

# Holiness: Essence, Form, and Impact

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If God is to engage people in the redemptive, reconciling, restoration work of the Kingdom through lives of holiness from generation to generation, his people must pursue the essence of holiness within the forms that are appropriate to the time, place and culture. Along the way, the people called to holiness by God must be able to distinguish between form and essence and not find themselves embracing the forms of holiness having lost the essence of the holy, God in us.<sup>1</sup>

In Revelation 2:2-5, we read the words of Jesus to the Church at Ephesus -

*“I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary. Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love.”*

By all outward appearances, the church at Ephesus was on the right track except for the central fact that inspite of their hard work, perseverance, and spiritual correctness, their love for God and for each other was missing. The outer form was present, but with little real impact. The inner heart, the intrinsic reality of God’s presence in the inner heart, the inward reality of God incarnate by the infilling of his very self, the indwelling nature of the Holy Spirit, the true essence of holiness was missing. The fulness of the love described by the Apostle Paul to the Corinthians in the “love chapter” was the essence of holiness missing in the church at Ephesus.

We see the same problem 1,700 years later referenced in John Wesley’s historical sermon delivered in the chapel at Oxford entitled “Almost A Christian”. . . John Wesley drove the point home that the form of Godliness misses the mark of an authentic Christian if the essence of Godliness found in purity of heart expressed in love is missing. Throughout Wesley's life he was preoccupied with and spoke often about what it means to be "a real Christian", not merely a nominal one. This theme appeared in more than sixty sermons and spoke to this matter of holiness essence.<sup>2</sup> His favorite verse of Scripture seemed to be -

“The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself in love.”

### **The Form and Essence of Holiness**

At the heart of any discussion of holiness, then, is this matter of essence, form, and impact. To begin, we may agree that the essence of something is its intrinsic reality, its inward nature, not so much its image as its “innage” (a word I made-up for this occasion). The *essence* of something is its permanent and continuing elements which are alive and dynamic. This is in contrast to *form* which may be understood to be outer appearance, image, changing and transient. “The outer is vital for it holds the ‘inner heart’ from which the ‘first love’ flows. The ‘outer appearance’ as the form must always reflect the essence, but is free to change as long as it stays true to the essence.

To speak of holiness in terms of essence and form is to frame our thinking with a theoretical construct that may help to assess and critique the personal, social, and organizational/institutional nature of holiness. Essence and form are also to be thought of as in relationship to one another. It is always form that translates essence. Form carries essence, communicates it, and makes it know. One might say that form incarnates essence as in John 1:14 – “the Word became flesh, and we beheld his glory as the only son of the Father, full of (essence) grace and truth.”

We may describe organizational holiness when we speak of the church as essence and form in relationship to one another ( a generous interpretation of church). The essence of the church is given by God. It is God’s very presence in and through the church when in obedience the church consecrates itself to God and is filled and transformed by his presence such that what is consecrated (offered up) to God, he sanctifies with his very self, Emmanuel, God with us and in us. His nature becomes our innage, his reality in the form of our very selves.

Essence is translated into form. The relationship is always dynamic such that the essence is always the same, but the form may change from age to age and generation to generation. We see this in the words of the Lord through the writing of Isaiah (54: 6 - ) – “Let out the curtains of your tent, don’t hold back. But lengthen your cords and strengthen your stakes.” This is to say, as a people, don’t be afraid to evolve, develop, grow, mature, prosper, change in shape, capacity, size, function, symbols, and methods, but be sure to drive your stakes down deep into first things, first commitments, primary priorities. In the words of Jesus – “Seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness. . .” Or in the words found 1 Peter 1: 15-16 – “But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written ‘Be holy, for I am holy’” (Leviticus 11:45,46; 19:2; 20:7).

Essence and form are interrelated. When we say we are a holy people, we acknowledge both essence and form. The essence of holiness always speaks to what God has called his people to be. It is at the heart of our existence, our identity. The form that holiness takes are the ways and means that the essence is made known, experienced, and informed in response to the peculiar and particular contemporary exigencies and challenges of the day. In this way, where we find essence it is in some form. However, the opposite does not always hold. Where we find form that may have once carried essence, we may not necessarily find form. Jesus spoke very clearly of this when he referenced the sad state of affairs in the inner life of the Pharisee's. We use today the efficient stereotype of the Pharisee as one who has all the form of holiness, but not the substance. We characterize churches as faith communities that have all the form and function of church, but have lost the Spirit and are in reality dead, and if not dead, then dying.

Form does not determine essence, but gives essence its visible shape while essence gives form its direction, impetus, purpose, and mission. The two are always in tension and form is always in need of renewal, reinvention, or restoration in reference to its origins in the past to assure its relevance to carry essence in the future.

To speak of holiness in a person, a people, or in a denomination is to speak of both essence and form at three levels: personal, social, and organizational/institutional. Much of the writings on holiness focus at the level of personal holiness. In my own tradition, The Salvation Army, in the writings of Commissioner Samuel Logan Brengle, General Fredrick Coutts, and many others, it is personal holiness that overwhelmingly fills the pages with "Helps to Holiness".<sup>3</sup> The personal holiness journey and experience of sanctification is the focus. Personal holiness writings often do keep a strong emphasis on essence and only secondarily strike a minor note on form. In the literature I am most familiar with, where social holiness is discussed, it is almost completely focussed on form and in particular on social ministry to the disenfranchised, needy, suffering masses on the margins of society, the "down and out" and "suffering tenth" of the community. There is an apparent disconnect between the personal holiness experience of the spirit filled life and the social reality of the outer forms of compassion that are attributed to the inferred inner realities of holiness. Tragically, more times than we would wish to think, the outer forms are driven by habit, normative institutionalized roles tethered to government funding and public financial support and calcified into a form of career and routine lending credence to the truism that "a rut is a shallow grave."

The idea of personal holiness in the aggregate that may characterize a social reality of a holy people in ever renewing, creative expressions of a faith community is not well discussed in the holiness literature of my denomination. Attention to the ever renewing forms of a collective holiness that vibrantly carry the essence of holiness may have characterized my own faith community in earlier days, but the lament of the loss of holiness essence is too often heard in describing contemporary realities of the present day faith community. The fact that it is being discussed, noticed as diminished, and written about, in spite of the confusion of essence and forms of holiness, is nevertheless a good thing. More recent discussion of ecclesiology and how we might better live out a sense of being a people, a community in mission, now raises questions around a fuller conceptualization of social holiness, form, and essence.<sup>4</sup>

### **Social and Organizational Forms of Holiness**

One of the great contributions to the world and the Kingdom of John Wesley and early Methodism was the means of grace which constituted a social organization, a social ecology of holiness, within which personal holiness could be experienced. The class meetings, bands, and penitent groups ordered and structured in intentional ways to permit participation in various means of grace all within a framework of discipline and accountability were effective forms of social holiness within which the essence of holiness was both a personal and a social reality. At yet another level, John Wesley established an organization of Methodism as a renewal movement within the Anglican Church which was open to participation of non-Anglicans, engaged circuit riding lay preachers, and promoted social organizations at a local level that permitted in their forms and structures exposures to God's love along a continuum of God's justifying, sanctifying, glorifying grace.

In the past fifty years Wesleyan Holiness churches and denominations have experienced somewhat of a paradox. On the one hand, fifty years ago people and churches of Wesleyan heritage largely abandoned the social forms of holiness, the social-ecological structures and processes which were the petrie dishes in which holiness germinated and grew, and out of which saints moved out into the world as salt and light, as redemptive, reconciling, restorative forces having an unimaginable impact on the world. It was in the 1950's that class meetings had their last run in the life of many Wesleyan faith communities. On the other hand, the small group fellowship movement is back largely promoted in non-Wesleyan circles and only vaguely related to an intentional concern for the essence of holiness. There remains a disconnect between the

forms that characterize Christian community life and the intentional desire to be holy as God is holy. The small group, cell group, fellowship group innovations are back, but largely without the discipline and accountability that held so much power and promise for helping new believers encounter the Holy Spirit, be transformed, and embrace the essence of holiness. Our congregations and faith communities are putting in place the social forms of fellowship and community life, but not necessarily in ways that effectively carry and convey the essence of holiness. If they were more reflective and intentional about seeking the essence of holiness, would not the impact of our faith communities be far greater.

### **Holiness Essence and Impact**

Without a doubt, the salt and light of early Methodism with its enormous impact on society, was driven by the essence of holiness in the relatively small sub-population of early Methodists. They were the leaven in the bread of the societies in which they resided in Britain, North America, Australia, and beyond. The same may be said for The Salvation Army in the early days. These movements of the Holy spirit expressed through social ecological, and organizational forms permeated the world with the essence of holiness lived out in ways that had an impact not only at the individual, personal level, but at the level of social policy and national life.

We know that the old forms that once were effective can be perpetuated without the true essence of holiness remaining. They are often old wine skins. To press the metaphor, however, new wine skins can be established and yet carry watered down wine, or sugar water. Whatever the forms may be, what the world desperately needs is the impact of the people of God who are the means by which the true essence of holiness becomes a great gift of God himself given freely to a world with deep needs.

Any discussion of a renewal of the doctrine of holiness in our faith communities must engage this matter of holiness form and essence if our faith communities are to have an impact on the world beyond ourselves. For God so love the world, and desires to impact the world, that he not only sent his Son, but gave us his Holy Spirit as well to every generation, the essence of his very self to become the essence of our very selves as his means of grace restoring the world to what the Lord imagined it to be in the very beginning.<sup>5</sup>

1 See Cairns, Philip. "Foundational Discipleship, Education and Training", *Word & Deed*, Vol. 9, No. 1, November 2006. I am indebted to Phil Cairns for introducing me to the idea of form and essence through his recent paper on Salvation Army ecclesiology given at The Salvation Army's 2nd International Symposium on Theology and Ethics, Johannesburg, South Africa in August, 2006. I have borrowed liberally from his thinking about form and essence of the church and his referencing the work of Catholic theologian Hans Kung, *The Church*, (Turnbridge Wells, Burns and Oats, 1995) on the topic.

2 Kenneth J. Collins, *John Wesley: A Theological Journey*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003, p. 243. For a helpful discussion of John Wesley's preaching on being almost and altogether a Christian, see Collins's discussion, pages 126 to 128. For a fuller discussion of Wesley's life long interest in the theme of being a "real Christian" as opposed to a "nominal" one, see his discussion on pages 243 to 247.

3 For a more thorough discussion of Brengle, Coutts and others' writings on holiness in The Salvation Army tradition and an elaboration of the distinction between personal and social holiness, see the paper on Social Holiness written by Jonathan Raymond for the Wesleyan Holiness Study Group's meetings, May 2005. This paper makes the case for thinking of Social Holiness as a matter of social-ecological-developmental factors working in the context of faith communities to promote holiness at a social-collective level with implications for society and the Kingdom.

4 See Noakes, David. "Life is Worship-Worship is Life", *Word & Deed*, Vol. 9, No.1, November 2006. The two most recent issues of The Salvation Army's journal of theology and ministry, *Word & Deed*, offers selected writings (papers) from the 2nd International Symposium on Theology and Ethics held in Johannesburg, South Africa in August 2006, and addresses related issues through several papers on ecclesiology.

5 This paper was written to be provocative of discussion for the fourth meeting of the Wesleyan Holiness Study Group, Azusa, California, March 2. It begs for more work on the topic and greater attention to the potential references and resources that with more time would serve the reader better. The writer's hope is that it does indeed provoke further thought and discussion in the spirit of the reasons for which the study group was established and continues.

