

“A Holy Church” by Steve Green

Response by George Lyons

My initial response to Steve Green’s paper was a question: “Is he correct in his assumption that there is something seriously wrong with the Church today?” If we are to judge the Church-as-it-is by comparison to the ideal-Church presented in the letter to the Ephesians the answer must be, “Of course.” But the church’s health has been worse. During such times I have rationalized my reluctance to invite people to church with the justification, “They’ve got enough problems already.” The New Testament and Church history suggest there have been darker days than ours.¹

But let’s grant Steve’s assumption and ask, “Is his diagnosis of the problem correct?” Is the basic trouble with the Church in North America an identity crisis — the failure of many professing Christians to be shaped by the Church rather than by the other communities to which they also belong? If so, “Is this problem new?” and, “Is Dr. Green’s prescription likely to effect the desired cure?” I suspect that this problem is chronic, not acute. It is only our postmodern context that has made finding a cure seem more urgent.

The Church described in the second century *Apology of Diognetus* does not fundamentally differ from the Church of the twenty-first, despite Steve’s assumption to the contrary. Then the scattered members of the Church were virtually indistinguishable from non-Christians. They were model citizens of their own countries, although they lived with a certain detachment from the world because of their eschatological hope. They experienced persecution as

the exceptional social isolation that occurred when their values clashed with the dominant culture around them. This sounds familiar to me!²

Steve's real concern is less primitivist nostalgia for the good old days than an appreciation of the communal dimensions of holiness as opposed to purely individualist notions. He asks, "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?" Certainly radical commitment to God and a desire for purity are inadequate definitions of *Christian* holiness. The shape of this commitment and the character of this purity must be defined by reference to Jesus. But Jesus of Nazareth was an individual. And Steve nowhere tells us what it might entail for a community to be "the social embodiment of Jesus Christ in the world today."

Although I have no quarrel with Steve's "three essential communal practices that the church must participate in" if we are to be holy in this fully Christian sense, few readers of the New Testament would recognize these practices as arising naturally from the model of Jesus Christ. Still, what Bible teacher would oppose "reading scripture in community," "praying the scripture in community," or "embodying the scripture in community"?

In fact, I heartily endorse most of Steve's recommendations regarding the scriptures. Use of the lectionary would seem to be an effective prescription for the arbitrary selectiveness of most preaching programs, which far too often contributes to our unconscious Marcionism and neglect of huge sections of the canon. The minimal time devoted to the public reading of scripture in most of our churches is obviously inconsistent with the alleged

priority of scripture we claim in our Fourth Article of Faith. Incorporating the lectionary readings into our church services would be a healthy move toward taking seriously our doctrinal claims about the “plenary inspiration” of the scriptures. Giving more of the Bible a public hearing would also make it harder to confuse eisegesis for exegesis. But anyone who has used the Revised Common Lectionary must admit that its coordination of selections from different parts of the canon is far from haphazard. Reading these in concert often imposes an intertextual theological logic upon these passages that is alien to the narrative logic the passages seem to have in their original scriptural contexts. And the lectionary is clearly a canon-within-the-canon.

Steve correctly warns against reading the scriptures for mistaken ends. He alludes to the dangers of fundamentalist and antiquarian readings. Of course, twenty-first century Christians should not read the Bible merely in pursuit of ammunition to defend our prior theological commitments, although that is exactly how the early centuries of Christians read it. Modern or postmodern Christians must not be content to dissect and atomize the ancient scriptures, leaving them lifeless and irrelevant for contemporary believers. Exegetical theology must be inductive, not deductive. But who today imagines we can read the Bible with no prior theological commitments?

I am not at all persuaded by Steve’s claim that deductive preaching, distorted by the political biases of liberal democracy and capitalism, adequately explains the “loss of fidelity to denominations, congregations, friends, and even families.” In fact, there is considerable evidence that culturally accommodated churches have more and more loyal members than counter-cultural churches.³ But the popular “cures” marketed by the Church Growth

Movement and Seeker-Sensitive Worship are worse than the problems they claim to address. Far be it from me to defend homogeneous churches that merely reflect North American culture and offend no one! But can the fidelity to denominations, families, etc. Steve wants to recover be defended by appeal to the model of Jesus — who came not to bring peace but division (see Matt 10:34-39 || Luke 12:51-53)?

Certainly an honest reading of the biblical narrative is better achieved in community than in the privacy of our personal prayer closets or studies. Only in a community may dissenting voices be raised to challenge our individualistic prejudices and unconscious biases. But this can happen only in contexts in which “group-think” is *not* cultivated, in communities characterized by heterogeneity. And yet it seems fairly obvious that not only contemporary pastors but also New Testament authors encourage likemindedness. A willingness to put aside individual concerns and convictions in the interests of the unity of the community is precisely what it takes for such things as families and denominations to thrive.

Steve insists that an honest reading of the scriptures must include “all of the people of God around the world,” another daunting task. I have read Robert McAfee Brown’s *Unexpected News: Reading the Bible with Third World Eyes*⁴ but I have also read James Barr’s scathing indictment of *Fundamentalism*.⁵ Why are we Christian scholars so willing to dismiss the possibility that red-necked North American independent fundamentalists just might have as much a claim to being Christian as the base communities of South American Marxist Catholics?⁶ Can we learn anything from Christians we refuse to listen to with respect?

Steve invites us to read the scriptures in community with all of God's people throughout all of history. And I admire his historical catholic-spirit. But it is not clear what he hopes to gain from this effort. He acknowledges that what might become obvious is not our catholicity, but our disagreements. Perhaps the greatest value of reading the Bible in community is that it makes us aware of our biases. But will comparing prejudices lead us to the truth? Are we willing to concede that an interpretation of the Bible that is entirely novel is probably mistaken? Are we willing to defer to premodern interpreters of the Bible?⁷

Annually I join my students in "New Testament Interpretation" in reading representative expositions of scripture written by Christians from the second through the twentieth century. This experience has increasingly persuaded me that Gerhard Ebeling is correct: Church history might be described as the history of biblical interpretation.⁸ Reading at this safe distance it is obvious how the doctors of the church, no less than average church members, were profoundly shaped by the spirit of their age. What is to make us imagine we or our denomination or any denomination might be exempt? Can we take comfort in the fact that we will likely be long dead before future generations point out the obvious prejudices to which we were totally oblivious?

Occasionally I teach a course on the noncanonical literature that did not make it into the New Testament. Here we get a rare inside glimpse of Christians whose views were out-of-step with what became orthodoxy. But it is quite clear that these heterodox believers imagined that they, not the orthodox, had a corner on the truth. Has our less-than-a-century existence as

a denomination allowed sufficient time to evaluate our place in Church history or our actual faithfulness to scripture?

Steve recommends a theological reading of scripture that discerns “the character of God” throughout the Christian canon — an overwhelming task for scholars, much less for typical Church members. A good deal that is said about God and in God’s name in the Old Testament must be “filtered” — but on the basis of what criteria? How are we to cultivate the high tolerance for dissonance required by canonized diversity? Reading the Bible Christianly while avoiding the trap of Marcionism requires a fairly sophisticated hermeneutic. Few Nazarenes are equipped to interpret the Bible at a level commensurate with their general education. So they ask questions their biblical hermeneutic cannot answer satisfactorily. And they often seem content to live bifurcated lives, unable to apply private devotional, much less corporate, reading of the Bible in meaningful ways to their lives outside of church. But who would suggest that the Church could solve its problems by requiring biblical hermeneutics as a prerequisite for membership?

Steve’s call for discerning and responding to the gracious activity of God in our world in light of a canonically sensitive theological reading of the scriptures is another difficult task. Scripture seems to suggest that it takes a “prophet” to do this. I, for one, am neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet. Are we willing to take the biblical approach to wait and see which of the conflicting contemporary voices claiming to speak for God proves to be that of the true prophet? Who among us are ready to swear allegiance to any would-be prophet on the contemporary Christian landscape?⁹

Steve claims that most pastors and congregants come to the scriptures with prior commitments that misshape the way they read the Bible in profound ways. Have we not learned from postmodernism that all of us do this?¹⁰

Total objectivity is an illusion. Steve reveals his own biases when he limits these deformative myths to liberal democracy and capitalism. This is not to deny the problems entailed in allowing our national allegiance to distort our understanding of the Christian faith. But we must not ignore a long laundry list of equally alien biases we naïvely cherish as Christian in origin.

Ultimately Steve's paper does not appeal for ecclesial Christian holiness as some kind of "religion of the Book." True, he calls for the Church to find its identity, its heroes, its ideals, its values, its priorities, its agenda, its mission, etc. within the stories of the Bible, as filtered through the lens of the story of Jesus. This sounds like a case for a Christocentric ecclesiology, which was the early Christian exegetical and hermeneutical practice.

But this is not what Steve recommends. His appeal to the Triune God as the basis for understanding the relational and communal nature of the church presumes an authority beyond the scriptures — the ecumenical Christian creeds as understood by the Cappadocian Fathers and recent Trinitarian theology. I must insist that the scriptures shed no light on the inner life of the divine Trinity, which might serve as a model for Christian communal existence. For all its contemporary appeal, contemporary Trinitarian ecclesiology is a speculative departure from the Christocentric ecclesiology that dominated Christian theology until the late twentieth century. How can we be certain that this does not tell us more about the spirit of the postmodern age than about scriptural holiness of an ecclesial sort?¹¹

I share Steve's concern about our all too common neglect of the means of grace — the sacraments. For a previous generation of Nazarenes a public trip to the mourners' bench assumed a virtual sacramental status that made baptism a vestigial organ in the Body of Christ. The innovation of the "open altar" during the pastoral prayer, now widely accepted throughout the denomination, was touted as a means of making the altar a less forbidding place. But has this been the reality? The lack of response to altar-calls in many quarters in recent years has made the reaffirmation of the more ancient and catholic sacrament of baptism all the more urgent. And although weekly celebration of the Lord's Supper might become an empty ritual for some, the practice has this advantage: Even if the sermon fails to proclaim the gospel, at least the sacrament does so.

In my opinion, however, there are other means of grace urged by John Wesley that are in more urgent need of revival among us. Allow me to mention two whose neglect contributes to the malaise of all the upwardly-mobile denominations in the Methodist tradition, including ours: Christian conference and works of mercy.

Methodist class meeting, bands, societies, etc. once created mutually accountable communities committed to growth in personal and corporate holiness. Abandoned long ago, Christian conference as a means of grace has never been adequately replaced. Even the "testimony meeting," which once served as a poor surrogate for such honest community sharing and striving for holiness, has all but disappeared in most Nazarene churches I know.

In our growing affluence and busyness we have forgotten Wesley's insistence that hands-on works of mercy cannot be replaced by a paid staff or generous giving. Virtually every Nazarene who has returned from a "Work and Witness Trip" reports, "I was more blessed than those I served." But we have not yet turned this realization into a corporate commitment to a lifestyle of compassion. We are apparently no better at learning from experience than from scripture.

Of all my quibbles with Steve's paper, this last one may be the most controversial: I am not at all convinced that the New Testament supports Steve's assumption that we go to church primarily for the purpose of worshipping God. Paul's letters and Hebrews suggest that we gather as communities for mutual edification. True worship of God most appropriately occurs as the scattered church expresses its faith in lives of holiness in the world and in behalf of the world.¹²

Mutual edification is a two-way street. We theologians definitely must learn to talk less and listen more. We must descend our ivory towers and respectfully attend to the aspirations and frustrations of ordinary Nazarenes, who are sincerely striving to live holy lives in the real world. Of course, there are narrow-minded bigots among us. But let us not imagine that our undereducated pastors and laypeople are the only ones. Demeaning their lack of sophistication in Bible, theology, and hermeneutics is unlikely to effect real change. If we took kenosis more seriously, if we served more selflessly, if we acted a lot more like Jesus and a lot less like the vaunted religious authorities of his day, the edification we have to offer might actually contribute to the health of the church.

¹ This might be an excellent opportunity to anoint the Church with oil and pray for her healing, so as to give at least a nod to Article of Faith 14 on “Divine Healing,” which neither Steve nor I address in our papers.

² Despite Steve’s claim, Diognetus does not describe a “community governed by the politics of Jesus,” if by that he intends the radical reformation model of the Church espoused by John Howard Yoder (*The Politics of Jesus* [rev. ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972]).

³ See Dean M. Kelly, *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing: A Study in Sociology of Religion* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1972). Mercer University Press (Macon, GA) published a revised edition in 1995.

⁴ (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox, 1984).

⁵ (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978).

⁶ Considerable experience teaching the Bible outside the U.S. has taught me that everyone — I and they — are shaped unconsciously by cultural, economic, political, and other such influences that have nothing to do with either the Bible or the church. But I have also been impressed by the remarkable kinship I have found with Christians around the world, despite our profound differences.

⁷ As is David Steinmetz, “The Superiority of Precritical Exegesis” (ed., Donald K. McKim; *Hermeneutics: Major Trends in Biblical Interpretation* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986, 65-77]).

⁸ *Word and Faith* (trans., James W. Leitch; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1963).

⁹ The values debate dividing the “red and blue states,” evident in the recent U.S. election, should remind us how much political persuasion influences the Christian perception of ethical priorities. What seems self-evident to most of us about God’s agenda in the world may tell more about our politics and economic and social location than about our biblical or theological sophistication or faithfulness.

¹⁰ See Joel B. Green, ed., *Hearing the New Testament: Strategies for Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

¹¹ In this respect Trinitarian ecclesiology resembles and is no improvement over the failed quests for the so-called historical Jesus as the basis for constructing a Christological ecclesiology.

¹² Steve’s call for “open friendship” with the world strikes me as a strange way to define the mission of a holy church. Of course, we must understand the world enough to communicate effectively and selflessly God’s desire to save the world and care enough to do so. It is true that Jesus was willing to accept the hospitality of sinners; but he was also willing to dine with Pharisees. We should not discount entirely the clear biblical understanding of holiness as separation from the world. Of course, we should not limit our vision of holiness to separation or legalism. But I see little evidence that there is much danger of contemporary Nazarenes being accused of these narrow-minded understandings of a bygone age.