

In the World, Not “Of” the World

I have been fascinated with the supernatural acts of God since childhood. I remember hearing stories from the Bible from my grandmother and grandfather and thinking, “I want to do that!” Whenever I would ask my grandparents about such things, they would say, “Oh, those things don’t happen anymore”—but my hunger persisted.

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As time went on, I learned that the accounts of miraculous acts of God in the Bible were, in fact, true because I saw them happening around me, and later through my own ministry. Beginning in 2010, the Lord opened a new chapter in my journey with Him. I left my 25-year career as an executive at Fortune 500 companies and began traveling and teaching the things that I had learned and experienced of God throughout my life. These travels took me to more than 45 nations, where I experienced all manner of miracles and healings (which, by the way, are not always the same). As a result, I can now say I have seen nearly every miracle described in the Bible with my own eyes.

Reality of Holiness

The word *holiness* conjures up stale images of revival meetings, gospel trios and old-time religion, along with stern prohibitions against drinking, dancing, cussing and playing cards. Despite a declining number of people who grew up in such settings, the images persist, and many are happy to leave these notions of holiness in the past. Yet while it seems we’ve cast off the old, legalistic dogmas regarding holiness,

often we've merely replaced them. In our era of techno-savvy megachurches and postmodern emerging churches, holiness (when it is discussed at all) is commonly reduced to moral behavior: sexual purity, financial honesty, no drinking, no drugs, commitment to private Bible study and prayer, and so on. When this occurs, it is all too easy for believers to relegate holiness to a small, albeit hopefully important, part of our private lives. This scenario, though common, is far from biblical.

Beyond The Article

Religion has become internal and subjective rather than external and objective. This is, in part, behind the rise of the new mysticism; in a world where we divorce our practice of religion from external benchmarks and specific behaviors, all that remains is internal visions, hearing voices and supernatural transportation. It's not that these things are wrong; it is that they are not enough for a robust Christian spirituality, which should include accountability to one another for Christlike character. Additionally, internal and subjective religion will never change a culture.

Said another way, we have favored personal standards over biblical standards of holiness in our quest for "cultural relevance." This is defended in the name of winning others to Christ. "If we talk about holiness with unbelievers," so the argument goes, "won't that just present another hurdle for them to overcome on their way to Christ?" For this and other reasons, we are rapidly forsaking our historic commitment to the pursuit of biblical holiness. Recent polls indicate that many self-described Evangelicals and Charismatics march in moral lockstep with mainstream Western culture in practices of divorce, spousal abuse, extramarital sex, pornography consumption, materialism, self-importance (pride) and racism, to name just a few. To this list, we can also add that we have essentially conceded on the matter of homosexuality. While we are busy tipping our hats to the importance of cultural

relevance, however, our culture no longer views us as different in any meaningful way, except for those who see us as hypocrites failing to live what we supposedly believe. That is a shame.

Bible Literacy Is More Important Than Ever

I believe this overall situation has a single underlying cause: as with so many biblical concepts, “holiness” is no longer understood to mean what it originally meant in biblical thought. To be sure, the biblical terms translated “holy” or “holiness” (*qadosh* in Hebrew and *hagios* in Greek) carry a strong connotation of moral purity. But moral purity is not, primarily, the essence of biblical holiness, though it does carry great importance. I’ll say that again: Moral purity is not, primarily, the essence of holiness. Rather, to be holy is to be set apart.

Holiness, as it pertains to God, is the quality by which God is set apart unto Himself. He is utterly unlike any other thing or person or being or experience in the universe. The beauty of His holiness is that He is so unique and incomparable. We may say that He is “like” this or that, but the truth is that He is really “unlike” this or that. He may be love, but He is unlike flawed human love. He may be our Father, but He is unlike our fallen earthly fathers. He has no beginning, yet even the universe had a beginning. He has no end, yet all other things we have ever known will come to an end. He cannot be corrupted, yet all we have ever known is eminently corruptible humanity. I could go on, but you get the idea.

Holiness, as it pertains to humans, speaks to the fact that we are called to be “set apart” or “dedicated” to God. “I will be your God, and you will be my people,” says Yahweh. (See Leviticus 26:12 and Hebrews 8:10.) We belong to God. We are not to be like the nations around us. We are to live differently.

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Prior to any consideration of morality, biblical holiness describes a unique relationship that God desires to have with His people. Because this covenant relationship is unique among all other relationships that He has with His creation, and because God Himself (not humans) has established it, He has the right to ask, require, yes, even to demand certain standards of behavior from His people (i.e., from us) because He can, because He is God. We don't attain righteousness in following these commandments, but neither can we legitimately say that we are His if we do not follow them.

Holiness begins with a relationship with God, but it also has definite moral ramifications. These may require—even in the New Testament era—that we not live or look like the people in our surrounding culture. Christian behaviors and practices should flow from the fact that Christians are “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for [God's] own possession, that [we] may proclaim the excellencies of him who called [us] out of darkness into his marvelous light,” (1 Pet. 2:9).

So what kinds of behaviors are forbidden to Christians?

>> Idolatry (or the worship of other gods alongside of God, on any level)

>> Adopting the “customs” of the people around us (which includes a wide range of behaviors variously listed throughout the Scriptures)

>> Intermarrying (because of the risk of syncretism, the blending of two or more religious systems; this is why Paul prohibits Christians from marrying nonbelievers in 2 Corinthians 6:14)

>> Killing (or aborting) our children

>> Engaging in the black arts, a subset of a wider class of New Age and pagan religious practices.

This is not an exhaustive list, but it does represent some of the behaviors that commonly ensnare Christians. Perhaps reading this list will stir thoughts of others.

At times, this can seem confusing when, in the modern context, many Christians have been told to be as much like the people around them as possible in order to “win the lost.” The meager harvest tells a different story. While Christians should be approachable and affable, holiness may ultimately be more attractive than assimilation. After all, if Christians act like nonbelievers, what is the point of becoming a Christian?

A look at biblical holiness through the lens of Jesus as the unique revelation of God brings the common emphasis on morals into a more proper balance. Think of it: those who have responded in faith to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ have been united with Him through the Holy Spirit. In other words, in Christ we are already holy because we have been joined to God’s holiness. Before we are ever called to be good or to refrain from any specific behaviors, we are called to be found in Him. “Goodness” flows from holiness, not the other way around.

Christianity therefore is a living, organic relationship. God Himself, in the Person of the indwelling Holy Spirit, motivates everything. In Christ we participate in the very life and holiness of God. Unless we rightly understand and affirm the primacy of this relationship, we fall into the inevitable trap of reducing holiness to mere morality and legalism. With these thoughts in mind, however, we begin to see how much more God is asking of us. As long as our notions of holiness are limited to doing certain things and not doing other things, we can go through our entire lives obeying the rules (or at least maintaining the appearance of doing so) without dealing with the more fundamental questions: To whom

do we belong? To whom do we give our first love and loyalty? Are we prepared to make our lives like He would have them look, irrespective of our own customs, habits and preferences?

We First Belong to Him Who Called Us

In the end, God's call to be holy is an all-encompassing claim on our lives, our loves and our identities. It is a reaffirmation of discipleship that may require us to stop doing certain things that we like to do, to refrain from doing things we have considered, or to start doing things that we would rather not do. It means that everything a Christian is and has belongs to God, and every aspect of life is to be shaped and directed toward God. To be a disciple of Jesus Christ requires nothing less than death to our fallen self-focus in order to live in and for Him.

Holiness is primarily about union with God in Christ and sharing in Christ's holiness. It is secondarily about living life as God requires. Out of these two, service to God and to others will naturally and abundantly flow. Only a biblical, Christ-centered holiness will safeguard Evangelicals and Charismatics from the twin traps of legalistic moralism and lawlessness. This is how the church can recover its spiritual footing in today's world and win the lost.

As I travel in cultures very different from my own, I am struck by how pressing and relevant these matters are to Christians, who live as a distinct minority with beliefs and customs that are decidedly different from their neighbors. The same "separateness" should be the experience of every Christian, whether American or Australian, English or Canadian, German or Israeli, Chinese or Sri Lankan, Mexican or Costa Rican. Holiness is a summons that God issues to all Christians everywhere, and it will be a hallmark of the coming visitation. "'Be holy [different], for I am holy [different],' says the Lord," (1 Pet. 1:16, MEV).

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