

### **End Notes: Holy God**

USA/Canada Theology Conference, Church of the Nazarene  
December 3-5, 2004  
Nazarene Theological Seminary, Kansas City, MO

Al Truesdale, Ph.D.  
Professor Emeritus, Nazarene Theological Seminary

I believe that that John Gammie, author of Holiness in Israel, would applaud the two-fold structure of this conference: “Holy God, Holy People.” Gammie speaks of these two *foci* as being Israel’s two vocations. Holiness in Israel, he observes, was not first and foremost something for humans to achieve or to do. Rather, holiness was first that characteristic of ineffability possessed only by God, the Lord of Hosts, the Holy One of Israel (John G. Gammie, Holiness in Israel, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989, p. 195). Principally, holiness “constituted a commanding, inviting, summoning presence.” God “summoned” Israel to himself. “Holiness calls.” God, and nothing else, was to be Israel’s first and defining interest. This was to be its *first* vocation.

Then, and only as defined by the first vocation, Israel was summoned to a *second* vocation, to holiness as spirituality. The second vocation was far more than a self-contained, inward-turning venture. Instead, the Holy God summoned Israel to aspire to the justice and compassion characteristic of her summoning God. He summoned Israel to a nobility of social conduct and individual morality “befitting the majesty and dignity of the Most High” (p. 195). This, Gammie says, was the “nobility of holiness.” Cleanness before the Holy God was to be its hallmark. Holiness as cleanness received special and complementary emphasis in the prophets, priests and sages. The prophets emphasized the cleanness of social justice, the priests the cleanness of proper ritual and maintenance of separation, and the sages emphasized a cleanness of inner integrity and individual moral acts (p. 196).

The order of the two vocations holds in the New Testament as well. N.T. Wright says that the universe of meaning in which, and out of which, the young church lived sprang not from their own imagination and needs, but from their encounter with the God who is present in his Son, and who raised Jesus from the grave. Their encounter with the empty tomb and the risen Christ compelled their confession, “God has raised Jesus from the grave” (N.T. Wright, The Resurrection of the Son of God, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003, pp. 734-5). In rich and diverse ways, the New Testament tells us that the church was called to holiness. For example, Paul wrote, “To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy. . .” (1 Cor. 1:2 NIV).

Those who have presented papers in this conference, and those who have responded, have uniformly addressed both of the vocations, and they have worked to establish their proper order. Using the best resources at their disposal, they have served the church by defining and relating the two vocations. They have warned of the consequences that follow from reversing the vocations. If reversed, distortion and subversion would inevitably result, and the church would fail in its witness to the Christ.

Recall that Tim Green charged us to consider carefully the current state of the order of the vocations in the Church of the Nazarene, and called us to confession for confusing the two. Steve McCormick told us that “trine love is not only how we come to know Who God is, but it is how we come to know and do God’s Will” (p. 4). Only if the two vocations are kept in order can the holy life have the character of *doxology*. Otherwise, “holiness” degrades into anthropocentrism, a fixation on what holiness [what God] means “for me.” But if the vocations are in proper order, then Christian holiness will yield “ecstatic love” toward both God and the neighbor (p. 8). Alex Deasley informed us that the point of origin of sacrifice is not humankind’s interest in God, but God’s interest in us—his Holy Love. Dianne Leclerc told us that only as the two vocations are kept in order can we hope to experience the full liberating work of the Holy Spirit that

“heals the dis-ease of sin and [that] empowers for sacrificial living” (p. 15). Unless the order of the vocations is maintained, what we define as liberation from sin’s bondage will be just more of the old slavery in disguise (p. 15).

The calls we have heard here to place and keep the two vocations in order have been delivered with passion, passion for the life of the church, and more specifically for the Church of the Nazarene. If Alan Wolfe is correct, there is good reason for their passionate concern, if not for alarm. In an indictment that explicitly includes the Church of the Nazarene, Wolfe says that those who fear that evangelicals will subvert secular American culture actually have nothing to worry about. American culture, he says, has already largely subverted evangelical Christianity in America. American culture, he observes, has characteristically and overwhelmingly transformed “Christ.” The chief characteristics of American culture are that it is narcissistic, materialistic and consumption-driven. Evangelicals, he says, capture the prize for their “ability to blend seamlessly with the most contemporary trends in American popular culture” (Alan Wolfe, The Transformation of American Religion, NY: Free Press, 2003, p. 28). Wolfe’s research leads him to believe that rather than being people of the cross, evangelical congregations in America are under pressure to shed “whatever stands in the way of appealing to the greatest number of potential believers” (Wolfe, p. 45). Far from being “resident aliens,” evangelicals in the United States have become so transformed by American culture that they have achieved “the end of religion as we know it” (Wolfe, 264).

As was hoped, this theology conference has been a church conference. Together, pastors, administrators, graduate students, professors and others have in love and maturity evidenced that they “believe in the church,” and that they love it with a love authored by its Head. In today’s climate we cannot assume that a gathering of

Christians will evidence a love for the church such as has been amply demonstrated here.

While being intellectually and theologically responsible and challenging, the papers and discussions have treated the church passionately, rather than merely as a topic for abstract examination. In this respect, we have been at our Christian and Wesleyan best. Our love for the church has fired our writing, debates, and discussions.

It is also clear that the participants in the conference are bound together by a subsidiary love for the denomination in which they predominantly express their life in Christ--the Church of the Nazarene. My observation is that our passion for the church is far more important than the differences in roles we exercise, this while respecting our diverse gifts. That the conference has yielded confidence and optimism, as well as prophetic warnings and critiques, bodes well for the church.

I have also observed that a spirit of urgency, not despair, has characterized the papers, the plenary sessions, and the small group discussions. The tone of urgency to which I refer was established by the prophetic word Tim Green spoke on Friday afternoon. It continued throughout. If I am correct, the urgency has to do with the state of the Church of the Nazarene in North America. More specifically, it has to do with its theological health, theological identity, religious life, and missional future. George Lyons reminded us that there has never been a time when there was no reason to be concerned about the health of the church. There is no primitive golden age to which we might return. But if I have read the signs of this conference correctly, there does seem to be a conviction among us that something is seriously amiss regarding who we are as a denomination as opposed to what we were called to be. And unless I am mistaken, it has to do with fidelity to the correct order of the two vocations.

Who could possibly miss the unannounced theme that has occupied our discussions: our identity as people given to the holy life as defined by the Scriptures and

the apostolic faith—including the Wesleyan-Holiness Tradition, is in jeopardy. Love, humility, and creativity, not cynicism or condescension, mark this sense of urgency. I have heard no one speak arrogantly as though he or she fully understands either the ailment or the cure. Instead, from numerous perspectives, words of confession, creative analysis, and imaginative suggestions regarding the way forward have been offered. What we do seem to agree upon is that renewal would need to be denominationally comprehensive, and that it should be in accordance with the revelation of God in the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ, as the Scriptures bear witness.

Unless I am mistaken, there is among us a contrite hunger for a denomination-wide renewal of “call and response” to Christian holiness as defined by the God of Holy Love. I have been told that this spirit characterized most, if not all, of the recent PALCON sessions. What could be more Christian and Nazarene than contrition, restitution and revival?

This posture of stewardship, thoughtful reflection, and energy manifest by pastors, judicatory heads, professors and others should encourage all of us to shoulder the task that lies ahead.

Sisters and brothers, we have been called to holiness. The question asked of us in this conference, and of us as a denomination, is clear. How will we respond? As a people, is our hunger for the Holy God and the holy life still sufficient, through the Spirit, to mount a systemic, unrelenting assault on “the empire,” and an equally unrelenting and costly obedience to the Holy God?

In the words of Tim Green, “Do we have the courage to return to the closet?” Our answer should be neither quick nor casual, for a positive response will require a transformation in the magnitude of the summoning God.