THE PREACHING OF HOLINESS

How often ought one to "preach holiness"? is a frequent question among ministers. There are two sorts of extreme responses, both of which arise out of a misunderstanding of what holiness preaching is. One says, "Don't over do it. Preach it once a month, or once a quarter or once a year." The other says, "Preach it everytime you go into the pulpit." And those who listen to him are apt to say, "We are tired of holiness. We wish our preacher would give us some food. We are 'emotionalized' into immobility."

In both cases the problem lies in the fact that holiness is interpreted too narrowly. It may mean a dry doctrinal sermon in which the bare theological bones are counted and properly located. Or it may mean a constant exhortation to a certain "experience" with no future beyond it. But mainly the difficulty is a limitation of the meaning of holiness to a second experience.

It is the conclusion of this study drawn from every specific element in it that there is a danger of stressing methodology until the moral and personal and life relevance is almost totally obscured. Considered Biblically, when this is the case the preaching, however correct it may be in stressing the crisis points, is no longer holiness preaching. Every Biblical exhortation was to a specific moral decision reaching into the farthest areas of life.

We may conclude, then, that Biblical preaching, will major on the content of the word holiness, pressing its demands upon the heart and life. It is basically Christ-centered. Every facet of the use of the word is bound up inextricably with Christ and His demands on us. And this is in total keeping with the Biblical idea of holiness as centered in God.

To major in preaching on any other emphasis or to overstress any one element over another within the total Gospel approach is to run the risk of "running out of sky." Only this spiritual, dynamic approach is capable of extended life and infinite increase. Only the moral demands of the gospel, as given us in the New Testament, can provide an adequate preaching substance which never grows old. Under it people come into salvation and mature in it and retain a perennial interest that does not die with human old age. Any other approach to holiness ends in a "dead-end street". The possibilities are soon exhausted and formalism is the inevitable consequence for lack of relevance.

Moralism has been tried and found wanting. Hebrew moralism is the classic example. It is easier to "keep law" than to be right but keeping the law without being right ends in the self-righteousness which is both repulsive to the on-looker and spiritually disappointing to the law-keeper. When the dynamic of holiness theology wanes its ideals tend to be translated into a moralism which isolates people from the life in which they need most to be immersed. Moralism ends in spiritual bankruptcy.
Intellectualism or rationalism has "too low a ceiling". Greek philosophy is the classic example. Its passion is to capture and preserve in logical formularies and precise expressions every detail of the Christian faith. The genius of Greek thinking gave the Christian church its ecumenical Christological creeds. But when it failed to keep practical concerns in its scope of thinking it ran into the dead-end of fruitless controversy in which the Eastern Church became entombed. It is possible to talk holiness theology into a grave. To know its content requires a corresponding obligation to do its truth. When this fails the doctrine becomes a head-stone to the grave of those who have betrayed it.

"Works" is a dead-end street. Catholicism is its classic example. Perfection that is earned by self-denial and acts of penance and good deeds is not Christian perfection. It is superficial and spiritually barren. The whole thing ends in a legalistic system of meritorious ritual that can and has issued in moral bankruptcy. The spiritual ceiling is too low.

Psychological patterning also has a low ceiling. "Experience", if it be not guarded becomes either a dismal source of truth - liberalism, or an irrational test of truth - emotionalism. Experience, or the life relevance of salvation truth, divorced from objective norms of truth, ends in a dangerous confusion about emotional states. Any preoccupation with psychological states must end in false tests of the true and a virtual denial of moral life. In the interest of a wholesome presentation of the message of holiness it must be said that there is a danger of so emphasizing the psychological aspect of experience that the moral relevance is almost obscured.

None of these approaches can maintain the spiritual dynamic of the New Testament gospel message. All of them begin in a truth but reach the climax of their truth and must be maintained in some unspiritual way to survive. The ceiling is too low. There is no "future". They run out of sky. Only the spiritual and moral approach characteristic of the New Testament message continues to throb with life century after century and - more miraculously - throughout the expanding life of a person. The true holiness message does not exhaust itself in issues which are discarded by a growing psyche. Maturity cannot outdate it. Properly preached, "holiness" has no ceiling. It is as big as the future and more challenging than the deepest capacity of any human person can possibly fully explore.

Holiness preaching grapples with moral issues and includes the secondary matters, such as methodology, only insofar as these help to relate the moral imperative to human experience. But even here, great care needs to be exercised. It is not the task of a preacher to convict another for sin, particularly the ultimate sin which lies as deep in the human heart as that which only the Holy Spirit can uncover. Wesley had a good word for us here. To the question, "In what manner should we preach sanctification?" he answered (in Plain Account),
Scarse at all to those who are not pressing forward; and to those who are, always by way of promise; always drawing rather than driving (italics mine).

It is not the task of the preacher, moreover, to tell anyone where and when this inner cleansing is to take place. In the zeal for "results", there has grown up a patterned methodology which is pressed with so much urgency as to dangerously threaten the real issues, namely, "If you come to the altar, today, you will go home 'sanctified'." A spirit of haste dissipates the spirit of depth. The Preacher's Magazine carried an article in the June 1958 issue in which Dwayne Hildie spoke to this important point.

This invitation was further implemented by an enthusiastic corps of altar workers who followed pretty much a set pattern which would include proper instruction, encouragement, singing — nearly always ending in an exhortation to 'take it by faith.' But if we project human methods on the seeker to the extent that he really does not pray through, we send him home with an empty heart and with no real work done. We can only estimate his reaction and disappointment when, within forty-eight hours probably, he can discern not one bit of difference in his life (p. 14).

The moral commitment is so deep and so personal and so intimate that no human being can accompany another into the depth of that act. No humanly structured hurry can do more than hinder the solid, painstaking way of the Holy Spirit with a human heart. It takes time for the "I" to divest itself of its self-righteous garments or, to change the figure, to push past the impersonal things with which it identifies itself into a naked self-awareness capable of the kind of commitment to Christ that will change the whole atmosphere of the self.

Preaching holiness is preaching Christ and preaching Christ is pressing upon the heart that kind of truth which Jesus pressed. If there is one word to describe it, it would be the challenge to straight thinking. It has been argued that it was the manner of Jesus' preaching that gave offence. He claimed to be the authority and that was not palatable to the ecclesiastical mind. But, as John Baker said in The Expository Times (March 1956), it was rather

His deliberate policy of driving men back to the point of self-examination, beyond their conventional attitudes, beyond their prejudices and their proneness to deceive themselves and to make excuses for their behaviour (p. 179).

Baker makes a strong and acceptable point of this matter. Christ was constantly doing and saying things that would force a reappraisal of personal motivation. "On each point Christ puts the emphasis where it was rarely put - upon the inner thought and motive preceding the action." He broke good rules (washing before eating) to attack the loose thinking of His age. He called no one to follow Him under false pretences. "He gave them no theories to swallow whole - He lived with them so they could thoroughly examine His claims."
But Christ's most telling exposures had to do with the more subtle forms of self-deceit—those which covered unholy motives with worthy ideals. Jews desired and prayed for the kingdom but Jesus showed them in parable and preaching that a pious desire apart from a clean heart and an accompanying personal commitment was hypocrisy. Christ wanted to save men and women but He could not do that until they became honest with themselves and stopped making excuses and gave up their pretences. "That was why he put such emphasis on straight thinking" (p. 181).

Preaching Christ is, also, preaching the deepest continuing moral responsibility for a life of Christian expression—not only in words—how formal they may become! but in action. Love is the atmosphere of holiness and love is the expenditure of the self. In the best sense of the word, holiness cannot happen in a moment. It begins, but as love cannot mature without expression so holiness, which is love, cannot exist apart from the life expression of it.

The Crisis Points

There is a Biblical emphasis on decisive, crisis points.

The Biblical approach to that crisis which is called in holiness theology, "the 2nd work of grace," constitutes the heart of the gospel message. No psychological methodology or theological terminology or mathematical designation obscures the stark moral meaning of crucifixion with Christ.

The passages demanding a "putting off" of sin and a "putting on" of the new man, or requiring obedience from the heart, or a presenting of the self as a living sacrifice, are not mildly advisory admonitions but the very essence of the gospel message. Forgiveness is never considered the summum bonum of the Christian life. The New Testament is largely and principally written to Christian believers and it is not comfortable reading. Biblical reading gives us the impression that great danger exists that the grace of God may be received in vain, that the Spirit may be grieved, that the sin of our first parents may be repeated in us. The urgent calls to self-purging, pursuing sanctification, perfecting holiness, yielding to God, bringing thoughts captive to the obedience of Christ and many others are not to be lightly regarded. They all carry serious consequences if not heeded.

All of these urgent exhortations drive one to the place of total moral commitment. The dangers relative to probation are great enough without the added hazard of an uncommitted heart which is itself impurity and which is always the source of enmity against God. Probation does not end with the new birth. But to maintain a committed heart is the responsibility of these under probation.
The commitment which completes moral experience and which brings moral integration is in preparation for the temptations of the enemy which can precipitate spiritual breakdown. We are told that very few German Christians maintained their integrity under the torture of the Russian prison life. However, that may be, none of us know how we may react to the sudden shock or prolonged testing which in some form awaits us in life. It is not the strong will that prevails but the heart that has met the full force of Christ's demands so that no untested moral depth remains.

The relatively low level on which many Christians meet their "Waterloo" testifies to the shallow commitment they have made. When money, or sex or love of ease or popularity or desire for power allures a Christian leader from his Christ-centered purpose and clean integrity, the depths of the heart's purpose had never been permitted to come under the scrutiny of Christ's light.

The crisis we speak of is that moment to which the Holy Spirit drives us in his relentless searching of our motives, when we meet a deeper test of fidelity to Christ than any we will meet in life. No self induced emotion on the matter will do. Only the Spirit can show us the true motivation of our hearts. Only He can prompt a right response from our chastened hearts. In this hour we are able to see the depth of ugliness in self-love and a more frightening sight we will never see. In this illumination, one is made more, not less, dependent upon the continuing mercy of God. A care and sensitivity never before known replaces any measure of self-assurance that the freedom of the Christian life may have produced.

The continuing cost of that freedom is an ever deepening commitment commensurate with the ever new expansion of personality and its capacities. When Wesley talked about a "moment by moment cleansing", he meant that this deep alignment with God's will had to be maintained, preserved intact, guarded carefully and not left to disintegrate by default.

We have an example of this testing in our Lord himself. The temptation experience was a part of the learned obedience. He met everything in that wilderness experience that he would meet in the course of his ministry. The "guy lines" were drawn tight. If there were flaws in them, they would show up. When we notice the thrust of each approach of Satan and locate it in his later ministry we can see the areas of stress and know much about the key spots in the redemptive purpose. No Christian can expect to enter the full responsibility of service who has not himself been "lead of the Spirit into the wilderness," there to be tested to the limit.

It is no wonder then that the preacher's message as he preaches Christ is more than simply the privileges of the gospel but also its deepest responsibility.
Conclusions

What is Basic to the Biblical Preaching of Holiness?

1. Present Christ. Press the claims of Christ, His love and sacrifice for sin, His absolute Lordship which must be made a living reality in the practical life. Press this, with all it means on everyone, sinner and saint alike. It is Christ who saves and who calls and who condemns sin and who calls to discipleship and Christian service. No Biblical preaching can by-pass Christ. It is Christ who validates and gives perspective to and sets the bounds around holiness preaching.

2. Press for a personal moral encounter with God. There is a place, out alone with God where each person must face for himself the issues of the moral and the spiritual life. In that place we cannot order the procedure or determine the rules. The final obedience is to God not to men, and all the conflicting clamor of human advice and human norms of approval must be stilled in the presence of Him with whom we have to do. Moral life must begin here and cannot begin until a high price has been set on spiritual integrity. This means that we dare not barge into that intimate encounter which we are arranging for others with our interpretation of God's requirements. We have done what is demanded of us when we have patiently cleared the way and lead the feet of needy men into the presence of God. "Judge for yourselves whether we should obey God or men."

3. Hold up the Cross. There must come a real death to self. But we must be careful that it is the right cross at the heart of our preaching and not one of our own making. There is a cross for the preacher for he must have a clean heart in order to preach a clean, selfless, winsome message. His cross will keep him criticized and tender. It is a two-edged sword cutting both ways. It is not true that holiness makes Christianity too hard but it is often true that the uncriticized holiness preacher makes it hard in the wrong places and in the wrong ways. There is a cross for the hearer but it must be the cross that Jesus presents. Let the human barriers to God be torn down in order that the sin barriers may be disclosed. It is Jesus who says, "Follow me." Let his voice be heard.

4. Press for Decision, clear, clean and sharp. The very structure of moral life demands decisiveness. It is not always easy to explain which of the many crisis decisions in life is "second", but when under the guiding and prodding of the Holy Spirit the deepest self is brought face to face with God and the responsible decision of the self is a "yes" to God and His will, not simply as a sentiment but as a life motivation and the Holy Spirit "takes over" with our deepest consent, "second" seems strangely appropriate. It is a different kind of response than the first. Each represents phases of the moral life. One is an acceptance of the responsibility of being in Christ and in grace.
Press for a continuing commitment. The need for decision in ever increasing and significant moral crises never ends. As personality enlarges, comes into new perspectives as character develops, as temptation strikes with subtle force, as the expanding self creates new situations demanding moral responsibility, as the whole of life is seen to need spiritualization, new tensions are created which must be met with the same watch-care with which the first was met. Spiritual and moral deterioration sets in at the first careless moment. Cleansing is maintained in the presence of the Holy Spirit only. Holiness is not something "possessed," but a relationship to be maintained by a life of love to God and man. "The law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death," said Paul. Death in the moral realm as in the natural world is held back by that strange integrating power called life. But when life ceases disintegration begins, in the natural world and in the moral world as well. We must "walk in the Spirit" or forfeit life.

6. Exhort to Growth in Love because that is necessary to the maintenance of holiness. The dimension of love, which is the practical dimension of holiness cannot be neglected. Love is enlarged by use. That takes time and practice. It changes the whole perspective of the values of life. It mellows, beautifies, enriches the personality. Where love is lost, holiness is lost. Love is the adhesive power in human relations. It must increase or be forfeited. The test of holiness is love. It is a very practical and objective test and the test which must often be applied to holiness profession. The deepening of love is an effective check on one's own testimony. It reveals progress in holiness - or signs of its absence.

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It will be seen that nothing is lost by a Biblical presentation of holiness. The questions relating to the "second crisis" tend to dissolve in the dynamic of the moral appeal but nothing of the decisiveness and victory of "second" is lost. The questions relative to perfection fall away when the moral nature of God's continuing demands of the expanding and maturing personality is understood. When "cleansing from all sin" is seen in its relation to a total commitment to God and the abiding of the Holy Spirit, the crude, materialistic or arrogant, humanist features become less a barrier to its meaning. When love is seen to be the necessary atmosphere of a holy heart and actually its description, the harsh, legalistic, self-righteous pretensions are rejected and holiness becomes the desirable and desired will of God.

My Controversy with Christ

The "last word" is an intensely personal word. It has actually been said in this book time and again, in many ways. But the author needs to point it up sharply again.

I have a deep rebellion - a "beef" - against the critics of the Christian religion. It is said that to be a Christian requires an
inhibition of life and vitality and creativeness. But Christian faith is not a negation of life. Rather, everything we find in the Bible suggests that God is trying to liberate us from sin and failure and false ideals and low ceilings and smallness and individualism. God wants us, in this life, to live fully, creatively. Being good is not simply not doing things, but living out the dynamic of God's purpose for men.

That is why a pure heart is so essential. Without it, Christian life is a smothering of life's impulses, and grace would be an enemy of normal personality. There is a basic urge to self-expression without which wholesome personality is impossible. An impure urge is death. God does not suppress the urge but cleanses the heart of double motives.

There is a cross in the Christian life but the cross is not an end of the self but an end of the sin that shackles the self and blocks the way to goodness. The cross is always at the beginning of life. The whole of real life lies beyond it.

Rather than Christ curbing our personal development, He requires that we put our whole personality to work. This puts a new light on our Christian faith. It is not a retreat but a moral obligation to advance.

I have a controversy with Christ. He will not let me rest. In His presence I cannot relax and rest on my "faith" in Him which dulls moral sensitivity. He will not let me settle for less than my best - not yesterday's best, but today's best. When I have done a job He confronts me with a bigger task - one too big for me. When I am selfish, He rebukes me until it smarts. When I am insensitive He has a way of prodding my conscience into activity. When I cry and pray for a little heaven in which to go to heaven in, He shows me the hell in which other people live. It isn't time for heaven, yet.

Purity is not an end in itself. Purity permits the personality to live in full expression of love to God and man. It is the power of a single-hearted devotion and must be kept intact by a daily fellowship with God.