L E A D E R ' S  G U I D E

# Relational Holiness

## Responding to the Call of Love

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# Introduction

Welcome to the leader's guided tour through *Relational Holiness: Responding to the Call of Love!*

Just to let you know up front, we the coauthors of this little book, Thomas Oord and Michael Lodahl, are cousins. We say as much on the book's dedication page, but do so in a kind of roundabout way, and we just thought we'd make it nice and clear, right here. While our boyhood years were spent in the same town, there is more than a decade that separates us in age—and Michael is the older one. (Tom is making me confess this.) Tom is the young, vibrant, energetic one. (Tom wrote that.) And while each of us assumed primary writing responsibilities for particular chapters, we also read and edited each other's work, freely suggesting to one another new things to say and new ways of saying them. So when all the dust had cleared, this was truly a joint effort. As far as the production of this book is concerned, we are less like cousins and more like twins joined at the hip.

We know our little book probably sets a new world record for "Number of Preliminary Bodies of Writing by Different People"—two different forewords, two different prefaces, and then a separate list of acknowledgments! Feel free to read them—or not. We are going to assume that they do not require a study guide, or any further elaboration at all—*except* . . .

The fact that so many people "get a word in edgewise" before the book actually begins is a pretty decent illustration of one of the main points in chapter 1, "Pygmies and Atoms." The noticeably long list of names in the acknowledgments section makes the same point. We believe that no one of us lives a life that is, or even can be, shut off from all the others around us. Having all those different people writing little introductory pieces is a powerful testament to the fact that we two authors, a pair of cousins, know that we are surrounded by, and nurtured by, the faith community (some call it a "tribe") that is the Church of the Nazarene. Of course we are thankful for a heritage that is larger, deeper, and much older than simply the Church of the Nazarene, for the Body of Christ extends far beyond our home denomination's boundaries in time and space. But we know, and want to encourage others to realize, just how much this faith community has instructed us, inspired us, shaped us, and taught us. We think this is a pretty neat idea, and hope that all those preliminaries can be read and appreciated in its light.

We have, of course, already supplied a fair amount of material to prompt group discussion with questions at the end of each chapter, along with suggested further readings. For this web site

leader's guide, we will add a few other discussion questions here and there, a further illustration or two, and some additional biblical passages that will contribute to the ideas explored in the book. The book's lists of additional readings at the end of each chapter, titled "For Deeper Study," will be helpful for students (whether in college or seminary) and pastors, but many of the readings may not be readily available to pastors and Sunday School or Bible study teachers. So, for each chapter, we will also highlight some of the readings that should be most accessible for teachers in the local church.

# 1
# Pygmies and Atoms

The main point of this opening chapter is to argue that God has created us for *relationship*—relationship to God, to one another, to God's creation as a whole. We cannot escape this, even if we wanted to. When quizzed about which of God's commands to the people of Israel was the greatest or most important, Jesus repeatedly highlighted two: to love God with all of our being (Deut. 6:4-6) and to love our neighbor as ourselves (Lev. 19:18). We take this to mean that the very meaning, texture, and quality of our lives arise directly from these fundamental relations.

You may want to look at those passages in the Gospels where Jesus emphasizes these two commands in the Torah. They are Matt. 22:34-40, Mark 12:28-34, and Luke 10:25-37. It might be worth pointing out that in the Luke passage, it isn't actually Jesus but an expert in Jewish law who quotes the two great commands of love. When the scribe follows up by asking Jesus the fateful question "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus launches into the parable of the Good Samaritan.

Ask your group members to imagine what their lives would be like—or, for that matter, who they would even be—without the significant relationships of their lives. Obviously none of us would be here without our parents, for starters. But then there are other family members, friends, relatives, Church family, and so on. On an even more basic, physical level, it is obvious that we cannot survive without food, water, and oxygen. We are not closed off from our interpersonal and physical environments; quite the opposite. Each of us lives (and hopefully thrives) in a profoundly complex web of relationships to others, to the world around us—and to God.

In light of this consideration, two small corrections of the text in this chapter may actually help to illustrate our overall point. First, we now wish we had written that God "enjoys give-and-*receive* relations with every creature who lives" (p. 35) instead of "give-and-*take* relations." We are convinced that God's nature of gentle, humble love is such that God is not so much in the business of taking as in the business of receiving what is freely offered by us—whether it be our praise, energies, service, time, or our very lives. We also believe that this provides a much more adequate way to think about the way we all ought to live with one another too. Ideally, anyway, we do not take; we

instead graciously and gratefully receive what others freely and lovingly give to us. Surely God is that way.

Later in the chapter, while describing an early philosophical position regarding the nature of ultimate reality, we mistakenly wrote, "From dust we came, and from dust we shall return" (p. 38). Of course it is *to* dust that we shall return, and that is a quotation from the Bible (Gen. 3:19). That really is a fundamental truth about our relationship as physical creatures to our material environment. You may know that the Hebrew term for human is *adam*, which comes from the word for ground or dirt, *adamah*. We think this helps to underscore our deeply interdependent relation to the world that sustains us.

We believe these themes are important to emphasize because those of us who are from North America, especially, have grown up in a culture that has a long and deeply influential history of individualism. The United States in particular was a nation born in the era of the Enlightenment, a 17th-18th century philosophical mood that celebrated individual rights, individual identity, and individual choice. We have much to learn from Scripture about living in true community as the Body of Christ. We hope you can encourage your study group to discuss the implications of a strong and healthy doctrine of the Church.

From the suggestions "For Deeper Study" at the end of this chapter, let us zero in on two. H. Ray Dunning's "Holiness: Experience or Relationship?" is a terrific complementary piece, and is found in a book of essays that we found ourselves repeatedly recommending at the end of our chapters. The book is called *Holiness 101: Exploring This Transforming Journey* and is available from Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City. (You're on the web site! You can order it!)

The other book we come back to continually—one that has been profoundly influential upon us and many others—is Mildred Bangs Wynkoop's *A Theology of Love*. If you are a Sunday School teacher or Bible study or discussion leader, and you want to cut your teeth on something a little more challenging, try Wynkoop's book. Her writings focused on these most fundamental relationships that make our lives what they are—and all of her books are available from Beacon Hill Press.

# 2
# Searching for the Core

There is a great deal of biblical material in this chapter, all of which will be helpful to study in depth, and in context, in order to appreciate the rich diversity of biblical teaching regarding sanctification.

We have another correction to make in this chapter, but it's a pretty exciting one. On page 47 we should have written, "Paul tells believers in Rome *that he is* (those are the missing words) 'to be a minister in Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, **sanctified** by the Holy Spirit' (Rom. 15:16)."

This is an important correction, because it reveals that Paul understood himself to be in the role of a priest whose calling it was to offer up to God, like a sacrificial offering, the Gentiles who were converted to Christ through his ministry. We believe that the beautiful challenge of Rom. 12:1 should be understood in that light: "Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your body as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship."

Paul saw himself as a priest lifting up an offering to God, but it's the sort of offering that required the willing cooperation of his Roman readers. They're not like a sheep tied to an altar for slaughter. They are to be a living sacrifice, a body of believers that responds to Paul's urging rather than being coerced, manipulated, or forced. But isn't it a beautiful image? Paul wants the Gentiles to be an acceptable offering, "sanctified by the Holy Spirit." If you decide to take this direction for discussion, it is surely worth noting that Paul then spells out in the rest of Rom. 12 what kind of common life together in the Church is implied in living as a living sacrifice—"in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others" (v. 5).

If you read with your group through the rest of Rom. 12, you will find a wonderful portrait of how life is to be lived as the Body of Christ. This may also lend further significance to the fact that, in the Greek, Paul begs his readers to "offer your (*plural*) body (*singular*)"—"the body of y'all," we might say. We tend strongly to read this individualistically, as referring to our individual bodies, but Paul writes here of a singular body shared in by the collective of Christian believers in Rome.

While you are in the neighborhood, you might take a careful look at Rom. 13:8-10, where Paul makes the bold claim that all of God's laws are summed up in this single command, "Love your neighbor as yourself." This should help to support our claim in the following chapter of *Relational Holiness* regarding the core notion of holiness.

We want to be sensitive to the fact that each of the contributing notions regarding holiness that we explore in this chapter has an important role. We are not rejecting these notions, but simply looking for the heart, soul, and center around which these notions make the most and best sense.

For example, the last of those contributing notions is "Being Perfect" (pp. 60-61). We are attempting to steer clear of perfection*ism*, or of the common misunderstanding regarding this term as meaning absolute, flawless perfection. Since in the following chapter we will address Jesus' command to His disciples to "be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt. 5:48), we will wait till then to unpack this important calling of Jesus upon our lives. Suffice it to say that it will become obvious that this contributing notion of perfection is best understood in terms of the core idea to be explored in the following chapters.

Let us highlight three of the items in this chapter's "For Deeper Study" section. Go to the Internet to find Dennis Bratcher's article "Psalm 51 and the Language of Transformation: A Biblical Perspective on Holiness." We also believe William Greathouse's *Wholeness in Christ: Toward a Biblical Theology of Holiness* and George Lyons's *Holiness in Everyday Life*, both readily available from Beacon Hill Press, are wonderful background resources for the serious student, teacher, or pastor.

# 3
# Adventures in Love

We believe that an excellent transition point from the previous chapter to this one is the citation from Matt. 5:48 on page 82. This is that somewhat troublesome statement of Jesus to His disciples that we are to "be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

Both as a way to review chapter 2 and to anticipate the direction that chapter 3 takes, you might encourage your group to discuss what in the world they think it could possibly mean for human beings to be perfect as God is perfect. Some people immediately dismiss this as utterly impossible, choosing instead to assume that Jesus' Sermon on the Mount must have been given in order to demonstrate to us all just how inadequate and sinful we really are—who, after all, really could attain divine perfection? In this fairly common interpretation, Jesus' purpose is to drive us to our knees, to make us feel our imperfection so profoundly that we will know that we could be saved only by grace.

The problem with this approach is that there is simply nothing in the Sermon on the Mount that actually suggests that this is what Jesus was doing. You might want to take your study group to the end of the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus concludes with the parable about building houses either on solid rock or shifting sands (Matt. 7:24-27). It is often overlooked that the difference between these two builders, in terms of Jesus' analogy, is that the wise one hears Jesus' words and obeys them, while the foolish one hears Jesus' words and does not obey. The solid foundation is not simply Jesus; it is Jesus as our Lord who teaches us how to live wisely for God's kingdom (cf. Luke 6:46-49). This means that Jesus is describing the nature of discipled living in the community of God's kingdom.

With all this in mind, let us return to Jesus' tough words, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." We have three important considerations we'd like to share:

1. The Greek word translated as "perfect" here is *teleios*, which is the adjectival form of the word *telos*. You might recognize this word; sometimes it is used as a "loan-word" in English. It means goal, or aim, or purpose—we like to think of a target with that bull's-eye perfectly

in the middle. Thus the term *teleios* suggests something like someone who is hitting the target just right—or who at least is heading right for it! It means, accordingly, that Jesus' disciples are called to fulfill God's purpose or aim for them.

2. What is that aim or goal? What is God shooting by creating us, and then re-creating us through Jesus Christ? This is where the context of Matt. 5:48 becomes crucial. Jesus begins this teaching by saying, "You have heard . . . " It is clear that Jesus is calling us, His disciples, to love all people as God does. Ah, there it is—so much easier than being "perfect"! But of course it really is not easy, even if it is simple. When Jesus says that when we love all other people, even our enemies, we become "sons of our heavenly Father," He means that we are living similarly to God, living in such a way that others can recognize this God who loves all. And obviously, this is the "core notion" of holiness that we hope to communicate to our readers.
3. It can be enlightening at this point to compare Matt. 5:48 to the parallel passage in the Gospel of Luke, where in 6:36, in the same context, Jesus calls His disciples to "be merciful, just as your Father is merciful." We suggest that Luke's use of the term "merciful" here sheds additional light on Matthew's "perfection." God's perfection is the perfection of loving all human beings, of lavishing mercy or compassion on all. John Wesley loved to quote Ps. 145:9 as evidence of God's universal compassion, extended, Wesley argued, not only to all human beings but to all living creatures. (You can read about this in Wesley's sermon "The General Deliverance," available at http://wesley.nnu.edu/, the Wesley Center for Applied Theology.)

It is this passage in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:43-48), along with its parallel in Luke (6:27-36), that leads us to the conviction that divine holiness is fundamentally and centrally the holiness of God's lavish, expansive, and unspeakably generous love. Certainly as far as our ability to be like the perfectly holy God is concerned, this is the core notion. We do not think loving like this is easy—but at least it is relatively simple. We can all get our heads around it.

It may well be that in some groups there will be people who will object to—or at least want to talk further about—our claim that at least in some marital situations the loving thing to do would be to leave an abusive partner (p. 78). We know that this can be a sensitive area of experience and discussion. One way to probe this issue further might be to ask if it is really loving other people when we allow them to continue in their abusive patterns. Is that loving?—or is it simply enabling them to continue in sinful, destructive practices? Since an abuser harms and dehumanizes not only his victims but also himself in the act, love for the abuser would dictate that we not allow ourselves, or others, to be victims. Perhaps your group will want to discuss this: How much is too much?

Where do we draw the line? When does suffering lose all possibility of being redemptive of those who inflict it? These may well be important questions for your group to discuss.

From this chapter's "For Deeper Study" list, let us highlight two little books, both of which are available from Beacon Hill Press: John Knight's *All Loves Excelling: Proclaiming Our Wesleyan Message* and William Greathouse's *Love Made Perfect: Foundations for the Holy Life.*

# 4
# Sharing in the Love of the Trinity

It is likely that this chapter is the most challenging in our little book, in terms of the complexity of the ideas explored. Never let it be said that the doctrine of the Trinity is a simple doctrine! On the other hand, we hope in this chapter that we do not make it more difficult than it need be.

One could use any number of other passages in the New Testament to teach about God's triune nature, but we recommend that it may be best to stick close to the passages that this chapter employs. The material from John's Gospel, especially, will lead the careful reader to appreciate that there is a very good reason for believing that divine perfection is fundamentally the perfection of love: it is the love between the Father and the Son, according to John's proclamation, that is at the very heart of who God is. Further, the gift of the Holy Spirit is the outpouring toward us of that very love between the Father and the Son. This concept was extremely important in the thinking of Augustine of Hippo (354—430) and is enjoying a significant revival of interest among contemporary theologians.

In this chapter, we also highlight how in John's Gospel Jesus reduces all of His commandments to His disciples down to just the one—"love one another as I have loved you" (John 15:12; see p. 94). This fascinating theme, which to be sure helps to underscore love as our core notion of holiness, is explored further in a new book by one of us. Since it deals almost exclusively with passages in the Gospel of John and the first letter of John, it might well provide some good background reading for this chapter. (It was written by the older of the two of us, Michael Lodahl, is also published by Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, and is called *When Love Bends Down: Images of the Christ Who Meets Us Where We Are*.)

Another important concept explored in this chapter is the witness of the Spirit, sometimes called the doctrine of assurance. As you discuss this section, emphasize that for John Wesley, our experience of God's love for us provides the possibility and the power for our loving response to-

ward God and others. This will open the door to the likelihood that some of your group will be willing to share an experience of God's love in their lives. How did it happen? Where? Under what circumstances? But such a discussion should also be directed with the sensitivity that there likely will be people who are not so sure they've ever really undergone such an experience. Be open to them and to their stories and their frustrations. Creating an atmosphere of that kind of honesty will actually provide a perfect bridge to the following chapter—and far more importantly, may well provide the kind of social context in which people might indeed feel the saving love and grace of God for them in a very powerful and peculiar way.

In addition to the book mentioned above, which is too recent to have been included in the "For Deeper Study" lists of *Relational Holiness*, we will suggest one more that is on the list. It may be available now only through on-line sources, but it would be well worth the effort to try to track down—H. Ray Dunning's *Reflecting the Divine Image: Christian Ethics in Wesleyan Perspective*, published by InterVarsity Press.

# 5
# Loving Practice Makes Perfect Love

You may have noticed that this chapter title takes the old saying "Practice makes perfect" and gives it a more biblical, Christian meaning. The point of this chapter is that there are specific practices or habits that we Christians can incorporate into our lives together as the Body of Christ that can help create a groove of holiness in which to walk. We create momentum in our lives by our everyday habits and choices. We are indeed "creatures of habit," even though we're usually of the habit of not liking this truth about ourselves. We further believe that the Church is God's gift to Christian believers as the place where we first learn, and then become lifelong practitioners of, the habits that help to shape and form us into God's holy people.

One of these habits is the one you are practicing with your Sunday School class or Bible study group. You are meeting together in a relatively small group, a setting in which honesty, accountability, repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation can all occur. A group like that provides exactly the kind of dynamic that we Wesleyans, following in Wesley's footsteps, believe is most conducive to living the holy life. When John Wesley wrote, "There is no holiness but social holiness," he meant that none of us is called to the life of Christian discipleship in solitude. There are no "Lone Rangers" in Christian faith—and for that matter, even the Lone Ranger had Tonto as a friend and companion!

A fundamental concept of this chapter is that the group you are leading may very well be the setting in which at least some (if not all) of your members can most deeply and truly be touched by the love of God. This point is driven home particularly on pages 113-15, and we encourage you to work carefully through the ideas on those pages with your group or class.

We then provide a couple of illustrations from Paul's writings that demonstrate the extent to which we modern Western people tend not to understand very well what Paul had to say about living in community as the Body of Christ (or, as with 1 Cor. 3:16, as the Temple of the Spirit). For some of your class members, it may be a new idea to think of the *fellowship* or *community* of Chris-

tian believers (i.e., a local church congregation) as the Temple of the Holy Spirit. We are all much more conditioned to think of our individual bodies as those temples—an idea which Paul does explore in 1 Cor. 6, but even there with a much stronger notion of our interconnectedness as Christians than what we are generally used to.

A good question to explore with your members might be, How would our local church congregation be different if we were really to begin to live in the ways God calls us to live together? Do we already do so? In what ways does our current society challenge, compromise, or undercut our efforts to live as the Church?

We do believe the "Questions to Stimulate Discussion" for this chapter are especially good! (Tom made me write that; he wrote all those questions! But seriously, they are wonderful.) From the section "For Deeper Study," let us recommend the following:

Jeren Rowell's "A Holy Church," in the aforementioned book *Holiness 101: Exploring This Transforming Journey.*

Theodore Runyon's *The New Creation: John Wesley's Theology Today* is a very fine exploration of Wesley's doctrine of salvation as rooted primarily in the idea of our being renewed or restored in the image of God. Runyon also does a great job of helping his readers to appreciate how profoundly social or relational Wesley's practical theology was.

Howard Snyder's *Liberating the Church: The Ecology of Church and Kingdom* is a powerful and deeply challenging vision of what the Church, the Body of Christ, ought to be in the world. We highly recommend it.

Rob Staples's *Outward Sign and Inward Grace* is undoubtedly the finest treatment of the theology of the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper that has been produced by a Nazarene scholar. Staples writes clearly and movingly about how much we contemporary Wesleyans have to learn from Wesley on these matters.

# 6
# Dancers, Not Dinosaurs

We should probably admit that we are not necessarily equally enthusiastic about the metaphor of dancing employed in this chapter. You can probably guess this, but the one of us cousins who is older, stiffer, and far less agile finds it to be less engaging than the other, younger, more fun-loving cousin.

We are happy to leave it to you, the discussion leader, as to whether or not you find the metaphor of the dance as helpful. We will concentrate our attention instead on some additional biblical texts that may be useful in shedding further light on this chapter.

We cite Rom. 13:9-10 on page 128, one of the places where Paul quotes the commandment found first in Lev. 19:18, "Love your neighbor as yourself." We have already mentioned that this command is quoted several times in the Synoptic Gospels (though never in John). Paul also cites it twice—here in Romans and also in Gal. 5:14. We encourage you to work through these two passages in Paul's writings, noting the context and the use to which Paul puts this ancient command from Leviticus. Both in Romans and in Galatians Paul makes a somewhat startling, perhaps even radical, claim: that the entirety of the (Jewish) law (or Torah) is "summed up" in this single commandment. While we're at it, let us point out, too, that the letter of James also cites the command to love one's neighbor as oneself, calling it the "royal law" (2:8). We suspect that it is also what James alludes to in 1:25 as "the perfect law, the law of liberty."

With all of this New Testament usage of the command of Lev. 19:18, surely it would be worthwhile to discuss together just what it might entail to "love your neighbor as yourself." (Keep in mind the parable of the Good Samaritan, inspired by the Jewish scholar's question, "Who is my neighbor?" [Luke 10:25-37].) We hope this discussion would shed greater light on our working definition of "love" in *Relational Holiness.*

We think that the statement on page 132, "This means that the general answer to the popular question 'What would Jesus do?' is always 'Jesus would love'" is important. We go from there to admit that "one can interpret wrongly what it means to be Christlike." This may be a good place to

discuss the problem of how to avoid making Jesus into someone who simply conforms to our own preferences and prejudices. There may be no simple answer to this problem, but we believe it is a worthwhile issue to discuss and to be aware of. In the midst of that discussion, it may be useful to bring 1 John 3:16-17 into the discussion. In that passage, to love as Jesus loves is described as laying down our lives for one another in the Christian community. That, in turn, is illustrated in very concrete terms of sharing our goods with other Christian believers who are in material need. (I [Michael] explore these ideas further in chapter 8 of my new book, *When Love Bends Down*.)

To illustrate the "do my own thing dance" (p. 137), it may be helpful to return to Paul's letter to the Galatians (5:13-26). For Paul, "living according to the flesh" is roughly equivalent to "doing my own thing," or what the *New Revised Standard Version* translates as "self-indulgence." Notice how Paul here offers a very different definition of "freedom" than what we are used to hearing as Americans: our freedom is not for "doing our own thing," but rather is an opportunity to "through love become slaves to one another"! In fact, notice that this is the passage where Paul quotes the command to love your neighbor as yourself. As Paul proceeds in this passage, it is not hard to associate the "do my own thing dance" with living according to the flesh, and the "cooperation dance" (p. 138) with living according to the Spirit.

We do trust that these additional notes and suggestions will be helpful to you! Let us finally highlight a few of the items from the "For Deeper Study" section that may be relatively accessible. In *Holiness 101: Exploring This Transforming Journey*, let us for this chapter highlight the chapters by Jim Bond and Philip Hamner. In addition, H. Ray Dunning's little book *A Layman's Guide to Sanctification* will provide a great background and support to your efforts.

God bless, strengthen, and guide you!

Tom and Mike