Sanctification and the Disappearing Heaven[1]
By Antonie Holleman

For effective proclamation we need to engage in a double exegesis. We need to study Scripture and theology as it grows out of our biblical studies, as well as the people to which we minister and the culture in which they live. It seems to me that pastors by their education are well equipped for the first exegesis, and missionaries for the second. It is somehow assumed that pastors speak the language of their audience and understand the signs of the times. But do they really? I think it was Karl Barth who said that the pastor should be versed in two books: the Bible and the newspaper. In our informational society we need to expand the newspaper to include television, magazines, Internet, movies and videos.

Much of the literature and preaching on holiness reflects a zealous engagement in the first exegesis. But the second is mostly missing, resulting in ineffective communication, because both the messenger and the message are out of touch.

In this article I want to do two things. First, to give a brief summary of my exegesis of European culture as it developed in the 20th century. This summary is far from complete and reflects my own view. My second step is to draw some conclusions from my exegesis for the proclamation of sanctification in Europe [2]

Exploring European Culture

At the start of my exploration I need to share a foundational assumption of my approach. I am strongly convinced that the culture in which we live has a major impact on us, whether we like it or not, and that this influence occurs gradually and unconsciously. It happens through the education we receive, television, the movies we watch, the magazines we read and other channels. Therefore, what I will be describing is probably not totally strange to you, even though you may not recognise the names and developments mentioned. What I hope to accomplish is that you will become more aware of how we are children of our time. I have organised my thoughts under several descriptive terms.

The Disappearing Heaven

In 2000, the Dutch Historian H.W. von der Dunk published a book on the culture of Europe in the 20th century with the title "The Disappearing Heaven".[3] This title summarizes the result of the changes of the 20th century. What happened in the 20th century is far more than just a set of major changes within a continuous development. The changes gave rise to a dramatic shift in the way people view reality. The feeling of most people at the end of this dramatic century was that humanity had lost heaven; no God, no objective truth, no meaning, no meta-narrative.

The developments in the sciences have contributed tremendously to this shift in the thinking of the people. This scientific revolution started in the beginning of the 20th century with persons like Max Planck, Albert Einstein, Werner Heisenberg, and throughout the century the new scientific insights and worldviews have filtered down to the common people.[4] The conclusions of the new scientific research shot holes in the existent Newtonian model of the world as an internally coherent, objective and unchanging reality. New scientific models were presented that emphasised relativity, coincidence, and the ever-changing character of existence.[5] These key words have found their way into varying philosophies and theories.

Rejection of Hierarchical Structures

Connected with this revolution of the sciences is the rejection of the traditional hierarchical structure of society. If reality is not as absolute and unchanging as always assumed, then people are free to revolt when their needs are not met. This ruthless spirit of revolution, introduced in 1789 by the French Revolution, has been present in Europe from the Bolshevik coup in Russia in 1918, to the student riots in Paris in 1968 and the fall of communism in Eastern Europe in 1989. No political order or ruler is sacred! This attitude has also become common among church people towards pastors and church leaders.

Historicizing and Fragmentarisation of Reality

Another related aspect to the loss of absolutes is the historicizing of thinking. It was Wilhelm Dilthey who, around 1900, called attention to the fact that meaning is always embedded in a historical context. The statements people make do not refer to an absolute truth, but reflect the worldview of the context in which they live. His underlying assumption was that one absolute universal view did not exist, but a multitude of worldviews.

These insights became common understanding in the 20th century. Ludwig Wittgenstein introduced the notion of "language games" to illustrate that the meaning of a word depends on the context or "game" in which the word is used. As the rule "You are not allowed to touch the ball with your hands" depends on the game a person plays, the same applies to all statements humans make. This approach reflects the fragmentarisation of reality in different arenas ("games"), with different rules, codes and meanings. People live in different worlds with different meanings, and ethics.

The linguistic theory that has dominated the 20th century is Structuralism. It states that language is a complete and internally coherent system and that the meaning of the words used is dependent on the structure of the text. There is no necessary relation to a reality outside of the text. This approach meant that the realistic model of language, in which words are a reflection of the objective reality (like the relationship between a map of a city and the actual city), became obsolete. Reality became language, or stated differently, we live in the language we create.

Pluralism

The end result of these insights is pluralism. This implies that all representations of reality have their validity, and ultimately cannot be judged by some kind of absolute criteria. They can only be judged from within the context itself. All truth systems (religions, ideologies etc.) are like closed circles. People from different perspectives are only allowed to say to each other: "I will respect your view, if you respect mine". This is the attitude we find among many church people as well.

What has happened to truth in such a pluralistic view? It has not just lost its absoluteness but also its supra-personal character. Truth has become something like the clothes we wear; if we feel comfortable wearing certain clothes and if they suit the circumstances it is all right. If it works for you, that's fine. Truth is no longer something we *find*, it is something we *construct*! What we are engaging in today is the fulfilment of the prophesies of Friedrich Nietzsche. He is, more than any other, the philosopher of our current culture, even though he died in 1900.

Attitude of Suspicion

Michel Foucault takes these insights one step further. He states that any truth claim, or what he calls "the will to knowledge" is linked to power. All doctrines, all scientific theories, all ideologies, all

statements are means to exercise power, and people "invent" the notion of truth for their own interest. The task of philosophy according to Foucault, is to unmask all forms of language. Instead of interpreting reality, he criticises all interpretations as being false and being expressions of a will to power. This is the critical approach we see every night when we watch the news on television, and when journalists ask penetrating questions of politicians. It is this attitude of suspicion that characterises the European mind. We have lost our innocence and find it very difficult to take at face value what people, and even more what representatives of institutions, tell us. Our culture trains us to be unbelievers.

Spirit of Non-Optimism

There is still something else that has impacted the European mind. These are the two world wars. The First World War brought an end to the hegemony of Europe in the world, and was also a blow in the face of the self-esteem of the Europeans. They had considered themselves to be highly civilised, and afterwards they had to admit that they had used the blessings of technology for the evils of war, a war more destructive than ever before in history. This was a shock! After the Second World War several questions haunted the Europeans, and those are being raised every time when new (European) "Killing Fields" are discovered. How could this have happened? What has happened to our civilisation to exhibit such evil plans? Where was God to prevent this? Pessimism, or at least a lack of optimism is the result.[6] This has even been enlarged by disillusionment after the fall of communism.

Secularisation

The last topic I want to mention in my exegesis of European culture is the secularisation process. The latest publications based on sociological research indicate that secularisation is more confined to Europe and not a strong global process as assumed.[7] Secularisation is defined as the loss of the social

significance of religion". Religion still has an impact on the private family life, but the impact on the public and social life is much weaker: Research even shows that religion is largely irrelevant to the work experience.[8] This illustrates the compartmentalisation of life and the privatisation of religion. What believers confess in church does not effect what they do on Monday on the work floor. It has also become clear that believers have become increasingly eclectic. They select from various sources their convictions, beliefs and behavioural patterns. The denominations have lost influence over the believers.

Proclaiming Sanctification

The above cultural exegesis can help us in a more effective proclamation of sanctification to people who are influenced by such a culture. What I have said for the first part also applies to the second: This is far from exhaustive, and reflects my own thinking. Also, this article does not allow me to go too much into detail. I can only outline some aspects of what, in my eyes, should and should not be emphasized.

Reflecting on my analysis of our culture the temptation could arise to call for a counter cultural approach, because of the incompatibility of our culture with the Christian faith. But this would be an impulsive reactionary response. What is needed is wisdom to find a balance between confrontation and accommodation. I would like to illustrate this with two verses from Scripture. In 1 Corinthians 1:23 Paul expresses his awareness of the counter cultural nature of the Gospel. It is "a stumbling block to Jews, and foolishness to Gentiles" (NIV). But a few chapters later he says: "To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews… to those not having the law I became like one not having the law… I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some" (1 Cor. 12:20-22 NIV).

To me these two verses represent the Scylla and Charabdis of the Gospel, two sides that need to be kept in balance. If we move too much to the confrontational side we lose contact with people, because they will think we are from some other planet. If we move too far to the accommodation side, we run the risk of forsaking the essence of the Gospel. Traditionally evangelical churches have been more on the confrontational side, yet have to acknowledge that they have a large backdoor through which the surrounding culture has slipped in.

Doctrine of God

The changed view on life that I have characterised as the disappearance of heaven poses a major problem to us. For the first time in its history the Church faces a reigning worldview that is diametrically opposite to the Judeao-Christian view. Where Paul could still refer to a statue of an unknown God in his speech to the people of Athens (Acts 17:22,23), we have nothing. Already our first word, God, is problematic. And even Christians have many questions about God and his activity in this world. What does God's sanctifying power imply? How can God transform people, who seem to be determined by their past? How does God work in relation to medicine? Of course, God's work cannot be fully comprehended, and remains a sacred mystery, yet many believers ask these questions out of disappointing experiences and unanswered prayers. For a doctrine of sanctification that talks about cleansing and transformation, these questions need to be addressed, or at least acknowledged. Therefore I see a great need to revisit the doctrine of God.

One of the evangelical theologians that has called for a re-evaluation of the doctrine of God is Clark Pinnock. His model of the openness of God deserves our full attention as it "invites believers to consider a new perspective on God in relation to the world".[9] It tries to overcome a Greek influence that has resulted in a deterministic view of God, and following Scripture, it wants to centre on the open, relational and responsive love of God for his creation. It is interesting to see that the

philosophical developments of the 20th century, reflecting the changes that occurred in science and society, allowed theologians to read Scripture in new ways.

But more is needed. Theologians need to cross the boundaries of their discipline and co-operate (not dictate) with medical doctors, psychologists and scientists to find some answers to the questions people have. Life has become so complex that theologians and pastors cannot stick to the easy answers of the past. It makes them incredible in the eyes of their audience, who are very often better informed about these developments in science, psychology, medicine.

Holistic Sanctification

The fragmentarisation of life is a serious threat to the proclamation of the church. If God the creator is a Holy God, then His call to holy living applies to all areas of life. We need to resist the privatisation of religion and holiness. Holiness applies to all fields of life. We cannot just focus on micro ethical issues as if there is no global warming. We cannot only think of our neighbour as the person who lives next door or our colleague at work, and not think about persons in other parts of the world who are underpaid so that we can buy our "goodies" for a very reasonable price. As a global holiness church we should not just apply holiness to our personal lives, but we should give it a global dimension and apply it to economics, social justice, environmental issues, poverty etc. I want to give two examples of how we can expand our concept of holiness beyond the individualistic level.

Sanctification of Structures

The first relates to the sanctification of structures. In his systematic theology, Hendrikus Berkhof has a chapter on the sanctification of the world, and talks about sanctified structures that allow room for the transforming power of God's holy love.[10] In his description of structural sanctification, he applies the

terms progress and struggle (Wesleyans could use the words process and crisis), which he also used to describe personal sanctification, to illustrate the continuity between the personal and supra-personal in God's sanctifying work. [11]

Those of us who have been in the church long enough know of unsanctified structures within our own organisation that have not allowed the transmission of God's love. It is too easy to blame certain persons (which happens too often), when the real problem is the structure itself. Also, in all honesty we need to admit that sometimes structures of secular organisations are more sanctified than the ones within our own church. We as a holiness church are in need of working on the sanctification of our structures in relation to leadership models, organisational structures, mechanisms of collaboration, etc. This will also increase the credibility of our proclamation, because people in our culture have become very sensitive to how organisations operate.

Vocational Holiness

The second example comes from Eugene Peterson. In his book, *Under the Unpredictable Plant*, he explores the concept of vocational holiness. On many occasions he noticed that his pastoral work had turned into a religious job. Instead of following a holy vocation, he pursued a religious career. In order to resist this vocational idolatry as he calls it, he explores in his book the contours of a vocational holiness. He writes that personal holiness is mostly emphasized, assuming that a personal piety is sufficient to deal with all temptations in ministry, and will result in a genuine pastoral vocation. [12]

Peterson calls for a paradigm shift from the pastor as programme director to the pastor as spiritual director.[13] Such a sanctification of the pastoral vocation is greatly needed in a time when the pastor seems to be forced to function more and more as a manager. What is needed is a purification of our call. The pastoral call is first of all a call to serve God and people, not to establish a church. Vocational

holiness to me is "a call to let go". Very often when I am concerned about the school and the church, and when I want to exercise control, I need to tell myself: "Antonie, it is God's church and His school, just stick to what God has called you to be or do!"

Humble Holiness

Henri Nouwen's In the Name of Jesus provides the impetus for implementing this "ministry of letting go."[14] In this book, Nouwen writes that leaders in the name of Christ need to let go of the three temptations to be relevant, spectacular and powerful. The three disciplines that the leader has to develop are: prayer to stay connected to our first love for God; confession and forgiveness to keep our ministry communal and mutual; and theological reflection to discern where we are being led by God. The call of Christ is a call to serve in humility!

People in society have become very suspicious, and will not accept what a person says at face value, nor will they accept the authority of a certain position automatically. Leaders need to earn respect and authority. We find this attitude both inside and outside the church. The people in our culture have been trained by postmodern philosophers like Michel Foucault to analyse situations and statements of persons in terms of control and power, and therefore have become very sensitive to what the church and its pastors and leaders say and do. I do not see this development as negative, because it helps all of us to refocus on what our call is.

The symbol of the servant leader is the cross. This should also be the symbol for the church and its proclamation of holiness. Many people use the dove, symbolising the power of the Holy Spirit, as the symbol of holiness. But this symbol must never be disconnected from the cross. People who long for power, even the transforming power of the Spirit, need to remind themselves of the words that God spoke to Paul: "My grace is sufficient for you for *power is perfected in weakness*" (2 Corinthians 12:9

NASB, italics added). Words from God like these will help us in keeping the focus on a humble holiness. Words like these will continue to create crises in our lives.

Every year in my church history course I show the video on Francis of Assisi, Brother Sun, Sister Moon.[15] Even though the way Francis is portrayed reflects the flower power of the early seventies, its message is still very powerful. In a gentle way Francis reminds the Roman Catholic Church of his day of the commandment to love God and one's neighbour. And in his full and radical consecration to this call, he is unmasking the worldliness of the church and the carnal ambition for power of the church leaders. This is Holiness to me.

Holiness is Interdenominational

Our pluralistic society is teaching all of us to tolerate and accept variety. Many walls between denominations have been pulled down, and people can actually see (or hear and read) what is happening in other Christian and non-Christian groups. Compared to fifty years ago we do not live as much in isolation. Just one illustration: based on the great variety of the backgrounds of the authors whose textbooks we use for our courses at EuNC, we could be described as a truly interdenominational school. Some might consider this to be negative, but I don't. How does this relate to sanctification? I want to emphasize two points.

The Fight Against Sectarianism

The first relates to uniqueness. Our people are finding out that not only the holiness churches are focused on sanctification, but that sometimes authors of other traditions have a far more refreshing and appealing approach than what we find in books and sermons within our own tradition. This means that the Church of the Nazarene is not as unique as we sometimes think we are. If we believe that

holiness is the essence of the Gospel, then others will see this in Scripture as well, and will proclaim it too, probably with varying emphases. Not acknowledging this makes us sectarian. What should concern us is not our Nazarene identity but our faithfulness to the scriptural call to holiness.

I see a sociological phenomenon at work in all of this. In the pioneering years of any new denomination a church is always in the defensive, because of the question: "Why another church? We already have enough churches!" In its reply, this new church needs to emphasize its uniqueness (and included in this is a criticism of the existing churches), because otherwise there is no reason for this new denomination, and its people should join other existing churches. As the denomination grows and becomes respected, it cannot continue to emphasize its uniqueness and distinctives with the same zeal, because then people will think the church is sectarian and arrogant. Now, as a mature and respected denomination, the church should first of all say that it is a Christian church that tries to be faithful to Scripture. This sociological phenomenon not only applies to our pioneering districts but to the Church of the Nazarene internationally as well. From this perspective the crisis concerning entire sanctification within our church is a necessary phase in a process of maturation.

Allowing Variety

The second point relates to variety, and is closely connected to the sociological phenomenon. In a small and young organisation uniformity is essential, but as the organisation grows the variety increases as well. Sectarianism can be described as a mechanism within a religious group to preserve the initial uniformity as the movement expands. In the beginning decades of the Church of the Nazarene there was a unifying experience of sanctification, along with a uniformity of worship. The religious experiences of the holiness pioneers functioned as models for the believers. Our current crisis indicates that the majority of Nazarenes cannot relate any more to these models of the past. The

reason for this is that times have changed, and the Church has moved beyond the white American context of its formative years.

I think that we need to allow more variety in the way people experience entire sanctification. This is already the situation. In another article, I have listed some of the changes that I have observed,[16] here I will mention three:

- Entire sanctification has become more private and less public. Many testimonies refer not to an altar in a church service, but to moments at home or elsewhere, and to the importance of key individuals, not necessarily the pastor.
- Entire sanctification is more integrated in the personal development of the people and occurs when the right moment in the personal journey is there, not necessarily when the pastor makes an altar-call.
- Many testimonies do not mention the victory over sin in general, but the victory over a specific sin, and are related to a specific struggle in their lives.

Acknowledging variety requires expanding the models and metaphors we use to describe sanctification. Instead of declaring war to the terminology of the past and exchanging them for others (that will some day become outdated as well), we need to encourage variety by increasing the variety of metaphors. The metaphor that my parents introduced to me was the model of the cross. I have personally found great benefit to look at entire sanctification as a breakthrough moment when blockades within us disappear.[17] W. Greathouse in Wholeness in Christ states: "second is depth",[18] referring to entire sanctification as a further deepening of the work of the Spirit. Secondness can also be described as subsequence. [19]

Holiness Language

One might argue that the above is just a matter of words. Yes it is, but words do matter! Language is very important as the linguists have taught us, and it is true that we live in language. Theologians and pastors should pray for the gift of words so that new metaphors (the only way to describe the work of God is by metaphorical language) can be used in talking about entire sanctification. Looking for other metaphors is more important than explaining the doctrine in reasonable terms. The pastor should become a theological poet.

Victory over Sin

My last point is more content oriented. A way to describe Europeans is to picture them as "the ones who stayed", those who didn't go to other continents to start all over again with new hopes and dreams. Events like the two world wars and communism have made Europeans even more aware of their limitations, and have produced a non-optimistic view on life. (Many Europeans will say that they have a realistic view, non-Europeans might describe it as pessimistic.) Any way we look at it, Europe is the continent of shattered dreams. We have become very cautious and do not easily get excited about grand ideas.

In general, this is also the mindset with which Europeans greet the optimistic doctrine of Christian perfection. They find it very hard to believe a message of "love excluding sin". And when they hear that perfection is dynamic and that it refers to our loving intention, they will reply: "But how do you know that all your intentions are full of love? What about hidden and subconscious motivations?" When they sing, "I surrender all", they ask themselves: "Have I surrendered all? How do I know it was all?" When they listen to persons testifying of how God has set them free of sin, they remember similar testimonies of other persons who could not live up to what they confessed. This is the suspicious and cautious mindset of the Europeans, but it doesn't mean that they do not believe in

holiness. Analysing my own resistance, I think what it tells us is that when the goal is set too high, it loses its motivating force and becomes an annoyance to us.

In light of the described mentality we need to think about how we could encourage people to strive for God's sanctifying gift without being turned off. Here again we see the importance of language. Wesley advised his people in a similar way: "We must speak very tenderly on this head [entire sanctification], for it is far better to lead men than to drive them. Study to recommend it rather as amiable and desirable than as necessary."[20] I think we should refrain from theoretical discussions about what all is possible in entire sanctification. It is enough to proclaim that we can be victorious over the sin we are struggling with. If this implies all sin, and that from that moment on we only have to talk about mistakes, shortcomings, etc. it is not relevant. I do not see this as changing the essence of the doctrine or lowering the goal. To me it is an issue of humility and being more specific.

In focussing on the culture in which I live and work, it was my aim to encourage readers to think of new and expanded ways to describe God's sanctifying work in this world. I hope that you have found one idea that will help you in relating holiness to the culture in which you live. May God guide you in proclaiming sanctification effectively to your people.

NOTES

[1] This article was first presented as a paper at the Leadership Conference of European Nazarene College in January 2003. I only made editorial changes and a few minor content changes to the original paper.

[2] As many developments in Europe are far from unique, and reflect certain developments in Western civilisation, I think that much of what I write applies to non-European Western cultures as well. When I refer to culture in this article I mean the specific culture in Europe, or more specifically, Western Europe.

[3] H.W. von der Dunk, *De Verdwijnende Hemel, Over de Cultuur van Europa in de Twintigste Eeuw* (J.M. Meulenhoff, 2000).

[4] One of the most popular books on science of recent years, translated into many languages is Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time* (Bantam, 1988).

[5] A very interesting book on this scientific revolution is A. van den Beukel *More Things in Heaven and Earth, God and the Scientists* (SCM Press Ltd, 1991). The author is a natural scientist and gives a critical review of his field from a Christian perspective, and he attacks the "limitless arrogance" of scientists like Hawking.

[6] The latest in the historical evaluation of the 2nd World War is Jörg Friedrich, *Der Brand, Deutschland im Bombenkrieg 1940-1945* (Propyläen Verlag, 2002). He calls attention to the planned massive bombing of German cities by the Allies. From January till May 1945 an average of 1000 civilians per day were killed in the German cities! No wonder Germany opposed the war in Iraq.

[7] Loek Halman, Ole Riis, ed., *Religion in Secularizing Society, The Europeans' Religion at the End of the 20th Century* (Brill, 2003). All information is taken from the article, written by Loek Halman and Thorleif Pettersson, "Differential Patterns of Secularisation in Europe", pp. 48-75.

[8] *Ibid., 58*.

[9] Clark H. Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover, A Theology of God's Openness* (Paternoster Press, 2001) x. See also Clark Pinnock, e.a., *The Openness of God*, *A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Intervarsity Press, 1994).

[10] Hendrikus Berkhof, *Christian Faith*, *An introduction to the Study of the Faith* (Eerdmans, Rev. Ed., 1986),

[11] *Ibid., 515-518*.

[12] Eugene Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant*, *An exploration of Vocational Holiness* (Eerdmans, 1992).

[13] *Ibid., 175*.

[14] Henry Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus, Reflections on Christian Leadership* (Darton, Longman and Todd LtD, 1989).

[15] Franco Zeffirelli, *Brother Sun, Sister Moon* (Paramount Pictures, 1972).

[16] Antonie Holleman, "Entire Sanctification in our Modern Time" in *European Explorations in Christian Holiness* (Vol. 1, 1999), pp. 78-80.

[17] *Ibid., 82*.

[18] William Greathouse, *Wholeness in Christ, Towards a Biblical Theology of Holiness* (Beacon Hill, 1998), 120. See as well Michael Lodahl, *The Story of God, Wesleyan Theology and Biblical Narrative* (Beacon Hill, 1994), 196 where he states that

secondness is a deeper relationship to God, based on our response to His love.

[19] See Tom Noble's pre-conference paper "Purity, Wholeness and Christ" for the Guatemala Conference 2002 (http://wesley.nnu.edu/2002-GNTC).

[20] Letter to Thomas Olivers (24 March 1757), *Letters* (Teford) 3:213.

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