

WHY THE HOLINESS MOVEMENT IS DEAD

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In an important article a few years ago, Keith Drury, a denominational official in The Wesleyan Church, maintained that the holiness movement, as a movement, is dead.¹ He offered eight causes for this unfortunate development:

1. We wanted to be respectable
2. We have plunged into the evangelical mainstream
3. We failed to convince the younger generation
4. We quit making holiness the main issue
5. We lost the lay people
6. We over-reacted against the abuses of the past
7. We adopted a "church growth" thinking without theological thinking
8. We did not notice when the battle line moved.²

Now Drury does not deny that a holiness infrastructure of churches, boards, and academic institutions is in place, nor that there are many pious souls within them, but what he does dispute is that the vitality and evangelistic power of the holiness movement, along with an attentiveness to holiness in preaching, and personal life, remain to any significant degree. Instead, he conjures up the image of a corpse in an upstairs room that we visit from time to time and with which we have little chats as if the body were alive.³ In other words, the days of talking about a pulsing, soul-winning, energetic *movement* are clearly gone.

More recently, Richard S. Taylor, noted Nazarene scholar, entered the fray and offered a similar jeremiad with respect to the holiness movement. Among other things, he listed the following evidences of decline and demise:

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1. The intense focus which originally created a movement has been dissipated by the diffusion of aims and the influx of a pagan, TV generated culture.
2. Many—perhaps most—in holiness churches no longer really believe that there is an instantaneous, supernatural, second work of divine grace.
3. The message of “full salvation” is inherently counter to sinful human nature.
4. There was an inevitable reaction to the excesses of the holiness movement.
5. A shabby demonstration of holiness was offered on the part of many of its professors.
6. When counseling moved in, rugged and radical holiness preaching gradually was displaced by what pastors thought was more germane to the real everyday needs of their people.
7. The church growth movement displaced concern for holiness.
8. Holiness folk failed to read holiness literature.
9. Liberal ideas about the Bible and doctrine, acceded to by a younger generation of scholars, undermined effective holiness teaching.⁴

As someone who works in the fields of Wesley studies, Methodist theology, and American religion, I would like to add my own voice to these painful laments, these eulogies, offered by both Drury and Taylor. And though I will consider some different reasons than either of these two important church leaders has offered, I sense that we are all united in believing that the “pretense” that all is well in the holiness “movement” must at the very least be dispelled. Acknowledging the painful reality of our situation, in an honest and forthright way, as well as calling for greater self-knowledge and humility, will be important first steps so that we may then be empowered, once again, to carry out our historic mission, namely, to spread scriptural holiness across the lands.

Before I get much further in this essay, let me first of all note my different background and “social location” from some holiness folk. I did not, for instance, grow up in a holiness church (such as The Wesleyan Church or the Church of the Nazarene), nor did I ever witness some of the more flagrant abuses and misunderstandings of John Wesley’s teaching on sanctification in general and on Christian perfection in particular. On the contrary, I was raised in the Roman Catholic Church until the age of twenty and witnessed a whole different set of issues and abuses, some of which those holiness folk who think that the grass is always greener on the other more “catholic” side of things will eventually have to face. Today, I am an ordained elder in The United Methodist Church, a communion of faith which I deeply love, and I am passionately committed to the Methodist standard of holiness, to the importance and cruciality of holy love in the warp and woof of life. With this brief background in place, I offer the following considerations as to why the holiness movement is “dead.”

THE AWAKENING HAS RUN ITS COURSE

First of all, there is a natural life cycle to revival movements as William McLoughlin has so ably argued.⁵ The awakening and insights of the earlier generation, along with its vitality and enthusiasm, eventually become institutionalized in rituals, practices, mores, and doctrines. This is not to suggest, however, that rituals, practices, mores, and doctrines are

problematic in and of themselves; they are indeed vital, a necessary part of any movement. But in time, all that unfortunately remains for subsequent generations is the *form* of religion without its inner *power*. Some scholars contend that the upper length of this cycle is forty years; others argue for a figure considerably less. We are, therefore, well into the "institutional phase" of things.

ENTIRE SANCTIFICATION IS DOUBTED

Second, in a way roughly analogous to Puritan New England, several of the sons and daughters (as well as the grandsons and granddaughters) of the holiness movement were no longer able—for all sorts of reasons—to make the same profession of perfect love as did their ancestors. The repetition of the altar call, then, a liturgical form employed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as an invitation to Christian perfection, soon became an annoyance, the reopening of a wound, a painful reminder that the favor of God so graciously received by the elders of another generation had apparently not been received by the next.

Given this new setting, which was informed by various levels of unbelief as to what the enabling grace of God can do, professions of Christian perfection were now looked upon as graphic examples of "self-delusion." That is, on the one hand, a sincere testimony of perfect love was often met with incredulity even when there was no significant evidence to the contrary. On the other hand, the unbelieving observer of such a profession of grace sometimes took great delight, even joy, in noting any contrary evidence, as if he or she had found "great spoils" in detecting sin in the life of the professor. This is truly a wretched state of unbelief and is referred to by the Germans as *Schadenfreude*, taking odd delight in the evil of others, rejoicing and taking comfort in the very presence of sin. Sadly some of these melancholic spirits fill pulpits on Sunday mornings.

For their part, the New England Puritans addressed their particular problem of malaise (which was somewhat different from the holiness one) through the "Half-Way Covenant." In this compromise, the unconverted could have their children baptized though they themselves were barred from the sacraments. The heirs of the holiness movement, on the other hand, took a much different approach, and one that was far more radical: that is, instead of reaffirming the necessity, indeed, the cruciality of holiness for all believers, several leading scholars now maintained that entire sanctification was not really a possibility for *any* believer, anyone who enjoyed the graces of justification and regeneration, but only for older folk, those advanced in age, thus confusing the high standard of this grace with mature, adult Christian states. But the evidence from Wesley's own writings belies such teaching on many levels as I have demonstrated in my recent dialog with Randy Maddox at the 1999 meeting of the Wesleyan Theological Society. In fact, John Wesley attested to the entire sanctification of both a four-year-old girl as well as a twelve-year-old girl.⁶

THE LIBERTY OF THE NEW BIRTH IS REPUDIATED

Third, the substance of the preceding observations suggests that the sons and daughters of the holiness movement are far more pessimistic, soteriologically speaking, than their parents and grandparents ever were. Put another way, an optimism of grace has been subtly replaced by what is trumpeted as a more "realistic" and "honest" assessment

of the human condition. Here depth psychology and subtle forms of deterministic philosophies have played an important corrosive role. In particular, attention to the subtle, nebulous affects of the subconscious is now supposed to preclude even the basic kind of liberty that Wesley had affirmed for the children of God in his sermons, "The Great Privilege of Those that are Born of God," and "The Marks of the New Birth;" namely, that they may be free from the *power* or *dominion* of sin. Indeed, "even babes in Christ," Wesley proclaimed, "are in such a sense perfect, or 'born of God'...as, first, not to commit sin."⁷ Wesley, of course, could be forgiven his error due to the psychological naivete of his age, but modern people could not.

Other factors to be considered on this head include the cultural predominance of Calvinism in the United States, especially among Evangelicals. Accordingly, the phrase "we sin in thought, word, and deed every day" flows much too easily from the lips not only of Calvinists, who regrettably attempt to provide sophisticated theological support for such notions, but also from the lips of holiness folk who are a part of a tradition which has taught them otherwise. Granted Calvinists and Wesleyans have different conceptions of sin which must be factored in (and several Calvinists are indeed living holy lives) but even after this is done, the broader soteriological effects of the cultural predominance of Calvinism remain much the same: many American Evangelicals, and now some Holiness folk as well, assume that they can *remain* in the graces of the new birth and regeneration, despite the *ongoing* and enslaving presence of sin. Consequently, professions of the liberty entailed even in the new birth, of *actual* freedom from the *power* of sin (glorifying Christ for the work that he has done) are now treated as quaint at best; hypocritical at worst. And silence on these matters is deemed the highest sanctity of all.

THE PROBLEMS OF PAST ABUSE

Fourth, holiness folk have, perhaps, overreacted to some very real problems and abuses within the tradition such that they are now, "throwing out the holiness baby with the modern bath water," as Douglas Strong has so articulately expressed it in his March 1999 Wesleyan Theological Society presidential address. Reacting to the tradition of the "jump and stir" of revivalism, and to the "instantaneousness" and decisiveness of altar calls, some holiness scholars have championed gradualist soteriologies where the Christian life is viewed almost exclusively as a *process* of incremental changes without any crucial events, and where John Wesley's intricate balance of process and instantaneousness has been regrettably lost. In particular, justification, regeneration, and entire sanctification have all been redefined and incrementalized (all changes are ones of degree) such that the cruciality of such lofty graces is often misprized, at times even repudiated. Moreover, when a gradualist, processive, reading is brought to bear on Christian perfection, itself, it can only emerge, once again, as maturity, as an adult Christian state, and not at all as a present possibility for the very young among us. In short, there are some theologies currently in place which *may* result in the loss of the next generation for holiness. Indeed, some of the more theologically astute among us have already begun to realize that gradualist soteriologies are actually incapable of carrying all of the theological meaning enjoyed in traditional holiness life and thought.

Interestingly enough, some of the most vocal champions of gradualist readings of

Wesley's soteriology have been equally vocal in deprecating conversion and the role that it plays in Christian life. During the 1980s and 1990s, for example, wave after wave of debunkers passed through Wesley studies, first deconstructing Aldersgate (it was referred to as a "non-event" by Theodore Jennings, for example)⁸ and then, not content with this, they proceeded to deconstruct the reality of conversion itself. Indeed, theologically speaking, things are in such a regrettable state in United Methodism (which contains many holiness folk) right now that my own and subsequent generations might have lost even the wherewithal to articulate a theology of conversion. And we wonder why the holiness movement is dead?

A CLIMATE HOSTILE TO TESTIMONY

Fifth, there is some very odd theological reasoning found among younger holiness scholars, and it is actually inimical to the reception of genuine heart-felt testimonies. To illustrate, almost any lofty witness to what the empowering grace of God can do is judged to be an instance of spiritual pride, a lack of humility, as if the perversions of such a witness in the past must now ever constitute its current expressions. Given this sort of reasoning, what is far more preferred in some holiness circles is not a bold witness to the liberating powers of the gospel or to the graces of entire sanctification, but rather a detailed chronicle of descent into sin along with a rendering of existential, participatory knowledge of the lingering effects of subtle, but no less real, bondages. Such honesty (which is, of course, always valuable) is mistakenly considered true Christian humility and is judged to be an instance of "real sanctity." Like the mental patients in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* it is not wise to tell the psychiatrist something so bold as that you are healed, but only that you're making progress, that you're a little bit better today than you were yesterday.

The problem with this theological reasoning is that it fails to recognize that there are two kinds of humility, not one. The first is associated with sin and repentance, and it must be carefully distinguished from the second which alone is called true Christian humility, as Harald Lindstrom correctly points out.⁹ That is, the former disposition of the heart occurs in the context of conviction and accusation and is often marked by fear of God, regret over past sins, and guilt. The latter disposition of true Christian humility, however, which takes rise *after* (or concomitant with) justification and the new birth, grows out of a sense of "being loved and reconciled by God."¹⁰ Simply put, the one grows out of consciousness of sin; the other out of a consciousness of love. And it is precisely this latter humility, so deep and rich, which forms the basis for unabashed testimony as what the grace of God can do. Here Christ, not the self, is glorified by means of this bold and faithful witness. But some, however, are apparently no longer willing to hear such witness or to add their voices to such praise.

Moreover, some leaders, oddly enough, have actually grown tired of the testimony that Christ has set believers free from the guilt, power and being of sin, and they erroneously contend that much "more" is being said if believers would *simply* focus on the love of God in their witness. Granted the liberties of the gospel can be discussed in both a negative and a positive fashion, as freedom *from* sin and freedom *to* love, but this last expression by itself does not, as is mistakenly supposed, say "*more*" than the first. Indeed, to be free from the guilt, power and being of sin *is* to be entirely sanctified, to be washed

and renewed, and to be in a proper *relation* with the Most High. Put another way, such language is simply another way of affirming that one does not commit sins either of *omission* or commission, that one loves the Lord with all of one's heart, mind, soul, and strength and one's neighbor as oneself. Again, if sin is a "missing of the mark," then freedom from sin, from all that separates us from the holy love of God, is the very actualization of our high calling and purpose in Jesus Christ. Therefore, to focus exclusively, or nearly so, on freedom to love, without also considering what believers are free *from*, is to remove the normative context of the moral law (which illuminates what freedom from sin means) from consideration. Such love, then, may in the end be informed not by the gracious liberty of the gospel, but by mere sentimentality and wishful thinking. As there is "cheap grace," so is there "cheap love."

INTELLECTUAL DISSIPATION

Sixth, the holiness movement is dead because its children have "come of age," not only because they have studied at some of the "finest" educational institutions in the world, receiving impressive terminal degrees and doing significant postdoctoral work, but also because they are now very much a part of the intellectual cultural establishment and there is much at stake. For some, the setting of the academy, with its emphasis on objectivity and professional distance, is far more congenial than that of the church. While education is clearly valuable, a tremendous resource which the church so badly needs, and while I would be one of the last people to develop an anti-intellectualist thesis, I must nevertheless go on to observe that *some* key leaders in holiness denominations have, in reality, substituted the thought of some particular philosopher or theological guru for divine revelation itself. Here, in other words, human creativity, the intricate projects of the human imagination, are given as much if not more weight than the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. Here humble, holy, sacrificial love (emphasis on relation) most often suffers, a love which was at the very heart of the holiness movement.

ACCOMMODATION AND COMPROMISE

Seventh, some liberal Protestant theologians at the beginning of the twentieth century offered greater legitimacy for their work (at least in the judgment of the secular cultural elites to whom they were appealing) by trimming the Christian faith of "superstition," the supernatural, and personal (read "individualistic") piety. Part of the concern here among these modern theologians was to continue to be relevant and therefore to enjoy, at least in some measure, a cultural power that they rightly sensed was already slipping away. What remained after this process of modernization or demythologization was a core of social ethics that looked remarkably similar to the ethics, and political judgments, of the elites to whom the original appeal had been made. Here the gospel was defined (or redefined) almost exclusively in terms of social ethics such that the purpose, indeed the telos, of the ministry of Jesus, himself, as well as that of the church were deemed to be, for the most part, the betterment of the *social* conditions of the disadvantaged.

Though the amelioration of the plight of the poor clearly is a part of the gospel, what was lost in this modernizing process was the "embarrassing" (read "supernatural") depth dimension of the Christian faith, that faith in Jesus Christ radically transforms within such that the

dispositions of the heart become remarkably and decisively holy and new. In this latter context, which was in danger of being lost, the motivation as well as the goals of ministry were viewed not so much in terms of abstract notions of ideology or justice, but in terms of fostering holy love, which includes, of course, justice and proper relations, among persons as well as within the broader society. Indeed, it was John Wesley himself who more than two centuries ago pointed out the error of thinking that the very purpose of the Christian faith was merely or largely social betterment. Accordingly, in a letter to Mrs. Bishop on June 17, 1774, Wesley pointed out that "the regulation of social life is the one end of religion, is a strange position indeed. I never imagined any but a Deist would affirm this."¹¹

Later in the twentieth century, some of the same intellectuals of the holiness movement who had come of age and who had experienced repeated frustration, even alienation, earlier in holiness churches now looked to the cultural and theological accommodations made by liberalism with renewed appreciation. And so a second, less extensive, phase of legitimization and accommodation set in, this time within the holiness movement itself. This change appears to have been largely a second order phenomenon in the sense that an accommodation was made to an already existing accommodation, and to a dying one at that.

Though some of these holiness historians and theologians (well placed in holiness institutions by the way) were reluctant to classify themselves as "liberal," they nevertheless developed themes congenial to theological liberals and tended to be embarrassed, at least in some circles, about their more humble holiness roots, both socially and intellectually. The irony of all of this was not lost on some observers who realized the contradiction entailed as scholars on the one hand deprecated the cruciality of inward religion (or at least downplayed it) and championed the rights of the marginalized—sometimes in some very strident ways—while on the other hand they became increasingly embarrassed, both personally and professionally, when reminded about their own more modest holiness heritage. Indeed, the holiness tradition has been, for the most part, a lower to lower-middle class phenomenon, invigorated by waves of revivalism, and determined to emphasize the importance of social reform out of and informed by nothing less than the gracious transformation, the conversion, which occurs in Christ by means of the Spirit, the very beginning of holy love. But what was held together by the fathers and mothers of an earlier generation was soon dropped by sons and daughters of a later one.

PROGRAMMATIC ISSUES

Eighth, though it may seem, at first glance, as if the death of the holiness movement in North America was brought about simply by theological or spiritual malaise, other programmatic, more structural, elements need to be considered as well.

For one thing, the way many holiness folk coalesced and began to form separate, discrete denominations (whether they "came out" or were "pushed out") during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, ironically enough, planted the seeds of subsequent demise. In my reckoning, the holiness movement thrived precisely when it was "persecuted," when it remained within larger bodies to which it bore painful, and at times, annoying witness. Remove that larger, more "catholic" context and you have a prescription for insularity, provincialism, and, unfortunately, decline.

Though my next observation may at first sight seem to be a theological and not a programmatic one, it is actually the latter. Here I am not initially concerned with the *content* of theology (though this is clearly important as well), but with how that theology is structured or "packaged" so that it can communicate the truths of the tradition. Thus, teaching about sanctification, the inculcation of holy love, is often presented simply as "holiness." People then begin to identify as "holiness" folk; zealous pastors preach "holiness" sermons, and energetic theologians write books on "holiness," from biblical, historical, and theological points of view. And in their late-night thoughts some theologians even begin to wax eloquently and to imagine that holiness is the very "substance" of God. The problem here, though it is often subtle, is that holiness may in time be considered apart from the *love* of God.

Though Wesley, himself, often used the simple term "holiness" he always meant by it, certainly after 1725, nothing less than the *holy love* of God. Indeed, apart from its "tension" with love, holiness quickly (and almost inevitably) devolves into sociological and subcultural components, that is, into the stuff of a very human-made religion. Moreover, with its heightened emphasis on separation from the "other," holiness religion may end up glorifying a particular social and cultural ethos—which is actually the reflection of its own social location. Soon the taboos are trotted out, disciplines are packed with strictures, and legalism continues apace. In this phase, some folk may even begin to conclude that they are "holy" precisely because all the taboos are kept. In the worst cases, some unfortunates will begin to enjoy, even to relish, the spiritual distance between them and their neighbors, those for whom Christ died.

In light of this dynamic, holiness folk must agree from the outset, in preaching, teaching, and discipline, *never* to consider holiness apart from the love of God or to consider the love of God apart from holiness (the error of "sentimental" liberalism). This is a structural, programmatic failure. Simply put, the tracks down which theology and life will move are distorted from the very start.

LACK OF LEADERSHIP AND VISION

Ninth, during the nineteenth century the holiness movement enjoyed the capable and steady leadership of Daniel Steele, Phoebe Palmer and Asa Mahan. In the twentieth century, Dennis Kinlaw, Melvin Dieter, Timothy Smith, William Greathouse, and Mildred Wynkoop as well as others provided both clear direction and an engaging vision for holiness people. But when one surveys the current generation of holiness leadership, those in their forties and fifties (with but very few exceptions), one cannot help but be less optimistic—even fearful—about the future. Indeed, things are in such an unfortunate state right now that many holiness leaders no longer see even the need for a distinct holiness witness as revealed in such comments as "there are just as many sinners in the holiness churches as in Lutheran churches" (or in any other denomination for that matter). Now while there are surely saints and sinners in all Christian denominations, and while some people live better than their theologies allow, holiness folk *should* enjoy a more gracious liberty, and one that they are, therefore, eagerly willing to proclaim to the broader church.

But if it is indeed true that there is little difference between members of mainline denominations and holiness folk in terms of sanctity, as some leaders suppose, then it must surely be asked what is the point of the holiness movement in the first place and

what has become of the *mission* of spreading "scriptural holiness across the land? Unfortunately, here we have lost not only our vision, but also our purpose, the very reason God had raised us up in the first place. John Wesley once said, "Give me one hundred preachers who fear nothing but sin and desire nothing but God, and I care not a straw whether they be clergymen or laymen, such alone will shake the gates of hell and set up the kingdom of heaven upon earth."¹² Can we find a hundred such preachers among us? Can we find even fifty?

A RAY OF HOPE

Despite such a gloomy prognosis, there are actually some signs of hope. Some minority voices, theologically speaking, that have been marginalized, ridiculed and stereotyped in the past, are now being heard and taken seriously in the Wesleyan Theological Society and in the Wesley studies section of the American Academy of Religion as well as in various organs of publication, including journals and publishing houses. Indeed, the *pretense* that all is well in holiness circles is effectively being dispelled. What will be the outcome of all of this remains to be seen. What is clear at this point is that the holiness movement constitutes a precious legacy. The problem, though, is that it must become more than a legacy. That is, it must once again become a vital, pulsing movement, transforming both the church and the unchurched alike, and inviting all to enjoy the very highest graces, nothing less than the wonder and beauty of holy love.

NOTES

1. Keith Drury, "The Holiness Movement is Dead," *Holiness Digest* 8, no. 1 (Winter 1994), pp. 13-15.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., p. 13.
4. Richard S. Taylor, "Why the Holiness Movement Died," *God's Revivalist and Bible Advocate* 111, no. 2 (March 1999), pp. 6-27.
5. Cf. William G. McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), pp. 1-23.
6. Cf. W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater, *The Works of John Wesley, Bicentennial ed.*, vol. 20: Journals and Diaries III (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), p. 39, and Thomas Jackson, ed., *The Works of Rev. John Wesley*, 14 vols. (London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room, 1829-1831), Reprinted Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1978, 12:333.
7. Albert C. Outler, ed., *The Works of John Wesley*, vols. 1-4. *The Sermons* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), 2:105.
8. Cf. Theodore W. Jennings Jr., "John Wesley Against Aldersgate," *Quarterly Review* 8 (Fall 1988): 3-22.
9. Harald Lindstrom, *Wesley and Sanctification* (Wilmore, Ky.: Francis Asbury Publishing Co.), p. 114.
10. Ibid. Appropriately, Lindstrom explores these issues of humility and true Christian humility (and repentance after justification) under the broader heading of the "stages" in the Christian life.
11. Jackson, *Works* 13:29.
12. John Telford, ed., *The Letters of John Wesley, A.M.*, 8 vols. (London: The Epworth Press, 1931), 6:272.

