

# THE POLITICS OF HOLINESS

ALWYN THOMSON



pathways



# INTRODUCING PATHWAYS

This booklet by Alwyn Thomson, Research Officer at ECONI, is the fourth in the PATHWAYS series.

ECONI has previously voiced its concerns by identifying biblical principles pertinent to a Christian response to the Northern Ireland conflict and applying these to the situation in our community.

Now, a complementary process needs to take place.

Our goal with this series of booklets is to identify issues raised by the situation in Northern Ireland and to bring these to the Bible looking for guidance. We hope that the questions asked and the debate raised will enable God's people to find his paths and to walk in them.

Though some of these issues are controversial, ECONI is committed to the task of examining all aspects of the Northern Ireland situation in the light of God's word. ECONI believes that God has something relevant to say to the community and that God's people need to engage with his word and the hurts facing our community.

We invite others to join with us in understanding God's word to Northern Ireland.

As Evangelical Christians we confess the historic faith of the Gospel as it is revealed in the Bible. We affirm that the Bible, which is the Word of God, reveals God's plan of salvation, that it has been breathed into existence by the Holy Spirit, and that through it the Holy Spirit continues to speak. We therefore hold the Bible to be truthful, authoritative and, in both the Old and New Testaments, the only written Word of God.

We want our thinking and behaviour to be governed by these Scriptures, as our only infallible rule of faith and practice. In the complexities of Northern Ireland it is of paramount importance that we subject all our ideologies to the test of the Bible and order our lives according to its teachings.

Our primary aim is to address our fellow Evangelicals in order to encourage a continuing process of relating the Bible to our confused situation.

ECONI 1997

ISBN 1 874324 11 5

Printed by GPS Colour Graphics Ltd.

Design by Spring Graphics

THE  
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## **'ON GOD'S ORDERS'**

In September 1993 Yitzhak Rabin, Prime Minister of Israel, shook hands with Yasser Arafat, Chairman of the PLO, on the lawn of the White House. After a lifetime of brutal conflict against his country's enemies the soldier turned politician finally made peace.

On November 4 1995 Rabin attended a peace rally in King's Square, Tel Aviv. Before a crowd of 100,000 people he joined in the singing of 'A Song for Peace'.

Let the sun shine through again  
To let the flowers grow.  
Don't look backwards to the past;  
Let those who left you go.  
Let your eyes look up with hope,  
Not through a rifle sight.  
Sing a song, a song for love,  
Not for another fight.  
Don't tell me the day will come;  
Work for it without cease.  
It's not a dream, so  
Inside every city square  
Let out a cheer for peace!  
Come on and sing a song for peace;  
Don't whisper us a prayer.  
Better to sing a song for peace.  
Let shouting fill the air!

Rabin looked uncomfortable, even a little embarrassed, as he sang in front of the crowd. Yet he, more than anyone, had made agreement between Israel and the PLO a reality.

As he stepped down off the platform and walked to his car a 25-year-old student, Yigal Amir, stepped forward. Approaching to within three feet of the Prime Minister, he pulled out a gun and fired three shots. Rabin was hit in the arm and back. He died later that night in hospital.

After the shooting Amir made no attempt to escape or resist arrest. An intensely religious orthodox Jew, he is reported to have told the police "I acted alone on God's orders." Later, hearing of Rabin's death, he said "I'm satisfied."

And so the Politics of Holiness claimed another victim.



# ISRAEL AND THE POLITICS OF HOLINESS

## **BE HOLY**

The Germans are efficient, the French have flair, the Chinese are inscrutable, the British are reserved. And so it goes. We define peoples and nations in simplistic - and often uncomplimentary - ways. Perhaps there is something to these generalisations. Maybe they do catch something of the spirit of a people. More likely they serve to reinforce our prejudices or to enable us to keep a safe distance between the truth and ourselves.

However, the nation of Israel was defined in a very simple and forthright way. God had told his people what their defining characteristic was to be:

“Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy.” (Leviticus 19.3)

God’s holiness was awesome and all-consuming (Leviticus 9.23-24) and only a holy people could encounter a holy God and survive.

## **HOLINESS AND SEPARATION**

At the heart of Israel’s call to holiness was the demand for separation.

“You are to be holy to me because I, the LORD, am holy, and I have set you apart from the nations to be my own.” (Leviticus 20.26)

Israel’s holy God was separated from all that was impure. What was unclean, impure could never come into his presence. Thus Israel had to separate from all practices, objects and peoples that would defile. In particular, “to be a holy nation, Israel had to separate herself from the other nations, especially all the forms of idolatry and immorality pursued by her neighbours.”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Hartley (1992) lix

Hence the law given to Israel stressed the need for the people, both individuals and the community, to keep themselves free of impurity. However, this separation was not an end in itself. The whole complex of rules regarding what was clean and unclean, what was pure and impure, and the system of sacrifices all served the one purpose of enabling God's people to stand in the presence of their holy God, as a holy people. Israel was set apart from what defiled in order to be set apart to their holy God.

## **HOLY COMMUNITY, HOLY NATION**

For Israel this call to holiness was more than a call to individual piety. It was a call to display God's holiness in all aspects of life. Thus the law "was not only divine revelation, but also the constitution of the community of Israel."<sup>2</sup>

How is Israel to live as a community? How is worship to be carried out? How are the people to be ruled? How will the courts function? How should the poor be dealt with? What standards of truth and justice should obtain? How is Israel to live as a nation among the nations? What factors will determine its foreign policy? Its alliances? Its wars? In particular, at those times when "Israel's sovereignty was denied and her very existence threatened...what did it mean to be Israel, the people of promise?"<sup>3</sup>

This call to holiness defined the life of Israel as community and a nation. More than this, the call to holiness defined the destiny and purpose of Israel. This is the stuff of politics - not politics in the limited sense of party and government but politics in the broad sense of how a community or nation understands itself and shapes itself.

In our community politics and holiness may seem an unlikely combination. Yet Israel had no difficulty in understanding the call to holiness as all embracing. Nothing of their life in the world as individuals, as families, as tribes, as a community or as a nation was excluded from the demands of the call to holiness.

<sup>2</sup> Borg (1984) 3

<sup>3</sup> Borg (1984) 4

## **RETURN FROM EXILE**

The nation's life was marked by many things but holiness was not often one of them. Much of the story of Israel is the story of idolatrous worship, corrupt rulers, social injustice and unwise alliances. As God had warned, judgement came on the people and exile followed.

The return from exile under the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah showed that some among the leaders of Israel had learned the lesson. The story of the return is the story of a people striving to create a community marked by separation and the pursuit of holiness. The people rebuilt the Temple, purifying the priesthood and restoring true worship and sacrifice; they rediscovered, read and obeyed the book of the law; they restored tithing, the Sabbath and the feasts; they broke off social and marital links with other peoples.

Read Ezra and Nehemiah and we get a sense of a community whose leaders are determined that the mistakes of the past shall not be repeated. "The political program of post-exilic Judaism was the permeation of her national life by holiness, a program undergirded by the twin institutions of Torah and Temple."<sup>4</sup> This was the politics of holiness.

## **THE DARK AGES**

What happened next? Did nothing change until the birth of Jesus? More than 400 years separate Ezra from Jesus. In these 400 years what events and influences shaped the Jewish people and their world? Above all, in a changed and changing world, how did Jesus' Jewish contemporaries understand their calling to be a holy people?

Imagine that you know nothing of the Reformation, have never heard of Cromwell and the identity of the man on the white horse is a mystery. As for Elizabethan settlements, 1641, 1690, the United Irishmen, the Act of Union, the Famine, Home Rule, 1916, the Government of Ireland Act - your mind is a blank page. If this were so could you hope to understand this community? Could you hope to explain it to an outsider?

<sup>4</sup> Borg (1984) 53

For most of us this is the difficulty we face in trying to understand the world of the gospels. Our knowledge of Israel's history - often patchy at best - ends with Ezra and Nehemiah, the rebuilt Temple and the rediscovered Torah. Yet the events of these missing years helped form the world of the New Testament. New movements for renewal and reform came into being - many of them advocating, in one form or another, the politics of holiness. Not a few of these groups and the agendas they pursued shaped the world in which Jesus lived and ministered. To grasp something of that world and Israel's understanding of the politics of holiness we need to take these 'dark ages' and shine some light on them.

### **FROM EZRA TO JESUS - A POTTED HISTORY OF TURBULENT TIMES**

Israel's Babylonian rulers had exiled the people; Israel's Persian rulers allowed them to return. Not many years later the Persian Empire fell to the forces of Alexander the Great. Whereas the Persians had been content to let the Jews live according to their own customs and laws, the new overlords came with a mission to spread the influence of their own culture. This process - known as Hellenisation - found an enthusiastic response among some of the Jewish aristocracy and priesthood. This, together with growing economic exploitation, led to increasing tension and growing resistance. Following Alexander's death his kingdom was carved up, Palestine eventually becoming part of the territory ruled by the Seleucids who continued the policy of Hellenisation.

The final straw for many Jews was the desecration and plundering of the Temple by the Seleucid king, Antiochus IV. Faced with a choice of acquiescence or resistance, increasing numbers chose resistance. While this resistance had political and economic overtones, undoubtedly religious concerns drove many of those who chose to fight.

## **'HE BURNED WITH ZEAL FOR THE LAW'**

In those days Mattathias...a priest of the family of Joarib, moved from Jerusalem and settled in Modein. He had five sons...He saw the blasphemies being committed in Judah and Jerusalem, and said,

"Alas! Why was I born to see this,  
The ruin of my people, the ruin of the holy city,  
And to live there when it was given over to the enemy,  
The sanctuary given over to aliens?  
...And see, our holy place, our beauty,  
and our glory have been laid waste;  
the Gentiles have profaned them.  
Why should we live any longer?"

Then Mattathias and his sons tore their clothes, put on sackcloth, and mourned greatly.

The king's officers, who were enforcing the apostasy, came to the town of Modein to make them offer sacrifice. Many from Israel came to them; and Mattathias and his sons were assembled. Then the king's officers spoke to Mattathias as follows:

"You are a leader, honoured and great in this town. Now be the first to come and do what the king commands, as all the Gentiles and the people of Judah and those that are left in Jerusalem have done. Then you and your sons will be numbered among the Friends of the king..."

But Mattathias answered and said in a loud voice:

"Even if all the nations that live under the rule of the king obey him, and have chosen to obey his commandments, all of them abandoning the religion of their ancestors, I and my sons and my brothers will continue to live by the covenant of our ancestors. Far be it from us to desert the law and the ordinances. We will not obey the king's words by turning aside from our religion."

When he had finished speaking...a Jew came forward...to offer sacrifice... according to the king's command. When Mattathias saw it, he burned with zeal and his heart was stirred. He gave vent to righteous anger; he ran and killed him on the altar. At the same time he killed the king's officer...and he tore down the altar. Thus he burned with zeal for the law, just as Phinehas did against Zimri son of Salu.

Then Mattathias cried out in the town with a loud voice, saying: "Let everyone who is zealous for the law and supports the covenant come out with me!"

Then he and his sons fled to the hills and left all that they had in the town. (1 Maccabees 2.1-28 NRSV Apocrypha)

Inspired by visions of the restoration of God's rule, the Jewish people under the leadership of Mattathias and his five sons sustained a long, bitter - and ultimately successful - campaign against their rulers. Allied with them were the Hasideans - a group of pious Jews, "mighty warriors of Israel, all who offered themselves willingly for the law." (1 Maccabees 2.42) Mattathias' descendants - the Hasmoneans - ruled an independent Israel until the Roman conquest.

Yet the Hasmonean victory soon turned sour. First Jonathan, then Simon - sons of Mattathias - accepted the office of high priest. Though from a priestly family, they were not of the family of Zadok - the only legitimate high priestly family in the view of the pious. "What had begun as a Judean peasant revolt...ended not in the final establishment of the Kingdom of God, but simply in the establishment of a new dynasty of high priests."<sup>5</sup>

It seems that out of that disappointment, and out of a sense of new possibilities, a number of groups emerged within Judaism at this time. Some - such as the Pharisees - are familiar to us from the New Testament. Others - the Essenes, for example - are known from other sources, notably the Dead Sea Scrolls and the writings of Josephus. Both these groups were renewal movements. Both had

5 Horsley & Hanson (1985) 22

their own analysis of the situation facing Israel, their own understanding of Israel's past, present and future, and their own programme for the transformation and renewal of Judaism in the new situation the people faced. Both advocated the politics of holiness as a means for renewing Israel in the face of the social and political realities facing the people.

Israel's independence ended in 63 BC when the Roman general Pompey conquered Palestine. The country was ruled by client kings like Herod, and Roman governors like Pontius Pilate. While the high priestly families, the court of Herod and the aristocracy were prepared to co-operate with the Roman system, many of the peasants, priests and scribes were increasingly discontent with their lot and that of their nation. Religiously, economically and politically the stage was set for conflict. Indeed, small-scale conflict was a regular feature at this time and a large-scale revolt broke out in 4 BC. Some years after Jesus ministry another revolt led to the devastating Jewish War (AD 66-70). The devastation was repeated in AD 132-135 during the Bar Kochba revolt.

Throughout the period of Roman occupation the renewal movements were active within Judaism. Though still advocating their programmes of renewal, these programmes themselves had been transformed by the fall of the Hasmoneans and the coming of Rome. And alongside existing movements, new groups appeared, determined to throw out the Romans as Mattathias had thrown out the nation's last conquerors.

Thus the movements of renewal that Jesus encountered and challenged were working out the politics of holiness in a world shaped by Hellenistic culture and Roman political power. This was the world in which Jesus lived and ministered and the world in which the Jewish people had to work out the implications of their calling to holiness.

### **ARE YOU AN ESSENE? NO! I'M A PHARISEE!**

So what were these movements? And where do they fit into the picture of Jewish life in Jesus' day? The variety within Palestinian Judaism at that time is every bit as complicated and confusing as the variety within evangelicalism in our day. The titles of

two recent books hint at this diversity - *Bandits, Prophets and Messiahs and Pharisees, Scribes and Sadducees*.<sup>6</sup>

Some of these groups appear in the New Testament. We have already mentioned Jesus' disputes with the Pharisees. In the New Testament we also hear of movements associated with people like Theudas, Judas the Galilean and the mysterious 'Egyptian' (Acts 5.36-37; 21.38). Besides what we know from the Bible, other literature from the period both deepens and widens our knowledge. From Josephus we learn more of Judas the Galilean, the Egyptian and other leaders of revolutionary movements. The Dead Sea Scrolls give us an insight into the beliefs and practices of the Essenes - a movement about which the New Testament is silent.

Each of these groups - Pharisees, Essenes and Revolutionary movements - faced particular challenges following the Roman conquest of Palestine. Each had to ask the question, What does it mean to be loyal to God in these circumstances? The answer was clear - Be Holy! But what did that mean? To this each group gave a different answer.

## **NO SURRENDER TO ROME - THE RESISTANCE**

Rome did not rule Palestine unopposed. "Under Tiberius things were quiet," wrote Tacitus. But in Palestine insurrection was never far from the surface. The story of Jewish resistance to Rome is complex. However, it is clear is that among the Jewish people there were those whose cry was "No King but God!" The regular violation of Israel's religious sensibilities by the Romans, whether deliberate or accidental, was bad enough, but, more fundamentally, those who resisted were driven by the conviction that Rome should not be there at all. The land belonged to God; the people belonged to God; the Temple belonged to God. Their heroes were those who had acted out of zeal for Israel's God - Elijah, Phineas, Mattathias and his sons - and those who had chosen to die rather than compromise (1 Maccabees 1.62-63; 2.34-38). They could not countenance the presence of Gentile rulers in the land. True service of God, true fidelity to the call to holiness, required that the occupier be expelled and God alone be recognised as Israel's king.

<sup>6</sup> Horsley & Hanson (1985); Saldarini (1989)



Many of the rebellions against Roman rule had distinctly religious overtones. Instead of illegitimate Roman rulers and their client kings there was an expectation of a righteous king, chosen and anointed by God - a messianic figure. "The people were ready for an anointed charismatic leader from among the peasantry, like David of old."<sup>7</sup> Thus, following the death of Herod the Great in 4BC - an illegitimate king in the eyes of many - the people had a choice of messianic pretenders. Josephus mentions three: Judas, Son of Hezekiah, Simon and Anthronges. Each aspired to kingship; each formed an armed band; each fought the Romans. It took more than 14,000 men under the command of the Roman general Varus to crush the rebellions.

Some decades later, during the great Jewish uprising against Rome in AD 66-70, two further messianic pretenders offered themselves to the people - Menahem and Simon bar Giora. Simon's movement survived for two years before finally being overcome by Rome. A further messianic movement resulted in the Bar Kochba revolt (AD 132-135). Simeon bar Kochba, acclaimed by Rabbi Akiba, rallied the Jewish people to his cause and fought the Romans for three years before the final - inevitable - defeat.

In these and other conflicts the Jewish people "fought against the hated foreign domination by the Romans, so that, led by the king whom they themselves had recognised or acclaimed, they could once again be free to live under the rule of God, according to the traditional covenantal ways."<sup>8</sup>

For these movements true separation required that the Gentiles be physically removed from the land. Not only this but some of these movements - notably the sicarii - also carried out a campaign of assassination against those among the Jewish people who were considered to have compromised with Rome. Their most notable victim was the high priest Jonathan. However they also assassinated pro-Roman members of the Jewish aristocracy.

Thus separation became not only a matter of separation from pagans, but also from those Jews who had, in the opinion of these movements, compromised. This was the politics of holiness with a vengeance.

<sup>7</sup> Horsley & Hanson (1985) 109

<sup>8</sup> Horsley & Hanson (1985) 131

## COME YE APART - THE ESSENES

Those pious Jews who had fought with Mattathias and his sons may have relished the prospect of a free Israel and, more importantly, a faithful Israel. However, disillusionment and frustration soon set in. The actions of Jonathan in assuming the high-priesthood together with increasing corruption and tyranny among Israel's kings drove some Jews to open hostility and, ultimately, to withdrawal from society.

These Essenes believed that a life of holiness and obedience was impossible in the community of Israel as it was constituted. Israel was a rebellious and corrupt people. The religious leadership was illegitimate and so Temple worship was also illegitimate. Consequently they established their own communities of holiness apart from Israel. Sometimes they moved into wilderness areas - withdrawing in a very literal sense. It seems likely that the community at Qumran, where the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered, was an Essene community.

Their geographical separation was reinforced by rigorous stipulations for joining the community and strict regulations governing contact with those outside. Daily life was marked by a strong emphasis on the importance of ritual bathing for purification and on the common fellowship meal which could be shared only by those who maintained the highest levels of purity.

They understood themselves as a community of the future - the final remnant, faithful to the covenant, whom God would vindicate. They were the 'sons of light' engaged in battle with the 'sons of darkness'. When God acted "the violent of the nations and the wicked of Israel" would be "cut off and blotted out forever." They, on the other hand, would "possess the whole world as an inheritance" and "the High Mountain of Israel for ever...enjoy[ing] everlasting delights in his sanctuary." (4Q171 10-14) In the pursuit of holiness this community practised an extreme form of separation. Moreover, this separation was not so much from Rome or other Gentiles but from their fellow Jews. The key question for this community was not, Are you a Jew? but, Are you a true Jew? In other words, Are you one of us?

The politics of holiness as practised by the Essene community had three consequences. First, it resulted in rejection of and withdrawal from society. Second, it emphasised and reinforced rituals of purity as a means of maintaining separation, in the process

erecting barriers that separated Jew from Jew. Third, the community was marked by a hostile and suspicious attitude towards anyone or anything outside its boundaries.

## **A KINGDOM OF PRIESTS - THE PHARISEES**

Of all the movements within Judaism the Pharisees are the best known, simply because they regularly appear in the gospel stories. While the resistance chose the sword and withdrew to the wilderness and the Essenes chose the ghetto and simply withdrew, the Pharisees advocated separation within society with a view to transforming society.

The Pharisees' agenda was "the hallowing of everyday life in all its aspects within the existing structure of society."<sup>9</sup> Or, to draw on an image from the Wesleyan tradition, it was to spread scriptural holiness throughout the land. They chose to live by higher standards of holiness than strictly required and called others to do the same. Hence in the dispute about ritual purity (Mark 7.1-16) the standards the Pharisees applied were those set down for priests officiating in the Temple. They, however, advocated that all the covenant people of God should live by these standards.

In the gospels the Pharisees are usually seen in dispute with Jesus. They debated ritual purity (Mark 7.1-18), Sabbath observance (Mark 2.23 - 3.6), Jesus' choice of dining companions (Mark 2. 15-17), fasting, (Mark 2.18-22) and tithing (Matthew 23.23). At the core of the Pharisees' programme was allegiance to Torah as they understood it. Thus their disputes with Jesus are usually disputes about Torah. However, this was Torah understood in the light of the traditions of the elders. So what do the disagreements between Jesus and the Pharisees' concerning Torah tell us about their understanding of the politics of holiness?

"In the circumstances which confronted Israel...the importance of the law for Israel's self-understanding as the covenant people of God was bound to come to focus in those elements of the law which brought their sense of distinctiveness and separateness to most explicit and visible expression and which thus functioned for good or ill as

test cases of loyalty to the covenant people and their God.”<sup>10</sup> The disputes between Jesus and Pharisees’ concerned precisely these elements. For the Pharisees matters such as Sabbath observance, purity rules and tithing were boundary markers, defining faithfulness to the covenant. Those who adhered to them were righteous, those who strayed beyond the boundaries were sinners.

## **BOUNDARIES**

Israel’s great boundary marker was the law - Torah - and, later, the Temple. Boundary markers established and protected the covenant community’s identity. At the point of greatest pressure the boundaries were reinforced. So Sabbath observance, food regulations, circumcision took on particular importance. Keeping the law was about remaining faithful to the covenant, but it was also about the survival of Israel for they helped maintain the nation’s distinct identity.

The Pharisees and others proclaimed the importance of keeping these laws - the boundary markers - if Israel was to remain faithful and distinct. Their observance became touchstones - tests - of the people’s faithfulness. When Jesus started pushing against the carefully constructed boundaries, conflict was inevitable.

## **TITHING**

Sabbath, circumcision, food laws - these were key areas. But other aspects of the law also played a part in maintaining Israel’s separateness.

Jewish law required tithes; Roman law required taxes. When the harvest was poor and money was short something had to give. Fail to pay the tithe and the result would be censure from fellow Jews; fail to pay Rome’s taxes and the result would be the loss of land and an uncertain future on the margins. Facing such a decision many chose to pay their tax and forget the tithe. The

<sup>10</sup> Dunn (1991) 31

result was an increase in the number of non-observant Jews and a decrease in the revenues that supported the Temple, the priests and the poor. Hence, when the Pharisees insisted on the importance of tithing they were advocating “an intensification of holiness precisely in the area in which the temptation to be non-observant was the greatest.” (Borg 59)

The dispute about tithing, then, was not just an arcane disagreement about legalism, but a matter of survival. For Palestinian peasants it was about the survival of their families; for the Pharisees it was about the survival Israel as God’s holy nation. Tithing was both a boundary marker and a test of faithfulness.

## **SINNERS**

Sinners were those who did not keep the law; the righteous did (Ps 1.1-6). Gentiles were sinners. Being outside the covenant community they did not have the law (Rom 2.12-14; Ps 9.7; Gal 2.15; Mt 5.47/Lk 6.33). Apostate Jews were sinners. They were the ‘wicked’ - those who had deliberately broken the law (28.3; 55.2-3; 104.35; 119.53,155). However, the renewal movements within Judaism believed that they alone were faithful to the law. ‘Sinners’, therefore, were no longer those who did not keep the law but those who did not keep the law as interpreted by the movement.

Thus ‘sinner’ and ‘righteous’ became factional terms - those within the group were the righteous, those outside the group were the sinners, “not in some absolute sense but in the judgement of those who thought that their understanding of righteousness was the only correct one.” (Dunn, Jesus 70) The Pharisees’ criticisms of Jesus and Jesus’ responses often reflect this factional understanding rather than the theological understanding.

Jesus himself turned these distinctions against the Pharisees in his ironic comment: “I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.” Mark 2.17) He also cut through these distinctions, emphasising that the real sinners are those who oppose the will of God - no matter who they are.(Mk 14.41; 8.38; Lk 13.1-2; Jn 9.31).

Thus the Pharisaic agenda sought obedience to the call to holiness through observation of the law. And at the points where the challenge was greatest the Pharisees established their boundary markers and called on the people of Israel to live within those boundaries. Those outside - the sinners and tax-collectors - met with social and religious ostracism.

The Pharisees' understanding of the politics of holiness, despite having as its goal the transformation of society, "had become, in Jesus' view, a symptom of the problem rather than part of the solution,"<sup>11</sup> for it reinforced national boundaries and aspirations. Jesus' willingness to break the boundaries and welcome those ostracised by the Pharisees lay at the heart of the disputes between them in the gospels. For his words and deeds would have been perceived by the Pharisees both as threat to national survival and unfaithfulness to God.

## **THE PLAIN PEOPLE OF ISRAEL**

Viewing Palestinian society through the lens of Jewish renewal movements alone gives us a distorted image. Even though the Pharisees appear to have been "reasonably numerous, reasonably widespread and reasonably influential,"<sup>12</sup> they were far from a mass movements. The great majority of men and women remained unaligned with any of these movements.

The farmers, fishermen, artisans and merchants who recognised themselves in the portrayals of everyday life in Jesus' parables, made up the vast majority of the Jewish people - perhaps 70% of the population. These were 'the people of the land'. Jesus was one of them; so were his first followers. They had little by way of economic security or hope of change but they were better off than the day labourers, hired servants, dispossessed farmers and - worst of all - slaves who existed at the bottom of the heap. For those who were religious, their practice centred round a few fundamental beliefs and actions.

<sup>11</sup> Wright (1996) 389

<sup>12</sup> Wright (1992) 197

“Ordinary Galilean Jews from the lower strata of society, particularly in the countryside, would have had no time for or interest in the theological niceties, the special observances, and the fierce disputes of the Essenes, the Pharisees, or the Sadducees. For [them] fidelity to the Jewish religion meant fidelity to the basics spelled out in the Mosaic law: circumcision, observance of the Sabbath, observance of food laws, and pilgrimage to the Jerusalem Temple, whose sacrificial ritual during the great feasts was the high point of the annual cycle of their religious life.”<sup>13</sup>

## **BREAKING UP**

“...[O]ne may think of first-century Judaism as a diverse collection of responses to the theological ‘contradiction’ involved in living under foreign occupation in a land God had promised to give to Israel forever. Pharisees sought to rectify the situation by internal reform...Essenes saw no hope apart from complete withdrawal and a fresh start; and zealots strove to overthrow the oppressors by military might. The average ‘person of the land’ was too busy simply trying to survive to join any of these parties. But many of them no doubt looked for a messianic deliverer of some kind.”<sup>14</sup> However, the response to this ‘contradiction’ from these movements, manifested in their pursuit of the politics of holiness, was leading Israel astray.

The Resistance movements had turned to violence, killing and destroying in order to bring about what they believed was God’s will. Their fellow Jews were led by false claims into futile battles with Roman Armies. Jews who did not measure up to the fighters’ ideal of faithfulness were considered apostate. Jews who did not sufficiently separate themselves from Rome were sought out and targeted in the name of Israel’s God.

The Essenes walked away, washing their hands of the society. They considered it to be a hopeless cause, and made little distinction between Gentiles, those Jews who were flagrantly violating the law

13 Meier (1994) 1039

14 Blomberg (1997) 51

and those Jews who were seeking to keep the law as best they could - all were sinners, all were excluded from the covenant community of light. Here in the name of a sincere striving for holiness and separation from impurity the Essenes created a society of exclusion and suspicion.

The Pharisees too pursued a noble aspiration - an Israel faithful to the covenant and faithful to the law. Yet the politics of holiness as they practised it built boundaries, not only between Jew and Gentile but also between Jew and Jew. Israel, far from being a light to the nations was turning its back on the nations, stressing its difference from the nations in order to survive. It was in danger of becoming an introverted, defensive community - not holy, but just strange.

The irony was that all these attempts to preserve Israel led to the fragmentation of Israel. Not only were the renewal movements competing with each other but the increasingly radical demands of these movements resulted in fewer and fewer ordinary people being able to live up to their requirements. This in turn resulted in a dramatic increase in the number of those considered non-observant or sinners. Thus Jews were set against Gentiles, committed Jews were set against other committed Jews and committed Jews were set against those Jews who could not attain the level of holiness demanded.

Into this world came one who ate with sinners and tax-collectors, proclaimed God news to the poor, announced the Kingdom of God, called men and women to repentance and a life marked by mercy, forgiveness, love and service. Jesus, too, advocated the politics of holiness.



# Jesus and the POLITICS OF HOLINESS

Like the Pharisees, Jesus was deeply concerned about the state of the nation. However, Jesus was also deeply concerned about the agenda the Pharisees were pursuing, driven as it was by their vision of renewal. Far from bringing renewal, Jesus saw an agenda that was leading Israel further away from God's purposes and closer to destruction. In his ministry Jesus repeatedly challenged this agenda, offering in its place his alternative vision. As an example of Jesus' challenge we will look at one area of contention - table fellowship - and one well known parable - the Good Samaritan.

## **A SPECIAL INVITATION**

Shared meals were important in Israel. They were a sign of fellowship, acceptance and honour. Moreover, their significance was not only social but religious. The blessing spoken by the host acknowledged the gift and presence of God. Refusal to share a meal, on the other hand, was a sign of disapproval and rejection.

Meals were also bound up with keeping the law - especially regulations concerning tithing and purity. Daniel refused to risk defilement by eating food from the King's table and God honoured him (Daniel 1.8-16). Judith and Tobit were similarly honoured for their refusal to eat Gentile food, while during the Maccabean crisis many Jews who refused to compromise on this principle were martyred.

“After I was carried away captive to Assyria and came as a captive to Nineveh, everyone of my kindred and my people ate the food of the Gentiles, but I kept myself from eating the food of the Gentiles. Because I was mindful of God with all my heart, the most high gave me favour and good standing with [King] Shalmaneser.” (Tobit 1.10-13)

Then [Holofernes, the chief general of the Assyrian Army,] commanded them to bring [Judith] in where his silver dinnerware was kept, and ordered them to set a table for her with some of his own delicacies, and with some of his own wine to drink. But Judith said, 'I cannot partake of them, or it will be an offence; but I will have enough with the things I brought with me.' Holofernes said to her, 'If your supply runs out, where can we get more of the same? For none of your people are here with us.' Judith replied, 'As surely as you live, my lord, your servant will not use up the supplies I have with me before the Lord carries out by my hand what he has determined.'" (Judith 12.1-4)

"But many in Israel stood firm and were resolved in their hearts not to eat unclean food. They chose to die rather than to be defiled by food or to profane the holy covenant; and they did die." (1 Maccabees 1.62-63).

Thus sharing meals together - or the refusal to do so - had deep social and religious significance for Jews. After all, people had died for this principle. Inevitably, then, table-fellowship was important to the Pharisees. Meals were "a microcosm of Israel's intended historic structure as well as a model of Israel's destiny."<sup>15</sup> The meal symbolised what was the nation should be - a holy nation, maintaining purity and separated from defilement. The meal also anticipated what the nation would be when God acted in power to vindicate his people (see Isaiah 25.6).

Since the shared meal proclaimed a vision of Israel as a holy people and a kingdom of priests, both in the present and the future, there could be no place at the table for those who were, in the judgement of the Pharisees, neither holy nor pure. Neither sinners nor tax collectors belonged to the holy community and neither sinners nor tax collectors would see God's future blessing.

For the Pharisees, then, table fellowship was not so much a matter of legal nit-picking still less a question of etiquette. Meals were a key expression of their vision of Israel in the present and the future and a visible manifestation of the politics of holiness.

<sup>15</sup> Borg (1984) 80

## **BANQUETING WITH THE BAD**

“...a friend of tax collectors and sinners.” (Matthew 11.19)

“Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?” (Mark 2.16)

“This man welcomes sinners, and eats with them.” (Luke 15.2)

“He has gone to be the guest of a sinner.” (Luke 19.7)

Jesus dined with sinners. Sinners “did not accept in practice the Pharisaic program of holiness for Israel and could not be trusted with regard to tithing and cleanness. And yet Jesus, in the name of the ultimate hope of Israel (the Kingdom of God) sat at table with sinners. To say, and to express, in action, that the Kingdom of God included these meant to his opponents that he had rejected their understanding of Israel’s holiness as separation, both as present practice and as final destiny. In short, to the extent that Jesus was a public figure, his action was perceived as a serious challenge to the internal movement of reform which was intended to make Israel a holy community, a kingdom of priests.”<sup>16</sup>

Jesus dined with tax collectors. Tax collectors were particularly singled out because, far from maintaining separation, they associated with Gentiles. Physical contact was inevitable as part of their duties but, more than this, they were collaborators, and collaboration “threatened the community goal of holiness which required separation from Gentile uncleanness and rule.”<sup>17</sup>

So Jesus table fellowship with sinners and tax collectors was perceived by the Pharisees as a threat to their programme of reform and a challenge to Israel’s solidarity against the Gentiles.

## **THE LEAST, THE LAST, AND THE LOST**

It seems that Jesus clearly intended his table fellowship to be a challenge - the dispute was not simply an unforeseen consequence of Jesus’ actions. Table fellowship was the battleground Jesus chose in his challenge to the Pharisees. The gospels record some of Jesus responses to his critics.

They were compared to children finding fault. (Luke 7.31-35). In effect Jesus was saying to them, Whatever I do, if it does not conform

<sup>16</sup> Borg (1984) 84-5

<sup>17</sup> Borg (1984) 85

to your norms, you will complain about. Their criticisms and Jesus response were driven by different understandings of what Israel was to be. In Mark 2.15-17 Jesus took the categories of the Pharisees and turned them on their head. You say these people are sinners? Well, they are the ones who need help. A doctor treats the sick, not the healthy. Luke 19.7-10 sees Jesus asserting that even the outcasts, the tax collectors - those excluded in the quest for holiness - are children of Abraham.

Jesus fullest response is recorded in Luke 15, reaching its climax in the parable of the prodigal son. In the parable Jesus justified his attitude towards the sinners and invited his opponents to join in the celebrations over the return of the prodigal. The elder brother's response is left unspoken, leaving Jesus' interlocutors with both a challenge and an opportunity: "Will the protestors commitment to the quest for holiness make them adamant that outcasts such as these cannot be part of the people of God?"<sup>18</sup>

The dispute over table - fellowship centres on two competing visions of Israel's purpose and Israel's hope. Jesus came to the sinners and the tax collectors - to the least, the last and the lost - and proclaimed to them the Kingdom of God. Where the Pharisees and others had built barriers of exclusion, Jesus tore them down and built bridges of inclusion instead.

### **THE PARABLE OF THE HOLY LEVITE (LUKE 10.25-37)**

The man lying on the road to Jericho was "half dead."<sup>(30)</sup> This presented a problem for the priest and the Levite. On the one hand, if the man was still alive they had a duty to help him. On the other, if he were dead, approaching his body would defile them. On the one hand preference could be given to the legal requirement that could be fulfilled with certainty - pass by and don't be defiled. On the other, priests and Levites could risk defilement to help a neighbour.

With no definite guidance as to which option to take the choice to pass by rather than to risk defilement reflected the priority given to the commitment to "the quest for a holy community understood as separation from all that defiles."<sup>19</sup> The consequence of this legal

<sup>18</sup> Borg (1984) 92

<sup>19</sup> Borg (1984) 105

rectitude, driven as it was by the quest for holiness, was that the heart of the law - "You shall love your neighbour as yourself" - was set aside. Instead, it was left to the half-breed, the compromiser, the impure Samaritan to demonstrate the compassion and mercy that God required (33,37).

In this well known story Jesus challenged the vision of Israel prevalent among the Pharisees, throwing down the gauntlet to their commitment to the politics for holiness.

### **THE BOUNDARY BREAKER**

To protect the holiness of Israel Pharisees, Essenes, Resistance fighters and others had come up with strategies of withdrawal and exclusion. They had drawn boundary after boundary defining who was in and who was out, who was acceptable and who was unacceptable, who was holy and who was unclean.

These boundaries mattered intensely to them for they marked out the limits of the covenant - those who stepped over the boundaries stepped outside the covenant. The boundaries protected Israel, defining the nature of faithfulness in the midst of the pressure to compromise. The boundaries defined and maintained Israel as a separate - and therefore holy - people.

These boundaries also mattered to Jesus - the boundary breaker. He saw that every boundary they drew was a denial of their calling as the people of God. The debate between Jesus and his opponents was not a polite exchange of views, for the implications of their differing views were crucial for Israel: "personal and group identity was at stake; salvation was at stake; the meaning and character of God's covenant was at stake."<sup>20</sup>

### **INSIDE OUT HOLINESS**

Jesus and the Pharisees may both have been committed to the politics of holiness, but the politics were different because the understanding of holiness was different. For the Pharisees holiness had to be protected from the contagion of uncleanness whether from the Romans or from

<sup>20</sup> Dunn (1991) 106

'unfaithful' Jews, hence the importance of the boundaries. However, holiness, according to Jesus, was not a matter of getting the boundaries right but of getting the centre right: "Nothing outside a man can make him 'unclean' by going into him. Rather it is what comes out of a man that makes him 'unclean'" Mark 7.15

Jesus, the Holy one of God, shattered the boundaries set up in defence of false views of holiness. He took his holiness to the despised, the compromised, the marginalised, the failures and the faithless. In his encounters he proclaimed and demonstrated the boundless grace of God. He proclaimed and made present the Kingdom of God.

Was Jesus' compromised? Did he gradually lose his distinctive message and ministry? Was he dragged down to the level of those around him? Was his distinctiveness? No! The irony is that those in Israel who wanted to protect Israel's distinctiveness by marking the boundaries had long ago lost their identity and purpose. Jesus, in breaking through the boundaries, did not compromise his holiness. Instead, he displayed true holiness and fulfilled the will of God for his people.

## **HOLINESS IS CATCHING**

Not only did Jesus oppose ideas of holiness that focused on the boundaries, he also challenged the attitude that true holiness had to be protected by strategies of withdrawal or exclusion. Consider Mark 5.1-20. Jesus went to "the region of the Gerasenes" - unclean territory. There he encountered a man possessed by an unclean spirit. So overwhelmed was this man by this spirit that he lived among the tombs - surrounded by uncleanness. To cap it all "a large herd of pigs was feeding on a nearby hillside" - unclean animals.

In this midst of this corruption stood the holy one of God. Was he corrupted, defiled? No. Instead, the unclean spirit was cast out and the newly liberated man was sent from the tombs to his family and neighbours to be a witness to Jesus. Was holiness corrupted by uncleanness? No. Holiness destroyed uncleanness. Holiness is catching.

Two other stories from Mark reinforce the point. A leper - a man who was unclean - came to Jesus for healing. And Jesus touched him! A sick woman came up behind him and touched his

cloak. Power went out from him and the woman was sent away in peace, freed from her suffering. Was Jesus' holiness compromised by contact with uncleanness? Did the contagion, physical or ritual, leap from the leper or the sick woman to Jesus? Far from it. It was the holiness of Jesus that was contagious. It was the holiness of Jesus that drove out the uncleanness of the leper and the woman. Holiness is catching.

For Jesus, it was holiness that was contagious - overwhelming and overpowering uncleanness. Holiness did not need to be protected from uncleanness through separation and exclusion. Instead, it was uncleanness that could not survive in the presence of holiness.

## THE QUALITY OF MERCY

"...you have neglected the more important matters of the law - justice, mercy and faithfulness..." (Matthew 23.23)

"...he took pity on him..." (Luke 10.33)

"the one who had mercy on him..." (Luke 10.37)

"...God, have mercy on me a sinner..." (Luke 18.13)

"...filled with compassion for him..." (Luke 15.20)

"...'I desire mercy, not sacrifice'..." (Matthew 9.13; 12.7 quoting Hosea 6.6)

There was a corrupting influence in Israel. It was not the Gentiles, nor was it the tax-collectors and sinners. It was rather the Pharisaic agenda - the politics of holiness as they understood it. This agenda was like leaven which permeating the whole corrupts the whole. It was like the unmarked graves that emanated defilement. The Pharisees wanted to bring Israel to holiness, but Jesus saw that their programme was defiling the nation.<sup>21</sup> In particular, the politics of holiness undermined the practice of mercy.

The passages from which the quotations above come have two things in common. First, they stress the preeminence of mercy. Second they are set in the context of Jesus challenge to the politics of holiness, either as responses to questions or contrasts that Jesus himself draws.

<sup>21</sup> Borg (1984) 115

Each passage demonstrates Jesus' concern that the cost of the quest for holiness had been the setting aside of mercy or, at best, that the sphere in which mercy operated had been restricted to fellow members of the different renewal movements. Jesus did not disparage the pursuit of holiness - properly understood - but he did call into question any understanding of holiness that could find no place for mercy.

Jesus' clearest challenge is recorded in Luke 6.36: "Be merciful, just as your father is merciful." As God enjoined Israel to be holy in imitation of his own holiness, so Jesus enjoined the people to be merciful just as God is merciful. Moreover, this was not just a challenge to the people to be kinder or more helpful or big-hearted. Instead, this was a dagger in the heart of the renewal movements' self-understanding.

## **LOVE YOUR ENEMIES**

Against the exclusivism of the quest for holiness, mercy was to be inclusive: Love you enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who ill-treat you..." (Luke 6.27-28). The sphere of mercy was not to be restricted only to Jews still less only to those who conformed to the expectations of each movement. After all, God's mercy was inclusive (Luke 6.35). Nor was mercy to be calculating. There were no grounds for limiting it to those who could or would reciprocate (Luke 6.35).

Nor was this simply a call to love those with whom his hearers had personal conflicts or family tiffs. In Palestine it was perfectly clear to those listening who the enemy was, who it was who persecuted and ill-treated them. Jesus was talking about the Roman enemy, the client kings, the tax-collectors, the lackeys and yes-men - whether Jew or Gentile - who maintained Rome's hold over Israel. The politics of holiness had created a climate of suspicion, hostility and resentment. The politics of holiness said exclude these people, they do not belong. Sometimes the politics of holiness even said these people must die.

The politics of mercy that Jesus preached said "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you..." As Luke makes clear, only as God's mercy displayed itself in love for enemies would



the people be fit to be known as “sons of the Most High” (Luke 5.35). Conversely, those whose pursuit of the politics of holiness resulted in the building of barriers and the attenuation of the role of mercy were, ironically, no better than the sinners, tax-collectors and pagans whose lack of holiness so offended them (Matthew 5.46; Luke 6.32).

The politics of holiness in the first century had radically circumscribed the sphere of mercy. Jesus proclaimed the need for a return to an authentic understanding of holiness that reflected the mercy and love of God. Not only did he proclaim this but in his ministry he practised it, breaking through the boundaries that had been established and challenging Israel to reflect both the holiness and mercy of God in all of life.

In the name of God Jesus challenged their understanding of holiness and its implications, calling them instead to the way of true transforming holiness that led to acts of mercy and love towards all - righteous Jews, unrighteous Jews, sinners, tax-collectors, the poor, the collaborators, the compromisers, the Romans.

# Jesus and the POLITICS OF HOLINESS IN NORTHERN IRELAND

What has any of this to do with Christians striving to live holy lives in Northern Ireland today? Simply this - holiness still has political consequences. Our stress on holiness as personal piety may have obscured this but that in itself has implications for our life in the community. So what kinds of holiness can we see among Christians in our community?

## **I AM HIS AND HE IS MINE**

“It’s a personal thing - it’s about my relationship with the Lord. Being holy means working out that relationship day by day. I take time to read the bible and pray regularly. I meet with other believers to worship on Sunday morning and study Scripture and pray during the week. Holiness means being a good neighbour, lending a helping hand whenever possible. I like to thin that my relationship with the Lord affects all my other relationships - with my family, in work, in business. It also means that I take every opportunity to witness that comes my way - sometimes with a gospel tract, sometimes with a testimony. Holiness to me means growing closer to the Lord and trying to please him in the way I live.”

This is admirable and good as far as it goes. The trouble is that it does not go far enough. God’s call to holiness was a call to a people, not to a person. The marks of holiness were to be displayed by Israel as a nation, not a collection of individuals. Israel’s holiness was to shape every aspect of life and society.

The truth is that without an understanding of the will of God for our society and without a vision for our society, the holiness of individual men and women will not survive the assaults of an unholy world.

The forces shaping our society are powerful and the values that reflect those forces are pervasive - we are bombarded by them. Against these forces the holiness of the individual is like the little boy with his finger in the hole of the dyke. For a time the flood may be held at bay, but there is no possibility of pushing back the flood and, sooner or later, all will be swept away.

God's vision of holiness and justice extends beyond the door of our home or the door of our church. It is a vision of more than a handful of individual standard bearers swimming against the tide. If this is how we understand holiness perhaps we should ask if our vision is faithful to the vision of God?

## **BE YE SEPARATE**

“Holiness to me is about being separated from a corrupt and sinful world - our society is godless and anti-Christian. While we have to live in this world I believe that we should keep our contact with it to the absolute minimum necessary. The world corrupts - if Christians get too close they start adapting and compromising. It's a slippery slope. Any Christian who gets too close to the world gets dragged down to the world's level. God has called us out of the world to be his people. To go back to the world is to disobey him. You can't be holy and be in the world.”

This world is in darkness - running away from the light. Christians have come into the light out of the darkness. The trouble is that too many of us stop there and if we do we are hearing only half the story. It is John's gospel that most clearly stresses the world's darkness and its hostility to Jesus and the disciples. Yet it is this same gospel that provides us with our favourite bible verse - John 3.16. This verse tells us that God gave Jesus to bring light into the darkness because of his great love for the world.

It is John who most clearly tells us that Jesus broke through the sectarian barriers of his day, bringing salvation to a Samaritan village. It is John who tells us that Jesus fed the hungry masses - irrespective of who they were. It is John who tells us that Jesus came to gather together the 'other' sheep. It is John who tells us that Jesus came to create a community of disciples marked by oneness, love and service. It is John who tells us that we are the disciples of the one who made

the world and is its source of light and life. Those disciples, separated from the world, are sent to the world, even as Jesus was sent by the father. Their mission is not to be accomplished by withdrawing behind the ramparts.

## **I ALONE AM LEFT**

“Holiness is indeed about separation, but not only separation from the world. Sadly, many who profess to be believers have compromised their faith. Churches that once held to sound doctrine are now promoting error or are willing to make common cause with error. There is no room in God’s presence for compromise with error. If we are to be holy we must separate ourselves, not just from the world, but from all error and compromise among those who claim to be Christians. More than that, we have a responsibility to challenge and confront error where we see it and to call other true believers to avoid it. Sadly, there is always compromise and declension in the church. Thankfully, God always has his faithful remnant.”

This is the Christian version of Essenism and it is marked by the same characteristics:

- “(1) A specific and tightly defined interpretation of a faith and heritage more widely claimed and practised by others;
- (2) A fierce insistence that their understanding and practice is the only correct one, the only one acceptable to God;
- (3) A denunciation of all variant and alternative interpretations and forms; the closer the variation, the more strident the denunciation.”<sup>22</sup>

Not only the characteristics, but often the consequences, are the same:

- (1) A rejection of and withdrawal from involvement in the wider society;
- (2) An emphasis on certain beliefs and practices as boundary markers and tests of orthodoxy;
- (3) A hostile and suspicious attitude towards anything or anyone outside the boundaries.

<sup>22</sup> Dunn (1992) 70

Reading through the New Testament we might be left wondering how many of the churches and individuals we meet in its pages would have been fully acceptable to the advocates of this view.

## **THE BATTLE BELONGS TO THE LORD**

“There is a battle going on in society but too many Christians are fighting the wrong enemy. The true enemy is not society or the world but the spiritual forces of darkness that hold society captive. Holiness is not about transforming society. IT is about aligning our lives with God in the battle against the powers of darkness. Only when they are defeated will society be liberated and the transforming Spirit of God poured out. If we want to be a holy and obedient people we must take up our spiritual weapons - praise and worship, signs and wonders - and fight the spiritual battle on God’s side.”

Sometimes we can lose sight of the spiritual battle. Other times we can become so caught up with it that we lose sight of everything else. In particular, we can end up with a very narrow understanding of what is spiritual. The truth is that wherever the church stands against the world and proclaims and makes known the holiness of God, spiritual warfare is being waged, strongholds are being pulled down, and the powers of darkness are in retreat. Bombing the enemy’s headquarters might be a vital strategic move, but the battle still has to be fought out on the field of combat.

Moreover, there is a real danger that this kind of thinking actually compromises our vision of a holy and all powerful God by playing up the power of forces opposed to God. The reality is that the defeat of evil is God’s prerogative - he does not need our help. The vision of Revelation is of a triumphant God destroying evil and asserting his power and authority. The role of the church is to hope, to witness and to worship.

## **IT’S NOT ABOUT BINGO**

Whatever our understanding of holiness we are all constantly at risk of being boundary makers rather than boundary breakers. Like the Pharisees we set up certain criteria by which we assess

whether others belong or not. In the process, like the Pharisees we end up critical and judgemental of those who meet our criteria, or we end up ignoring "the more important matters", or we end up adopting attitudes of hostility and suspicion towards wider society.

For the Pharisees the boundary markers were Sabbath, circumcision, ritual purity and such like; for us they might be what translation of the Bible we read, whether people go to the pictures or football matches, whether parents take their children to a leisure centre on a Sunday. What else? Drums in worship; jewellery and make-up on women; long hair on men; smoking cigarettes; going to a pub; playing the national lottery. It is not that these are necessarily irrelevant; it is rather that these have become tests of the reality or acceptability of a person's Christian profession.

## **A NEW MOTIVATION**

Jesus vision of a holy community was quite different from this. "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." (John 13.34) By this everyone will know - not by which version of the Bible we read, not by the intensity of our defence of civil and religious liberty, not by how many gifts of the Spirit are exercised in our church. The concern with boundaries missed the point of true holiness - true holiness is the holiness of the centre.

But is this not terribly vague? Does it not seem soft, naive, unworkable in a world where error threatens? What did all this mean for Jesus' disciples. Was Jesus assault on the politics of holiness leading to the overthrow of the law? Would the end result be a descent into religious anarchy? What would guide the lives of Jesus disciples as they tried to live out Jesus' vision of holiness?

Jesus did not advocate abandoning the law - apart from anything else it was not just religious law, but the law of the nation. When Jesus cleansed the lepers he instructed them to go to the priest and offer the prescribed sacrifices as a testimony (Mark 1.44). When the rich young man pursuing eternal life came to Jesus he was confronted with the commands of the law (Mark 10.19). Even when Jesus interpreted the law in what seemed like radical ways he was not

rejecting the law (Mark 2.27; 10.2-9; Matthew 5.21-22,27-28).

What Jesus was objecting to was a vision of holiness premised on a misuse of the law. "Not the law itself, but the use of the law as a barrier to exclude others, was what he reacted against; and particularly the overscrupulous interpretation of the law that resulted in a negative judgment against those who failed to conform, the overdefinition of the will of God so that the channels of God's grace became ever more restricted, the attitude which assumed that only what was acceptable to one's own group was acceptable to God."<sup>23</sup>

Against a vision of holiness driven by exclusion Jesus advocated a vision of holiness driven by love. When Jesus summed up the law he focused on the twin commands to love - love God, love your neighbour (Mark 12.28-31). As we have seen, he went further still commanding love of enemies. Holiness of life, expressed in love of neighbour and love of enemies, was the consequence of an encounter with the forgiving, healing and renewing holiness of God.

This holiness driven by love of God and love of neighbour was marked by two characteristics. The first of these was a readiness to forgive. This was a mark of the new community Jesus was creating (Matthew 18.21-22; Luke 17.3-4). Correspondingly, to refuse to forgive was to invite judgement (Matthew 6.12-15; 18.23-35). The second characteristic was a willingness to serve others. This was the way to true greatness (Mark 10.35-45) and was the model set by Jesus himself (Mark 10.45).

Thus, fundamental to Jesus proclamation of holiness and his understanding of the place of the law was this "closeknit relationship of love, forgiveness, and service. For love is forgiveness, the genuine acceptance of the other who has hurt or offended, wronged or slighted. And forgiveness is enabled by the security which comes from the sense of being loved and accepted, not just because of what one is, but in spite of it. And love is readiness to serve, not as a means of gaining favour, of building up a store of credit, but without thought of return. And the readiness to

<sup>23</sup> Dunn (1992) 84

serve stems from and is sustained by the same sense of having received far more than was ever deserved in the first place. Such is the pattern of discipleship and resource for discipleship to which Jesus calls.”<sup>24</sup> Does this still seem too vague? In a world driven by the pursuit of certainties and absolutes, perhaps so. Nonetheless, it is the command of Jesus.

## **NOT AN INCH**

In Northern Ireland there are other, more dangerous, boundary markers. These are the boundaries of political allegiance and identity.

To question whether the gospel requires the preservation of the Union to flourish in Ireland is to step outside someone's boundary.

To accept that our society - including our churches - has been marked by sectarian attitudes and behaviour is to step outside a boundary.

To question whether parades and marches are the best way to maintain religious liberties is to step outside a boundary.

To ask if we as Christians have any reason to repent or reform our ways is to step outside a boundary.

To warn of the danger that land and nation can become our idols is to step outside a boundary.

To reach across the barriers - emotional or physical - that divide people in this community to understand and to explain is to step outside a boundary.

Too many of us in Northern Ireland have built these political and social boundaries, as solid and permanent as the 'peacelines' that blight the city of Belfast. Often, like the Pharisees we have done so out of a genuine sense that we were doing God's will. Often like Jesus' disciples we have done so despite ourselves and almost unconsciously, not realising what we are doing or the consequences.

<sup>24</sup> Dunn (1992) 90



Of course some of us may console ourselves with the thought that we have not built up the barriers. But how many of us have followed the master in breaking them down? How many of us have been willing to break through the boundaries? How many of us have displayed the love and mercy of God in our dealing with all the people of our community? How many of us are known as people ready to forgive and willing to serve? How many of us have a vision - God's vision - for our society and pursue it?

Some may have drawn the boundaries knowingly, some unknowingly. Others may have refused to reinforce the boundaries. Wherever we stand if we have not been breaking through the boundaries and bringing the presence of a God centred holiness into the life of our community we have, in effect, subverted the work of the gospel in Northern Ireland

### **THE BOUNDARY BREAKERS**

Faithful followers of Jesus will not be people who establish exclusion zones or draw boundaries. True followers will not fear that their holiness will be contaminated by others. True followers, like Jesus, will have a holiness of the centre, not the boundaries. In Northern Ireland true followers will, like their master, have to challenge the boundaries that have been drawn by others. It may not be sufficient simply to practise holiness as best we can in our own lives. Like the master we may have to consciously confront and expose those visions of holiness that are leading the people of God away from their calling. It may be that we cannot practise true holiness until we are prepared to challenge false ideas of holiness that have affected our community.



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THE  
POLITICS  
OF  
HOLINESS

ALWYN THOMSON

Jesus came to a people whose vision of holiness was not just personal, but social and political. Yet far from commending them, he challenged their vision time and time again. He proclaimed instead his vision of a holy community marked by mercy, service and love of neighbour and enemy. But how do we measure up? What is our vision of holiness? And would Jesus commend us or challenge us?

This is what the Lord says:

*'Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls.'*

Jeremiah 6 . 16



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