

STUDY 15

The Church—The *Holy* Temple

Deane Meatheringham

THE CHURCH CONFESSES HER OWN HOLINESS

‘We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church.’ At a time when unbelievers seem to have ramped up their opposition to the Church and when believers have grown cynical, are we like the Pharisee at prayer in the temple when we confess our own holiness? The stress of this study is on the holiness of the church. Holiness conjures up all sorts of associations that are usually connected with other qualifications, like exemption from the sphere of contamination that in many respects rules the lives of human beings. Does holy church mean spotlessness and a moral purity that comes close to perfection? If we do indeed confess our own holiness how do we measure it? Do we contradict what we confess?

Cynicism and disillusionment have come down to instances of Christians not being able to confess belief in ‘one holy catholic and apostolic church’. In part the difficulty is tied to understanding the nature of holy church. However, in the Nicene ecumenical creed, members of the church first confess the first three articles concerning the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, i.e. the eternal holy community of the Godhead. The nature of the Triune God of grace is to bring others into the divine communion. Belief in holy church is one piece with the confession of God the Father’s eternally begotten Son coming down from heaven to die and rise for our sake. As the Lord and giver of life, the Holy Spirit baptises us into the body of Christ, making believers participants in the divine nature. It is this that makes the church holy and believers simultaneously humble and bold to confess it.

WHAT MAKES THE CHURCH HOLY IS PARTICIPATION IN THE HOLY ONE

Holiness is often thought of in ritual terms with a concentration upon the practices we follow, the energy we create, and the dietary rules we follow. To more effectively engage in attaining holiness it is often associated with asceticism, various forms of monasticism and the practice of discipline. Holiness or sanctification in many circles is seen as making moral progress after being saved or justified, without or with the assistance of the Holy Spirit, so that the transformation of the believer becomes more visible.

The Church—The *Holy* Temple

The Roman church venerated the saints and martyrs as a separated and very select group on the basis of their radically devoted lives which were a testimony to God himself. The Reformers did not deny the holiness of believers as a testimony to God himself, but Luther ‘brought the saints from heaven down to earth’.¹

Believers are called the saints (2 Cor. 1:1; Eph. 1:1; Col. 1:2), who are sanctified in Christ Jesus (1 Cor. 1:2; Phil. 1:1). The church is ‘chosen by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit to be obedient to Jesus Christ and to be sprinkled with his blood’ (1 Pet 1:2). As saints they find themselves living in an everyday, earthy reality.

God alone is inherently and permanently holy. Holy love is the essence of God’s being. Holiness is the sum of the Triune God’s life-giving, creative, ordering, blessing, saving, judging, healing and ‘supernatural’ outgoing community (1 Sam. 2:2; Isa. 6:1ff.; 10:17; 57:15; Matt. 6:9; John 17:11; 1 John 1:5; 4:16). Unlike pagan religions where holiness may be derived from a number of persons or sources, God alone is the source of holiness. All holiness is derived from God, human beings become holy as they are claimed by God and brought into God’s presence.

As the Holy One of Israel, Yahweh demonstrated his divine power over the gods of Egypt by freeing the Hebrews from slavery and making them his treasured possession:

You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, *you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation* (Exod. 19:4–6).

At the heart of it, all Israel was a holy priesthood because the Holy God dwelt in their midst (Lev. 26:11–13):

The state of holiness was the environment created by God’s presence in the tabernacle or the temple. It was a divine bridgehead in the profane world. The place where heaven and earth overlapped. Its opposite pole was a state of impurity which was utterly incompatible with holiness, like light and darkness.²

It was Yahweh who sanctified his people (Lev. 20:8; 21:8, 15, 23; 22:9, 16, 32). Human beings cannot produce any holiness for themselves; they must receive it entirely from God. It follows, therefore, that all self-fabricated holiness is abhorrent to God, for anyone who would make themselves holy sets up their own god and seeks God’s glory for themselves.

The church is the holy temple of God because the holy God dwells within her (1 Cor. 3:16f.; Eph. 2:19–22; 1 Pet. 2:4–10). ***The sanctification of the church is in Jesus Christ who was sanctified and sent into the world by the Father (John 10:36).*** This means he was set apart as the pre-incarnate Son for a mission that would fulfill all that was preparatory in the exodus and the temple worship. In turn Jesus sanctified himself or consecrated himself for the work the Father had given to him

¹ K. Holl in G. C. Berkouwer, *The Church*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1976, p. 315.

² Pastor John Kleinig, lecture, ‘Sharing God’s Holiness’, 1984.

The Church—The *Holy* Temple

(John 17:19). This has to do with Jesus' holy vocation and his worship, wherein he would offer himself on behalf of all who were defiled and polluted through sin (Heb. 10:7–10).

The people of God have been sanctified through the offering of their great high priest, Jesus (Heb. 10:10). We are first washed of all defilement (Heb. 1:3; 9:14; 10:1–4; cf. 1 Cor. 1:30). God's great act of purification and sanctification is once for all (Heb. 10:11–14). Jesus did not enter the heavenly sanctuary of God's presence alone but with those whom he had sanctified (Heb. 9:24; 10:19–22). The high point is that the church participates in God's holiness (Heb. 12:10).

PARTICIPATING IN GOD'S HOLINESS

The church is in a unique position as the holy people of God. The Living God, whom heaven and earth cannot contain, now dwells within the living stones of the temple, making them holy. Moreover, as we have just said, the church shares in God's holiness. This is akin to being sharers in the divine nature (2 Pet. 1:3–4). About this Herbert W. Richardson says:

For, as we have previously argued, the distinguishing characteristic of God is a property not of His nature but of His person, viz., holiness. Someone can know things *about God* by knowing characteristics of His nature (e.g. truth or love or happiness). But one can only know God Himself, i.e., know God insofar as He is God, by experiencing the holiness that is the distinguishing property of His existence. Since holiness is inseparable from the person of God, we can only know God in Christ by experiencing Jesus of Nazareth as the Holy One in person.³

God's presence in the church is not a bare principle or powerless concept, but something like volcanic fire and glorious in light and life. Thus when God says to Israel, 'You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy' (Lev. 19:2), it is a promise as well as a command. The imperfect tense can be translated, 'You are—or you will be—holy, for I the LORD your God am holy'. The church is set apart for God in the power and splendour of newness.

The writer to the Hebrews exhorts us to 'Pursue peace with everyone and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord' (Heb. 12:14). In the context of Hebrews 12, the call for an earnest response or effort is not an admonition to achieve peace and holiness by our own endeavors but to realise what we have as those who share in the holiness of God. (An example from cycling: contrasting a pursuit race with a pacing race.) We cannot be indifferent or swerve from the gift we have. This must become visible as we deliberately choose not to let idols defile us. Not to do this results in bitterness and misuse of people in the congregation. In matters of relationships and sexuality we will not defile the marriage bed or pursue greed, but practice hospitality and look after refugees (Heb. 12:15ff., 25ff.; 13:1–7).

³ Herbert W. Richardson, *Theology for a New World* (SCM, London, 1968), pp. 132–3, quoted in G. C. Bingham, 'The Gift of Holiness—1', *New Creation Monthly Pastors' Study*, 1 July 1996 (NCTM, Blackwood), p. 1, n. 2.

The Church—The *Holy* Temple

BEWARE OF HOLY IDEALS

When thinking about the holiness of the church we can be deceived by images of the church which have been drawn from an idea or ideal which we may have imagined or drawn from some other situation.⁴ The dream of the church can break down the community, causing a breakdown in the fellowship (Heb. 12:15). Some well-organised service and social clubs do succeed in bringing people together without too much stress or threat. We can begin to impose these high experiences upon a congregation. The person who dreams of an ideal can enter the holy community with his or her demands, setting up a false goal of holiness which they expect the church and God to achieve. It ends in disillusionment when the creator's dream fails.

Ideal communities do not have to deal with or respond to the Word of God, or people's various responses to it. The church is subject to the reality of the Lord's discipline in its fellowship. The gospel of the gift of holiness draws out the good, but as it reaches the deceitful heart it also brings out contradictory reactions. Karl Barth said somewhere that there is more sin in the church than in the world. He was not justifying sin in the church. Paul takes congregations to task for being bewitched and for morals that deviate from what has been taught. And the presence of the Holy God breaks our illusions in order to bring us back to reality. This is often disruptive and leads to tensions within the church.

Participation in God's holiness is a present reality, but it is also eschatological. We have what we will have in the future in the present, but the present is the penultimate and not the ultimate. Though we live with the *simul* it must not be perverted into a complaining, negative, joyless disfigurement of the church. We continue to battle with indwelling sin in the power of the Holy Spirit and only faith in the Lord saves us and continues to save us from the abyss. The holy church is neither a sin haven, nor a pretence community advertising that it has its act together. We cannot lay claim to our sanctification for it is a gift of grace. The more thankfully we receive this the more possible it will be to grow and to live together and learn to understand our brothers and sisters in the community as they face their battles, joys, successes and failures.

HOLINESS IN THE CHURCH HAS TO DO WITH NEWNESS AND MISSION

I expect Noel Due will take up the theme of mission in study 19. Where there is a distorted view of the holiness of the church we may find that it glories in the past and adopts past cultural practices to measure holiness. Such holiness is inclined to regard membership of the church primarily as a place of security in a climate of change. The holy church is guardian of its traditions, particularly faithfulness to the prophetic and apostolic gospel in Holy Scripture and to the sacraments and commands given to us by Christ. But holiness is radically misunderstood if the impression is given that the church hangs inertly onto the past without the powers of the age to come. Holiness is

⁴ See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, SCM, London, 1972, pp. 15ff.

The Church—The *Holy* Temple

even more radically misunderstood if the church uses the Bible to justify its entombment to the old ways.

The presence of the Holy One distinguishes the church radically in being set apart from glorifying the old and the past. The church is not related exclusively to the past. Words like ‘old’ and ‘new’ are revamped by the gospel. Salvation is directly linked to newness (Eph. 2:15; 4:24; Col. 3:10; Gal. 6:15; and especially 2 Cor. 5:17). Holiness is the setting apart of the church in Christ for newness of life, for new advances in the purposes of God.

The chosen race, royal priesthood and the holy nation is set apart to proclaim the mighty acts of God to the world (1 Pet. 2:9f.). Mission is future moving. It is moving from being a church membership that is moribund in its security, to being a membership that is engaging with its local community. The energy, life and creativity for this come from the astonishment and power of God’s present universal mystery. Mission flounders on churchliness because church planting has been included from the beginning in making disciples. The church cannot be holy church unless this mark becomes evident in universal proclamation. Karl Barth shakes us up when he says that as the church fulfills her mission this is an:

... external sign by which the true community of Jesus Christ may be infallibly known. In this way as in every other respect the true community of Jesus Christ does not exist esoterically and invisibly but visibly and exoterically, so that it may be noted by the world around.⁵

⁵ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, T & T Clark, Edinburgh, 1975, vol. 4, pt 3.2, pp. 771–2.