

Holiness: Against an Idea of Incommunicable Holiness

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Before beginning a critique of John Webster's Holiness, we must realize that if we are to accept any part of the essay, then Webster has already laid the basis for any critique by showing that "theological thinking about holiness is itself an exercise of holiness" (8). An analysis of Holiness, positive or negative, must not stand as an impartial spectator evaluating Webster's idea from afar, but must stem directly from God's holiness and offer critique only by the use of holy reason. Put more simply, a critique of Holiness can only be successful if its objective is to bear further witness to the thrice holy God. Realizing this theological mandate to constantly echo the self-revelation of God, we can proceed to say that Webster's presentation of holiness is a desperately needed rewriting of what it means to be holy. Webster stands against the idea of an incommunicable holiness by exhibiting holiness as belonging to God only, yet imparted to humanity through sanctification. In thus doing, Webster proclaims the triune God, provides for a re-animation of the Church, and enables the quickening of the Christian life.

We begin with the first sentence of this proposition by examining how exactly Webster has redefined holiness. In order to do this, it is necessary to understand the modern evangelical concept of the holy. Holiness is listed among the attributes of God: "God is distinct from and transcendent to all his creatures, not only metaphysically and epistemologically, but also morally... God is holy, and as such is the source and standard of what is right."¹ While not denying that God is in some way distinct, transcendent, omnipotent, and unchanging, we must recognize that when theology proceeds from these incommunicable attributes to an idea of holiness, it will inevitably lead to an incommunicable holiness. If this idea of incommunicable holiness is in fact true, then God stands over and against all creation in holiness; God and creation can never be reconciled due to the depth of their separation. In this idea of holiness God is undoubtedly distinct, transcendent, omnipotent, and unchanging. But is it truly the Christian God if we, as created beings, can have no relation with a holy God?

If we reject this incommunicable holiness, then a new definition is needed. In pursuit of this, Webster recognizes that theology itself can only be undertaken in the "revelatory presence of the holy trinity" (12) and that this revelation "is the establishment of saving fellowship" (13). Thus, our definition of holiness must be reworked to stem from a different source: holiness understood to be an integral part of the triune God's relations with creation. In this task of rethinking the definition, the starting point must be changed from "rewording the question Plato asked to apply to the Christian God"² to "defining God's holiness out of God's works" (39). As created beings, we cannot relate to an impersonal platonic God, yet we recognize God's movement within creation—creating, redeeming, and perfecting. This contradiction leads to the realization that the God who is holy in all relations with creation is not the same as the

incommunicably holy God of modern evangelicalism. Instead of holiness simply being derived from the ontology of God, the Trinitarian holiness offered by Webster is both defined by and helps define the ontology of God (32). It is in this context that Webster's redefinition of holiness is so desperately needed. If theology is to constantly echo the self-revelation of God, if the Church is to await her bridegroom and trust in his coming, if the Christian is to be sanctified unto God, then God's holiness must be worked out unto the world through God's acts. Holiness accomplishes the goal of holy reason—to proclaim the triune God—by identifying God's holiness as this very action of God outworking sanctification to the world.

One caution needs to be mentioned in regards to Webster's redefinition of holiness. Holiness must still be remembered as an attribute of God, a mystery that theology seeks to understand through the work of holy reason. Webster recognizes this: "like all attributes of God, the attribute of holiness is an indication of the name of God" (36). As created beings, we cannot comprehend the fullness of God, but are left to reflect on God's name through God's attributes. God is many things—loving, merciful, faithful, infinite, omnipotent, eternal. God is all these things, yet each is only one aspect, one attribute that indicates God's name. We must remember that holiness is the same. In *Holiness*, Webster does not stray down the path of overemphasizing holiness, as others have done with the attributes of omnipotence or transcendence, but if we accept his redefinition and continue with it theologically, we must continue to remember that holiness is not God, but that it points to the God who is holy.

Continuing with the proposition, Webster's essay is needed today in that it provides for a re-animation of the Church. Again, holiness is often seen as "the separateness, or otherness, of God from all creation".³ Yet we know that the Church is called to be holy (1 Corinthians 1:2). How is this to be? If we accept the concept of incommunicable holiness, the Church is tasked with the impossible undertaking of making itself holy, as God's very holiness forces separation from creation. We must turn instead to Webster's revised definition of holiness and see that "the Church is holy because God is holy" (58). The holiness of the Church is "not a natural or cultural condition" (63), but stems from and reflects the election and sanctification of the Church by the triune God. Webster's view takes the calling of the Church to holiness and redefines it from a human endeavor to an act of election by God. This holiness is then carried out by the Church hearing the Word (72), confessing its sin (73), bearing witness to the world (74), and hallowing God's name (75). These activities constitute the re-animation of the Church, as the community of saints presents itself to God so that God will continually sanctify it and bring it to fulfillment. Thus, the very purpose of the Church is possible only if God's holiness is imparted to it through God's election and sanctification. Holiness brings forth this possibility because the Church is no longer left striving for an incommunicable holiness, but receives holiness imparted from the triune God.

In his conclusion, Webster goes on to extend this re-animation of the Church to the culture: "Persuading our culture that holiness is of paramount importance will require not only the culture's conversion, but the continual conversion of the Church to the gospel of holiness" (105). This may exemplify the re-animation of the Church that is forced by a new view of holiness, but two cautions should be mentioned. The first is a reminder of the earlier note on holiness as an attribute, especially in regards to the term "gospel of holiness". The second person of the Trinity, the Word, is the gospel toward which the Church and the Christian is to turn. The Son is holy in very essence, but the gospel is the Son alone. The second caution concerns the idea of "persuading our culture" of holiness. While the Church is to bear witness to the world, we must be careful not to be sidetracked on one of the many paths that holiness has followed before, whether disciplinary, experimentally spiritual, or perfectionistic.⁴ Each interpretation of holiness was in some way derived from scripture, but failed to grasp fully the concept of the holy. "Persuading our culture" could easily become excessively disciplinary or purely spiritual, forgetting that holiness stems from God through sanctification. Webster only briefly mentions holiness in relation to culture and would undoubtedly expound more; this is simply a reminder that even in bearing witness to the world, we must remember that holiness is of God.

Finally, Webster's redefinition of holiness is needed today to enable the quickening of the Christian life. Webster speaks of holiness in terms of mortification and vivification (88). If we return to an idea of incommunicable holiness, mortification is unavoidably apparent in the separation of a holy God from fallen creation. But where is the concept of vivification if a holy God cannot redeem and relate with the Christian? It is this that the new definition of holiness resolves; in it mortification and vivification are "characteristics of all the patterns of activity that comprise the life of holiness" (89). The Christian life is quickened in and through God's election, sanctification, and imparted holiness. In application to the individual Christian, Webster's vision of holiness allows for the Christian to constantly echo God's self-revelation through theology in accordance with the Church and under God.

The necessity of Webster's Holiness today is its provision of a concept of holiness that stands against the idea of an incommunicable holiness. Only by understanding God's holiness as belonging to God only, but imparted to humanity through sanctification, can the name of the triune God be echoed, the Church prepared for Christ, and the individual both mortified and vivified at the foot of the cross. Webster has succeeded in the goal of theology by proclaiming God's name through calling the Church and the Christian back to holiness in the Father, Son, and Spirit.

Notes

¹ G.R. Lewis, "Attributes of God," Evangelical Dictionary of Theology (Baker Book House Co., 1985), 455.

² Ibid., 455.

³ J.R. Williams, "Holiness," Evangelical Dictionary of Theology (Baker Book House Co., 1985), 515.

⁴ Ibid., 516.