

Preaching Holiness In This New Millennium

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Introduction: Setting the Text & Defining the Task

I set out to find at least one passage from the NT that would directly connect preaching and holiness. It was a pleasant surprise to find various portions of Scripture that make this connection, but I will only read one of them as support to our theme: *1 Thessalonians 2:3-13*.¹

This paragraph talks about Paul, a pastor who...

- preaches or exhorts about the revealed truth, “the appeal we make does not spring from error” (v. 3a).
- preaches with total transparency and with pure intentions, “the appeal does not spring from impure motives...not trying to please men but God, who tests our hearts (vv. 3b-6).
- preaches surrendered to others and saturated with pastoral love (vv. 7-8). Emphasis on verse 8.
- preaches through his holy example (vv. 9-10). Emphasis on verse 10.
- preaches thinking in the well being and benefit of his audience, “as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God” (vv. 11-12).
- preaches the Word of God or the complete gospel (vv. 4a, 8b, 9d), that has the power to change us from within, “which is at work in you who believe”(v. 13).

With this text we would have enough biblical base to extract principles to guide our preaching of holiness into this millennium, but it will also be necessary to look at some aspects of our theme question of preaching holiness in this new millennium.

What do we mean by preaching?

Preaching has to do with the passionate and persuasive proclamation of the gospel. The gospel is God's good news that all we have lost in the first Adam is totally restored through what Christ has done for us, and thus we could have intimate communion with God and our neighbor and live in total and growing obedience to Christ motivated by His love (this is precisely what it means to live in holiness).

But the gospel like a song, has words and music, that when harmonized together produce a beautiful melody, they are inseparable one from the other. The music of the gospel is the personal, silent, observable and constant testimony of our lives in midst of our everyday challenges. Unfortunately, we have reduced or limited preaching to the verbal and individual proclamation of a pastor behind a pulpit. Utilizing our analogy, preaching is the song that the church as a community and individually should sing in midst of its action in the world, in that way preaching as verbal proclamation does not disconnect itself from its compassionate action.

What do we mean by holiness preaching?

Although I am not that old, I remember the days when in the annual pastors' reports it was asked, How many holiness sermons have you preached this past year? Pastors would look back into their preaching agendas and sermon outlines and would count the times they had preached on themes like holiness specifically, entire sanctification, being filled with the Holy Spirit, and other such topics to

come up with their tally. But, Is this what we mean by holiness preaching? Is holiness, for us, simply one more theme that we have to occasionally include in our preaching slate because we belong to a holiness church?

I do not think so..., if we are consistent with our theology, in a sense, all our sermons should, in some way, talk about holiness without violating the biblical text. This is not to say that in each one of our preaching opportunities we need to use the term holiness, sanctification, or other related terms, nor does this mean that we should see direct references to these terms in all biblical texts.

But it does mean that for us, Wesleyans, the doctrine of holiness and its preaching is the axis around which all biblical doctrines and preaching rotate and depends. Therefore, anything we say about God and his purposes for humanity and the world has a direct relationship with His holiness. By the same token, all biblical doctrine is connected or subjected to the biblical doctrine of holiness, and this should be reflected in our preaching. For example, the doctrine of the sovereignty of God, in order to be presented biblically needs to be related with the holiness of God, which is in essence holy love. Our God is a sovereign God who uses his sovereignty to accomplish His holy purposes. Another example, is the mission of the church. The church's mission is a holy mission. Likewise, the same could be said of any doctrinal statement.

But in spite of this, I believe that we also should have specific, intentional times when we preach and provide moments so that our people are exposed to the biblical foundations of the holy life and have the opportunity to experience the crisis of entire sanctification. Thus the importance of holiness campaigns at all levels, local, zone and district. Then we would meet the need of continuing to guide our people in their process of growth in holiness, so to help them to be open to the constant renewal of the Holy Spirit in their lives and accept gladly their commitment of holy service towards others

through the ministry of the church; for to live in holiness is a present reality, as well as a lifelong project.

Why do we refer to the new millennium in our theme?

Does that mean that from now on or within some months we will have to preach holiness in some other way just because the date on the calendar has changed? The answer is yes and no.

I do not believe that we have to change the biblical essence of the holiness message. But we do need to be sensitive to the new challenges the new millennium will provide in the form of different tendencies or orientations of our society, since the people that live within its structure are our target audience as preachers. The new millennium brings a “new mentality,” or way of being human in society, that is related with such realities as postmodernism, globalization, the information revolution, technological advances, and other things, that we as holiness preachers should understand in order to be relevant and effective in the communication of our message.

Also, the new millennium, as an historical landmark, provides us with the opportunity to evaluate our effectiveness in our holiness preaching in the past and to make necessary corrections so we can project ourselves into the challenges of the future. How effective have we been in the past in our holiness preaching? Can our average layperson in our churches articulate the doctrine of holiness in his/her own words and with biblical base? or Is holiness a type of tangled string topic in our laypeople's minds that it is better for them not to talk about the matter and if someone would want to know about this theme they would just refer them to the pastor or another authorized spokesperson? Because of our holiness preaching, What difference has it made in the way our people act and how we as leaders live? Does God's holiness reflect itself in our lives, in everything we do? Are we known by other evangelical groups as a holiness church? Are we hearing testimonies in our churches that the

Holy Spirit is sanctifying our brothers and sisters? These are important and vital questions we need to reflect and act upon.

But, what can we do to improve the exposition of our holiness message in the future? Have we unintentionally or intentionally neglected or exaggerated any aspect(s) of the holiness message? Maybe in this sense, yes, we would need to change or modify the way we go about preaching holiness, but the challenges and opportunities that our context provides us are great and we should be ever cognizant of them. For instance, we live in times when some scholars are saying that Christian preaching is immersed in a severe crisis and others are wanting to do away with traditional preaching as a means of effectively communicating the gospel. On the other hand, we are witnessing in the present a resurgence of the doctrine and preaching of holiness among many Christians, although not all are from the Wesleyan Tradition. A few years ago, I was attending the biannual meeting of the Association of Seminaries of the Southern Cone in South America (ASIT), an interdenominational organization, where the president, a Baptist, ended with a sermon on perfection. He admitted to us, "I do not know a lot about this theme or even understand the term completely, but I will try to share with you since it is biblical word."

Latin-American/ Nazarene Reality

Furthermore, for us, in our Latin-American and Nazarene reality, the preaching of holiness has to try to bridge at least three chasms. The first chasm lies between the biblical doctrine of holiness and our contemporary culture, its values, practices and orientation with a strong influence from Roman Catholic spirituality. Where we often hear remarks like: "No one is perfect, and the saints are those that have died or exceptional persons like Mother Teresa, the Pope or other 'special' human beings."

The second chasm lies between the biblical doctrine of holiness from our Wesleyan perspective and the doctrines of holiness of other denominations and/or evangelical movements. A lot of our people do not come to us first but have been exposed to other focuses of the doctrine of holiness and so we have to deal with these type biases these believers bring who are among us and because of the proliferation of the Christian mass media we have to constantly “compete” with these other “types” of holiness doctrines that are more widely heard and circulating massively.

Finally, the third chasm lies between the biblical doctrine of holiness and the different emphasis of this doctrine we have even within our denomination and contemporary Wesleyanism. Some of these different “schools” or “currents” are known as substantialism, relationalism, privation, the death of self, among others. Also among our own circle there are at least three dangers that we need to avoid in the preaching and experience of holiness: pharisaism (“the saint is the one that literary fulfills scripture the way I do”, liberalism, absolute and ethical standards are ignored or stretched out to the limits (“for the pure everything is pure”) and, what I call “Calvinistic holiness” (“once a saint always a saint”), there seems to be no way one could lose the holiness experience no matter what one does. In the face of these three chasms ministers need a new approach to holiness preaching to address the realities of Latin American and Nazarene realities.

Expository Preaching

Now, I would like to suggest to you the following elements that, in my opinion, could help guide us in our holiness preaching entering into the third millennium. Holiness in this millennium should be preached expositively and inductively. If we really believe that the doctrine and experience of holiness has deep biblical roots we should utilize, more often this homiletical tool, that, is expository preaching. Sometimes there are pastors that give the impression that the holiness message needs to be preached to demonstrate our denominational loyalty or to convince some church leaders that we are in fact truly

"Nazarene." Thus, holiness itself and the preaching of holiness becomes a type of password, buzz word or slogan among us but void of its spiritual dynamic.

Michael Green (1982), in the preface, of John Stott's, one of the leading contemporary English preachers, excellent book on preaching, *Between Two Worlds*, warns us that: "Much of the current uncertainty about the gospel and the mission of the Church must be due to a generation of preachers which has lost confidence in the Word of God, and no longer takes the trouble to study it in depth and to proclaim it without fear or favor" (p. 7). It might be as pertinent to make this same comment regarding some of our holiness preachers.

It is imperative that the orientation of our preaching be expository and inductive, that is, that our holiness message flow out directly from Scripture itself, because in this way we would be affirming the efficacy, power and authority of the inspired Word per se and validating our strong conviction that our holiness message is truly biblical and not mainly, our personal or even our own private message as a denomination. So that holiness preaching is simply the natural outcome of trying to be true to the biblical text and message of Scripture. Now, I must admit, that this is not the easiest way to preach the doctrine and experience of holiness, but I do believe that it is the most adequate way which provides the greatest possibilities to give greater fruits in the long run.

Expository preaching, according to Stott (1982), refers "to the content of the sermon (biblical truth) rather than its style (a running commentary). To expound Scripture is to bring out of the text what is there. The expositor prizes open what appears to be closed, makes plain what is obscure, unravels what is knotted and unfolds what is tightly packed. The opposite of exposition is 'imposition', which is to impose on the text what is not there. But the 'text' in question could be a verse, or a sentence, or even a single word. It could equally be a paragraph, or a chapter, or a whole book. The size of the text is immaterial, so long as it is biblical. What matters is what we do with it. Whether it is long or

short, our responsibility as expositors is to open it up in such a way that it speaks its message clearly, plainly, accurately, relevantly, without addition, subtraction or falsification" (pp. 125-26).

In addition, exposition is not only explanation, as it is described above, but also application. Walter L. Liefeld states, in his book *New Testament Exposition* (1984), that "without a substantial content of clear exposition, balanced in its covering of all the principal aspects, an exposition would not be trustworthy. But without a practical application, the exposition is simply description. If exposition is explanation, the expository preaching is **applied explanation**" (p. 16). This focus in preaching lends itself for the elaboration of sermon series based on a book from the Bible, which Douglas White (1984) describes as consecutive exposition, which for him "is the most precious jewel in expository excellence. It is the apple of the eye of all preaching" (*The Practical Procedure in Expository Preaching*, 135).

As we can see this process does not have any short cuts and requires diligent study of the Word and of our audience. It means being in the Word constantly and profoundly and being with people and sensing a heavy burden for their continued spiritual growth throughout their lives. It might be that the decision of preaching holiness expositively represents the most important personal and ministerial ethical decision that we as pastors must encounter.

Holiness in this millennium should be preached persuasively. One of the main objectives behind our holiness preaching is that persons, our people, might come to personally experience and as soon as possible what we are exposing biblically. We should not preach holiness merely so that people have more head knowledge of the doctrine and thus make them responsible for somehow living it out and then wash our hands without caring if they have experienced or not the doctrine. Nevertheless, persuasion should never degenerate into imposition, manipulation or lack of sensibility.

Persuasion in preaching is more the activity of the Holy Spirit that could be supported if we faithfully preach the Word and motivate our people to appropriate for themselves this blessed experience and life-style, which is holiness. In fact, persuasion is an important element of true expository preaching (White, 65). A none-wesleyano author affirms that “we as preachers have a divine assignment ... We should present the gospel in such a way that the persons that hear us are put under conviction by the Holy Spirit and are drawn closer to the redeeming grace of Christ so that they could be rescued from sin and thus be presented without blemish before the presence of the glory of God” (Alan Streett, 1979, 14). How much more is our responsibility as holiness preachers.

Another element that should not be left out in our holiness preaching, if it is to be persuasive, is the altar call, where persons are dealt with individually. We as a Church, need to recover the place and function of the altar in our services and elaborate a biblical theology of the altar. The altar is a place of encounter and surrender, or a meeting place where we present our lives as a living offering, between God and we human beings. It is not only a place for sinners but mostly for God’s children. I am still convinced that the most transcendent decisions in the believer’s life are often made around an altar with someone guiding and supporting in prayer and communion. With this I do not support a “two trips to the altar” mentality, but a constant seeking of God’s grace taking advantage of the altar with its biblical significance.

As holiness preachers we need to be well acquainted with the basic steps or process required biblically to experience entire sanctification (e.g. entire consecration, sense the need for this second work of grace, exercise faith and search for this experience, see John Knight’s 1986 book *The Holiness Pilgrimage*) and understand and live the different facets of holiness, so to guide others in this experience and teach the doctrine of holiness to others, preparing altar workers to help guide many in the holiness experience. We should also learn how to effectively extend an invitation or call to the

altar to those who would like to experience this grace. Unfortunately, very little has been written about this topic, guiding towards entire sanctification in the altar.

In addition, our persuasion as preachers is greatly increased when we, and others, share or testify verbally and vividly about our personal experience of entire sanctification and our growth in grace. Why is it that we do not have any problems testifying publicly about our forgiveness of sin, yet we do not have the same disposition when it comes to testifying about our holiness experience? Are not both works of grace received by the same grace of God when we meet the divine conditions? Could it be that to testify about our holiness experience has been interpreted as lack of modesty or simply is perceived as false humility?

Holiness in this millennium should be preached relevantly: Our holiness preaching should always include insinuations and concrete examples of how our holiness doctrine should be applied to our daily life and the everyday challenges we face. Sometime we as preachers present holiness living as the desert or icing on the cake of our Christian lives, in other words as something that is nice, sweet, desirable, and even good but not totally necessary or essential for our Christian walk. And often this perception of the life of holiness is due to the fact that we have failed to relate in a dynamic way the doctrine of holiness with everyday life or the marketplace, where people are living day in and day out.

It would be helpful if we take into consideration the following questions, among others, as we endeavor to preach holiness relevantly: What does holiness have to do with my job, my boss, my co-workers and the realization of my tasks as a worker? How can a holiness life-style help me in my marriage, in the upbringing of my children and in our future as a family? How can my holiness living guide me in the use of my resources, in paying my bills, during trying times financially, which I often have to face?

Holiness in this millennium should be preached so it could be easily understood. The terms we use should be readily understood by all our people. Although our biblical-theological and ecclesiastical terminology has a place in our church often this same terminology obstacles or short-circuits our communication regarding the doctrine and experience of holiness. For example, for the majority of our brothers and sisters in our local churches to talk about initial and entire sanctification, and that the baptism with the Holy Spirit is concomitant with Christian perfection, and that entire sanctification is an instantaneous work of grace where our inherited depravity is eradicated is like talking Greek to them.

It is not that we do not hold these truths to be certain and part of our theological inheritance, although more than one good theological debate can be undertaken on different points, but we should seek to utilize simple biblical terms and metaphors that express more clearly and vividly to our people the doctrine and experience of holiness as it relates to a dynamic experience. In this respect we should have in mind as well our young people and the new generation of Nazarenes that utilize different paradigms and linguistic expressions that we "older" Nazarenes are not accustomed to. For example, holiness could be expressed as being Christ-like, or permitting Christ to be the center of our lives, living within the full will of God for our lives, living in total obedience to God, dedicating our lives to Him and living a clean life, we could talk about integrity, honesty, transparency, living a life in the fullness of the Spirit, being filled with God's love, etc.

Holiness in this millennium should be preached illustratively. Very often the truths we preach related with the holy life or holy life-style tend to be complex or elaborated, for that reason a good illustration that pictures or gives a clear mental image of what we are trying to communicate through our preaching is very helpful. I like to make use of what I call a "master illustration," which is simply an illustration that shows in a vivid way the central truth or heart of the biblical passage that is exposed. This usually causes a better impact at the end of the message and at the same time prepares the way

for an invitation to the alter or another way to appropriate what is preached into ones life. I have come to believe that one good illustration is better than many illustrations scattered throughout a sermon, since the use of a lot of illustrations tend to distract the attention from the biblical text. It is our goal as preachers that people not only go away remembering our illustration but also or most importantly, the truth or truths it tried to make clearer and not just the good story.

But in order to have good illustrations available for our holiness preaching it requires that, in first place, we as preachers grasp with clarity the concepts we are trying to convey. We also need to have a degree of discipline to compile possible illustrations and in the practice in the use and narration of illustrations. However, the effort dedicated to this task will be rewarded with much increase to us as we begin to see that our brothers and sisters understand with clarity the doctrine of holiness, are convinced that it is real, and begin to experience and live out this grace.

Holiness in this millennium should be preached focusing more on its relational and social aspects. We should seriously ask ourselves the following questions, Is it possible to understand the doctrine of holiness, live it, and at the same time have problems relating to others? Could we really live in holiness and care little or nothing about the condition of our society and let our world continue to deteriorate without us doing anything? Have we been called to live in holiness in this individualistic fashion, alienating ourselves and being indifferent to our surroundings? Too often we have witnessed these holiness “contradictions” in our church. Yet, John Wesley constantly affirmed that “there is no holiness apart from social holiness.”

It seems plain to me that the greatest difference that holiness should have in our lives is in the area of our interpersonal relationships. Our holiness preaching should, more often and intentionally, zero in on this important and priority need. Holiness living should flesh itself out in that we are better husbands and wives, sons and daughters, fellow workers, neighbors, citizens, employers, brother and sisters in

the faith and servants. In synthesis, our holiness living should affect positively all our human relations. This could be facilitated if we emphasize more the concurrent work of cleansing of our hearts and the infilling or fullness of God's love in us.

Holiness preaching in this millennium should be accompanied with a strong emphasis on teaching and modeling. Although expository preaching is also accompanied with a high pedagogical emphasis we should also take advantage of other teaching moments to share about the doctrine and experience of holiness. In this way we would be reinforcing our preaching and preparing the way to be more effective in our preaching. Maybe it would be recommendable that we elaborate and implement a type of holiness discipleship with basic lessons on the doctrine and experience of holiness.

Also, it is important that as preachers we could be faithful, although imperfect, examples of the holiness message we proclaim. It would also be helpful that we could point out other brothers and sisters or leaders in our congregation that reflect before us a holy life. This year participating in a meeting of the ministerial credential committee I risked asking one of the candidates we interviewed: Have you seen recently a saint among us as a church? It was a blessing for us to hear him respond affirmatively almost immediately. Of course, he did not mention any names.

Holiness in this millennium should be preached with the unction from above. Unction is not something that we could muster up or generate by ourselves, nor is it something we could store within ourselves and then give it out to others, as it is being taught erroneously in some quarters. But on the contrary, our unction comes only and exclusively from God, so that each one of us has to personally go to Him to receive His unction. The unction of God upon our lives and preaching is the result of spending time alone with Him, it reflects our spirituality and pilgrimage with Him, in other words, our constant spiritual formation. The unction upon us is the concrete evidence of the activity and support of the

Holy Spirit upon our lives and ministry. This provides us with passion, fire, enthusiasm and motivation for our holiness preaching.

Also God's unction upon our preaching will strengthen us in our battle against Satan. What do we think Satan is doing while we are fervently trying to preach and live out holiness? I can assure you that he is not asleep or inactive, the amount of pastors and leaders that have fallen from grace these past few years, that are no longer in ministry nor in our church, is the most convincing evidence of Satan's activity. Through our anointed holiness preaching we should be able to counter attack the works of Satan and make him flee from us. But as Scripture advises us, we should not ignore his dealings.

God wants us to give to him or that we surrender what we have that is false and valueless, yet we tend to hold on to it with so much determination, so that He could freely give us what is His, His holiness, which is genuine and of infinite value. Let us make this transaction, let us preach holiness with love into this millennium. Holiness is the message of hope!

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Notes

¹Other passages include: Acts 18: 4-5; 20:31-32; 26:16-18; 1 Corinthians 9:18-19; 2 Corinthians 4:5-7.

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