

## **Naming the Silences: the Doctrine of Holiness**

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When Jon Johnston called and asked me to prepare a paper for this year's ANSR conference, the first idea which came to me as we talked was a topic on "Secular Spirituality." The topic is important to me because I live in an area where over 90 percent of the people do not attend a church of any type—Christian or otherwise. The Bay Area represents fully the Post-Christian, Post-Modern, Post-Industrial, Post-Hippie yet future wave American culture more fully than any other area of the country, and I live in one of its symbolic centers in Berkeley. The second oldest church in the denomination founded in Berkeley is now a Buddhist church. What has happened in the Bay Area during the last 15 years is an indication of what will be rolling across the country sooner than we realize. If we do not learn how to respond to this massive cultural change, not only as the Church of the Nazarene but as the Christian Church, then America will be truly Post-Christian in the traditional sense. However, at the same time I believe that the work of God's Spirit is very much alive and evident in this "Post-Christian" culture and that we need to see how God is at work with the "eyes of Christ." But after pondering my topic for a week, there grew the sense that we as Nazarenes are not ready yet to deal with the issue of secular spirituality because there are so many issues around our core doctrine and the "culture" of that doctrine which have to be dealt with first. Hence, the title, "Naming the Silences," borrowed from a book by Stanley Hauerwas (Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1990).

In one of those strange occurrences, during this time I came across a book which had one section which spoke to a set of issues with which I have been wrestling for at least 35 years. Apparently I am the type of person who has a personal intellectual puzzle which I keep pondering until I find an explanation or analysis which makes sense of a faith or cultural issue (usually both) of which previously I simply could not make sense. One example in the past was the issue of prohibition.

In my family and with my father, this was one of the few issues which was not open to discussion when I was a youngster. I puzzled over this issue for decades until I happened across the book, *The Symbolic Crusade*, which gave a powerful explanation for me of the conflict over prohibition being a cultural conflict unique to the history of America. What is interesting is that the conditions of the period of the late 19th-century America, especially the 1890s, when our denomination was founded, are very similar to the conditions of the 1990s in terms of economic dislocations and upheavals, massive waves of immigration, the concentration of wealth, and the fragmenting of previously stable social systems. I would suggest to you that such issues as abortion and gay rights are current parallels to prohibition.

What I am presenting and dealing with in this paper is very fundamental to my faith life and pilgrimage. The issues involve my own wrestling with the doctrine of holiness, as I had been taught it, combined with deep puzzlement about the attacks of Jesus on the Pharisees. As a child of the '40s and a youth of the '50s, I believe I received some of the best of the preaching and teachings of the church concerning the doctrine of holiness or Christian perfection. What it led me to by my junior year of college was a complete loss of faith in being able to achieve such a reality in my life, therefore the loss of belief in the relevancy of God, prayer, etc., to my life. Now in some strange way I had achieved a level of tolerance in my view that I was not denying such reality of faith to others, but it simply was not achievable for me, and according to my understandings, anything less was loss. The irony of this was at the time I had been appointed leader of the prayer and fasting band at NNC, which was the equivalent of the student high priest. There I was trapped between the integrity of being faithful to my lack of faith and behaving in a way that would not trouble others. Suffice it to say, it is helpful that growing up in our religious culture provides a certain skill in living two lives. Fortunately, I was able to mature and move to a new level of commitment by the discovery of grace. I would have to say it was not the result of the holiness teachings but through a growing understanding of the love and grace of God. In addition, I would have to say that the holiness teachings, as I encountered them and understood them, created a blockage to my understanding of God and His grace rather than directing me to a deeper experience of grace.

So, you may ask, what does your experience have to do with your "Naming the Silences"? I believe that my experience of faith related to the teaching and preaching of Christian Perfection was so common, even if not discussed, that it has led to current realities related to our core doctrine to which I want to speak. I present these "silences" rather briefly because I think there is an even more important set of issues related to the holiness culture in the Church of the Nazarene which are more important and contribute to the "silences."

Before launching into these sensitive issues, I recognize that the most usual response to anything as central to the church as discussing the core beliefs and doctrines is (1) to shoot the messenger by questioning motives or commitment or (2) doubt or deny the message by saying it is overdrawn or simply wrong. The first move is pure logical fallacy while the second position suggests there is nothing wrong, hence nothing to be learned from the analysis. The minimum I would hope for is some significant conversation.

**Silence #1: The Doctrine of Holiness is essentially missing in the Church of the Nazarene.** Now that I have your attention, let me expand on my meaning. First, we could accept the marketing analysis that suggests that people entering churches today don't care what the denomination is so they have little concern for issues of doctrine, so why worry, it doesn't matter. This may be true from a church growth

perspective but as an organizational sociologist I am convinced that any organization, whether church, business, or government, that does not have clarity about its philosophy or mission or never states its values and vision continuously, rigorously, and in terms of everyday practices, that organization will have little viability in this age of uniformity. The issue in the church is not that the trumpet gives an uncertain sound but that it gives no sound at all. What sound I hear is the tin horns of those in leadership positions blowing the slogan phrases of "scriptural holiness, heart holiness, biblical holiness, perfect love," with no deep content beyond them.

I have heard preachers from the '60s, '70s, and '80s and for the most part in terms of sermon content, the doctrine is not presented. The last time I heard a sermon on the holy life and holy living was at the Catholic cathedral in Adelaide, Australia, where I went to hear the music. Talk about being shocked by hearing a Catholic priest giving a call to holiness and holy living. The few messages I have heard from Nazarene sources were no different from those I heard in my youth except for a more psychological spin in some of the presentations. I do not think this "missing" message is particularly strange when so many of us growing up in the church found the teaching and the living in such apparent disharmony.

**Silence #2: Perfection language is not perfect and tends to perfectionism.** If there is anything I wish Wesley had been more careful about in his development of the doctrine of holiness, it is in the use of terms involving perfect and perfection. This language of perfection has created more misunderstandings and despair and an unnecessary sense of failure among believers than any other aspect of the doctrine. It is a language that implies arrival and absoluteness almost as strong as Calvinistic absolutes. It allows little place for the natural ebb and flow of life and relationship with God and others and tends to shut out the necessary growth in grace. I like his phrase "purity of intention" and I have tended to use the concept of total commitment. This problem of perfection language point to the next silence.

**Silence #3: Holiness is not sinless perfection.** How can I express to you my amazement and irritation, no, my down right anger (righteous, of course) when in reading through Wesley's Plain Account of Christian Perfection (there's the P word again) he states, "Therefore sinless perfection is a phrase I never use, lest I should seem to contradict myself" (p. 43, italics used). I have never, ever, no how, no way, even heard a Nazarene preacher or a layperson make this simple statement known. This statement was preceded by a very interesting series of propositions on "mistakes" in which Wesley talks about:

"Every one may mistake as long as he lives . . . mistake in practice . . . Every such mistake is a transgression of the perfect law. Therefore, Every such mistake, were it not for the blood of atonement, would expose to eternal damnation. It follows, that

the most perfect have continual need of the merits of Christ, even for their actual transgressions, . . .

All I can say from my perspective is, "Wow, do we have some explaining to do." I would also point to a set of propositions which he wrote at age 60 (pp. 103–104). A section called "Advice to Those Sanctified" written as a separate tract two years before (pp. 85–103) is worthy of some careful analysis and debate in relating it to the cultural realities of our age.

I have often thought with my "Far Side" type of humor that if a group of Nazarenes had been standing around when Jesus said, "Let him without sin, cast the first stone," that poor woman would have been stoned. Even the Pharisees understood that their purity was not sufficient even though they appeared to pray with great self-righteousness.

**Silence #4: In spite of our claim to be Wesleyan, we may be more "folkian" in our theology.** Please refer to comments in Silence #3.

**Silence #5: The deep reality of sanctification is in the gradual growing even more than in the instantaneous, no matter how we see this as a definitive doctrinal difference.** As Wesley says, "It is constantly both preceded and followed by a gradual work" (p. 104). And earlier he states, "It is improbable. It is so far from lying in an invisible point, from being incapable of increase, that one perfected in love may grow in grace far swifter than he did before." We have not done well by our people in teaching them about growing in grace. In teaching them about the spiritual practices which are a part of the Church through the ages but which have mostly disappeared only to be taken up by "new age" groups.

When my original take on sanctification and holiness implied "perfect spiritual lives"—a viewing which I believe is still too common and which explains the loss of the doctrine in the preaching—I doubted the reality of the doctrine and for good reason. Too many of those professing appeared to me to have lives marked by Wesley's "mistakes" yet moved with a self-righteousness requiring no further forgiveness. They were the elect of sanctification parallel to the Calvinist's elect of God. It is encouraging that some recognition of this particular silence is being called out in some of the current preaching and discussion on sanctification of the reality that we were sanctified, we are sanctified, and we are being sanctified.

**Silence #6: Nazarenes are in deep need of confession and opportunities to ask forgiveness.** Whatever we need to do as a part of our growth in sanctifying grace, we need to ask forgiveness and pray personal and collective prayer of forgiveness. Here are some of the issues about which I would hold that even sanctified Nazarenes need to ask forgiveness:

- Our self-indulgent appetites and ways,
- Our exploitation of other people,
- Our anger at our own frustration,
- Our envy of those more fortunate than ourselves,
- Our intemperate love of worldly goods and comforts,
- Our negligence in prayer and worship,
- Our failure to commend the faith that is within us,
- Our neglect of human need and suffering,
- Our indifference to injustice and cruelty,
- Our lack of compassion and caring,
- Our belief that we no longer need to ask forgiveness.

What would happen and what would we be teaching our people if we had a prayer of confession in our services as is the tradition in many Christian groups.

**Silence #7: Predominately as a church culture, we exemplify a holiness of separation rather than the holiness to which Christ called us.** This “silence” is an issue that I have been wrestling with for over 30 years, trying to understand what has appeared to me to be deep contradictions related to Christ and our church. When I left NNC and went to Michigan State and then to the University of Washington, I became quite involved in Campus Crusade. It was through that experience that the importance of the Person of Christ was truly recognized by me. I began to take seriously who He was and what He said and did when He was one of us. The God-Man became Christ the Center for me. It was a puzzle that I had to discover this truth from a group dominated by those dangerous Calvinists, one of the four Cs we were to avoid along with Catholics, Charismatics, and Communists. I had some incredible disagreements with the Calvinist brothers during that time but I did come to believe, as Ruben Welch says, “You want to see what God is like, look at Jesus.”

I began to look at Jesus and what He said and, more important, what He did and that got me into a lot of trouble. To put it simply, He associated with all those types I had been taught to avoid and he “attacked” those whose behavior and “holiness” appeared to be the closest to what I thought we were suppose to be like (i.e., the Pharisees). They were seeking after holiness and purity even as Nazarenes were. They were pious and careful not to associate with people involved in any kind of impure lifestyle even as was the call of a good Nazarene. They abstained from many things and followed many behaviors and practices that marked them as “holy” even as Nazarenes did similar things related to our culture. Yet, Jesus spoke harshly to them and used strong language in attacking them (think of the modern equivalent of “whitewashed tombs” as in “full of . . .”). “Come on, Jesus, be a little more careful or you are really going to make them mad and they have a lot of influence even though they are a small minority in the land.”

For me the dilemma was that when I read about the style of the Pharisees, I saw the underlying style of most Nazarenes and certainly as taught in terms of being separate and the emphasis on behavioral ethics. But I am stubborn in my commitments and I stayed put in my commitment to the Church of the Nazarene even while not being able to reconcile these differences. So it was that God, in His infinite humor, while I was pondering the silences, put in my way a book by the New Testament scholar, Marcus Borg, with whom I would disagree about his views on Jesus and Scripture. Yet, I believe his analysis of the Pharisee and Jesus is a powerful explanation which deals with my dilemma and points to the renewing of doctrine of holiness. Borg's writings on Jesus and the quest for holiness has solved the contradiction for me but also suggests a major transformation of the cultural vision and understandings of the church (*Holiness and Politics in the Teachings of Jesus*, The Edwin Mellen Press, 1984; *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, Harper, 1994). I will borrow liberally from Borg's analysis but the connecting of it to the Nazarene church is strictly my own doing. You must also recognize that this is a first attempt with very limited reflection time and almost no time to sort out the language (a point at which I take Wesley to task). But what great fun it will be to chew on these ideas and what a hope it brings if we can see it as a means of transforming the message of holiness to match the call of Christ.

When the Jews returned from exile, the focus on Torah and Temple was an effort to follow the call of "Be ye holy as I am holy," a verse near and dear to us. This holiness was understood as separation from all that defiled, especially other peoples who were not Jewish. The emphasis on holiness as separation helped Israel maintain a clear identity while surrounded by alien (non-Jewish) cultures. This separation, which had been absolutely necessary in captivity, came under subtle attack with the rise of the influence of the Hellenistic culture around 175 B.C. and resulted in the rise of the Maccabees, whose victories for purity were so powerful in the time of Jesus. The final feature was the conquest of Palestine by the Romans approximately 50 years before Christ. This reinforces the call to "be holy" most clearly seen in the group called the Essenes whose response was separation from society and who saw themselves as "men of perfect holiness." The other major group was the Pharisees whose quest for holiness was to require separation within society.

I believe, as a sociologist, that we have similar parallels in our own history as a church, though much more compacted. The Civil War can be seen as our time of exile ("As we seek to make men holy, so we fight to make men free"), following which there was a great stress on holiness in many groups. This culminated in the creation of distinctive holiness groups during the 1890s, a final period of dislocation for many in the country. The "Hellenistic" period for the church was the period following World War I but especially the Roaring Twenties which captured the upheavals the war had caused. The closest parallel to the Roman conquest was the materialistic conquest of the American society, hence, the church during the post

World War II era of the last 50 years. Of the three, the most crucial to the culture of holiness the church came to represent is the response to the changes in the '20s. But let's return to the first century.

The Pharisees were the holy of the holiest, the "saints" of Judaism. The prayer of the Pharisee contrasted with the tax collector in the scripture would have been seen as an honest statement of the holy life in the time of Jesus, not a boasting, self-righteous statement even in the eyes of non-Pharisees. Pharisees were the model of piety, the embodiment of holiness and holy living. Yet, it was this group that Jesus attacked. And what was the attack about? It was about the content of the piety, not just an attitude. The issue of conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees was what might be called the hermeneutics of holiness. Both Jesus and the Pharisees sought to operate faithfully as God's presence within the society, not withdrawn from it, as the Essenes. The Pharisees followed the traditional rendering of the Matthew verse, "Be ye perfect, as I am perfect." Jesus presented a counter rendering best seen in Luke, "Be merciful as God is merciful." I prefer the rendering, "Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate," which is taken up by Henri Nouwen and his associates in their book *Compassion* (Image Books, 1983), as well as by Borg in his *Meeting Jesus* book.

The conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees is most deeply seen in the issues of table fellowship and ritual actions of washing and tithing often underscored by parables such as the Good Samaritan. I find the table fellowship context most interesting because it represented such a deep cultural practice representing holiness for the Pharisees. As Borg states in *Holiness and Politics*:

. . . sitting at table with another was an expression of intimacy and fellowship; to invite people to a meal honored them and expressed both trust and acceptance . . . But within Judaism the significance of the meal was even greater because in it came to focus the cultural dynamics of holiness, of which the Pharisees were pre-eminently the bearers. . . . (p. 80)

. . . In the meal converged the two streams of halakhic development which dominated the quest after holiness: tithing and purity . . . The Pharisees were thus "a table-fellowship sect." . . . (p. 80)

Thus the meals of those belonging to the Pharisaic fellowships symbolized what was expected of the nation of Israel: holiness, understood as separation. (p. 81)

Jesus took this extremely symbolic setting so intimately linked to the holiness of separation and brought in all of the unrighteous groups usually referred to by the terms "tax collectors" which today would mean any despised groups (i.e., Democrats) and "sinners" which culturally meant outcasts or untouchables or in

today's language we would term "the marginalized." Anyway you look at it, the actions of Jesus in this highly emotional context was a direct attack on the holiness worldview of the Pharisees. Borg summarizes the implications of Jesus' acts of table fellowship:

. . . they did not accept in practice the Pharisaic program of holiness for Israel and could not be trusted with regard to tithing and cleanness. And yet Jesus, in the name of the ultimate hope of Israel (the Kingdom of God), sat at table with sinners. To say, and to express in action, that the Kingdom of God included these meant to his opponents that he had rejected their understanding of Israel's holiness as separation, both as present practice and as final destiny. (p. 94)

In the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus struck at the heart of the different meanings of holiness in ways we miss from our cultural space. In the story the man is left "half dead" with the result that the priest and the Levite "passed by on the other side." What we don't understand is that the actions of the priest and Levite were holy actions of holy men who sought to shun the very appearance of evil by avoiding all manner of defilement and uncleanness. Because being near anything appearing dead brought on defilement and subjected them to the loss of holiness, they absolutely, unconditionally had to walk by on the other side, a point fully understood and condoned by those listening to the story. The key isn't so much that the one who acted as neighbor was an untouchable heretic, though Jesus always seemed to drop in uncomfortable examples in His teachings, but that the evidence of holy action was compassion. Thus the parable is both a statement of what Jesus is teaching holiness is not as well as what holiness is.

All of this is pointing to an alternative vision of the holy life and holiness. It explains to me what has seemed such a contradiction. Here were the Pharisees, the holiest of the holy, defenders of a holiness tradition, practicing it faithfully in their everyday lives at some economic cost, seeking in every way possible to be "pure and spotless." Yet, Jesus is saying to them that that to which they were committed was not the holiness to which God was calling them. In fact, it was getting in the way of being holy. Jesus also said, "Except your righteousness exceed that of the Pharisees, you will not enter the Kingdom." This has been another great puzzle for me until now. The righteousness or holiness of the Pharisees was in staying clear and separate from unclean things and following the right practices and behaviors. I was being called to exceed their behavior which suggested doing more and better of the same. Yet, here is Jesus seemingly violating the holy practices and having unholy associations. But when I see the call to holiness as compassion, then I see the call of Christ in exceeding the holiness of the Pharisees as the call to compassion, not separation or purity for purity sake. The holiness culture of the Pharisees was a purity culture that couldn't protect, but worse, it was not the holiness to which God was calling.

In Jesus, "God with us," we see the modification of the understanding of the holiness code of Leviticus with the mercy–compassion teaching and action of our Lord. To imitate God is to take on and live His mercy and compassion. It is to be embracing and nourishing as a neighbor to both those of faith and those in the margins. Most of all, the holiness of the Jews after exile as epitomized by the Pharisees was a holiness which required separation, protection, "insulation from sources of defilement," but always with the fear of contagion from the world around. Rather than a holiness of fear, the call of Jesus is to a holiness of power and freedom from fear.

But in the teaching of Jesus, holiness, not uncleanness was understood to be contagious. Holiness—the power of the holy, the other realm—was understood as transforming power, not as power that needed protection through rigorous separation. Such was implied in the metaphor of the physician in Mark 2:17 par., set in the context of table fellowship. The physician was not overcome by those who were ill but rather overcame the illness. (Borg, p. 135)

In short, the real call of God is not to "protective holiness" but to "projective holiness."

One of my favorite stories of Jesus, which now I better understand why it is, is the story of the Gerasene demoniac (Mark 5:1–20). As Borg notes, it is the total picture of absolute uncleanness violating every purity issue in the holiness code of the Pharisees. You have a man living among the dead, in Gentile land, possessed by the demonic, nearby to a large group of the most unclean of animals. Of course, Jesus was right in the middle of it. What's the outcome? The holiness of compassion overcomes all and includes what I consider a mark of God's great sense of humor, the swine drowning in the lake.

In his summary comparison of the Pharisees with the first-century Christians, Borg makes this analysis with which I will close:

The (Pharisees), committed to the actualization of holiness had narrow and sharp boundaries; the (Christians), animated by the fission of mercifulness, had broad and very indistinct boundaries. Though (the first century church) maintained its own identity, it sought, on the one hand, not to judge that some were beyond God's mercy, and, on the other hand, to embrace all, even the outcasts, seeing them as also affirmed by the mercy of God. (p. 139)

As Nazarenes, we must move back to what I believe was the major culture of holiness of our founding father, Bresee, the holiness marked by compassion. We must reject the holiness of separation which took hold of our church in the '20s and from which we are yet to recover. We must reject the holiness of separation and

embrace the transforming and empowering holiness of compassion because that is the call of Christ.