

# The Holiness of the Church<sup>1</sup>

**GERALD BRAY**

## **Abstract**

Holiness, the Holy Spirit's work, is not external conformity to a law but an internal transformation. God does not expect us to be perfect, but he wants us to have the mind of Christ and to act accordingly. Personal holiness and the holiness of the church ("a holy nation") go together. Our lives must reflect the teachings of the Bible. We are holy because God chose us, but we must grow in holiness (sanctification). In this life, we shall always be sinners, saved by divine grace and not by human effort. Today, the church needs pastors and teachers who can show us how to grow in holiness, to strengthen the church for the battle and share in the victory over sin in Christ.

## **Keywords**

*Behavior, chosen, creation, divine, holiness, image, law, likeness, perfection, persons, sanctification*

---

## **I. A Holy Nation**

You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. (1 Pet 2:9–10 ESV)

---

<sup>1</sup> This article was originally presented on October 29, 2022, at the Sixth General Assembly of the World Reformed Fellowship, in Orlando, Florida, <https://wrf.global/about/the-general-assembly/sixth-assembly>. The editors added footnotes for this publication.

**T**hese stirring words, written by the apostle Peter to “the elect exiles of the dispersion” in the Roman provinces of Asia Minor, “according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood” (1 Pet 1:2), continue to echo down through the ages as a clear definition of what the church is and why God has called it into being. At the heart of our identity as Christians is the fact that we are holy, set apart by God for his purposes, gathered together from the four corners of the earth and blessed by the grace that equips us for the task that no human being, relying on his own strength, could ever hope to accomplish. “A chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation”—this definition of the church must be the starting point for considering what it means to be his children and how we should reflect that in our lives today.

Peter’s definition begins with an explanation of the church’s origins in the mind of God—it is a chosen race. It continues with a declaration of its function in the created order—it is a royal priesthood. And it culminates in the perfect description of its character—it is a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession. We shall return to the church’s origin and its chief function in due course, but let us begin with what the church is meant to be in its very essence. What does it mean for it to be a holy nation? Already, at the beginning of his epistle, Peter had quoted Leviticus 11:44–45, where, in the midst of regulations regarding clean and unclean foods, God told the Israelites that they were to be holy, even as he is holy (v. 11; cf. 1 Pet 1:16).<sup>2</sup> The Christian church, following the command and example of Jesus himself as recorded in Mark 7:14–23, abandoned the letter of the food laws but kept their spirit by extracting the underlying principle of holiness from its external manifestation in the Mosaic legislation. Christian holiness is not measured by what we eat and drink but by how we purge the thoughts and desires that come from within our hearts and minds.

It is a much taller order than the one God gave to the Israelites. It is relatively easy to abstain from eating pork, for example, but how do we get rid of those passions and prejudices that haunt our minds and corrupt our judgments? Often, we do not even recognize these malign impulses and allow ourselves to be led astray by forces that creep up on us seemingly unawares. Moreover, by internalizing the demand for holiness, Jesus shifted the

---

<sup>2</sup> On God’s holiness, see Gerald Bray, *The Doctrine of God*, *Contours of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 215–18; see further Gerald Bray, *Holiness and the Will of God: Perspectives on the Theology of Tertullian* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1979). For brief comments on holiness and its relation to the church, see Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, New Combined Edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 73–74, 574–75.

burden of proof from the community to the individual. Eating nonkosher food might be an individual choice, but it could easily be perceived by the community and censured accordingly. Pigs can be banned from sale in the market in a way that evil thoughts cannot be wished away. Being governed by law, Israelite society could present an appearance of outward holiness that was much more difficult for the church to replicate. There have been times when the church has enjoyed secular power and has been able to turn its principles into law, but this has always been seen as inadequate. As the New Testament makes clear, holiness is primarily a matter of transforming individual behavior so that Christians conform to God's will and so contribute to the upbuilding of the church as a whole. The foundation is secure because it rests on the apostles and prophets, with Christ as the cornerstone. However, the superstructure of the holy temple must conform to its foundations if it is to withstand the pressures that it will face, and Paul appeals to every believer to make sure that he is worthy of his calling (Eph 2:19–22). To be a holy nation in the sight of God is not the result of a decree given from the top down but the fruit of patient construction from the bottom up—a more challenging but also more promising procedure because a church built on a solid foundation with every stone in place is more likely to endure than a prefabricated frame that has been dropped down with little regard for the ground on which it is placed or for the people who are meant to inhabit it.

When considering what it means for us to be holy, even as God is holy, the first thing we must accept is that there are some ways in which we can never be like him. He is infinite, eternal, and sovereign over everything he has made. If these are the attributes that make him holy, then we can never duplicate them, however much we may want to and however hard we try. God knows that, of course, and does not expect us to achieve the impossible.<sup>3</sup> Strictly speaking, holiness is not an attribute of God's being at all. God can be described as holy only when he is being contrasted with other things that are not, and since he has made those other things out of nothing, the word holy cannot be applied to him apart from their existence. In other words, God is holy, not in his eternal, uncreated self but in relation to the things that he has made—he is completely different from them, must not be confused with them, and, above all, must not be mistaken for them.

---

<sup>3</sup> For discussions of holiness among God's attributes and in relation to the distinction between God's incommunicable and communicable attributes, see Bray, *The Doctrine of God*, 212–14; Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 55–56; Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2: *God and Creation*, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 148–255, esp. 216–21.

Pagan peoples worship creatures instead of the creator because they are unable to distinguish him from them, but neither Jews nor Christians can do so. Idolatry, as the worship of creatures is called, is the greatest sin because it sanctifies what is not divine and has no conception of God's absolute distinctiveness, which is what the Bible calls his holiness.

No creature can ever become divine, and in that sense, no human being can ever be truly holy. However, human beings are unique in the created order because we are created in God's image and likeness (cf. Gen 1:26).<sup>4</sup> Even though we are not divine in ourselves, there is something in us that connects us to God, whether we recognize that or not. Even fallen humanity shares in this connection, which makes us guilty for not honoring our prototype in a way that no other creature is. Sin is a human failing that does not apply to other creatures. An animal or a falling tree may kill me, but neither of these has committed a sin or broken the sixth commandment (Exod 20:13). At the same time, neither of them can be redeemed either—when the Son of God came into the world, he came to save human beings, not dogs or trees. This principle also applies to the angelic creatures who have rebelled against God. They could fall away, and some did, but the demons, as these fallen angels are called, cannot be redeemed because they are not made in God's image. God hates nothing that he has made, and so he loves even Satan and his minions, but in their case, love means keeping them in being but denying them either salvation or eventual annihilation. They will worship God and acknowledge his sovereignty, but they will remain outcasts and will not reign with him in his glory as believers in Christ will do.

To be created in the image and likeness of God is to be a person with an innate capacity for relationships with other persons, not just with other human beings but also (and primarily) with the three persons of God himself, as Peter reminds us in the opening salutation to his first epistle (cf. 1 Pet 1:2). We must look at that the level of personal relationship to see how we can share in the holiness of God. Finite creatures though we are, we are nevertheless called to enjoy a relationship with him that allows us to speak to him and enter to some degree into the mysterious thoughts of his mind. We cannot expect to understand everything about him, but the fact that we can stand in his presence and commune with him is an act of divine grace that transcends the capacity of our minds to understand. We can see that it is to our great advantage to be able to talk to God, but why should he want to communicate with us? He does not need us to be himself or to manifest

---

<sup>4</sup> For more on the concept of the image of God, see Gerald Lewis Bray, "The Significance of God's Image in Man," *Tyndale Bulletin* 42.2 (1991): 195–225.

his glory, and the majority of those who have been created in his image and likeness are not granted that privilege. Communion with him is granted only to those on whom he has set his love. Why he should have chosen us and not others is a mystery that has not been revealed to us, but we can be quite certain that it has nothing to do with any merits that we might possess. Israel was taught this fundamental lesson by Moses himself:

For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers ... (Deut 7:6–8)

It is by an act of his unfathomable love that God has chosen us from among the nations. In Christ his choice has broadened from the physical descendants of Abraham to encompass representatives of the entire human race (cf. Rom 3:16–17). Before Christ came, Israel existed as an identifiable reality with its own language and culture, but the church did not. In Christ, those who were not his people have been called to become a new nation, one not bound by language, geography, or inheritance but united across all human barriers, as members of the body of God's beloved Son. It is our holiness in his eyes that makes us what we are, binding us to him first and then to one another as we share in the common inheritance of the saints in light.

This new nation, let it be said, is first and foremost God's choice and not ours. We are neither born into it, nor can we apply for citizenship in it by taking some kind of test or fulfilling certain criteria for belonging. To be sure, the church has visible and external signs of membership, of which baptism is the most important and universal, but it is no guarantee that we are members of the chosen people. Like the Lord's Supper, baptism shows us what the gospel is and what its benefits are, but if we do not receive that gospel by faith, then it is of no value to us. On the contrary, as Paul says of the Lord's Supper, we may eat and drink to our own damnation because we are unable to discern what the true meaning of the outward signs is (1 Cor 11:27–29). Some Christians are at great pains to fence the Lord's Table or to restrict baptism to those whom they believe to have an adequate profession of faith, but these attempted safeguards are far from foolproof. There is no substitute for faith, and ultimately it is God alone who sees into our hearts and who knows the truth about where we stand in relation to him.

To be chosen by God means that our holiness is not synonymous with sinless perfection. If it were, nobody would (or could) ever be chosen at all.

No one is so close to the kingdom of God that he is entitled to enter it on his merits, but equally, nobody is so far away from it that he has no chance of ever being included in it. It is God's decision, not ours, and our holiness is a gift from him. In human terms, some of the most promising candidates will be turned away at the judgment, while some of the least noteworthy will be crowned with glory and honor. That is not an excuse for us to behave like the prodigal son, but it is a reminder that however far we may be from God, he can still call us to himself. Those who have been chosen will be redeemed, and no power in heaven or on earth will be able to separate us from the love of God (Rom 8:38–39).

To be chosen by God means that we are given an agenda to live by that is laid down for us in the Holy Scriptures. Just as we have not chosen our election, we have not chosen this agenda either. We have no need to add to it, as some branches of the Christian church have done by inventing devotional practices or other traditions that go beyond what God has commanded, but we cannot subtract from it either, as many people are prone to do. There is no shortcut into the kingdom of heaven, and the church today is not at liberty to excuse its members from obedience to God's commands on the ground that they are no longer applicable. Neither the passage of time nor the expansion of human science has altered the will of God for our lives, and we must respect that whether we find it convenient to do so or not.

God's agenda for us is not something that we can accomplish by ourselves—the only way to fulfill it is for us to be filled with the Holy Spirit, guided and strengthened by him to do what would otherwise be impossible for us. The agenda is the law written on our hearts. To those who are not filled with the Spirit, the law's holiness is a message of despair and ultimately of death. By itself, the law can do nothing but set the standard required of us—it cannot give us what we need to live by it. But to those who are filled with the Spirit of God, the holiness of the law comes into its own as we interpret it not according to the letter but in the Spirit who has been given to us. This is what the church claims to be and to possess.

To be chosen by God means that there is no escape from his will, which he will accomplish in our lives whether we want him to or not. We may be tempted to deny Christ as Peter did or run away from his calling like the prophet Jonah, but God will call us back to his purposes. We may even discover, as Jonah did, that the ministry we do not want bears fruit in ways that we cannot appreciate. God is sovereign and uses us, weaknesses and all, to work out his plan both for us and for the world. It is also possible that we shall wander in error and rebellion for many years, as Saul of Tarsus did, but remember what he said to the Galatians: after telling them that he had

persecuted the Church of God, Paul went on to say, “He who had set me apart from before I was born, and who called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me” (Gal 1:15–16). Like all of us, Saul had been chosen from before the foundation of the world to manifest the glory of God. For those who are chosen, there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God, whatever appearances may suggest to the contrary. We are holy and therefore protected, whatever our outward circumstances or actual behavior may be. God does not approve of everything his chosen people do, but we may rest assured that when the time is ripe, he will intervene, put us right, and send us out along the path that he has prepared for us from the beginning.

What is true of individuals is even more true of the church. There have been times when the church has rested on its laurels and done nothing to further the gospel. There have been places where it has been complicit in social evils like slavery and racial segregation. Church leaders have sinned for a long time and discredited their ministry. Corruption of one kind or another has dogged the church’s mission, even in places where the gospel has never put down solid roots. And yet, in spite of everything, the light of Christ has not been extinguished. Faithful watchmen have kept the flame burning, even when it has appeared that all was lost. Where Christians have been persecuted—and more people died for their faith in the twentieth century than in the entire history of the church before then—martyrs have arisen, and the church has been purified by their witness. It may yet be that the sick churches of the Western world will not come back to life unless and until they are forced to suffer for their beliefs—we do not know. It may also be that the remarkable growth of the church in places like Iran and China will cease when persecution comes to an end, and they will find themselves in the same predicament that their Western counterparts do, with internal division, false teaching, and general apathy replacing the zeal that we now see. The history of Israel is a warning to us—the chosen people suffered slavery, exile, and internal apostasy for centuries, but they were preserved in being, and in spite of everything, they are still with us today. Holiness is not a passport to an easy life for people who are not naturally born to it. It is the fruit of the refiner’s fire, and the church experiences it as much as individual believers do. There is no escape from the will of God for our sanctification.

To be a holy nation is to be chosen by God as a royal priesthood. The oddness of this expression may not strike us immediately, but in Israel, the monarchy and the priesthood were never combined. The only priest-king in the Old Testament is Melchizedek, who stands out because of his

uniqueness. It is only in Jesus Christ, the one who is a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek (cf. Heb 7:17), that the throne and the altar come together. He is both the king and the priest, the kingdom and the sacrifice. We who are called to be members of his body are also called to sacrifice as our priest-king has done. The apostle Paul is very clear about this. He told the Romans to present their bodies “as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God,” which was their spiritual worship (Rom 12:1). It is obvious that he was using the word “sacrifice” in a metaphorical sense, but that we must die to this world and be born again by the Spirit of God is a constant New Testament theme, and it defines what the Church is and is called to be. The holy nation is a royal priesthood formed after the image of Christ and called to witness to and for him.

## **II. *Sanctifying What Is Already Holy***

One of the apparent paradoxes about holiness is that it is both a gift and a work in progress. It is a gift with immediate application, as, for example, in the case of the thief on the cross, who Jesus said would be with him that very day in Paradise (Luke 23:43). Of course, nobody should use that example as an excuse to put off conversion until death approaches, but we must accept that such unusual circumstances are possible and that the grace of God is not diminished because of a lack of time for sanctification. This needs to be said, if only to counteract the opposite error that has plagued the church for generations and still leaves its mark today. It has long been thought by a great many people that sanctification is the achievement of a very few, a spiritual elite dignified with the title of saint. The Roman Catholic Church, in particular, has a sophisticated procedure for determining who these people are, and every once in a while, new “saints” are proclaimed and canonized. To get on this list, it is necessary for the candidate to have performed a miracle or two because there is really no other way of knowing whether he or she is actually in heaven. When looking back to the distant past, however, the careful procedures of the modern Catholic Church cease to apply. There are a large number of saints whose credentials are impossible to verify and who in some cases may not have existed, the most famous examples of these being Saint George, the patron saint of England, and Saint Denis in France. To be fair, Rome occasionally takes some of these traditional saints off the approved canonical list, though what happens to the prayers that innocent people have offered to them is not explained.

It is easy for us to shake our heads in disapproval at this sort of thing, but the notion that some people can (and do) attain sinless perfection is by no

means absent from the Protestant world. John Wesley came to believe that he had reached that goal toward the end of his life, and the holiness tradition has continually emphasized the need for a second blessing that will set the seal on the Christian's sanctification and guarantee his entry into heaven. There is no ground for this kind of belief, but that is not to say that it does not exist or that it is not very influential. In the New Testament, all believers are called saints, but none of us could approach a stranger and introduce ourselves in such terms—even if what we would say is correct. For me to call myself a saint would sound ludicrously presumptuous, and I would never do so, but I have to admit that in reacting this way I am bowing to the false doctrine of sanctification that has so deeply affected the church through the ages. I do not like that, but I have no choice in the matter because the penetration of erroneous teaching has gone too deep to be reversed, and the truth is obscured as a result.

But if as Christians we are holy in principle, do we still need to be sanctified in practice? How is that possible? Some people have said that sanctification is an illusion, a relapse into a doctrine of salvation by works that the Protestant Reformation has supposedly delivered us from. To their minds, justification by faith alone is all that is required, and the Christian can “sin boldly,” to misquote Martin Luther's famous remark to Philipp Melancthon, knowing that we cannot lose our salvation by our bad behavior. Many Catholics believe that this is authentic Protestant teaching and reproach us for it, but Paul's words to the Romans are a sufficient refutation: “Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?” (Rom 6:1–2). On the contrary, we are called to live in newness of life, which in effect means that we have to adopt a program of sanctification that requires deliberate action on our part.

Others have tried to explain the apparent paradox by claiming that sanctification means becoming what we already are. This means that what is true in theory must become a reality in practice. There is undoubtedly some truth in this, but there are dangers in such paradoxical thinking that we must not ignore. What will happen if I die before reaching Christian maturity, which is almost certainly going to be the case? Will I go to heaven half-formed, or will there be an intermediate stage in which what is missing in me will be introduced or brought to completion? It is thoughts like that that led to the invention of purgatory as a place where the dead can pursue their sanctification until such time as they are good enough to get to heaven. No doubt, many of those who advocate the “become what you already are” interpretation of sanctification would reject such a conclusion, but we must

apply logic to good intentions and adjust our theology accordingly. In recent years, there have been some Evangelical theologians who have fallen for this way of thinking and who have sought to reintroduce a doctrine of purgatory into Protestant thought, even though there is no evidence for it and it contradicts the very nature of the gospel. Purgatory resurfaces in spite of all the arguments advanced against it because people know that there will always be a discrepancy between what we are and what we are supposed to be, and the only way out seems to be by providing a means to close that gap before we enter into our eternal rest.

That fact is that we are what we are, and that will not change. We are saved by grace through faith and, having done all, remain miserable sinners in need of that grace until the day we die. When we are in heaven, we shall be there, not because we have been miraculously turned into better people, but because we have been grafted into the olive tree of Christ. It is by union with him, not by any transformation of ourselves, that we shall be there, and we shall be shining in his glory, not our own. As branches of the tree, we shall be visible and distinguishable—we shall not dissolve into the Being of God—but it is only by union with him that we shall live, and not by any transformation of our own natures.

So what, then, is sanctification? As the New Testament tells us, it has two main components that follow one another in logical sequence, though in practice, they go together. The first element is that we have the mind of Christ (1 Cor 2:16). This is fundamental. Without understanding there can be no sanctification or holiness of any kind. Good intentions are not enough. It is possible to do the right things in ignorance, as the rich young ruler did (Matt 19:16–22). Jesus did not criticize him for his accomplishments or even suggest that he was being hypocritical in his claim to have fulfilled the law. Instead, he showed the young man that he did not have the mind of Christ by reaching deeper into the recesses of his soul. The young man did not fall down by any failure to keep the commandments but by something more fundamental than that—his heart was in the wrong place. Instead of trusting in God, he put his faith in his own possessions. The commandments do not touch on those, at least not directly, but Jesus did, and the young man turned away in sorrow. To have the mind of Christ is to give up everything to follow him wherever that may lead and never to look back. We may walk through the valley of the shadow of death, but if he is our guide, we shall fear no evil. Do we have this kind of faith? It is easy to sit here in comfort and say that we do, but what will happen when the test comes? The mind of Christ is one that learns obedience in the school of suffering (Heb 5:8), and how many of us can claim that we have succeeded

in doing that? We are haunted by the memory of Thomas Cranmer, the archbishop of Canterbury, who recanted his beliefs in writing in the hope of saving himself from being burned at the stake, but who in his final agony found the courage to put his hand into the fire first, as if to atone for his weakness. What would you or I do in his place? Would we try to save ourselves at the cost of our conscience, or would we have the courage to be true to our beliefs, even if it cost us our lives? We all know what the right answer is, but would we have the courage to act on it? Tertullian wrote that the blood of martyrs is the seed of the church, but there is no indication that he was a martyr himself, and I fear that most of us are probably in the same position as he was.

To have the mind of Christ is to act in the knowledge that Christ gives us—that is the second element of our sanctification. We are not perfect people, nor can we perform superhuman acts of heroism without the grace of God working in us. We hold our spiritual treasure in earthen vessels (2 Cor 4:7), and we must not be surprised if at times the earth makes its presence felt. It is not success that God demands of us but obedience to him, whatever the result may be. There are many martyrs whose obscure deaths must seem pointless to most observers but who will be wearing crowns of glory in heaven because they have been faithful, even if they have apparently achieved nothing noteworthy in this life.

It is remarkable how often the New Testament connects holiness in the church with sexual morality. Christians are constantly being told not to indulge in fornication, to practice continence in their relations with each other, and to remove offenders in this respect from their midst. Other forms of personal misconduct also come in for censure, sometimes with impressive vice lists that are almost always tied to social behavior. The works of the flesh, says Paul, in addition to sexual immorality, are “impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies and things like these” (Gal 5:19–21). He tells Titus that a church leader must not be “arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain” (Tit 1:7). Once again, the emphasis is on antisocial behavior by particular individuals, which the apostle clearly sees as injurious to the health and reputation of the church community. These things are the result of inner disorders and can only be controlled if those who are susceptible to them experience an inner transformation of heart and mind that will change the way they act and relate to others.

What we are dealing with here is spiritual warfare within our own souls. It is not so much a case of becoming what we are as of expelling from our minds the thoughts and attitudes that we have inherited from Adam and

switching our allegiance to Christ. We are set apart, called to be holy, and therefore subject to deep inner change that will affect everything we think, say, or do. That this process is likely to be gradual is built into the image of the new birth. To be born again is to start afresh, to become like a little baby, and to grow in the knowledge and fear of the Lord. Yet this process of regeneration begins when our old Adam is already fully formed. It is therefore not surprising that the spiritual struggle that we are called to wage will at first appear to be a very difficult challenge. How can a child fight a grown man? But if defeat is often hard to avoid, especially in the initial stages, we must always remember that the old man is dying while the new one is going from strength to strength. We shall never escape from the old Adam completely, and as long as we live in this world, the voices attracting us back to him will continue to be heard. Yet if and as we turn our eyes toward Jesus and cling to him for succor and deliverance, we shall find that both our understanding of what is right and our ability to resist what is wrong will grow proportionately as we soldier on. This is what it means to be holy and to be continually sanctified at the same time. We are holy because we are justified by faith alone as a once-for-all act of divine grace and mercy. But it is as we do battle with the world, the flesh, and the devil that we grow into our new life and draw nearer to the likeness of God.

### **III. *From Individual Sanctification to Corporate Holiness***

So far, I have been speaking mainly in terms of the individual believer as a member of the church and not about the church as a whole. This is in line with the New Testament, where the holiness of its individual members is often stressed as the essential foundation for the holiness of the entire church. But in 1 Corinthians 12, the apostle Paul tells us that as a church, Christians are like a body, with eyes, ears, and hands that may look very different from each other but that are not self-sufficient and must work together for the greater good of the whole. In the same passage, we are also told that if one part of the body suffers, the entire body is affected. If there is a thorn in our little toe, for example, the pain it causes will focus our attention on it, and we will not overcome it by the thought that there is nothing wrong with our eyes. The good of the whole is directly dependent on the well-being of each part, and on this basis, we must approach the question of the holiness of the entire church as opposed to the holiness of each individual within it.

The first principle that we have to accept is that however we define the church, it is made up of sinful human beings. The idea that there can be

some kind of spiritual perfection in a body of people who are not themselves perfect is illusory, and those who have sought collective purity by seceding from a mixed multitude have invariably been disappointed sooner or later. However, if perfection is unattainable, the sense of a common calling and purpose is not. It is one thing to be part of an army in which all the soldiers wear the same body armor and are combatting the same enemy and quite another to find ourselves in the midst of a group of people, some of whom are dressed for spiritual warfare but others of whom are not and indeed may be actively fighting for the other side. Sadly, we have to admit that in the church today the second scenario is often the more common one. Time and again, the warriors of Christ find that they are being sabotaged from within their own ranks by people who are either indifferent to their concerns or in active collaboration with the enemy. In the Western churches we see this very clearly in the struggles over homosexuality. Many people in those churches do not see any problem at all. For them, the issue is either unimportant or a matter of personal choice that should not be allowed to interfere with the fellowship of the wider body. In practice, of course, their indifference works in favor of the enemies of the gospel, who use it to pretend that the issues involved are secondary and can therefore be brushed aside, while at the same time insisting that anything less than the full acceptance (“inclusion”) of practicing homosexuals at every level of the church is unloving and therefore a denial of the teaching of Christ. Those who oppose such tactics are often accused of bigotry and prejudice based on emotion rather than reason. Arguments like that can be powerful and difficult to combat, with the result that false teaching gains a foothold and the holiness of the church is compromised.

There is no easy solution to this problem, and orthodox believers must be prepared for a long and difficult battle. The biggest single difficulty that we face is that few Christians are trained to see that practical questions such as the recognition of homosexuality are rooted in fundamental principles of doctrine that ought to shape and determine our approach to them. In this particular case, the doctrine at stake is that of creation. When God made human beings, he made them not only male and female (cf. Gen 1:28) but also for each other. If Adam was lonely all by himself, God could presumably have produced a second Adam to keep him company, and the garden of Eden could have become a boys’ club, something that Adam himself might even have preferred. But that was not his way. Instead, he created Eve, not out of the ground, as he had created Adam, but from Adam himself, so that different though she was from him, she was nevertheless bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh (cf. Gen 2:23). Male and female complement each

other and were meant to do so from the beginning. Same-sex relationships are possible and have their place, but they cannot imitate, let alone replace, the most essential relationship of all. However much we may wish to ignore or deny it, humanity cannot reproduce itself except by the sexual interaction of male and female. This interaction is necessary for the preservation of our race; it is not an optional extra that can be safely disregarded or replaced with something else. To use our sexual organs for something that precludes reproduction is to abuse them and to attack the doctrine of creation.

Attacks on creation are nothing new. The early Christians had to face an opposition that claimed that because the created order is imperfect in some ways—allowing disease and deformity to exist, for example—it cannot have been the work of a good creator. Instead, it was claimed that the world was made by a divine force called the Demiurge (Greek for “creator”), whose work had to be brought to perfection by a higher god, identified as the Father of Jesus Christ but a divinity quite distinct from, and in competition with, the God of the Jews. For these thinkers, or Gnostics, as we call them today, the Christian must rise above the limitations of the created order and seek salvation in a higher, more purely spiritual reality.<sup>5</sup> It was a denial of the material world in favor of a supposedly more spiritual order, but it was also a denial of the incarnation and therefore a repudiation of the salvation offered to us in Christ. The truth, however, is that the Son of God did not appear on earth in human form—he became a man in the womb of his mother Mary. He did not go through the motions of suffering and death without really feeling them himself—he suffered and died for our salvation. On the cross he took our place and died the death that we deserve for the sins that we have committed. The early Christians had to insist that the creator God is also our Redeemer—what is wrong with the world lies not in the way in which it was created but in the disobedience of those who were given dominion over it. Sin and evil are spiritual forces in the mind, not defects in the material universe.

What we are seeing today is a similar movement, in which the fantasies of the mind are being allowed to deny the reality of matter. If our identity as human beings is not tied to our material bodies, it is a mental construct that has no concrete existence. Transgenderism is the natural outcome of this worldview because it insists that I can have whatever identity I choose, even if that identity flies in the face of biology. The notion that I can claim to be

---

<sup>5</sup> On Gnosticism, see Bray, *The Doctrine of God*, 29, and 255, n. 16; on God as creator and Gnosticism, see J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, rev. ed. (1960; repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 83–86.

a woman with no objective evidence to demonstrate it and that others must respect my assertion is the ultimate denial of the goodness of our creator. The church cannot succumb to this without denying the first article of the Creed (“I believe in God the Father, Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth”) and the entire logic on which Genesis 1–3 is built. If the church is to be holy, it must be built on a foundation of truth (2 Thess 2:13), and the truth is not a matter of personal preference or opinion. Making that case may be very difficult in many parts of the modern church, but it must be our starting point. There can be no holiness in practice if there is no holiness in principle, and it is the function of our doctrine, contained in the ancient creeds and in the Reformation confessions, to point that out. Our first task must therefore be to educate our people to appreciate this and to look for the principles underlying the questions that we are expected to deal with.

Teaching correct doctrine to the church can only be done by preparing teachers who can do that effectively. This is the role of seminaries and of those who have been called to write for the benefit of God’s people everywhere. We are fortunate to be living in a time when global communication is easier than it has ever been and when the resources available to some churches can be readily shared with others. Of course, these same advantages are also available to heretics, but we should not be too worried about that. In the open marketplace of ideas, the good can drive out the bad, and if the members of the church are primed to seek what is good and faithful to the Scriptures, the chances that this will be the preferred outcome are high. There is no infallible method for assuring that, of course, and there will always be charlatans who will do what they can to lead people astray, but here we must trust in the sovereignty of God. The apostle Paul discovered that his congregations often went astray as soon as he left them, but we know that it is the letters that he wrote to rebuke and correct them that have survived, whereas the nature of the errors have to be guessed at from the evidence that he provides for them. Let us trust that it will also be so with us.

Teaching correct doctrine requires preparing gifted teachers, but those teachers must also model the principles that they proclaim to others. The Pastoral Epistles make this very clear. Many scholars think that they are not authentically Pauline in origin because of the subject matter of which they treat, but I would argue that, on the contrary, they are central to Paul’s understanding of ministry. The shocking truth is that there are teachers and preachers whose words are fully orthodox but whose lives are a contradiction of everything they proclaim. Sooner or later, many of them are exposed, and the church is scandalized by their deception. There is no guaranteed

way of avoiding this altogether, but we must always be on the alert for it and, when we come across it, have the courage to say so and deal with the offender(s) as best we can.

This is not easy. Heresy trials seldom achieve their aims and may backfire if there is a wave of sympathy for the accused. But problematic as church discipline often is, it must not be lost sight of, as it often has been in main-line Protestant churches, especially in the Western world. At the time of the Reformation, the Church of England included a service in its Prayer Book that asserted first that the discipline demanded of the church had ceased to function effectively and second that congregations needed to be exhorted to try to examine themselves until such time as the desired discipline could be restored. This service, known as the Commination, or denunciation of sinners, still survives in the traditional Book of Common Prayer, where it is appointed for use on Ash Wednesday in particular, but it is seldom heard in practice, and in modern liturgical reforms it has been omitted altogether. The desire to restore the church's primitive discipline has simply been abandoned, with consequences that are evident all around us.

Yet true teachers of the faith cannot ignore the need to challenge people in this way. Preaching is more than just teaching—it is exhortation to obey and apply what we already know. I listen to a great many sermons, most of which convey interesting and useful information but few of which challenge anybody to do anything—and certainly not to examine themselves and repent of their sins. One of the glories of classical Presbyterianism was the communion season, when church members were prepared in advance by a series of sermons and other spiritual exercises exhorting them to turn to the Lord before presuming to come to dine at his table. I believe that this practice still survives in some places, but very often it has faded away, to the great detriment of the church. The fear expressed by men like the late James Torrance, that some people may be so overcome by a sense of their own sinfulness that they dare not come to Holy Communion, is misguided and overblown. Perhaps there are a few people like that, but better that than the opposite, which is all too common nowadays. Staying away from the Lord's Supper out of an exaggerated sense of unworthiness is based on a misunderstanding, since none of us is worthy to partake of the grace of God. That is why Christ came, after all, and why he has given us his Holy Spirit. But to eat and drink with abandon, not discerning the Lord's body, is far worse and far more likely to be the case today. I am not advocating mass excommunication of those whose indiscipline risks profaning the Lord's table, but surely some sense of the solemnity of the undertaking to which we are committed ought to be conveyed to those whom we invite to partake.

Here we have reached the heart of the matter and the ultimate test of the church's holiness. The command of Jesus to remember his atoning death until he comes again is the call to affirm that we are prepared to take up our cross and follow him, that we are totally dependent on his sacrifice for our spiritual life, and that only as we proclaim our corporate union and our spiritual unity with him can we truly say that we are advancing the holiness of the church. Sin will always be with us, and failure is inevitable in a fallen world. However hard we try, we shall never manage to cleanse our churches or ourselves from the burdens that we bear as a consequence of the fall of Adam. We cannot be what we were never meant to be, nor can we become something that lies beyond our grasp. But the light of Christ has shone in our darkness, and we have beheld his glory. It is as we walk in that light that his glory will shine in and among us and that the church will manifest the holiness without which we shall not see the Lord.