

A Spotless Bride

by Hywel R. Jones

Hywel R. Jones discusses the holiness of the church and the imperative to address impurities within local congregations.

Scripture: Psalm 46:5, Matthew 16:18, Acts 2:40, 1 Corinthians 5:1, 2 Corinthians 6:14, Ephesians 1:21, Ephesians 2:1, 1 Peter 2:9, Revelation 12:10

Topics: "Church Holiness", "Spiritual Purity"

Description

Hywel R. Jones preaches about the current state of institutions and professionals, emphasizing the lack of moral integrity leading to the crumbling of various realms in the western world. He discusses the contrast between the church on earth and the heavenly world of peace, joy, and righteousness, pointing out the need for the church to reflect the holiness of God. Jones explores the distinction between the universal church's holiness and the purity of individual local churches, highlighting the importance of addressing impurities within congregations while upholding the church's overall holiness. He stresses the sacred duty of believers to ensure that their local churches exhibit holiness and purity, aligning with the heavenly reality of the church.

Transcript

Institutions are in trouble these days and professionals are suspect. The political, legal, financial, educational, and even charitable realms of the western world are crumbling. A lack of moral integrity is at the core of this disintegration. This is sad to admit, but it is true--and not only the "have-nots" and the cynics acknowledge it. Those who ought to be most protective of an institution's good name and traditions often seem to be the most indifferent to them. Intoxicated by prestige and power, they squander their own credibility and the resources of the institutions they represent. Consequently, ordinary people feel disappointed and betrayed. Many of them are soured, lonely, and despairing.

But isn't there another world, so to speak--a world of peace, joy, and righteousness? Yes there is, in heaven. And heaven has a colony--an outpost--here on earth in the church, the current home of God's people. Yet to many people this other world seems nonexistent, partly because the church on earth resembles "the kingdoms of this world" far more than "the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ" (Rev. 12:10). What is happening in society at large is also happening in all kinds of churches, from Roman Catholic to evangelical, but with far more serious consequences. And although the church's holiness is only one of its attributes, the absence of this attribute perhaps conceals the church's real

identity more and thus exposes her to more dismissal and derision than the lack of any other. Consideration of the church's holiness is therefore pressingly relevant. Asking and answering two very similar questions may help us to appreciate this.

CAN THE CHURCH BE WORSE THAN THE WORLD?

If we think of the church as the "catholic or universal church, which is invisible, [which] consists of the whole number of the elect that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ the head thereof" (Westminster Confession of Faith, Chap. 25, Sec. 1), and if we think of the world as the realm of fallen mankind, then our answer to this question must be, "No." In these senses, the church and the world are not only different but antithetical to each other (see Eph. 1:21-23; James 4:4). God is for the church while the world is against him; he rules the church while Satan rules the world (see Eph. 2:1-2); and he is in the church while the world is "without" him (see Eph. 2:12). Such stark alternatives as these bespeak the profound and permanent distinctiveness--or holiness, in the sense of separateness (see 2 Cor. 6:14-7:1)--that belongs to the church as the people of God. We must answer this first question, then, with an unequivocal, "No!" The church is never in a worse condition than the world; she has never been nor can she ever be. "God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved" (Ps. 46:5). Her Lord Jesus Christ so builds her that "the gates of hell will not prevail against [her]" (Matt. 16:18). The church is not of the world. In that sense she is--and will remain--holy.

CAN A CHURCH BE WORSE THAN THE WORLD?

This is a different question. In order to answer it, we need to remember that Scripture uses the word church in more than one way. In addition to what it tells us about the church as we have noted above, it also tells us how particular local churches actually came into being as people of differing religions and nationalities believed the gospel, were baptized, and renounced the world's ways (see Acts 2:40-41; 8:12-17; 16:13-40). These particular local churches are members of "the visible church . . . [which] consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion, together with their children . . . [which has] the ministry, oracles and ordinances of God" (Westminster Confession of Faith, Chap. 25, Sec. 2-3). Particular local churches are therefore no less sacred than the one, catholic, and apostolic body of which they are not only parts but also manifestations. But they may not be as holy as they ought to be. Particular local churches can be "more or less pure" (Westminster Confession of Faith, Chap. 25, Sec. 4). This is the distinction that we are emphasizing by means of the definite and indefinite articles in our two questions.

So we must think of particular churches as well as of the church, of each and every individual congregation together with the association or denomination to which those individual congregations formally belong. In this sense, our second question is deliberately phrased in order to call to mind some words of the Apostle Paul. Writing to the Corinthians, he reminded the Christians there of something that had happened among them that was unparalleled even in the decadent environment for which first-century Corinth was notorious. He referred to immorality of "a kind that [did] not occur even among pagans" (1 Cor. 5:1). This shows that a church of which Christ is head and in which God's Holy Spirit dwells can be worse than the world, at least in specific respects.

HOLY AND YET IMPURE!

We are limited in terms of what we can do physically and mentally. For example, looking two ways at once is not something that we are able to do--and even thinking about two things at once can be beyond us! So

how can we, with our limitations and partialities, remember that the church is holy and yet deal with impurities in particular congregations and denominations?

Graciously but not surprisingly, God has not left us to puzzle this out on our own. This tension between the visible church, with all of its impurities, and the invisible church, in all of her holiness, is not outside the scope of his truth. First Corinthians 5 deals with this very tension. There Paul informs the saints at Corinth both of how they ought to react when a church is not what it ought to be and also of what is to be done to maintain and manifest proper holiness. Using the analogy of leaven as a symbol of sin and as a reminder of Israel's bondage in Egypt (see Exod.12: 8, 15-20), Paul says two things in verse 7. First, "you . . . are unleavened." Second, "Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump." Let us consider each of these things.

THE HOLY CHURCH: "YOU . . . ARE UNLEAVENED"

In eternity past, God chose a people for himself out of the sinful human race (see Eph. 1:3-4). He graciously set his love upon each of them, giving them to his Son so that Jesus might redeem them by his obedient life offered up to God in an atoning death (see John 17:9, 24; 2 Cor. 5:18, 20-21; 1 John 4:9-10, 14). By his obedient life and sacrificial death, Jesus Christ created one body (see Eph. 4:4) and one bride (see Eph. 5:25-32) of people from Old Testament Israel and the gentile nations (see Eph. 2:11-22)--"a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages" (Rev.7: 9)--"one flock" (John 10:16) and "one new man" (Eph. 2:15).

This one purpose of God is presented in both the Old and the New Testaments but with slightly different emphases. In the Old Testament, the spotlight is on the larger entity of the theocratic nation, with passing notice given to the faithful remnant within it. The New Testament focuses on particular churches, with reference made in passing (but in some detail) to the larger catholic whole. Drawing a straight line between the two testaments, we can see continuity between the Old Testament remnant and the new covenant church. So on the subject of the church, as on so much else, there is a real and deep harmony between Scripture's two Testaments. Sketched out, that harmony looks like this.

In the Old Testament, the book of Exodus gives us the account of how God formed the tribes of Jacob into the nation of Israel as his own covenant people. God did this because of his covenant with Abraham. Having delivered the Israelites from bondage in Egypt, he "bore [them] on eagles' wings and brought [them] to [himself]" (19:4). At Mount Sinai he called them to be his own treasured possession and set before them his law, telling them that if they would indeed obey his voice and keep his covenant, then he would make them "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (19:6). These Israelites possessed "the very words of God" (Rom. 3:2 [NIV]) as well as all of the signs and seals of his favor. They were meant to be a kind of special kingdom among all the peoples and nations of the world--a theocracy or a church-state (indeed, the only church-state ever appointed by God), serving him in cultic and civic affairs. During the Exodus, Israel was "holy to the LORD" (Jer. 2:3), although this calling soon became more honored in the breach than in the observance. Indeed, on the very mountain where God's covenant with his people was sealed, they proved treacherous and disloyal by worshiping a golden calf (see Exod. 24 and 32).

Yet God remained faithful to his pledge. Although he justly chastised generations of his people by subjugating them to alien powers and even by expelling them from his land, he graciously preserved a faithful remnant. And so Stephen reminds the Sanhedrin that God's angel was present with "the congregation"--that is, the church (ekkl_sia)--"in the wilderness" in spite of its waywardness (Acts 7:38),

and the Apostle Paul places covenantal privilege and disobedience together in 1 Corinthians 10:1-12 (cf. Rom. 9:1-8). God's unique relationship to Israel explains her continued survival in the Old Testament, as is no less true with the church of the new covenant. If Israel had had no place in God's purpose, then she would have been like Sodom and Gomorrah (see Isa. 1:9). But God's Messiah was to come from his old covenant people.

Much of the New Testament is made up of letters to churches in a given locality or region. It is therefore striking that Peter, John, and Paul--the three major writing apostles--spoke to particular local congregations about the larger catholic church of which they were members or parts. In the Apocalypse, John not only addresses each of the seven churches in Asia Minor with a message peculiar to its need but also (and by using Old Testament imagery) with a message about the security and triumph of "the holy city, new Jerusalem" (21:2) that they all needed.

Similarly, Peter, in addressing Christians gathered in congregations in "Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia" (1 Pet. 1:1), uses the very words of Exodus 19 to remind them of their identity in Christ. He describes them as "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession" (1 Pet. 2:9), adding some words from the prophet Hosea that speak of the extension of God's mercy to the gentiles (see 1 Pet. 2:10 with Hos. 1:6, 9; 2:1, 23 and Rom. 9:24-26). Though many of Peter's addressees were not Jews, they all were part of the Israel of God because there is now but "one body" in Christ (see Eph. 2:11-22).

Paul also did not hesitate to apply descriptions of the whole church to particular congregations, addressing individual congregations as "the church" and thus using the very same term that he uses for the company of the elect, the whole covenant people of God (see, for example, 1 Cor. 1:2 with 12:28). He also does this with those striking metaphors by which he describes the church in its most exalted character; namely, as "the body of Christ" (see Eph. 1:23 and 4:14 with 1 Cor. 12:12-27) and "the temple of God" (see 2 Cor. 6:16-18 with 1 Cor. 3:16-17).

So we must keep this larger reality of the church in mind whenever we are dealing with particular churches, whether single or several, and neither allow "our own parish or patch" to set illegitimate boundaries for our concern or activity, nor should we conduct ourselves within those particular churches in ways that do not consider the impact of our decisions or actions on that larger whole.

THE UNHOLY CHURCH: "CLEANSE OUT THE OLD LEAVEN THAT YOU MAY BE A NEW LUMP"

Just as God determined to redeem a people to be his own and bring them to glory, so he appointed certain means by which that purpose should be accomplished. Based on the death, resurrection, and enthronement of Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit is commissioned "to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad" (John 11:52). This is accomplished through the preaching of the gospel and as people are given the grace to repent and believe. The book of Acts is full of accounts of churches coming into being in various parts of the Roman empire and we have letters sent to many of those churches in the remainder of the New Testament.

"The church of God that is in Corinth" (1 Cor. 1:2) was one of these churches and Acts 18:1-18 contains the account of its early days. It was made up of those who had professed faith in Christ, repenting and responding to the call to holiness (see 1 Cor. 1:2 and 6:11). Yet as a result of reports he received from others and the questions that the Corinthians themselves put to him, Paul indicates that it was a church that was--to put it mildly--among the "less pure." Plagued by the blatantly immoral (see chap. 5), the

openly uncharitable (chap. 6), the idolatrous (chaps. 8-10), the sacrilegious (chap. 11), the divisive and disorderly (chaps. 12-14) and the seriously heretical (chap. 15), it was a church full of persons who seemed unworthy to be called "saints." All that Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians is therefore to be understood as a strenuous attempt to deal with that church's impurities while not forgetting its greater holiness as part of the church.

In the case of incest that he addresses in chapter 5, the apostle urges that the offender be excommunicated. He presses this because the Corinthians are shamefully unconcerned and consequently slow to address the matter--yet the purpose for which Christ died is being contradicted in practice; the church's survival is being jeopardized; and God's chastisement is being incurred. And each of these things can also be said about all of the other grievous failures of this particular church.

This teaches us that sometimes we must act in order both to stop the rot and to purge specific churches so that they might become again lumps of dough without the leaven of blatant sin, that is, churches worthy of their name.

OUR SACRED DUTY

Of course, it is important to review church history on this score (as on all others) in order to glean both positive and negative lessons. Yet our interest in the past must never be used to evade the current call of sacred duty. We are responsible for seeing that the church of today--the church to which we belong in its local and denominational manifestations--exhibits as much holiness as possible. Just as no one can bask in the halcyon days of the past without sinning (did those days ever exist to the degree that we like to imagine?), so we cannot concentrate on the invisible church's holiness while ignoring or underestimating obvious impurities in visible congregations or denominations.

The fact that the church is holy does not imply that each congregation and denomination is so. Much less does it mean that the sins of an individual congregation or a whole denomination are of little account. Indeed, the fact that they are sins of local and particular manifestations of the church makes them more, and not less, serious. They outrage and bring just censure upon her from the world, and they expose her to the just chastisement of God. They grieve his Holy Spirit and obstruct the spread of the gospel. The triune God is altogether and always holy, and sin in any church is always reprehensible in his sight.

So in thinking about the holiness of the church, we must focus our attention on its local and visible manifestations in the light of its catholic and invisible reality. We must focus on the present in the light of the eternal, the "already" in the light of the "not yet." The visible and the invisible are not separate realities; they are in some sense one and the same. Because this is so, we can attest to the larger, heavenly reality by calling attention to its smaller, earthly parts. In short, we must seek to make our local congregations true colonies of the heavenly Jerusalem.

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