TIMOTHY C. TENNENT

Missional Holiness in a Post-Christendom World

Abstract

The following address was given by Dr. Timothy Tennent, president of Asbury Theological Seminary as the Fall 2010 Convocation Address, first on the Florida-Dunnam Campus (September 7, 2010) and then on the Wilmore (Kentucky) Campus of Asbury Theological Seminary (September 9, 2010). It has been left in its oral form of address.

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Timothy C. Tennent is president of Asbury Theological Seminary, Wilmore, Kentucky and professor of world Christianity.
It was July of 2009, just a few days after I began my ministry here as your President. Someone came up to me and thrust a copy of the Jessamine County Herald-Leader into my hands and said, “Congratulations, you made the front page!” Now the Jessamine County Herald-Leader is not the New York Times, or the Boston Globe. OK, it’s not even like being mentioned in Miley Cyrus’ blog, but there I was on the front page of the Herald. I glanced down and saw the Asbury article. … and then it happened. My eye glanced around to see the rest of the front page and it was then that I saw it – the real front page story that had people talking - not my Presidency, but – on the same page as our presidential announcement, was the other front page story of the day – Cracker Barrel was announcing the opening of a new restaurant on Nicholasville Road! That was the real news on everyone’s lips! Cracker Barrel at Brandon Crossing!

There is at least one thing that Asbury Theological Seminary and Cracker Barrel have in common. We both have mission statements. Cracker Barrel’s mission statement is three single syllable words – it’s simple and it’s unforgettable, and it clearly captures their mission: eat, relax, shop! That is the Crackle Barrel mission: EAT, RELAX and SHOP. The “eating” is, of course, classic southern cuisine – the kind of stuff that many of us grew up eating – biscuits and gravy, corn bread, chicken, country fried steak, etc. You won’t find any sushi or cappuccino at Cracker Barrel. The “shopping” is a reference to the fact that every Cracker Barrel restaurant is attached to a store which sells a wide array of goods, all mass produced in China, but made to look like your grandparents handcrafted them in Appalachia. The “relaxing” is the most interesting part of the mission statement. You see, Cracker Barrel is not just selling food and knick knacks. .they are selling an experience, a feeling of going back in time when the pace of life was slower, things were simpler, and people seemed to be happier. This feeling is conveyed through hundreds of symbols of the past which are hanging on the walls. Their walls are festooned with objects from the past – mostly early 20th century stuff – washboards, advertisements for talcum powders, old automobile tags, etc. The front of every Cracker Barrel is a porch, lined with rocking chairs and large checker boards, recalling a slower paced, more relaxed time. The store sells old TV serials like Leave it to Beaver, the Partridge Family, and the Andy Griffith Show. Cracker Barrel is really a shrine to the past. Modern 21st century people sit at tables in this shrine and eat and relax and maybe do some shopping. … and then they go back out into the “real world” where nobody has ever heard of talcum powders and it’s hard to find a “Leave it to Beaver” family anywhere.

This is, in a nutshell, a picture of what it is like for many people who go to church today. The Church, for many, is a shrine to the past, a weekly escape from the worries and anxieties of the real world they inhabit. Modern
people come and sit in strange long chairs called pews in church buildings, surrounded by numerable relics from the past, many of which they know little to nothing about, but it does produce a certain kind of feeling. The stained glass, the agrarian scenes, the strange swaths of 1st century clothing, maybe even a sheep in Jesus’ arms, can be comforting. For many, the inside of a church is a strange, alien world – the sights, sounds, and even the smells are all unusual... The church has its own vocabulary – our own “foreign language” – words like redemption and sanctification are not normally bandied about the market place! All of it makes perfect sense to the cultural and ecclesiastical insiders - those who have been raised up in the church, who have learned the language of discourse, who are not surprised to see a group of people standing in choir robes, or people lifting their hands singing “blessed be your Name.” It is a “come and see” model - a “come and experience” model. It is not really set up to be a “go and tell” model. It is hard to export all of that into the streets. Its DNA is not really missional, though many have tried to adapt it as such. You see, the non-missional church is the inevitable child of Christendom.

By Christendom I don’t mean only the notion of an official state church like has been experienced in Western Europe or Latin America, but the broader idea of Christendom which is simply a church which occupies the center of cultural life and assumes that people grow up in Christian homes. Christendom recalls a church where the vocabulary of discourse is consonant with the broader culture’s vocabulary of discourse. In Christendom it is assumed that most people in the culture are “church-goers” and evangelism happens passively. The dominant values of the culture flow out of the church albeit in a domesticated form which has sanded down the harsh prophetic edges and, all too frequently, has succumbed to the seductive temptations of power and social location. However, that is a world of our past. It is no longer the world of 2010, nor will it likely be the world of 2050 which is the world where you will exercise your greatest influence and leadership.

Asbury Theological Seminary must awaken to these new realities and transition to equip men and women for ministry in a post-Christendom world. This is a challenge not only for those of us in the Western world which has become decidedly post-Christendom, and, perhaps, culturally post-Christian, but even more so for those parts of the world, particularly throughout Asia and Africa where the church is growing rapidly in a context where Christianity is on the margins of the culture, a post or non-Christendom world which doesn’t even have the memory of Christendom. The challenge of training, preparing and equipping a new generation of leaders for a post-Christendom world is a challenge which is shared by every Seminary in the country. But we here at Asbury have an additional
challenge. Namely, how do we extend our particular mission in this context? What does it mean for us to “spread scriptural holiness” in a post-Christendom, global Christian context?

**Missional Holiness**

In response to these questions, I dedicate my second convocation address to a call for Asbury Theological Seminary to embrace and become practitioners of what I call **MISSIONAL HOLINESS**. What do I mean by **missional holiness**? Missional Holiness brings together two streams of historical understandings of pneumatology which have often lived in isolation from one another. The **first stream**, central to our holiness roots, is the Holy Spirit’s primary role as inwardly sanctifying us from sin – the eradication of that sinful orientation and living a life of dedicated purity. It recalls the great call of God which stretches from Lev. 11:44, 45 to 1 Peter 1:16, to be holy, because He is holy.

The **second pneumatological stream** is the role of the Holy Spirit in empowering the church for effective and bold witness in the world. This stream recalls that bold unction of the Holy Spirit which turned the denying Peter of Matthew 26 into the proclaiming Peter of Acts 2. The first stream emphasizes the Holy Spirit’s work in our interior life. The second stream thinks of the Holy Spirit as the one who empowers us for bold, external witness in the world. Today, we must embrace a radical form of Missional Holiness which unites these two streams together - Inward and outward holiness in full embrace. Missional holiness is what our mission statement is pointing to when it calls us to “spread scriptural holiness throughout the world.” One or the other of these streams can be observed in the holiness movement, the Keswick movement, the Pentecostal movement, the Charismatic movement, the Convergence movement, the missional church movement, but rarely have they been effectively brought together.

Methodism was, as we well know, an 18th century protest movement to revitalize the church of its day. Because Methodism arose two centuries after the Reformation, Wesley was able to observe the long term fruit of the weak pneumatology of the Reformation. Therefore, Methodism represented, among other things, a pneumatological and ecclesiastical corrective to the theology of the magisterial reformers, who inadvertently had created a functional subordinationism in their doctrine of the Holy Spirit. This continues to this day in many of the classic works of Reformed theology. There is a robust defense of the deity of the Holy Spirit as a full member of the Trinity, but the actual work of the Holy Spirit is often organized as a subset of Christology as the One who applies the work of Christ to the believer. Compare, for example, the systematic theologies of
Henry Theissen or Louis Berkhof with Thomas Oden’s three volume work and you will really see this point in stark contrast.

We shouldn’t be overly critical of the Magisterial Reformers on this point. They never claimed that they had completed the Reformation. In fact it is Luther himself who proclaimed, *ecclesia semper reformanda* the church always in Reformation. Furthermore, the Reformers understood that the loss of Biblical Christology in the overall meta-narrative during the late medieval period was so great that it required the full attention of the church to re-articulate who Christ is, the centrality of his person and work, and the need to call men and women to faith in Jesus Christ — *sola scriptura, sola fide, sola gratia, sola Christus* — these are the rallying cries of the Reformation — and we should only applaud them for their focus on the central acts of the meta-narrative centered on Jesus Christ and our response to them. Luther’s task was to re-establish the doorway into the household of faith, i.e. to unambiguously set forth what it means to become a Christian. The full implications for what it means not just to become, but to be a Christian had to unfold over time. However, in retrospect — 200 years after Luther - Wesley discerned the glaring neglect of the significance of Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Spirit, sanctification, the life and social impact of the church in the world. The Reformation left us with a truncated meta-narrative which, speaking frankly, moves from Fall to Covenant to Incarnation to Cross and finally to the Resurrection and ascension, and then comes to a virtual stop. While this truncated meta-narrative did restore the centrality of Christ and his work, it also, over time, created problems in the life of the church which an 18th century Wesley keenly observed. The most obvious legacy which remains with us is the evangelical penchant towards equating the word ‘salvation’ with the word ‘justification.’ The church needed then, as it does today, more reformation, as it more fully responds to the full meta-narrative.

Wesley continued the ongoing reformation process by making the radical suggestion that a believer must be “filled with the Holy Spirit” as this alone is the evidence of true Christianity (*Scriptural Christianity*, vol. 5, pp. 48f, 52). In Wesley, faith and fruit are finally being joyfully wed! If the gospel ends in the resurrection of Christ, then the church has only an instrumental function to look back and proclaim what God did in the past, with no clear connection with what He is doing now in and through his church in the world. In this truncated meta-narrative a para church organization might get the job done with greater efficiency and less cost — a marketed gospel domesticated by American pragmatism. From this vantage point the church is like a food court, with varying programs to meet the needs of religious consumers. However, Wesley saw that the church had not merely an instrumental role in God’s unfolding meta-narrative, but was itself part of the meta-narrative. The church is more than merely the community of individuals who have
appropriated the work of Christ. The church has a corporate, ontological role, embodied in community, reflecting the Trinity, and central to God’s unfolding plan. (ubi Christus, ibi ecclesia – where the church is, there is Christ) The church doesn’t just proclaim what God did; the church is what God is doing in the world. “I will build my church” (Matt. 16:18) declares our Lord Jesus. At the heart of the gospel may, indeed, be the cross and resurrection, but the gospel continues to unfold in the coming of the Holy Spirit, the life of the church in the world, culminating in the return of Christ and the ushering in of the New Creation. The Bible does not run from Gen 3 to Rev. 20 – the Fall to the Return. It runs from Gen. 1 to Rev. 22 – from Creation to New Creation. Missional Holiness enables the church to see the full meta-narrative which stretches from creation to fall to covenant to incarnation to cross and resurrection, ascension, coming of the Holy Spirit, the life of the church, the return of Christ and the final ushering in of the New Creation. Along the way, the ordo salutis gets a more robust understanding of sanctification!

Wesley profoundly understood this and therefore the Methodist movement represents a corrective – a renewed sense that the gospel continues to unfold in the world. Wesley saw that the people of God must not be declared holy in merely a forensic, judicial, private sense, but be holy in the practical, lived out public sense! Faith and Fruit must meet and be joyfully wed. Wesley’s emphasis on sanctification is his attempt to extend the meta-narrative to be fully Trinitarian; fully embracing that God is building the people of God. The subsequent holiness movement in all of its manifestations represents a holy “push back” of Luther’s doctrine of simul iustus et peccator – simultaneously righteous and sinner. In Luther’s theology righteousness is alien righteousness – we are not made upright, we cannot become upright, we can only be declared upright as the righteousness of Christ is imputed into the life of the believer. For Luther, sanctification is still largely a subset of his Christology. This makes perfect sense from the perspective of a truncated meta-narrative which ends in Christ and never quite makes it to Pentecost. However, Wesley was not prepared to accept sin as the inevitable and ongoing experience of the believer. For Wesley, righteousness is more than God just looking at us through a different set of glasses. Through the power of the Holy Spirit Wesley affirmed that “one might overcome sin and the world.”11 The new creation has broken in to the present age in Jesus Christ and through the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit it is being appropriated into the life and experience of the believer – that’s what the second blessing is all about! Brothers and sisters we are called to be holy, as the Scripture declares, “without holiness no one will see the Lord.” Luther’s anxieties about the book of James was because Luther’s task was to defend the front door of the house – but when you
look at the entire household of faith, James is more interested in the living room than in the front door. The life of holiness is not a novel doctrine. Wesley re-discovered it in the Scriptures. Wesley heard it afresh from the Nicene Creed, which set forth four marks of the true church: One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic church. Wesley learned it from the 4th century saint Macarius the Egyptian. He learned it from the 15th century Thomas a Kempis. He learned it from the pietistic Moravians of his own day like Peter Bohler and Nicholas Von Zinzendorf. The Moravians represented the non-magisterial reformation and therefore they were inherently more in touch with a post-Christendom world since they never accepted the Christendom project to begin with. These were Wesley’s tutors in holiness: Biblical authors, patristic saints, pre-Reformation mystics, and pietistic Moravians, not to mention his own heart-warming experiences of Aldersgate and Fetter’s Lane.

Wesley eventually emphasized the Spirit’s role in the sanctification of believers and accepted the idea of a “second” crisis experience subsequent to justification, a doctrine which would become a key feature in later holiness and Pentecostal pneumatology. He referred to this experience in various ways, including “perfect love,” “eradication of inbred sin,” “second blessing,” and “entire sanctification,” all of which influenced the theology of the holiness tradition. Christian movements around the world will use different terminology to describe this – we say “entire sanctification,” or “second blessing,” the Pentecostals and H. C. Morrison call it “baptism in the Holy Spirit,” the Eastern Orthodox call it becoming “living icons.” But, taken together, the church around the world is increasingly recognizing that along with sola Scriptura, sola fide, sola gratia, sola Christus, we must add sola Spiritus – the Holy Spirit alone makes the church holy! The Holy Spirit alone empowers us for holy mission in the world. Missional holiness!

Wesley’s emphasis on sanctification is his attempt to extend the meta-narrative – to continue the Reformation – to help the church be more fully Trinitarian. His theology began with a focus on holiness as the eradication of sin, i.e. the inward pneumatological stream. However, as Wesley’s pneumatology developed, he came to see the public and external power of holiness as the church bears fruit for the kingdom. The witness of the Spirit which confirms faith becomes in Wesley the power of the Spirit to produce fruit and to transform the world – to spread scriptural holiness through the world. This is missional holiness: The Holy Spirit empowering believers for witness, service, evangelism and church planting.

This is why I call us to embrace missional holiness. Missional holiness insists on discipleship and sanctification in the lives of believers, but also joins that with a deeper appreciation that we are cleansed from sin so that we can more effectively proclaim and model Christ’s life into the world. It
is this missional focus which unleashed the dynamic church planting ministry of Francis Asbury. It is missional holiness which made Wesley an evangelical “brick yard” preaching, church planting, holy club organizing, social visionary theologian.

What does this mean for us today at Asbury? What does it mean for us to embrace missional holiness? I would like to make three suggestions.

**First**, a renewed emphasis on our evangelistic-church planting history and calling. In the world of Christendom, evangelism happens passively, mostly within the home – pillow and hearth catechesis - and through the ordinary work of confirmation classes. However, the traditional heartlands of the church are today increasingly post-Christendom. The Western world is the fastest growing mission field in the world. The church in African and Asia is growing in a context where Christianity is on the margins quite separate from any Christendom models. Even Latin America, after centuries of Christendom, is today emerging as a post-Christendom church, in large part due to the dramatic inroads Pentecostalism is making in traditional, magisterial Roman Catholicism. We have to learn how to evangelize and plant churches again, and do it from the prophetic margins, not the center, of culture. I look for the day when Asbury Theological Seminary will be one of the great church planting sending centers in the world, modeling how to plant churches in a post-Christendom world, whether in Wilmore (multi-ethnic Orlando) or in China. This can happen if we embrace missional holiness.

**Second**, Missional Holiness reminds us that holiness is central to the meta-narrative; a true mark of the church, not a sectarian doctrine. We must embody for the world what it means to be a holy people. We must never forget the basic lesson of the Reformation about what is necessary to become a Christian, but we also dare not lose our holy momentum in setting forth what it means to be a Christian – to live as a discipled believer. We must not forget that the only actual imperative form in Matthew’s Great Commission is the word “mathetesate” -’make disciples’ This was Wesley’s passion which led to holy clubs and class meetings and people being called “Methodists.” When people ask you what in the world has happened to Methodism today, just tell them that our current state can be traced to that time when the word Methodist became a noun rather than an adjective, and the day we get our adjective back, is the day we will once again model missional discipleship. Wesley understood that discipleship is crucial for holiness. We must recapture this, because it is central to our DNA. We still believe in a post-conversion experience with the Holy Spirit which re-orient our affections away from sin and towards holiness. The second blessing makes perfect sense once the meta-narrative itself is released from its truncated state and fully embraces not only the person, but the work of the Holy Spirit. Missional Holiness is the bridge between faith and fruit.
Third, if we, in true Wesleyan tradition, capture the full meta-narrative from creation to New Creation, then we will also, simultaneously, capture a truly global, non-sectarian vision of the church. This Fall we are launching our 2023 global prayer vision. It is a commitment to a process to pray and to envision what we are to become by the year 2023 when we celebrate our 100th anniversary as an institution. You see, what I am advocating today is not a “quick fix” but a generational transformation of Asbury. Like building a cathedral, each generation had its part. For us, missional holiness means understanding “theological education” holistically, including forming the mind, inward transformation and discipleship, and missional equipping for bold service in the world. We go forth not only as bearers of the gospel to those who have not heard, but as partners with the church of Jesus Christ around the world. We have resources and capacities which can enormously encourage and assist the global church. Likewise, the global church has insights into evangelism and church planting for a post-Christendom world which we desperately need to receive. In India I have met brothers who have seen the lame healed, the dead raised and the good news preached to the poor. I have had the privilege of training hundreds of church planters in India and have seen the fruit of this vitality. In Africa I have met sisters in Christ who have seen visions and seen thousands come to Christ in the dawning of new days of Pentecost. I had the joy of personally baptizing a new Chinese believer in the Yangtze River. I did it in the dead of night for fear of the authorities, but in the process I captured a renewed glimpse of what God is doing in China. God is moving in the global church and we being called to be a part of it.

It was John Wesley who once prophetically wrote what I believe is one of the best definitions of missional holiness. It is in his work entitled, the General Spread of the Gospel: “May we not suppose that the same leaven of pure and undefiled religion of the experimental knowledge and love of God, of inward and outward holiness, will...gradually be diffused...to the remotest parts of not only Europe, but of Africa, Asia and America.” (Works, vol. 6, p. 283). You see, Wesley’s missional holiness and fully envisioned meta-narrative, not only gives us sola spiritus, but it also gives us sola ecclesia—the Church alone is the embodiment of the New Creation and is the visible expression of God’s redemptive missio dei in the world. Students of Asbury, fall in love with God’s holy church!

Brother and sisters at Asbury Theological Seminary, we are called to go into all the world precisely because God’s prevenient grace has already beat us there. That prevenient grace becomes embodied in modern flesh and blood versions of the Macadonian Man who continues to call and beckon us. The worship of Jesus which John eschatologically sees in the New Creation is from men and women from every tribe, tongue and language,
worshipping the Lord. Today, worship is rising up in Spanish and English and German and French, but that will never suffice – not at this banquet! The New Creation is calling forth worship in Mandarin and Farsi and Kurdish and Afrikaans and Lao and Hausa and Hindi and Swahili and Korean and Arabic and hundreds more! I can almost hear the strains of the New Creation now as the global church explodes in growth! Holiness never impacts the world in some vague, generic, or merely forensic sense, but in the enfleshed lives of real people in local contexts. Missional holiness must become embodied in the lives of the rice farmer in Tianjin, China, the textile worker in Hanoi, the literature professor in Sao Paulo, the construction worker in Nairobi, the businesswoman in Budapest, the soccer mom in Seattle, the IT professional in Mumbai, the school teacher in Orlando. This is missional holiness for a post-Christendom world!

Conclusion

Cracker Barrel may have given us those three comforting words:

EAT, SHOP and RELAX

But, we have a far more compelling, powerful and transforming mission. Not, EAT, SHOP, and RELAX, but FAITH, HOLINESS, AND NEW CREATION. May those words summon us afresh as the people of God here at Asbury Theological Seminary, “a community called” to missional holiness. Amen.

End Notes

1 Donald W. Dayton, Theological Roots of Pentecostalism (Grand Rapids: Francis Asbury Press, 1987), 37