

PREACHING
HOLINESS

PREACHING HOLINESS

Pastoral
Considerations

JEREN ROWELL



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Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open, all desires known,
and from whom no secrets are hidden:
Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit,
that we may perfectly love you and worthily magnify your holy name.
Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.
—Collect for Purity, Book of Common Prayer

No condemnation now I dread,
Jesus, and all in him, is mine!
Alive in him, my living Head,
And clothed in righteousness divine,
Bold I approach the eternal throne,
And claim the crown, through Christ my own!
—Charles Wesley, “And Can It Be?”

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Not long before spending the day with the Nebraska pastors, I was sitting in a General Assembly plenary session, sketching an outline for the presentation. Sitting next to me was Bonnie Perry, editorial director for The Foundry Publishing. The conversation about what I was doing quickly turned to Bonnie's declarative invitation: "That's a book!" So thank you again to my good friend Bonnie, for your belief that I have something to say to the church.

Thanks also to my colleague at Nazarene Theological Seminary, Rev. Levi Jones, who read the manuscript and offered helpful suggestions.

And I am grateful to the congregations and mentors who shaped my preaching over many years and were a large part of not only teaching me how to preach holiness but also helping to form me in the pursuit of Christlikeness.

■ THE WHO, WHAT, AND HOW OF PREACHING

Pastors who identify in the Wesleyan-Holiness tradition may recognize some variation of this exchange:

Parishioner: “We don’t hear holiness preaching anymore.”

Pastor: “What do you mean? I preach holiness every week!”

This can be a frustrating conversation for conscientious pastors who believe they are faithfully preaching holiness of heart and life as proclaimed in the Scriptures and through the witness of the church. I have noticed that pastors can become defensive about this critique in ways that usually do not help the conversation proceed. Perhaps it elicits memories of being grilled by the credentials board on holiness theology.

So what is really going on here? I am not sure this exchange is about doctrine or even about biblical preaching. I suggest this *insider disconnect* between parishioner and pastor is about language or, to use a broader term, culture. I use the phrase *insider disconnect* here because we need to acknowledge the shaping presence of an insider culture that is the Holiness Movement as it gave birth to several denominational expressions, including the Church of the Nazarene. I find this noteworthy because most pastors will testify that they do not experience this *insider disconnect* with seekers or new Christians who generally know nothing of the language and culture of a holiness church. Therefore, they do not begin with preconceived ideas or expectations

about how they are learning to know the fullness of God's provision for us in holiness of heart and life.

When I have listened carefully to people who say, "Our pastors do not preach holiness anymore," what I have discovered is that, often, there are certain terms or certain phrases they are not hearing that they have come to associate with holiness preaching. For example, *second-blessing holiness* is a phrase that at one time was ubiquitous and well loved but now brings puzzled expressions to the faces of new generations of holiness people. The absence of that once-familiar language is viewed by some as a failure to teach, preach, or guide adequately our young people into a vibrant experience of heart holiness. There is certainly serious responsibility to be accepted all around in this regard.

However, in perhaps hundreds of discussions I have engaged with young people preparing for ministry, I have discovered that their puzzled looks do not come because they do not believe in a sanctifying act of God "subsequent to regeneration;"¹ rather, they are simply unfamiliar with the particular language and much of the culture from which that belief was born. Additionally, there are others who do know the cultural language but prefer to reach more directly into the language of Scripture in ways that speak less of a dramatic experience and more of being formed in the character of Christ. (Please do not assume that I will argue process against crisis here. Both are involved.)

There is no particular deficit that should be attached to this lack of familiarity with the culture of the American Holiness Movement. Additionally, those of us with much history in the movement must recognize that communicating holiness in changing contexts may require new language to proclaim faithfully the "old, old story." The point here is simply that the disconnect we sometimes lament between clergy and laity or between generations around the proclamation of holiness doctrine and experience is not typically a disconnect of belief or conviction but one of language and culture.

1. From Article of Faith X, "Christian Holiness and Entire Sanctification," *Manual of the Church of the Nazarene 2017–2021* (Kansas City: Nazarene Publishing House), 31.

This disconnect is precisely why the pastoral skill of preaching holiness with clarity and conviction is so important and so much in need of renewal for our time. Vital holiness preaching cannot rise from obligation, cannot occur simply because it is our distinguishing doctrine and ought to be preached. Holiness preaching that moves people, under the work of the Holy Spirit, to know and experience the fullness of God's provision for us in Christ Jesus must rise from the preacher's passionate and intimate personal knowledge of the love of God that saves and sanctifies, forming us more and more into the image of the Lord Jesus.

Could it be that holiness preaching has lost some of its voice in our time because we have too often approached holiness preaching as an *apologetic*² rather than from pastoral love? This happens when the idea of apologetic is reduced to some kind of "scientism" approach to proclamation, where winning the argument is the goal. When proclamation is delivered not only with logical precision but also with pastoral love, it can become the best kind of apologetic, one that woos and wins rather than seeking to manipulate or control. That is to say, if we approach holiness preaching only in terms of trying to convince people of the rightness of the doctrine, the preaching can quickly become dry, lifeless, and potentially combative. This kind of preaching is typically born of our own anxiety or unease with the subject.

However, if holiness preaching comes from the heart of a pastor who has gone to Scripture in service to a people she or he knows and loves, then the preaching has a chance to rise from the heart of a pastor who longs for people to know the freedom and joy of God's sanctifying grace. Of course, this premise assumes that the preacher personally knows and is living in the experience of holiness of heart and life. Perhaps that assumption should go without saying, but it cannot. The evidence, in terms of the fruit of the Spirit, has too often been lacking in the lives of our preachers and pastors—we who should be modeling it for our people. That lack creates what Dr. Mildred Wynkoop

2. Meaning a formal defense or justification.

called a “credibility gap,”³ or a disconnect between what we proclaim and how it actually shows up in the attitudes and conduct of our lives. “The peculiarity of Wesleyan theology is its emphasis on holiness as personal experience.”⁴ This emphasis is why we must not reduce holiness preaching to merely explaining doctrine but must always allow it to proclaim the good news of freedom from sin and transformation of life. The doctrine of holiness “turns gangrenous apart from the constant flow of living blood out of the deepest heart.”⁵

To think rightly about preaching holiness, we must not only think about *what* should be said (Scripture, doctrine) and *how* it should be said (culture, language, story, structure, and form), but we must also think deeply about *who* is doing the saying. In other words, Pastor, we cannot preach what we do not know. And when I say *know*, I have in mind the kind of knowing that the Bible describes in the deepest and most intimate ways. It is something deep and visceral, a knowing that goes beyond data alone and reaches to intuition, life wisdom, and experiential validation. I have always believed that faithful and effective preaching can only happen when the text of Scripture, through the present work of the Spirit, does its work first on the preacher. Only then, having encountered the living Word, can the preacher come with any authority to proclaim to the people of God: “Thus says the Lord.” When this happens, the preaching is rich, beautiful, and life-giving. When it fails to happen, the preaching is tepid and impotent.

During my twelve years of serving as a district superintendent for the Church of the Nazarene, I sat hundreds of times with pastors and church boards to conduct a review of the health of a congregation and a church’s ministry. I began by inviting board members to offer personal accountability for their leadership in terms of the statement of qualification given in the *Manual of the Church of the Nazarene*. First among

3. See chapter 3 of Wynkoop’s *A Theology of Love: The Dynamic of Wesleyanism* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1972), 39–52.

4. *Ibid.*, 44.

5. *Ibid.*

the several questions is, “Are you living in the experience of entire sanctification?” The answer choices I gave were:

- I have no idea what this means.
- By the grace of God, yes, I am.
- I understand what it is, but I am really not living there.
- I want to know this, but I do not really understand sanctification.

Over the years I was amazed at how often the board members of our local churches were willing to answer honestly that they really had no meaningful understanding of what we mean by “entire sanctification.” These revelations afforded me the opportunity to spend some time with them, talking not only about what the doctrine means but also sharing my own testimony with them and urging them to seek the Lord with all of their hearts, minds, souls, and strength so that they might know the joy of a life that is free from the tyranny of sin!

Without exception, I encountered people who responded to this good news with spiritual hunger and with what seemed a sense of relief that holiness is no dreadful obligation but a life-giving provision from God. Usually, the hesitation they articulated was rooted in the language of “entire,” thinking it means “finished” or “nothing further needed.” When they learned that the word *entire* in this context does not mean “it is all done” but something more like, “I am all in, by the grace of God,” their faces lit up and their postures straightened as they realized the blessing that is God’s sanctifying grace.

The purpose of this book is to help us connect the *what* and the *how* of holiness preaching with the *who* of the preacher’s own knowledge and experience of the sanctified life. We have sufficient resources for the theological and exegetical work that must be done to be good holiness preachers. A faithful and effective holiness preacher will be immersed not only in the classic works of holiness theology but also in the more contemporary works of our recent and current theologians and teachers.

What I mean to do in this present work is to challenge and inspire us afresh to approach this task from a pastoral bearing that is something like what the apostle Paul expressed when he wrote to the Co-

rinthian church, “We have . . . opened wide our hearts to you” (2 Cor. 6:11). There is no more compelling way to preach holiness than from a heart of authentic love, a deep desire that people under one’s spiritual care would know and experience the life-transforming power of the perfect love of God in Christ. If we truly believe that the holiness message is a gospel word for our people, who so often are “harassed and helpless” (Matt. 9:36), then we will give ourselves as pastors to proclaiming this good news with clarity, conviction, and passion.

To this end, Pastor, I want to talk to you as a friend and mentor in these pages. This is certainly not about breaking any new theological or homiletical ground. It is a far humbler project. This is, perhaps, more about reminding us of a rich heritage that can continue to shape our missional engagement with the world, even while we necessarily learn the rhythms and language of post-Christian culture. This is about trying to inspire us as pastors to be unafraid to preach a message that is radically optimistic about what God wants to do for us.

My concern for us is that our people have been and are being shaped significantly by a Christian culture that too often sells short the transforming gospel of Jesus Christ. I have encountered thousands of Nazarenes, across years of traveling from church to church, who believe that the best they can do as followers of Jesus is to find themselves on a constant cycle of failure and forgiveness. It is a fairly pessimistic view of what it means to know and follow Jesus. The gift of God to us in the birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension of our Lord Jesus is certainly more than “do the best you can until we get to heaven.” The promise of the gospel is that “there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death” (Rom. 8:1–2, emphasis mine).

Good news! And, that’ll preach!

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WHO Is Doing
the Preaching?

1

THE TESTIMONY OF A HOLINESS PREACHER

All clergy in the Church of the Nazarene, and likely in most other groups as well, have stories to tell about the journey toward ordination, which typically involves an annual meeting with an area board of ministerial credentials. An essential part of this annual accountability, rightly so, is to hear the candidate's spiritual testimony. In holiness groups, this testimony must include a clear profession of the experience of entire sanctification.

When I was a candidate more than thirty-five years ago, we all knew that this testimony, in order to be judged sufficient, must include the ability to name the date and locate the place of our "crisis experience," our "second definite work of grace." This expectation was driven by the belief, which was supported by holiness preaching at the time, that the focal point of the sanctified life was an individual moment of consecration, usually at the altar (mourner's bench) of the church or camp meeting, when one "prayed through" to a crisis of full surrender of life to the lordship of Jesus Christ. This moment of consecration included the belief, experience, and testimony of the "infilling of the Holy Spirit," which cleansed the heart from sin and empowered one "for life and service." When one experienced this "second work of grace" (the "first work" usually being understood as justification), one was expected to give clear and regular testimony to the experience.

I affirm that there is indeed a crisis component to the work of God's sanctifying grace in the life of the believer. There is a point of entry, a recognition of God's invitation, a response "in view of God's mercy" (Rom. 12:1) that is called for and necessary on the journey toward Christlikeness. However, the emphasis upon a point of crisis that can be located in terms of date and place carries some potential, though perhaps unintended, consequences. Chief among these is the possibility that the dynamic life of holiness can become static and potentially stagnant. Stories abound of those who have been "saved and sanctified," yet the daily conduct of their lives bears little resemblance to the character of the Lord Jesus.

I will always remember one of my first meetings with a local church board as district superintendent, when I encountered a dear saint who was really causing turmoil in the life of the congregation. The atmosphere was thick with tension and anxiety as I began to address the conflicts that brought me to their meeting. We began to talk about what holiness should mean to a local church navigating differences of opinion about how things should be done.

Wanting to establish his superiority of understanding and practice, he pointed his finger in my direction and said with a scowl, "I haven't sinned in thirty years!"

I resisted the temptation to respond with, "Well, there's one!"

What I mean to illustrate with this story is the danger that overemphasis on historical testimony rather than present testimony may be part of what has created the credibility gap to which many people have responded with dismissal and disbelief. For the idea of holiness to have meaning in contemporary life, it must be understood, preached, and lived as something that truly makes a difference in the daily conduct of one's life. And this is not just about behavior. It is about holistic formation into the likeness of Jesus in a way that transforms one's life from darkness to light, from self to others, from fear to love.

There are multiple important points of theological reflection right here that are beyond the scope of this book. The point for this project

is to remind us that the testimony of a holiness preacher has great importance and impact for how people come to understand God's invitation to a sanctified life. If our testimony is always transactional, imagining holiness as a date-and-place decision to consecrate ourselves fully to God, it may communicate that holiness is a once-for-all-time act that mostly involves my decision rather than God's prevenient grace. Conversely, if our testimony is always developmental and never includes decisive moments of call and response, it may communicate that holiness is more about a developing spiritual maturity than about a gift of grace that sets one into a qualitatively new journey of discipleship. I recognize that these are simplified descriptions along the dialectic of crisis versus process, but the testimony of a holiness preacher needs to communicate a call both to enter into the life of holiness and to the dynamic, present reality of the presence and power of the Spirit in one's life, forming us more and more in the character of Jesus.

One of my great concerns for the life of the church these days is the place of testimony among us. I know that our primary task is to bear witness to the world of the in-breaking kingdom of God. But there is also something important about how the community of faith itself is formed through testimony. Sacraments are foundational for this shaping, but testimony also has a shaping influence. What are the ways and where are the places in local congregations where God's people are encouraged and enabled to bear witness? Do we have purposeful opportunities for our people to share what they are coming to know of God and how God is working in their lives to do for them what the gospel promises? Pastors must lead the way in helping create an atmosphere in the congregation where this is a regular and anticipated part of life together.

I know that I grew up in the church in a different era than what we are experiencing today. There were certainly some components of the holiness church culture of the mid-twentieth century that were not healthy or theologically sound. However, I know that my life was shaped in significant and positive ways by hearing the weekly testimo-

nies of the saints who were part of the little congregation in western Oregon that raised me in the faith. These testimonies were predictable, and we fairly knew the order in which members would rise to share their testimonies and what they would say, sometimes word for word. We could dismiss this as purely cultural and even as inwardly focused, but I am unwilling to do so. I have no doubt that the liturgy of testimony in my local church helped create in my heart and mind the space for grace-enabled confidence that I could actually know God, love God, and serve God in ways that reflected the very purposes of God in the world. It also opened the space in which I came to know and experience, in a way that changed the trajectory of my life, the sanctifying grace of God in Christ. And even more, although I would not have been able to articulate it at the time, I had a sense, even as a child, that there could be and was something holy about our life together as the people of God, the body of Christ, in that particular place and time. I learned to pray into the possibility not only of holy persons, including myself, but also of a holy church.

So, Pastor, before we think about the task or the work of preaching holiness, I want to ask you to think carefully about your own testimony. Do you have a personal testimony of the experience of entire sanctification? Does your testimony of holiness of heart and life flow naturally from your daily life in a way that inspires trust in your integrity and truthfulness as a follower of Jesus? (Having a testimony of holiness does not mean it is void of struggle, doubt, or failure.) Do you know the joy of freedom from the tyranny of sin? Can you see that your affections, desires, and attitudes have been and are being turned from a self-orientation to a self-emptying willingness to serve the other? Do you know the abiding peace and blessed assurance of the Holy Spirit in your daily life? You may have your own language for all of this, which is just fine, but don't dismiss the heart of these questions. The only way to be a faithful and effective holiness preacher is to first be living in the experience of holiness of heart and life in such a way that it does, in fact, come pouring through all of your ministry and all of your preaching.

I was raised in a wonderful Christian family and a generational Nazarene family. My great-grandfather, the Rev. A. R. Gladen, was a Methodist circuit-riding preacher in the hills of northwest Arkansas around the turn of the twentieth century. He joined up with the Nazarenes in their earliest days and was a holiness preacher for sure. He was relentless in his proclamation that there is a second definite work of grace for the believer. This was his primary criterion when my grandfather came courting his daughter. In fact, my grandfather's inability to testify to entire sanctification in those early days resulted in the Rev. Gladen withholding his blessing from the union! Through the influence of my grandmother, Olen Rowell came into the experience of entire sanctification, and there is no doubt in my mind that the story of our family was transformed as a result. As a layman, he helped to start the Church of the Nazarene congregation in which I grew up in Lebanon, Oregon. In the context of this family and local church, I came to know the graced experience of entire sanctification.

I have no memory of understanding myself as anyone other than a follower of Jesus. My earliest spiritual memories are of expressing my trust in Jesus as the forgiver of my sins and leader of my life. However, being one who by personality has a strong sense of responsibility, I soon found myself struggling to understand how I could ever measure up to what I was reading in Scripture and hearing in the testimonies of the saints about what it means to live a victorious Christian life. I confess that one of my main spiritual struggles, even to this day, can be with fear. Coming of age in the Vietnam era and in the midst of a turbulent culture, my heart and mind were regularly captured by fear, sometimes to the point of despair. (I hear these echoes today in current conversations with young people.)

Even as a young teenager, I realized that I was headed for a Christian life (there was never a doubt about whether I would follow Jesus) of uncertainty, fear, and struggle—unless God could do something for me that I was unable to do for myself. I also found myself, growing up in the age of the emerging *Playboy* culture (1960s) and having experienced a far too early exposure to pornography, needing God to

reorder my mind in terms of sexuality. Combining these things with the stark truth that the culture of the holiness church was too often a culture of shame, it was a toxic recipe for a life of spiritual defeat.

I will never forget the night it came to a point of crisis. Everyone in our household had turned in for the night, but I lay awake with my mind racing, heart beating, and feeling nearly paralyzed with hopelessness and fear. Not knowing what else to do, I went in to my parents' room and awakened them, confessing my need. One of the best things my parents ever did for me happened that night. They did not impatiently tell me to get back to bed, nor did they try to minimize my struggle in order to make everything better. With gracious wisdom, they acknowledged my struggle, validated my experience, and offered their up-to-date, personal testimonies as laypeople of how God was helping them to know spiritual victory and peace. They explained that God was not only willing to forgive my sins and provide for me the hope of eternal life but that God could also fill my heart with his Holy Spirit in a way that the Spirit would purify my heart and empower me to live a Christian life day by day. They led me in a simple prayer of consecrating my life entirely to God: my past (not much of a past at that point!), my present, and my future (that was the big part). That night, kneeling beside their bed, I prayed a simple prayer of accepting God's gift of the sanctifying work of the Spirit. Nothing particularly dramatic happened. It was not highly emotional, just a confession of my faith, much in the spirit of Wesley's testimony: "I felt my heart strangely warmed." I went to bed with a new sense of peace.

The next day when I awoke, I knew that something had changed. I still am unable to describe fully how things were different, but there was an inexpressible awareness that God had done something in me that would change the trajectory of my life. I was essentially the same person, of course, but there was a brand-new sense of belonging to God and of assurance that even I had been welcomed into the fellowship of Father, Son, and Spirit in a way that would begin to renew my mind and transform my life (Rom. 12:2). I knew what Paul meant when he said, "What we have received is not the spirit of the world,

but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may understand what God has freely given us” (1 Cor. 2:12). Thanks be to God!

It probably could go without saying that my Christian life since that night has not been a forty-year experience of flawless perfection or uninterrupted growth in Christ. There have been so many moments of crisis on this journey. I have known my share of struggle, doubt, and failure, but I have also known the faithful and abiding presence of Christ in such a way that crises of faith or action have not defined my discipleship but have become additional testimonies of how the sanctifying grace of God is forming me more and more in the image of Christ Jesus. What is more, I find it more than coincidental that, not long after this experience, I began to recognize an emerging awareness that God’s plan for my life may be something other than my plan. Ultimately, I discovered that my full surrender to the will of God would include offering my life in service to Christ and the church as a pastor.

The risk of sharing my testimony here is offered not because I think there is anything particularly special about my story but because I want to model what I am calling for: that, as pastors, we are able and willing to open up our lives to the church and to the world in ways that become part of the preaching of the gospel. This includes the articulation of our testimony, and it especially includes the conduct of our lives.