No wonder pastors have felt the necessity to use the logic of modern myths in the shaping of their sermons? The Bible has become a footnote to the logic of the myths of radical individualism. We preachers scurry to our concordances to find biblical support for the myths that shape our liberal democratic and capitalistic universe of discourse, telling the congregants how to become better citizens in a world of commerce like ours. Or, we footnote with deceptive accuracy the narratives of therapy that attempt to sooth the pain of the chaos caused by our consumerist world. It seems natural that there would be a loss of fidelity to denominations, congregations, friends, and even families.

This is not a call to adopt a particular historical slice in time hermeneutically. Neither is this a call to adopt a particular historical cosmology. It is a call to read the scriptures as the most truthful identity narrative of the Triune God and God's people. This narrative reading in communion is to be done with the people of God in all of space and all of time. It takes reading the scriptures with the saints through time in order to know how the scriptures have formed

the saints in time. Is there any wonder that this community of saints is called “one?” It also takes reading the scriptures with all of the people of God around the world, in order to see truthful testimony to the nature of God in this world. Is there any wonder that this community of saints is called “catholic?” But this reading in communion also necessitates the reading of open friendship. You might be thinking that I am adopting a similar hermeneutic as the one I have been critiquing. I trust that I am not. What I am attempting to say is that it takes open friendship to read the scriptures christianly. Only in our love for the world can we come to understand a God who loves the world to the extent of self-giving sacrifice. Open friendship takes seriously the captivity of the world. It dares to hear, love, get involved, and sacrifice for the glory Triune Love.

It will take a people capable of reading the scriptures in communion to read the scriptures in communion. In other words, certain virtues are necessary for reading the scriptures in communion. A people who are combative, frightened, and exclusive can never read the scriptures in communion. A community capable of reading the scriptures in communion has a deep faith or conviction that the pursuit of a truthful reading of scripture is not destructive to God or God’s people. Honesty becomes a necessity in reading in communion. Honesty in the church means at least that one can tell the truth here in the reading of the scriptures, our lives, and the world. In other words, honesty presupposes a safe place to read in communion. Honesty does not mean a lack of disagreement, but it means a “speaking the truth in love” for the sake of building up the Body of Christ. To use a paraphrase of Alasdair MacIntyre, The Church is a socially embodied, historically extended argument of the good internal to itself.⁶ In other words it is a safe place to seek the truth of the biblical witness to the nature and purpose of the Triune God in creation. Therefore, loving embrace for the sake of the other and the others dignity and wellbeing is a virtue that seems necessary to reading in communion.⁷

⁶ See Alasdair MacIntyre’s *After Virtue*.

⁷ I would like to make four recommendations: First, we must find a way to read the scriptures in communion through out our denomination and with other Christian communions. I suppose you could ask the question this way, do we need a form of the daily office and lectionary? Second, how do we encourage honesty and a safe place to read the scriptures in communion? Third, what forum can we develop to have conversations with one another, rather than conversations about one another? Finally, how do we redirect the reading of our denominational communion toward the narrative logic of the scriptures?

The second practice that I want to explore is **praying the scriptures in communion**. What I mean first and foremost is to understand that God is the subject of worship. Something is happening in our churches across North America that is not forming communities that reflect the identity of Jesus Christ. Church hopping and a lack of denominational loyalty are only symptoms of the grammar of the day. Convenience and consumption dominate congregational strategy. “Reconciliation” and “redemption” have lost their social use. At most they mean something that happens “in me” with God. Personalized, privatized and interiorized faith has eclipsed any Christian understanding of a community formed without lines of demarcation: Jew/Greek, Slave/Free, and Male/Female. The powers that hold people captive have been turned into idols, and freedom and peace have become states of mind, rather than a way of ordering our lives in the world. The conviction of this paper is that we have so tailored our worship to the radical individual’s tastes that we fail to form communities of faith and instead form collections of consumers.⁸ We have become religious malls that peddle our songs and programs and have lost the hope of becoming the temple of the living God. We use the tastes tied to a consumer’s “universe of discourse,” rather than the “cornerstone” of the person of Jesus Christ as the determining shape of our ministries. God, not the congregants’ tastes, is the subject of Christian worship. The Revelator says it well; it is before God that we cast our crowns. The Triune God alone is worthy of all praise and honor and glory. Paul speaks in profound ways to this issue in Romans 12 when he says that our “spiritual worship” is demonstrated in the complete submission of our lives to God, and this submission prepares us for life in the “Body of Christ.” So what must we do?

If we find ourselves in communities that worship God week after week, what does that worship of God do for us? Has it changed us? Has it made us see the world differently? Does worship have any lasting sanctifying effect upon us, or is it simply comforting us and misleading us? True Christian worship is dangerous for any radical individual, because it refuses to comfort and console us in the chaos of our sin managed lives. True Christian worship initiates us into the stories and practices of God who is in our midst and whose ways are maddeningly different from our own. If we worship faithfully we should hardly be recognizable by those who knew us in our former lives. This is why the church has described this startling transformation as a death and rebirth, as a burial of one way of perceiving and participating in the world, and as a

⁸ A collection of essays edited by Rodney Clapp, *The Consuming Passion: Christianity & the Consumer Culture* is a very helpful book to begin an exploration of how consumerism is compromising the Church in the North American context.

resurrection into a radically new kind of life that is filled with hope. People are not naturally friends of God that are naturally “seeking” the ways of God.

Christian worship should form the church into a community of friends of God. This friendship with God makes us into a community of friends committed to carrying on the mission and ministry of God. If we approach worship as something safe and comfortable, and not as a setting that we come to know God and God’s dangerous ways that have come to us in Christ, then the congregant becomes the focus of worship and therapy and entertainment its function. This will trivialize worship by shifting attention from the narratives of God and the compelling challenges those narratives present to us, to making worship a pleasing pastime like a concert or a show. “Once we believe worship has to be entertaining and amusing in order to be worthwhile, are we not secretly acknowledging we no longer believe that the stories of God we find in the Scriptures are captivating enough to merit our attention? Or that the God who comes to us in the Eucharist is sufficient to nourishment for our hearts?”⁹ I am becoming convinced that we must revisit the worship and sacramental practices of the church. ¹⁰

The final practice that I want to explore is **embodying the scriptures in communion**. What I am referring to in this phrase is Christian ethics. What

⁹ Paul J. Wadell, *Becoming Friends: Worship, Justice, and the Practice of Christian Friendship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2002), 18 & 19.

¹⁰ Let me propose at least a few questions to explore concerning our use understanding of the sacraments. How do we use the concept “baptism?” What is the function of this concept in the forming of a people called Christian? How does baptism form us to be an eschatological people of God? Do we really enter into the Body of Christ through baptism? How? What is the function of baptism in our pursuit of holiness, both corporately and personally? How does infant baptism function theologically in the forming of a people? If infant baptism is used, then how is catechism and confirmation to be used? What baptismal rites make the most sense of our understanding of baptism? How does church discipline interface with Christian baptism? A few more questions that must concern us have to do with the sacrament of communion. What does it mean for the church to gather at the table of the Lord? How does the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper function as a means of grace? If the Lord’s Supper is a means of grace then why do we insist that the people called Nazarenes participate in this means of grace so seldom? What does it mean to discern the body of Christ when we gather at the table? How does Paul understand our taking of the feast of the Lord in an unworthy manner? How does baptism and communion make us a people where God is the subject of our worship? How does baptism and communion make us a people where “reconciliation” and “redemption” have rediscovered their social use? Do we need a prayer book?

does it mean to embody the scriptures? It at least means that we understand that the call of Jesus is to follow him. So what does this following Jesus mean? Following Jesus means more than simply asking what Jesus would do. The question, “what would Jesus do” is a question that does not necessarily need his body to perform. “What would Jesus do” is a kind of Christian ethics that is all about determining the right Christian course of action and summoning the will power to follow through on this course of action. I am much more interested in the kind of Christian ethics that emerges from our trained dispositions in Christian community. The passage of scripture that alerts me most to this need for the Christian training of dispositions is Matthew 25. The story is the one concerning the sheep and the goats. The great judge judges our lives based on how we have acted in relation to the least of these. I suppose one should frantically attempt to visit, give, care for the least in our world. The problem is that those who did and did not care for and attend to the least of these were completely unaware of all that they were doing or not doing. In other words, they were being judged not by their conscious decision to do or not to do something. They were being judged ultimately by the kind of persons they were becoming. The dispositions or affections that form character are what ultimately shape how we live in the world and how we are to be understood at the end of time.

How I am coming to understand embodying the scriptures in communion is how a person or community “bears witness” to God in the world. In other words how do we reflect in our personal and corporate lives the presence of God? As we read the scriptures in communion and pray the scriptures in communion we find that we inhabit a different “universe of discourse.” This universe of discourse is called the kingdom. Whether we “get it” or not, if we continue to read the scriptures in communion and pray the scriptures in communion this “universe of discourse,” God’s kingdom, will begin to get us. We will come to understand the world christianly. We will eventually stop attempting to squeeze God into our lives, and come into the freedom of bearing witness in the great drama of God. It is the story of the Triune God that is from everlasting to everlasting. It is God’s purpose and God’s will and God’s way that begins to shape the witness of our lives. To embody the scriptures in communion is to learn to discern the footprints and fingerprints of God in our world. To embody the scriptures in communion is to see clearly his image in the tragic disguises of the least of these. To embody the scriptures in communion is to begin to mimic the heroes of the faith, the saints. As we embody the scriptures in communion we learn to see and resist the powers that hold us captive. We learn to see and resist their confusing of the concepts of greatness, power, wealth, and embrace.

The gods of this world have deafened us to the sounds of the presence of the God of the scriptures. As we embody the scriptures in communion we come to hear that this world is God's world. The "universe of discourse" that misunderstands greatness, power, wealth, and embrace begins to become Babel to us. We begin to learn the new language of the eschatological people of God, a language made possible by the Spirit of God. The grammar of this language is that "power is being made perfect in weakness." The grammar of this language is that "the greatest are the least." The grammar of this language is that life is really found in losing it. The grammar of this universe of discourse is that there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for all are one in Christ. The purpose of God is not concerned with a congregation finding its "market group," nor "homogeneous unit." The purpose of God is about friendship that is always open to and for the other. It is the open friendship of the Triune God for the sake of the world that we call Christian mission. The biblical grammar of this open friendship in God is love. God's love will not let us go, but embraces us and is shed abroad in our hearts and lives. It is this love/friendship that makes us one with God and one another for the sake of the world.

We have failed to discern the purpose and presence of God because we have failed to read, pray, and embody the scriptures consistently, contextually, and communally. The scriptures no longer function as a lens within which we learn to see God, the world, and our lives rightly, rather they have become at best a means to a worldly end, and a therapeutic way of coping with all that worldly ends bring to our lives. If there is an eclipse of reading, praying, and embodying the scriptures, how can we know the mind which was in Christ? If we do not know the mind which was in Christ, then how can we become his embodiment, his image, his witness in the world?