

“Personal Holiness”

by Douglas Wilson, Christ Church

The following is adapted from a speech delivered June 24, 2004, in Atlanta, Georgia, at the ACCS annual conference.

... I was thinking of Philippians 3:1, actually, because I addressed this topic at these conferences before. Sometimes it has been called “Confession of Sin,” “Personal Holiness,” and so forth, and I want to be addressing the same basic thing now. The reason we need to do this over and over again is that it is a perennial issue. As schools start up, there are schools that need to hear it for the first time. As schools move from the startup phase into a phase of maintenance and growth, we need to be reminded of these things over and over again. So, I want to be addressing what I have addressed before and what I have said before. But I don’t get tired of saying it because if you have ears to hear, this is the sort of topic that is fresh every time and it is needful every time. We all need to be reminded of these things and I have not only spoken on this subject here before, but I have spoken on it in numerous other settings. It is the sort of thing that I need to hear, as often as I can come up with occasions to address it. So I do not want you to be tired of the subject—it is a very important subject. I think it is at the center of what you are doing, it is a daily issue, a moment-by-moment issue, and, if we are thinking rightly, we can’t get tired of it. If we are getting tired of it—“yes, I know I have heard this before”—then that is an indication that we need to redouble our efforts to pay attention

to this particular topic. The topic is personal holiness, confessing our sin, keeping short accounts with God and with one another.

Although I am not apologizing at all for addressing this subject again, I do want to back into the subject a little differently this year. I was struck by this just within the last week or so. Some of you have seen, in the Veritas Press catalog that Ty Fischer and I are editing, the Omnibus project they’re putting together. There are a bunch of books in the Omnibus curriculum and we are gathering writers to write introductory essays for all the different books and have study questions, exercises, and so forth. As we are working on the seventh grade curriculum, among the books that we are doing are *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Being in a position to assign writers to different things, I took the *Narnia Chronicles* for myself!

Because I had the *Narnia Chronicles* read to me—I don’t know how many times when I was a boy—things would get dislocated because I was the oldest and my dad would read us a chapter or two. I could read better than the others so I would sneak off that night and finish the book. Then, the next night when he wanted to read the next chapter, I wanted to read the next book. I was steeped in the *Narnia Chronicles* growing up and then, of course, we did the same thing with our kids and read them over and over again. We have seen the same thing happening with our grandchildren as our son-in-law, Ben Merkle, has read the *Narnia Chronicles*

to his kids, our grandkids. They have this little “thing” in the landing where he reads to them; and they each get a little teeny bit of beer and they sit around on the landing and whenever he says “Aslan” or “Narnia” while reading, they all toast “to Narnia and the North!” It is a very weird family!

And you might be wondering, what are little grandkids doing with a little teeny bit of beer, and especially what are they doing in a talk on personal holiness? But this is a very important point: holiness is defined by God, not by us and not by our traditions. That is something I want to emphasize a little later. Getting back to the Veritas curriculum, as I have said, I would like to write an introductory essay for each of these books; I’ve been steeped in the books and I don’t know how many times I have read them. But I thought, I am going to read through them again, but with a highlighter this time, and I’m going to read through them in chronological order. I’m halfway through the next to the last one now, *The Silver Chair*, and then *The Last Battle*. I’ve done this over the last two weeks; I have just been roaring through them. It has really given me a remarkable perspective on these books because one of the things that has come to my mind is the phrase “what I learned in Narnia.” It is an astounding amount of practical, vibrant, personal, Christian living. It really is remarkable.

One of the things I have learned in Narnia has to do with this particular topic and there are two elements of it. One of them is the nature of honest confession, the lack of what we would call “spin,” the necessity upon us of confession. “And then Digory

Douglas Wilson is the pastor of Christ Church in Moscow, ID. He is an ex-officio member of the ACCS board.

Personal Holiness . . .

said, 'We met the witch.' And Aslan said with a low growl, 'You met the witch?' 'Well I woke her up.' " Well when we first confess, when we first acknowledge what we have done, we say, "I met the witch." You met the witch? Is that the whole story? Repeatedly in the books, that sort of interchange happens between Aslan and one of the characters. Is that the whole story? Is that an honest confession? Are you spinning it or presenting it to look good for you? Honest confession is one of the fundamental elements that you see in the *Narnia Chronicles* and a second one is related to it and that is the element of personalism.

The title of this talk is "Personal Holiness" and we might read this as individual holiness. When I say personal holiness, you might be thinking that as individuals we are each to be holy, and, of course that is true. But personal holiness involves more than that—not just holiness for individual persons, but holiness defined as holiness between persons. Holiness is a function of relationship. When God the Father loves God the Son, and God the Son loves God the Father, and—following Augustine here—the Scripture calls the Holy Spirit the Spirit of God, the Spirit of the Father, and the Spirit of Christ. In the Nicene Creed we say in the Western form that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father (*Filioque*) and the Son. The Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son together. He is the Holy Spirit of Christ and the Holy Spirit of God the Father. Augustine said, and I follow him here and believe this is scripturally warranted, that the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of love between the Father and the Son. The Father loves the Son and the Son loves the Father and that

spirit of love between two infinite persons is itself an infinite person, the Holy Spirit. Holiness is defined by the Holy Spirit which is defined by the love between two persons.

Holiness is not conformity to an external wooden standard. Holiness is not keeping the rules. Holiness is not engraven on tablets of stone. It is engraven on the tablets of human hearts as Paul says. Once you move from personalism—a relationship between persons—to a wooden standard off to the side, you then start conforming to that standard because that is just what we do. Once you have lost the personal element, it doesn't much matter what the content of that standard is. It oftentimes begins in Christian circles with those things which are unobjectionable in themselves, the Ten Commandments for example. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength; love your neighbor as yourself. That is where it starts and then we approach that wrongly. We forget that love God means love God. We think that love God means going through the motions of loving God. Then we put the Ten Commandments up and we start substituting in our own commandments. Then traditions develop which would cause many American Christians to gasp in disbelief—like little kids drinking beer and toasting Narnia. European Christians, Christians from virtually every other century and era would think, "Oh that is sweet, that is nice; they have something to drink." What has happened is we have substituted in our own standards of holiness for the standards of God and we have been able to do that because we have substituted the standards of God for God himself.

One of the things we see in Narnia, very clearly, is that sin is always the violation of a personal relationship. Sin is always the violation of someone's character and not an abstracted list of rules. What happens oftentimes when the children in Narnia are confessing sin or being brought to the point of where they will confess sin honestly, the thing that makes them do this is a personal encounter with Aslan. He just looks at them and he says, "That is not what I told you to do; that is not what I said." You don't take the words that he said and move them off to the side and say, "Oh, here is the abstracted wooden standard." Everything is bound up in the relationship; everything is personal. That is one of the things that has been remarkable for me coming back and reading through the books in rapid succession. How much of what I understand about this was not because I was born understanding it. I was brought up in a family where these things were taught, but also where these things were read to me.

One of the things that we want to do is impress upon you the importance of telling the right stories, the right kind of stories. This is another element, another thing that I learned in Narnia; this comes up all the time. Lewis says Eustace Scrubb liked to read books with pictures of grain elevators in them and fat foreign children doing exercises in model schools. Stalin comes to mind. The books that Eustace Scrubb read were strong on imports and exports, but they were weak on dragons. They didn't have the right element of dragons. In *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, when they get into Narnia, the robin leads the children from

Personal Holiness . . .

tree to tree to find Tumnus, and Edmund, who is treacherous and sneaky, has epistemological questions. “How do we know that the robin is good and how do we know that the White Witch is really bad; how do we know these things?” he says, turning into the philosopher. The answer to this is, “In all the stories that I have ever read, robins are good birds.” So let’s follow the robin.” The story, the moral authority of the fairytale, is important. The kind of stories you tell, the kind of stories you tell yourself, the kind of stories you read to your children, the kind of environment they grow up in, is going to settle whether or not your school is godly because it is characterized by godly relationships between godly persons, or whether your school is legalistic. If you don’t have godly persons involved in this, then what you will do is imitate other schools or other situations you have seen. The external rules that you have are the same rules, but the heart of it is gone.

So this is the difference between morality—biblical morality—which is personalism, and moralism which is not. Moralism has to do with observing the standard for the sake of the standard so that I can feel good about myself. That is moralism. Morality has to do with covenant relations between covenant persons between the holy triune God. He is holy in His love: the Father’s love for the Son, and the Son’s love for the Father, and the Holy Spirit of them both. Then we, as God’s people, are incorporated into fellowship with this triune God (about which I am going to say more a little bit later) and because of this we are ushered into this realm of covenant relationship.

Now, I want to emphasize this because covenant relationship is different from what many people assume when they say Christianity is not a religion, it is a relationship. I like to reverse that and say Christianity is not a relationship, it is the religion, because we need to be reminded that we are of faith, that this is not all subjectivistic. The problem, to use the illustration that my friend Steve Wilkins has used, is that when we say Christianity is a relationship, what we mean is an individual relationship between God and each individual Christian—the relationship that we have with one another is not really that important, the church is not important, covenant relationships in covenant communities are really not that important. His illustration is that of a deep-sea diver; we are all deep sea divers and there is a hose on our helmet that runs up to heaven through which grace comes. Grace flows between God and us, and this is our individual relationship, our personal relationship with Jesus. And this is why any number of people with an individual relationship with Jesus can be so snarky to one another. Have you ever noticed that? Christians can really be nasty to one another—in the name of the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit, Amen. And off they go and you wonder, how did this happen? And then, of course, we are tempted to be snarky back. But behind all of this is a paradigm, an understanding of the Christian faith which leaves out the word “covenant” when you talk about relationship.

Yes, the Christian faith is a religion with a relationship at the center of it, but it is a

covenant relationship of God with His people. We believe in the triune God, which means that God Himself is a set of relationships: the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The beginning of the word for God, the creator God, is Elohim. The ending of Elohim is plural, so, cherub, cherubim; seraph, seraphim. Elohim is when we confess our faith in the one true God. If we wanted to follow the Hebrew we would say, “We believe in one true Gods.” This is because God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit—one God, three Persons—are in themselves a society, a family. A Father and a Son and a Spirit, they are family; and so, consequently, what we might call horizontal relationships with one another are absolutely central. We can’t just say, “I am saved, I am going to heaven and I’ve got my deep-sea-diver helmet and God saved me and so it doesn’t matter what the rest of the Christian world does.” *It does matter what the rest of the Christian world does.*

Download the rest of the article from www.accsedu.org. See Publications > Classis.