

Striving for Holiness

In the early 1960s a leading Latin American missionary told the evangelical theologian Dr. Carl F. Henry of his utter frustration because, when he identified himself as an evangelical, three times out of five the response was, " Oh, you are one of those folks that don't drink or smoke." Dr. Henry commented that in our society alcoholism is undeniably a pernicious cultural vice, and medical science attests the incompatibility of cigarette addiction with a Christian regard for the dignity of the human body. But Dr. Henry did add that when the public narrowly misunderstands Christianity in terms of cultural negation, rather than in terms of the Gospel, the effective presentation of Christ is hindered. I believe that today the old prohibitions no longer identify evangelical Christians. In the 1990s they focus on issues of family and sexuality. Their talk is more about self-help programs, self-fulfillment, interpersonal relationships than about sin, self-denial, and prohibitions. Someone said that niceness seems to be the cherished virtue of many modern Christians.

My question is: " What does it mean to be a Christian?" We are involved in a fierce spiritual warfare. The Christian life is not easy. Christianity is a muscular faith. Those who take their faith seriously experience this deeply. In this immoral world God's people are called to holiness and to be a consecrated people. God said, "You shall be holy, for I am holy" (1 Peter 1:16). He did not say, "You shall be holy as I am holy," that would demand of us absolute holiness, something that belongs to God alone. Sinless perfection will never be reached on this side of the grave. People who claim perfection are usually very difficult to live with. Even God's holy angels veil their faces before His blazing holiness. No honest person can say of himself, "I am morally pure. I never do anything wrong." Yet no Christian may ignore the admonition of the inspired Scripture, "Strive ... for holiness without which no one will see the Lord." An awesome command! In other words, we will not see God in His heavenly glory in the hereafter, if we live any way we please in an unholy state.

We are called not just to be nice but to be holy in our daily lives. "For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life" (1 Thessalonians 4:7).

The world is not at all impressed with Christians who stop doing what everyone else is doing. But they are impressed with Christians who walk their talk. The pursuit of holiness does not save. Our holiness does not entitle us to heaven; salvation is through the finished work of Christ, through His death on our behalf. Yet personal holiness, the life of gratitude for the wonderful salvation received, qualifies us for heaven; it makes us ready and fit to enter the state of glory. The saintly William Wilberforce (1759-1833), a true Christian in public service of government, involved in the abolition of the slave trade and philanthropist, rightly observed, "the true Christian knows...that this holiness does not precede his reconciliation with God, and then be its cause. But he has to follow, and be its effect. In short, it is by faith in Christ alone, faith marked by repentance of sin."

How should we live as Christians? The true Christian life, as I already indicated, is not merely a negative not-doing of a small list of things. Even if the list contains an excellent number of things, we must be aware that the Christian life is more than refraining from a list of taboos. The pursuit of holiness does not mean fleeing the world, going into seclusion, forsaking one's job, marriage, or worldly possessions, or have a certain style of dress or peculiar behaviour. When we follow this approach to holiness, we are in danger of equating the Christian life with an endless list of legalistic do's and don'ts. The call for holiness is a call to be separated from sin and to be consecrated to God. Someone wrote that the word signifies "separation from sin to God, and the conduct befitting those so separated." Holiness is loving what God loves and hating what He hates. It is measuring everything in this world by the standard of the Scriptures. The pursuit of holiness is not a flight from reality but living daily the Christian life in conformity to God's will. Holy living is practical. We must relate to our neighbour and see his need. The example is the Good Samaritan: he responds to the needs of his neighbour, and his neighbour is whoever crosses his path: the widow, the orphan, the poor.

One of the most devastating modern diseases is AIDS, which has until now no known cure. Help must come in the form of prevention and care. For example, the African Inland Church of Tanzania (AICT) is practicing holiness in this area. Through its Medical Department, seventeen volunteers from five communities have received training in the care of AIDS patients. They have returned to their villages with this knowledge to help the families of AIDS patients to care for their own. At the same time, they provide education in schools and village meetings to help prevent the spread of AIDS. Practical holiness gets involved in politics. For also in this area of life the Christian influence must be felt. But practical holiness does not overlook the needs of the whole person. Man is much more than an animal. He is created in the image of God and as a sinner is alienated from God. Therefore we must give man more than a survival kit with aspirin, tranquilizers and medicine for aids. His deepest needs stem from his alienation from His Creator. The Christian then will seek to reach others with the Word of Life, believing there is a heaven to be gained and a hell to be shunned.

Genuine holiness will make a Christian do his duty at home, at work, at school. It will make him humble, compassionate and considerate of others, loving, and forgiving. Holiness is seeking the Kingdom of God, where God is honoured and self is denied, seeking to do what is right and opposing evil in every situation. Holiness teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and to live self controlled, upright and godly lives (Titus 2: 11f.).

Our first concern must be holiness. I suggest that we make the prayer of Robert Murray McCheyne (1818-1843) our own, "Lord, make me as holy as it is possible for a saved sinner to be." It was said of this Scottish minister, "He cared for no question unless his Master cared for it and his main anxiety was to know the mind of Christ." The call to holiness is for every Christian, not just for pastors, missionaries, elders or deacons. All Christians, whether banker, baker, mechanic, student, etc. are called to strive for holiness.

Johan D. Tangelder