



## Holiness of Heart and Life: Love Your Neighbor as Yourself – Part 2 of 6

BY STEVE MANSKAR

### Genuine communication requires self-knowledge

Genuine communication begins when participants know themselves. Self-knowledge enables people to know their abilities, weaknesses, and limitations. When self-knowledge is lacking self-deception is likely to take over. Any subsequent efforts at communication will then be shaded by pride. Pride leads inevitably to self-righteousness, defensiveness, grandiosity, patronizing, proselytizing, or worse. These behaviors seldom contribute to honest, fruitful dialog. They are much more likely to result in monolog that leaves the participants feeling defensive and angry.

With regard to inter-religious dialog self-knowledge has at least two essential meanings. First, persons must know themselves. “Mindfulness” is a way of describing self-knowledge:

*Mindfulness is a state of active, open attention on the present. When you're mindful, you observe your thoughts and feelings from a distance, without judging them good or bad. Instead of letting your life pass you by, mindfulness means living in the moment and awakening to experience.<sup>[1]</sup>*

Mindfulness enables a person to be present to himself or herself, to others, and to their surroundings. Such persons are comfortable in their own skin. Mindfulness allows persons to listen to others and be open to hearing ideas and beliefs that differ from their own without getting defensive. It also equips persons to honestly share their beliefs with others with humility and grace.

Secondly, within a context of religious and inter-faith dialog, self-knowledge implies participants have working understanding of the essential doctrines, practices, and history of their faith tradition. They are grounded in the Scriptures of their tradition. This is to say that persons need to be practitioners of their own tradition. They also know that theirs is not the only expression of their religion. For example, Christians in the United Methodist tradition understand that Roman Catholics, Presbyterians, Baptists, and Pentecostals are other equally valid expressions of Christianity.

John Wesley provides some help in understanding the character of self-knowledge. He equates self-knowledge with repentance:

*And first, repent, that is, know yourselves. This is the first repentance, previous to faith, even conviction, or self-knowledge. Awake, then, thou that sleepest. Know thyself to be a sinner, and what manner of sinner thou art. Know that corruption of thy inmost nature, whereby thou are very far gone from original righteousness, whereby 'the flesh lusteth' always 'contrary to the Spirit', through that 'carnal mind which is enmity against God', which 'is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be'. Know that thou art corrupted in every power, in every faculty of thy soul, that thou art totally corrupted in every one of these, all the foundations being out of course. The eyes of thine understanding are darkened, so that they cannot discern God or the things of God. The clouds of ignorance and error rest upon thee, and cover thee with the shadow of death. Thou knowest nothing yet as thou oughtest to know, neither God, nor the world, nor thyself. Thy will is no longer the will of God, but is utterly perverse and distorted, averse from all good, from all which God loves, and prone to all evil, to every abomination which God hateth. Thy affections are alienated from God, and scattered abroad over the earth. All thy passions, both thy desires and aversions, thy joys and sorrows, thy*

*hopes and fears, are out of frame, are either undue in their degree, or placed on undue objects. So that there is no soundness in thy soul, but 'from the crown of the head to the sole of the foot' (to use the strong expression of the prophet) there are only 'wounds, and bruises, and putrefying sores'.<sup>[2]</sup>*

According to Wesley, prior to repentance a person is deluded into believing he or she is something that he or she is not. They are alienated from God and ignorant of the things of God. Their mind and heart are blind to their true condition of ignorance and self-centeredness. Without repentance a person cannot know themselves nor God. Repentance is the beginning of knowing the true self, which is the first step toward holiness. It opens the mind and heart to the light of God that reveals the damage caused by sin. Repentance turns the heart and mind away from the self-deception of sin and towards the truth and life of God. Mindfulness begins when the heart and mind are turned away from self and turned towards God.

Repentance also opens the mind and heart to the truth and life of God revealed in Scripture and tradition. It enables persons to begin to know, understand, and live the doctrine and discipline of Christian faith. As they learn, practice, and grow in faith Christians become confident practitioners who can humbly enter into relationship with their neighbors who practice other religions, or no religion at all.

Persons who lack repentance live in a world of illusion. This world is represented best in contemporary western culture that discounts the very idea of sin. People in the west do not recognize sin in themselves because they are bombarded by messages in media, and the church, that they are okay. If people believe they are okay as they are then acknowledging sin and repentance becomes irrelevant. Faith in Christ is reduced to belief or intellectual assent to a creed or certain doctrines. No change in the heart and behavior of the person is required.

This means many people who regard themselves to be Christian in "Mainline" congregations lack self-knowledge. They misunderstand sin because it is seldom taught or preached. Sin is often equated with mistakes or character flaws. It is rarely acknowledged to be an innate, "inbred" brokenness of the soul that denies God and distorts all of life and human community, including the church. Therefore, they deny the reality of sin and their own sinfulness.

Some years ago I was part of an adult Sunday School class in a typical United Methodist Congregation. During the course of conversation about the Scripture lesson for the day I made what I thought was a simple statement of truth: "We are all sinners." I did not expect the class to erupt in anger and indignation. Everyone took personal offense at my remark. It did not help when I responded to the angry gazes directed at me by saying, "I'm including myself when I say that we are all sinners. No one is immune from the human condition that alienates us all from God." Every person in the room agreed the doctrine of original sin was mistaken. They agreed that labeling people as "sinners" demeans them and damages their self-esteem. The consensus of the class was that sin is not really that big of a problem. They believed that sin was nothing more than bad habits that can be changed through a little will power. When I challenged their thinking by asking, "If sin is not really a problem then why did Jesus suffer and die on the cross?" the room was silent.

Reflecting on my experiences as a pastor and, for the past fifteen years, an active member of various United Methodist congregations, I am convinced the vast majority of church members are ill equipped to engage in real dialog with their neighbors, friends, and co-workers who practice other religions, or no religion. Without conviction of sin and earnest repentance they cannot know the God revealed in Scripture, the person and work of Jesus Christ and the witness of the early Church. We should not be surprised, therefore, when Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is the dominant theology expressed by the majority of members in mainline denominations, such as The United Methodist Church.

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The god of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (MTD) is like “a butler or therapist, someone who meets our needs when summoned or who listens non-judgmentally and helps [people] feel good about themselves.”<sup>[3]</sup> The job of a butler or therapist is to serve, not to be served. They are chosen by us according to our own criteria, which reflect our character. We could say this god is created in the image of the people. Therefore, sin is re-defined as flawed character traits and bad habits that can be overcome by a little self-discipline. The god of MTD does not ask for nor require repentance.

Repentance requires awareness of sin and sinfulness. Persons must first hear the gospel proclaimed and experience Christ in a community in which the gospel is taught and practiced. The Apostle Paul puts it this way:

*But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!’ But not all have obeyed the good news; for Isaiah says, ‘Lord, who has believed our message?’ So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ (Romans 10:14-17, NRSV).*

This is why the church’s ministry of teaching, preaching, and practicing the gospel of Christ is essential to the formation of a culture of holiness. Christ must be at the center of the congregation. When Christ is the center discipleship follows. When Christ is supplanted by Moralistic Therapeutic Deism holiness is replaced by niceness. Repentance, and subsequent self-knowledge and faith in Christ necessary for Christian witness, are short-circuited.

<sup>[1]</sup> Psychology Today web site: <http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/mindfulness>

<sup>[2]</sup> John Wesley, Sermon 7, “The Way to the Kingdom”, §II.1, in *Works*, 1:225-226.

<sup>[3]</sup> Dean, 17.

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