

The Holiness Debate

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I have referred in another context to Barry Callen's and James North's *Coming Together in Christ: Pioneering A New Testament Way to Christian Unity* (College Press, 1997), which provides readers with some of the dialogue that has taken place between Christian Churches/Churches of Christ and the Church of God (Anderson). Naturally, in the context of that dialogue, one of the questions addressed was this: What does it mean to be holy? It is interesting that within the American Holiness movement there is also dialogue over a similar and equally basic question: What does it mean to be holiness? In 1995 Keith Drury spoke at the annual meeting of the Christian Holiness Association, an organization of holiness denominations. Very much to everyone's surprise, Drury announced, "The Holiness Movement is dead!" Don't misunderstand. He did not say that holiness is dead, or the doctrine of holiness is dead, nor that there was no such thing as believers being sanctified. Rather, he declared that the movement is dead, in the sense that it no longer has the broad-based power to influence the American culture.

The reaction of the audience who heard these words was mixed. Some people, including denominational leaders, had the attitude of "So what?" Others contended that perhaps their corner of the movement was dead. Still others prided them-selves in being the "last" of the true holiness movement, and they were alive (see D. Curtis Hale, Prologue to *Counterpoint: Dialogue with Drury on The Holiness Movement*, Schmul, 2005, 8).

We have noted in a previous Bulletin on the American Holiness movement (July 2005) that the historical Holiness movement is today somewhat diverse. It includes Methodists of all kinds, Nazarenes, Wesleyans, Brethren, Salvationists (Salvation Army), Church of God, and a host of smaller groups. However, at the same time, there are "holiness people" in almost any denomination or group you might care to name.

In his address to the Christian Holiness Association, Drury offered eight overlapping "factors" which contributed, in his opinion, to the death of the Holiness movement. These eight contributing causes may be summarized as follows:

- 1. Holiness Christians wanted to be respectable, viewed as normal, regular Christians - not as a fringe group. In this quest for respectability, we lost our willingness to be different, not just different from the world, but different from average evangelical Christians. It's hard to be holiness when one is unwilling to be different than the average Christian.
- 2. Holiness Christians plunged into the evangelical mainstream. Holiness people became generic evangelicals.
- 3. Holiness Christians failed to convince the younger generation of the importance of sanctification. Holiness is preached as an attractive accessory, not as an essential necessity. Many holiness pastors have opted for the much more appealing notion of optional or progressive sanctification rather than instantaneous and/or "entire" sanctification - if they preach holiness at all.
- 4. Holiness Christians quit making holiness the main issue. Holiness is our stated belief, but in most churches today the mood is uplifting, cheery, help-for-Monday sermons, not the necessity of holiness of heart and life.
- 5. Holiness Christians lost the lay people. A real movement is not made up of professionals, but is lay-dominated. Most holiness gatherings have become fellowships of ministers on expense accounts.
- 6. Holiness Christians overreacted against the abuses of the past. Because some in the old Holiness movement were legalistic and judgmental, we became behavioral libertarians. Some were so ingrown as to never touch the world, so we became assimilated into the world and seldom touch God. Some were radically emotional, running the aisles, shouting and "getting blessed," so we became orderly and respectable, and we labeled all such emotions as "leaning charismatic."
- 7. Holiness Christians adopted church growth thinking without theological thinking. We discovered in America numerical success is the doorway to respect. We wanted to be accepted into the mainstream and we found that church growth gave us the chance. When the Church Growth movement first came along, holiness people were wary. We were nervous about too much accommodation to the world in order to win the world. But evangelism has always been a twin passion with holiness. So, many holiness churches - at least the growing ones - suppressed their natural reticence and adopted church growth thinking in a wholesale way. Pastors become CEOs. Ministers became managers. Shepherds promoted themselves to ranchers. Sermons became talks. Sinners were renamed "seekers." "Twelve steps" became the new way to get deliverance, instead of at the altar. Growth itself became the great tie-breaking issue. Everything else was made to serve growth.
- 8. We did not notice when the battle line moved. Many of us believe we are in danger of losing the doctrine and experience of "second-blessing holiness" - an experience through the Holy Spirit which cleanses the heart of its inclination to rebel and enables the believer to live above intentional sin, producing a life in obedience to the known will of God...While we have been discussing holiness in our theological societies and denominational conventions, the battle line moved on us. Many of our people do not need to be sanctified - they need to be saved! The doctrine at risk in many holiness churches is not entire sanctification, but "transformational conversion." We may need to stand at Luther's side awhile before we can rejoin Wesley. How can those convinced that God can in an instant purify the heart of a believer get that message across to someone who has experienced no crisis of conversion or even is able to testify to any deliverance in their life to date that occurred in a moment? Yes, there are those who have been delivered (converted), but not in a moment, but only after a long period of gradual growth and increasing victory and diminishing defeat. Could it be that while the remnants of the Holiness movement are fighting a rear guard action trying to defend

instantaneous sanctification, the progressive-conversion generals are taking the field? Can a crisis sanctification survive when a crisis conversion disappears? (Keith Drury, "The Holiness Movement is Dead: A Retrospective," in Counterpoint: Dialogue with Drury on The Holiness Movement, Schmull, Publishing, 2005, 17-35).

What I want to address in this context is not so much the issue of whether or not the Holiness movement is dead, half-alive, or still alive, although cases could be offered for all three pronouncements depending on where one chooses to look, rather I want to focus on the question: Is the doctrinal emphasis of the classical Holiness movement correct? In other words, does the Bible teach John Wesley's concept of holiness of heart and life and, in particular, does Scripture suggest anywhere that our experience of what Christ accomplished for us on the cross works itself out in two distinct works of grace in our lives as believers?

I begin by affirming what Richard S. Taylor says in his essay in Counterpoint, specifically, that although the Holiness movement needs new life, it is not totally dead. There are still many thriving holiness camp meetings, Schmull Publishing not only has kept many holiness classics alive, but every year prints many new holiness-oriented works, and there are numerous colleges and seminaries where Wesleyan holiness is alive and well, including Asbury College, Asbury Theological Seminary, Wesley Biblical Seminary, and Nazarene Theological Seminary. Further, organizations like Dennis Kinlaw's Francis Asbury Society (FAS) are expanding and promoting the holiness teaching of Scripture not only here in America, but overseas as well (see "Why the Holiness Movement Died," by Richard S. Taylor, in Counterpoint, 36ff).

Focusing now on the doctrine of holiness, I also agree with Taylor that the idea of "full salvation" is seldom popular today in any church because, as Taylor states, "it is inherently counter to sinful human nature" (Counterpoint, 41). In short, we live in an age of easy believism, an age in which grace is not only cheap, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer termed it, but one in which believers can be both saved and continue in sin at the same time. But this popular teaching that grace is "cheap" has nothing to do with Scripture.

In Romans 6:1-2 Paul makes it clear that believers are not to continue in sin:

"What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?"

In 1 Corinthians 10:13 he puts it a little differently:

No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your strength, but with the temptation will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.

In other words, there is always a way of escape. We need not sin. In 1 John 2:1 we read:

My little children, I am writing this to you so that you may not sin; but if any one does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.

Later, in 1 John 3:6-9, John says:

No one who abides in Him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him. Little children, let no one deceive you. He who does right is righteous, as He is righteous. He who commits sin is of the devil; for the devil has sinned from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil. No one born of God commits sin; for God's nature abides in him, and he cannot sin because he is born of God.

But did Jesus teach this same idea, that sin has no place in the life of the believer? In John 5:14, after healing the cripple man by the pool of Bethesda, Jesus told him:

"See, you are well. Sin no more, that nothing worse befall you."

In John 8:1-11 Jesus told the woman caught in the act of adultery:

"Go and sin no more."

Did Jesus really expect born-again believers to "sin no more"? Our forefathers throughout church history have argued He did. For example, Charles Haddon Spurgeon, not exactly a Wesleyan, much less part of the Holiness movement, preached, "Jesus will not walk with His people unless they drive out every known sin." But how can human beings, even born-again, Spirit-filled human beings, drive out every known sin?

In his second letter, Peter describes the false teachers of his day as men "with eyes full of adultery" who "never stop sinning" (2 Peter 2:14). In the Old Testament the psalmist wrote that, even after God smote the Israelites for

disobedience, "In spite of all this, they kept on sinning" (Psalm 78:32). Moses told the terrified people of Israel who stood at the foot of Mount Sinai that the reason God had come down in awesome, fiery glory was so "the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning" (Exodus 20:20).

Today, however, as Keith Drury stated, it is popular in evangelical churches, even holiness churches, to teach that Christians will, to some degree, continue regularly to sin in thought, word, and deed. Indeed, many pastors use the phrase "sinning Christians" without any embarrassment at all. But if Christians continue to sin in thought, word, and deed, what distinguishes them from those who are not Christians? The gospel preached by Jesus and the early church did not characterize believers as continuing in sin, at least not intentionally. The gospel message in a nutshell is that Jesus came to save us from our sins, not in our sins.

In the first chapter of the Gospel of John, the disciple makes it clear Jesus came to "take away" the sin of the world (John 1:29) - freely, by His grace, mercy, and goodness - so that we might serve Him with all our hearts, free from the dominion of sin (Galatians 1:4; 1 Peter 1:14-18). The New Testament emphasizes that the blood of Jesus not only cleanses us from sin (1 John 1:7), but it frees us from sin as well (Rev. 1:5). It liberates us from the tyranny of sin, enabling us to say no to temptation and to resist the pull of the flesh, consecrating our bodies and minds to the Lord. When we sing "There is power in the blood [of Jesus], that is the "power" we are singing about.

In other words, when a person becomes a Christian, when he or she is "born again," according to the New Testament, there is a definitive break with a lifestyle dominated by sin. This is why Paul raises the question in Romans about how can new creatures in Christ continue to live in sin. His answer is: They can't. In Romans 8:13 Paul makes it very clear to the believers in Rome, "For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live."

But, again, you can visit hundreds of evangelical churches today, many holiness churches included, and never hear that passage emphasized. Why? Because Paul uses rather violent language. There is no question or doubt in his mind about this. What Paul says makes us uncomfortable. But he is very clear. We are to treat sin ruthlessly by "mortifying" - killing, destroying, slaughtering - its power in our lives. Clearly, there is no place for sin in the Christian's life.

When worldliness crept in among the Corinthians because of their denial of the future resurrection, Paul rebuked them very sternly. In 1 Corinthians 15:33-34 he says:

Do not be misled: 'Bad company corrupts good character.' Come back to your senses as you ought, and stop sinning; for there are some who are ignorant of God - I say this to your shame.

In other words, there were people in the church in Corinth who were "ignorant of God" because they did not stop sinning.

The warning in Hebrews 10 is even stronger:

If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God (Hebrews 10:26-27).

Do not misunderstand. The New Testament says it is one thing to "struggle" with sin. All believers will face temptation. But it is quite another thing to be a deliberate, willful sinner. It is one thing to slip and fall. But it is quite another to habitually and consciously say yes to the flesh and no to the Spirit. Those who live like that - as purposeful, willful, deliberate, continual sinners - are God's enemies, not His friends, much less His servants.

In every century the church has had such people in it. Jesus Himself says that these people call Him "Lord," but He does not know them (Luke 6:46, Matt. 7:21-23). Even the apostle John, who is famous for his emphasis on the love of God, has some rather strong words to say about anyone who walks in sin. As we read a moment ago from 1 John, he makes it clear that "no one born of God will continue to sin." The believer who is truly born-again "cannot go on sinning."

John does not mean that anyone who claims to be a believer and sins even one time is not truly saved. After all, it is in this context that he says:

If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make Him out to be a liar and His word has no place in our lives. My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense - Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world (1 John 1:8-2:2).

Thank-God there is provision for our sin - before we are saved and after we are saved. Even though God's will is for us not to sin, if we confess our sins to Him, He is faithful to wash us clean. Certainly this is a glorious truth that brings comfort to us and daily encouragement. But we must, as Michael Brown says, be careful to put the emphasis where it belongs (see Brown, *Go and Sin No More*, Regal, 1999, 99ff.). Intentional sin in the life of the believer should be something that is very rare.

John was not making excuse for our sins, nor was he giving believers a license to sin. John did not view sin in believers lightly. There is nothing God hates more than sin. The whole purpose of John's first letter was to call his readers to a closer walk with Christ. He challenged them to holiness, while encouraging them when they fell short.

However, his emphasis is on holiness, not on falling short. Anyone who really understands the gospel would never think for a moment John was telling his readers it was fine to sin freely, as long as they confessed their sins along the way. No, his emphasis is very clear: Believers must live radically different from unbelievers.

Believers live in light, unbelievers live in darkness. The righteous walk in truth and overcome sin. The unrighteous walk in lies and do what is wrong. Michael Brown notes immediately after John talks about Jesus pleading our case with the Father when we do sin, he writes:

We know that we have come to know Him if we obey His commands. The man who says, "I know Him," but does not do what He commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But if anyone obeys His word, God's love is truly made complete in him. This is how we know we are in Him: Whoever claims to live in Him must walk as Jesus did (1 John 2:3-6; cf. Brown, *Go and Sin No More*, 100).

John was not telling his readers how they could live like this, but he was telling them and us that this is how we are to live. After all, he was only reinforcing standards that God had already laid out in the Old Testament centuries before - standards that Jesus took even deeper in His teaching in the Sermon on the Mount.

You remember, through the prophet Isaiah the Lord had said, "Wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight. Stop doing wrong, learn to do right!" (Isaiah 1:16-17). The psalmist asked in Psalm 24:3: "Who may ascend the hill of the Lord? Who may stand in His holy place?" His answer was direct and clear: "He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to an idol or swear by what is false" (Psalm 24:4). That person is the only person who can live in God's presence. Such holiness is demanded by God in both the Old Testament and the New Testament (Lev. 11:45; 1 Peter 1:16).

In fact, all the Old Testament prophets, with one voice, brought the same message from the Lord to the chosen people. In 2 Kings 17:13 we read, "Turn from your evil ways. Observe my commands and decrees, in accordance with the entire Law that I commanded your fathers to obey and that I delivered to you through my servants the prophets."

The good news of the New Testament gospel is that now, by the indwelling Spirit of God, we can fulfill the Law's demands (Romans 8:1-4; 6:12-14). Now, holiness is written on our hearts (Hebrews 8:10; 10:16' cf. Jer. 31:33).

So, again, Scripture says our holiness, not continuing to intentionally sin, is not an option, it is essential. We are called to live holy lives, anything else is disobedience. That is why the author of Hebrews is so strong on this subject:

Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy, without which no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many (Hebrews 12:14-15).

Whereas, as unbelievers, sin used to be the rule of our lives, and we did whatever we wanted to do with little or no thought of God; as believers, sinning should be the exception to the rule, because we live to please our Lord.

Paul reminds his readers we are no longer slaves to sin, we are now slaves to righteousness, and sin is not to dominate our lives any longer. However, our tendency in the church today is to make light of our disobedience and freely excuse our sins. Many "Christians" live as if God actually expects us to disregard His commandments and standards, as if chronic disobedience was the norm for born-again believers. Jesus said in John 8:34-36:

I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.

In his popular book on holiness, *Breaking Free from Sin's Grip* (Beacon Hill, 2001), Frank Moore breaks down the biblical teaching on holiness by explaining what the Bible teaches about sin. He writes:

Sin creates a twofold problem. God's forgiveness takes care of my past acts of sinning. That long list constitutes problem number one. But what about sin's nature buried deep within me that causes me to want to do the wrong thing or "my thing" in the first place? What about that pride that boasts to the world, "I did it my way!" That's problem number two. Preference for self-sovereignty lurks at the heart of this matter.

That self-preference remains deeply rooted in my nature even after God forgives the list of sins. I enjoy God's forgiveness and fellowship, but part of me wants to retain at least some control of my life. After all, it is my life isn't it?

This attitude or mind-set highlights this second problem that needs God's touch. It's not that I want to go out in the dark of the night and sin against Him. It's not that I wish to rebel against Him. I'm not hoping to harbor some sinful habit or spirit. I just want to retain some autonomy about life's direction. Why should someone else get to call the shots in my life? Why should I have to surrender control of everything? (Frank Moore, *Breaking Free from Sin's Grip*, Beacon Hill, 2001, 37).

As most traditional holiness preachers have been heard to say many times, what God wants to do in our lives is a two-stage experience, not because He is unable to provide full salvation to us in a single experience, but because when we are saved, we typically don't grasp all that God in Christ wants to do for and in us - and our understanding of what we need is very important. Moore writes:

...when we give our hearts and lives to Christ in conversion, we give Him everything of ourselves that we know to give Him at the time. We're so anxious to be free from the guilt and bondage of sin that we're willing to sign just about any contract He sets before us, much like we're willing to sign loan papers when bills pile up and the money's all gone.

Then, we begin to clean up all of life's areas (actions, thoughts, attitudes, motives, reactions, possessions, habits, and all the rest). They all fall under Christ's oversight. Unfortunately, we usually move a few personal items to one very small room in our lives. Not anything big and bad, just a prideful attitude, a sour spirit, or an unhealthy habit. The items don't matter. The issue is that they represent our autonomy.

Wouldn't you know it! When we start getting really serious with God and deeply involved in Christian living, He asks for the key to that little room in the house of our lives, but that's not enough for Him. He wants all of the keys, not just 99% of them (Moore, 37-38; cf. Robert Boyd Munger's *My Heart Christ's Home*, InterVarsity, 1986).

Moore goes on to refer to Romans 12:1 and 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24.:

Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God - this is your spiritual act of worship. - Romans 12:1

May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it. - 1 Thess. 5:23-24

Moore explains the Romans 12 passage speaks of our offer, in a sense, our readiness to go "all the way" with Christ. It is our offer of consecration. The 1 Thessalonians 5 passage speaks of God's work of sanctification.

Keep in mind Paul is writing to believers in Rome and Thessalonica, urging them to do this, telling them that God has something more for them - if they are ready and willing to accept it by faith. No second blessing? Look again.