

Context Matters: Reflections of a Wesleyan-Holiness Theologian

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I begin with a quote by H. Ray Dunning, Nazarene theologian and author of *Grace, Faith, and Holiness*, the standard Nazarene systematic theology for the past 30 years. He speaks of the *via media* in Wesleyan theology, and what takes up residence on either side of the middle position.

There is danger . . . in remaining in the middle of the road and keeping proper balance between two poles. One is vulnerable to attack from both sides. The liberal accuses this position of being fundamentalist, and the fundamentalist accuses it of being liberal. Consistent Wesleyan theology with its indigenous tendency toward a *via media* is precisely fitted to occupy this mediating position, but this is a precarious position that places pressure upon the theologian who seeks to maintain it by having to guard [herself] on two fronts. The result is that authentic Wesleyan theology has too often succumbed to the pressures and escaped to the safety of one or the other of the extremes and thus lost its distinctive character (38).

We may have passed the popularity of using the poles of liberal and conservative, but it is still a very helpful framework in some circumstances. The circumstance here is my own theological work and context, one I believe relevant for the wider Wesleyan conversation. I was born and raised in the Church of the Nazarene. I received my liberal arts and seminary education within her institutions. I am an ordained elder in the denomination. I have been a pastor in a few of her churches. I have authored several books published by her publishing house. And I am a professor in one of her universities. My one form of coming out from under her wings was my Ph.D. education in a United Methodist university. All these experiences put together have led me to ask myself: Is it more tolerable to be considered a liberal in a conservative environment or a conservative in a liberal environment? In fact, the answer to this question has led me to make intentional life choices. The answer has certainly influenced the fact that I remain a Nazarene. The answer is that I'd rather be accused of being a liberal than a conservative. But, as Dunning implies, I stand very much in the middle in reality, and would not define myself as a liberal were it not for my context. By way of example here, if I were exactly the same person, with exactly the same theology, and were a United Methodist, I would be considered a conservative! Context matters.

To extend this further, the word “evangelical” has become a powder keg of a word today. In light of recent developments in the United Methodist Church, it is a word that now demarcates those who want to dissociate with the extremes of a liberal agenda, who want to hold on to creedal Christianity and John Wesley as a theological father (not just founder), and who especially want to hold on to certain beliefs and sentiments about the theology of holiness and the need to emphasize *entire* sanctification. In the Nazarene Church presently, for those who wish to dissociate with the dangers of American fundamentalism (particularly politically), many have renounced the word “evangelical” in their own personal identity, myself included. Most academics, as well as thoughtful pastors and laypersons, in the denomination also want to remain creedal and hold to John Wesley as theological father (over against the abuses of the American Holiness Movement [AMH]—because we were raised in them), and we want to hold to certain beliefs and sentiments about the theology of holiness and the need to emphasize *progressive* sanctification. Context matters. I do believe that what we all want, from both positions, is a robust and healthy understanding of holiness.

Why such a long introduction to my assigned task here—to write about my commitment as a scholar to aid in my denomination’s understanding of holiness theology? Because my context matters. If I had been born and raised in a different denomination, I would probably be up to very different things. (With doctoral emphases in the theology and history of the early church; Origen; John Wesley; and Original Sin, I might be a late-antiquity scholar, or like many, a scholar trying to connect John Wesley to the Patristics.) I perceive myself and my work as trying very hard to live, preach, speak, and write precisely on the knife’s edge of the *via media* of holiness theology. But, in light of Dunning’s reference to the precariousness of this position, I

am fully aware of where accusations against me have come from. Remember, I'd rather be considered a liberal in a conservative environment. My main agenda has been this: to make the theology of holiness holistic and healthy, vigorously relevant to today, living and active and applicable, and transmittable to the next generation.

The following paragraphs represent what I believe my denomination needs to understand about holiness theology. First off, I stand on the shoulders of previous theologians who were accused of abandoning and perverting Nazarene theology with their "relational" emphasis, rather than healing and solidifying it: William Greathouse, Rob Staples, H. Ray Dunning, and Mildred Bangs Wynkoop. Even though most of these persons are no longer with us, they still to this day receive venomous attacks. On the other hand, I have a deep appreciation for aspects of the American Holiness Movement, including the theology of Phoebe Palmer, someone who has been vilified by the "other side" of the Nazarene spectrum. One of the reasons my appreciation of the AHM grew was the watershed book by Donald Dayton, *Discovering an Evangelical Heritage*. It has become extremely important in my teaching and writing to reference the radical social agenda of our early Holiness mothers and fathers, especially around the issue of women's right to preach. I have argued that this position comes directly out of the *theology* of holiness, and not as an interesting coincidental aside. The equality of all persons is a central theme of holiness, and by no means can be put aside as peripheral or negotiable. Most Nazarenes simply do not know this history, and still puzzle over why we ordain women. Much of my career has been advocacy for Nazarene women clergy. I was called a "pioneer" by taking a senior pastorate in 1989, almost a hundred years after women were ordained at the denomination's inception.

More generally speaking, my books, chapters, and articles on holiness focus on clear definitions of the holy life, and the full meaning of sanctification. My book, *Discovering Christian Holiness: The Heart of Wesleyan-Holiness Theology* (2010), includes sections on Scriptural foundations, holiness in the history of Christianity, theological foundations of holiness (such as humanity, sin, and grace), and then key sections on what holiness looks like in real life, and how it happens. I have recognized, along with others, that my undergraduate students over the last two decades cannot define holiness or sanctification at all (See *The Holiness Manifesto*). They have either not heard the doctrine or have not retained it in any meaningful way. Even when teaching Nazarene pastors at the graduate level, I encounter great confusion. Both groups have found it helpful to define holiness practically. My definition of the "what" of holiness includes long explanations of holiness as purity, perfection, power, character, and love. Emphasizing one of these over the others can distort a holistic understanding of holiness. In the same way, distorting one aspect of the "how" of holiness—how it happens, namely sanctification—distorts an understanding of how God works in the renewing work in us into the image of God. A balanced understanding of initial sanctification, progressive sanctification, entire sanctification, and final sanctification is crucial.

When speaking in churches to many people who suffered under legalism, and an over-emphasis on entire sanctification as a cure-all, absolute perfection, and final spiritual event, it has been important, and actually healing to them, to emphasize progressive sanctification, and the continuing work of the Holy Spirit in their lives. I've heard many elderly folks say that if they had heard this 50 years ago it would have prevented great heartache. But when speaking to students who have hardly ever seen an altar call or heard spiritual progress explained by calling them to a definite decision, a different emphasis is needed. They have not been taught that perpetual and enslaving sin is not inevitable and necessary. They do not know the victorious hope of sanctification, especially entire sanctification. Again here, context matters.

Yet, what I have found to be most important to everyone I encounter in the Church of the Nazarene is that the life of holiness is not a Pelagian work ethic (for a generation that "works too hard" at their legalism, and a generation that "works too little" in their antinomian pessimism); it is a matter of the heart. A heart cleansed by grace, a heart empowered for love, a heart transformed in virtue, a heart like Jesus Christ's. It is a heart like this that...well...transcends context, all contexts, for it is the call of God to everyone, everywhere, in every time. Holiness Unto the Lord may be our Watchword and Song, but it is also our

reason for existence, denominationally and individually. May we be holy, as God is holy, and reflect the heart of God in the context of a desperately needy world. That's what ultimately matters.

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