

Response

By

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I want to thank my friend, Steve Green, for his valuable contribution to our theological reflection. Although I must confess, as I downloaded Steve’s paper and read the first sentence, “The basic assumption of this essay is that something is terribly wrong with the church in the North American context,” I had to stop, get another cup of coffee, swallow hard and intentionally settle in to read the rest. Self-examination, whether personal or corporate, is always difficult to swallow. But it is absolutely necessary for health, for holiness, and for missional effectiveness.

As I read Steve’s opening description of some of the unhealthy symptoms in the church, I was reminded that it was really just a short time ago for our Global Theology Conference in Guatemala that my friend, Jeren Rowell, presented a paper on this same topic, “A Holy Church,” and referred to some of the same symptoms. In that paper Jeren shared a bit of his own personal journey, being raised in the church with the misunderstanding of discipleship as “Just Jesus & me on the Jericho Road.” Jeren raised the question, “in what sense is the church holy?” He went on to lead all of us in confessing a corporate awareness of our shortcoming, citing H. Ray Dunning’s description of “the obvious unholiness of the empirical church,” and describing his own pastoral experience, “Much of my daily pastoral work rises from the failure of the community of faith to reflect the character of ‘a holy nation’ (1 Peter 2:9).”

My wife, Vicki, was one of the respondents to Jeren’s paper. I remember looking over her shoulder one evening as she was at the computer composing a portion of her response. Like Jeren, she too was writing a bit about her own personal journey, “As a pastor’s daughter I was very aware of the ‘unholiness of the empirical church’... I remember singing ‘Tis A Glorious Church without spot or wrinkle’ and thinking not in this life! ... sometimes ‘holy church’ seems like an oxymoron.” As I read over Vicki’s shoulder that evening we laughed together and grieved together over the church. And God renewed His Calling on both of us to His service as Ordained Elders in the church.

I affirm Steve’s keeping before us the unhealthy symptoms in today’s church. These symptoms manifest themselves in a number of ways.

Certainly in a declining percentage of the population claiming to attend church regularly, now estimated to be 40% for the USA and 19% for Canada. Even more telling are indications that there is little difference between those attending church and those not attending church when it comes to real life matters such as broken homes, abuse in the home, use of pornography, spending habits, gossip, gluttony, racism, fear, hope and love. And certainly each of us could witness to this broad-brush depiction with our own experience or anecdote. At the same time, I want to be quick to say that we can each also witness to “holy exceptions,” that person, household and congregation that reflects Steve’s criterion for Christian Holiness, embodying Jesus Christ in the world. The difficulty is that Christ-likeness is too often the exception when we are to be a holy church.

I resonate with the criterion Steve proposes for Christian Holiness and the holiness of the church, “the social embodiment of Jesus Christ in the world today.” This is reflected in our Article of Faith on The Church, “the community that confesses Jesus Christ as lord, the covenant people of God made new in Christ, the Body of Christ called together by the Holy Spirit through the Word... in the world to continue the redemptive work of Christ in the power of the Spirit through holy living, evangelism, discipleship and service.”

I appreciate Steve’s placing before us the centrality of scripture as we address the question of what is necessary to embody Jesus Christ in our world. In our present assignment Vicki and I often have opportunity to visit local congregations. It has become another occasion for us to laugh together and grieve together over the church as we prepare to leave the house and look at each other asking out loud, “do you think we will need our Bibles this morning?” All too often, we find Steve’s observation to be true, “There is a strange silence of the Bible in the common life of our congregations these days.” The centrality of scripture is certainly necessary for a holy church embodying Jesus Christ in our world.

I do want to pose some questions regarding the specific practices of reading, praying and embodying the scriptures in communion as proposed by Steve.

- 1) The Hermeneutical Task- Although the hermeneutical task is not the goal of these practices, it is a critical pragmatic reality. We must be true to the scripture narrative and the present “real world” context for today’s holy church. How do we assure that the critical hermeneutical task referred to is adequately cared for? If presently the congregant’s

response is “that was a good sermon pastor, but in the real world...” and scriptures are too often “seen as an intrusion of make believe into a hard world of reality,” how do we assure that the “real world” is properly considered in the proposed practices and the congregant is empowered to embody Christ in that “real world?”

- 2) The Necessary Communal Virtues- Steve proposes, “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.” Does this mean that only a people already shaped by the scripture narrative are capable to read the narrative? Is this, for example, what Stanley Hauerwas refers to when he maintains, “you cannot rightly read the Sermon on the Mount unless you are a pacifist... The Sermon does not generate an ethic of nonviolence, but rather a community of nonviolence is necessary if the Sermon is to be read rightly” (*Unleashing the Scripture*, pp. 64, 72). Are the virtues of the scripture narrative only available to those who already embody those virtues? Look around you. There are a lot of wonderful people in this place. But, honestly, we are combative, frightened and exclusive. Does this mean we are not capable of reading scriptures in communion?
- 3) The Communal Scripture Practices- Is this a hard emphasis on communal scripture practices and necessary virtues that would deny the significance of private individual scripture practices? Do the practices proposed reflect the position of Hauerwas when he declares:
Most North American Christians assume they have the right, if not an obligation, to read the Bible. I challenge that assumption. No task is more important than for the church to take the Bible out of the hands of individual Christians in North America. Let us no longer give the Bible to every child when they enter the third grade or whenever their assumed rise to Christian maturity is marked... Let us rather tell them and their parents that they are possessed by habits far too corrupt for them to be encouraged to read the Bible on their own (*Unleashing the Scripture* p. 15).
Is this not denying the ministry of the Holy Spirit through the inspired Word? Personally, I am ready for a new reformation in the church with regards to scripture, but not one that takes us back to pre-reformation access to the Bible.
- 4) The Unbeliever & Evangelism- What is the place for the unbeliever in the communal practices? What is the place for evangelism in the communal practices?

- 5) The Form and Model- How can we prevent these communal practices from becoming simply another form in our pursuit to be a holy church? How could other forms of the daily office and lectionary assist us? Is there a model we can look to where these specific practices of reading, praying and embodying the scriptures in communion are contributing to a holy church?

I appreciate Steve placing this before us, and I look forward to the opportunity for further reflection on this with Steve and others.

In affirming our Article of Faith regarding The Church, I would pose some additional questions for our consideration:

- 1) What should the institutional structure and leadership roles look like for a holy church in the 21st Century? Local Congregations & Pastors? Districts & District Superintendents? General Church & General Superintendents? Men & Women? Anglo & Non-Anglo? Academy & Academicians?
- 2) How does a holy church affirm/reward/celebrate the missional ministry of Congregations/Pastors & Districts/District Superintendents? Attendance? Deployment? Monies & Members Received? Monies & Members Given Away? Lives transformed & embodying Christ in the world?
- 3) How do we assure that our pastors are sufficiently equipped to lead/serve a holy church? Who is responsible to assure that our pastors are sufficiently equipped? (ie. Of those Ordained on the SW Region over the last 7 years, less than 30% studied at any of our Nazarene Institutions-NTS, NBC, Universities).
- 4) What are the roles of our Nazarene Educational Institutions in a holy church? Nazarene Theological Seminary? Nazarene Bible College? Liberal Arts Colleges/Universities?
- 5) With Steve, I also raise the question, in a holy church what forum do we develop to have conversations with one another about all of this, instead of conversations about one another?

Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle, or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. (Ephesians 5:25-27 NIV)