

A Case for Engagement

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In the changing landscape of American culture, the reality of pluralism confronts Christians and the Church requiring new and adjusted patterns of living our faith. The idea that Judeo-Christian principles will be understood much less accepted de facto is history. In its place varying worldviews, presuppositions, and beliefs about the Divine and humanity are vying for recognition, legitimacy, and often, control. To fulfill its mission the Church requires a clear understanding of engagement so as not to default to isolated exclusion. Wesleyan Holiness thinking offers a helpful approach to engagement wherein Christians may flourish and bring hope in this growing pluralism.

The initial reaction on the part of the dominant Christian culture is immediate resistance and a posture of defensiveness in attempting to hold back the tide thereby preserving some visible understanding of how Christian faith manifests itself. Although Christians may feel disestablished, they remain the dominant culture. The effort to create a “seawall” against the rising tide of encroaching pluralism is a natural result of a bounded pattern of thinking influenced by the 20th century evangelical movement. Fraught with theological dogma, defensive apologetics, syncretistic political involvement, cultural assimilation, and a false sense of authority the evangelical movement influenced all theological streams with a sense that our theology and missiology are synonymous – at least in the domestic American context. Latitude existed where “foreign missions” was concerned, but missiological principles diminished at our own shores. In its place, relevance in reflecting cultural patterns are driven by desires for evangelism and community influence.

As the culture around us is changing and pluralism is the new condition of our existence, we are forced to consider the same missiological questions that drive “over there” ministries across the world. With that uncomfortable reality comes the concomitant need to distinguish clearly the foundations, essence, or heart of the Gospel to which we give ourselves. Of paramount importance is the question: “To what degree does the essence of God’s good news of salvation through Jesus depend upon the way in which we relate it to the culture around us?”

While a variety of possibilities exist in responding to that question, people in the Wesleyan Holiness stream of the Church tend to lean readily toward a posture of engagement more than enforcement or defense. We tend to imagine ourselves as a stream that flows through culture interacting with its existing contours to shape our course. This “engagement” with culture is a hopeful effect of our theology and heritage. Other traditions may understand themselves more as a seawall attempting to stem the tide of encroachment. This is different than a Wesleyan Holiness pattern, not better or worse. This distinction is in large part due to the fact that Wesleyan Holiness people tend to be more centered than bounded in living out faith, and more relational than propositional in thinking about loving God and about loving our neighbors as ourselves.

The evangelical movement of the 20th Century tended to blunt the propensity toward engagement that comes naturally to Holiness people. In contrast to 19th century advocacy for abolition of

slavery, women's rights, and economic reforms, the holiness movement, which includes the Pentecostal and Revivalist currents, was generally silent and sidelined during the mid-century civil rights movement. The very people who should have been pressing the principles of Christian faith into culture in edgy engagement were themselves silent behind firewalls of defensiveness in fear of repercussions that others may assume such engagement was a form of theological liberalism or spiritual capitulation.

Holiness people are compelled to engage. Consider the following:

1. **Responsible engagement is a descriptor of people who are walking the way of holiness.** If our pursuit is to reflect the nature of God through full surrender, the effect is that we will begin to "be holy as God is holy" and thus behave like God. Upon witnessing the free choice of selfishness that brought about estrangement in the account of humanity's fall, God did not wait around until we asked for help. Before we knew we needed it, God made provision for a pathway to reconciliation of all things to Himself. He took responsibility to make a way – first through prophets, priests, and kings, and in the last days through His son Jesus. He did not wait for the request. His love compelled Him to initiate engagement with us in a manner we could see and understand, even though there were repercussions and a price to be paid. Likewise, Christians are compelled into action before the request is made. Where there is division, injustice, disenfranchisement, hurt, brokenness we spring into action. We take responsibility to initiate engagement knowing there will be repercussions and resistance.
2. **Reflecting Jesus Christ is a central theme of Holiness.** The resistance mindset that drives hostile, vitriolic rancor in public discourse is not part of any engagement recorded about Christ. We see strength that is uncompromising, but always with clarity of vision and compassion. He did not hesitate to challenge the hypocrisy of religious leaders, to confront moneychangers in the temple, or to "turn the other cheek" in civil resistance to oppressors. Mostly, Jesus dined with the publicans and sinners – even in the face of criticism and rumor. He went to places and touched people who would otherwise be outside the circle of acceptability to defensive-minded religious leaders. In like fashion, even in the face of rumor, criticism and pressure, Holiness people reflect the advocative nature of Christ because all people matter to Him.
3. **Every person is created in the image of God, whether they acknowledge that or not.** Many who do not acknowledge their created source, still possess an innate desire for virtues whose source is God. In others, those same desires may have become warped or misshapen due to selfish urges and priorities attributable to the fallen human condition. It is incumbent upon Christian people to see the image of God in every person no matter their lifestyle, behavior, or proximity to God. This requires that all people be treated with dignity and impartiality as is due the very nature of God. To undermine the dignity of any person is to disrespect the image of God within them. Furthermore, it presumes to determine the value of a person possessing that image however occluded – a judgment that is God's alone.

4. **Every person is our neighbor no matter what they believe.** We are called to love God and others; to watch out for our neighbors; to be the hands and feet of Jesus. These injunctions are not conditional on the level of compliance with certain behaviors or even faith tenets. They are not limited to certain ones who give assent to our belief system or even acknowledge our Lord. We see people first. Once we have earned the right to be trusted, if at all, we may be clear about why we engage and what our hope is in regard to their life and eternal destiny.
5. **Truth is a person more than a proposition.** Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” The singularity of Christ as the way back into proximity with God is clear and unequivocal. It is not the concept or the proposition that is the way, but the person of Jesus. Salvation, therefore, is a relational reconciliation through Jesus to God that is both momentary and continual until we are restored in God’s image of wholeness and healing. Because of the personal nature of truth, the relational nature of salvation, and the fact that we are inherently social beings, Christians are therefore naturally tilted toward engagement which is characterized by relationships. Our view of who God is, who Jesus is, and who we are remains clear. But, we begin with the person and the desire to know them rather than the belief and the need to correct, refute, or conform them.
6. **Our mission is to bring the Kingdom of Heaven into the cultures of the world, representing God and reflecting Jesus in that endeavor.** Two key elements are required. First is the essence of the gospel that is central to the Kingdom thriving in the hearts of people and the systems of culture. In brief, the core elements of the message of salvation are available through Jesus to all who receive it. Second is the point of connection between the Kingdom message and people in culture. The first deals with what the Kingdom is and the second deals with how it is brought to people. While the essence of the first remains as constant as God’s love, the second may change given the constant change that is endemic to the fallen condition of humanity. Thus, our missional engagement may appear different from one generation to the next while the essence of the message remains constant. As our culture changes before our eyes, Christians know the times and know what to do to bring the Kingdom to culture. This missiological fluidity may raise concerns but is necessary to preserve the transformational relevancy of God’s mission.

Engagement is the natural response of God to the fallen condition of humanity. Certainly, He calls us to a path of righteousness that leads us closer to Him in which there are expectations for living that please Him and fulfill His vision for us. But, God does not begin with enforcing those expectations nor does He do so apart from the clear context of love and relationship with us. God began with desire, love, passion for us that invites into relational trust and proximity without condition – even to the point where His own reputation is at risk. Christians likewise in a new culture of pluralism are called to engagement after the same pattern of God exemplified in Jesus Christ.

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