

Fellowship Driven Theology of Sanctification:
a Theology of Sanctification for the 21st Century:

Sungwon Kim, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Seoul Theological University
sungwonkimis@gmail.com

I. Current Impasse of Sanctification

One may reasonably summarize the mandate of the Old Testament in one sentence: "Be holy!" S/he may arguably summarize the whole of the Bible in the same sentence, especially if s/he knows John Wesley. John Wesley's lifelong work was to make this point.

For two centuries before Wesley the doctrine of justification was the center of theology for Christians. Justification had fought with the legalistic doctrine of sanctification Roman Catholicism held and defended. Against the Catholic doctrine of sanctification, the doctrine of justification claimed that humans must not rely on meritorious good works for their salvation. This doctrinal campaign of the Protestant Reformation was largely successful. In a sense, this campaign was overly successful that many Christians reached a point that sanctification was no more needed. For those people the perfect merit of Christ was and would be enough.

It was the historical mission of John Wesley to remedy this imbalance between justification and sanctification and revive sanctification in an Evangelical way. Wesley had to introduce sanctification into the lives of the church and believers in the terms of *sola gratia* - grace alone. In other words, Wesley's mission for his time was not to establish justification without works, but to establish sanctification from its essential root of justification. We believe that Wesley was successful to break the theological and practical impasse of his time and made sanctification a central concern of the church and the believers.

Now, two centuries have passed again since John Wesley's time. Interestingly enough, the theological and ecclesial situation looks almost identical with that of Wesley from the perspective of sanctification. In spite of John Wesley's hard work and great success to revive sanctification and renew the church, Protestant churches still don't

seem to embody life of sanctification as much as they live by justification. In other words, protestant churches do not pay enough attention to the divine mandate of holiness.

As a result, Protestant churches are being criticized for their moral laxation – a sign of unholiness - not only in Korea, but also in many countries. Sadly enough, Wesleyan denominations and churches are no exception to this general phenomenon. Today moral failures of Protestant leaders are often on the news, and the ethical immaturity of churches is shamefully compared with the moral excellence of legalistic religions and even heresies.

Another result of the neglect of sanctification is that several theologians begin to question the validity of the doctrine of justification. They claim that the Protestant Reformation misunderstood the biblical justification. They claim that justification is a process that includes sanctification.

If we would describe this situation more positively, we are now at the same starting line with John Wesley, agonizing on how to present the gospel of sanctification to the church today (especially we here at Oxford). How can we, and how shall we revive sanctification in the life of the churches today? How shall we claim sanctification within *sola gratia* so that we may not degenerate into legalism? How can we harmonize the justification of the Reformation with the mandate of sanctification without losing the essential balance between the two? Where is the direction of the Holy Spirit in all this? This is an essential task for all Christians today, and particularly for Wesleyan theologians. The first step for answering those urgent questions will be assessing today's situation.

II. Current Causes of the Impasse

What has extinguished the flame of holiness in the lives of church today? What of today makes it extremely difficult to follow the mandate of holiness? We find several factors. Here are some major examples of them.

1. Modern Atheism

In pursuit of rational principles of progress, modernism could have focused on the holiness and sanctification as a proper ethical and ontological goal. In fact, there were

certain efforts in this vein. For example, liberal theologians pursued to identify the ethical ideals in the teachings of Jesus in the New Testaments.

However, modernism had a pre-engagement with other concerns and ideas such as conceptualism, sensationalism and, most of all, scientific materialism. In other words, modernism was committed to material things that are subject to our sense perception and conceptualization. We find this unfortunate maneuver in most modern thinkers, but especially in the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. Kant formulated this line of thinking in his so-called Critical Philosophy.

As a result of this preoccupation with sensational and material conceptuality, modernism systematically drove out any realm that is outside its own boundaries. God and religion were thereby expelled from the modern philosophy proper. This rejection of God and religion started moderately in the form of agnosticism and deism. However, as time went and the materialistic science grew up a full-blown atheism appeared with Ludwig Feuerbach and Karl Marx. Today for many scientific minds, God and religion are nothing but an illusion or worse, psychological immaturity as Richard Dawkins' theories claim. With all this process, divine mandate of holiness was also forgotten and rejected by modern minds.

2. Postmodernism

Postmodernism started as a modest protest against the problems of modernism, but postmodernism itself has become a new worldview for many people now. Whereas modernism emphasized logical reason and universal principles, postmodernism is skeptical about them, and instead, cherishes emotional feelings and individual perceptions. Unlike modernism that rejects religion and existence of God based on scientific materialism, postmodernism appreciates religious experiences of individuals and their personal religious views.

However, in this context of postmodernism, holiness and sanctification cannot be a universal mandate of God, for such religious claim can be an oppressive and arbitrary "meta-discourse." Instead sanctification may be an individual life-style among many. In the same vein, moral requirements embedded in sanctification are also rejected as equally oppressive and mis-conceived "meta-discourse."

3. Neo-liberalistic Capitalism

Unchecked and un-intervened capitalism that prefers to be controlled solely by market systems has had consistent, enormous and increasing impact on the lives of people on the earth. In fact, capitalism never ceased to exercise its powerful influence on peoples and societies since its conception, and it has been the most powerful worldview.

Neo-liberalistic capitalism puts everyone into endless economic competitions, depriving from people time and energy to think, pray, worship and care for themselves and others. The “making of living” that are supposed to be a part of our life has become exhaustive of our life. This endless economic struggle of most people today and the severity of the competition are not only caused by people’s economic desires for possession, but dominantly by the fact that more and more resources are being monopolized by the few winners of this money game. Majorities of people are now in struggle over what is left of the resources after these money-tycoons and global corporations sweep the fields.

Capitalism’s *de-facto* materialism is also effectively dominating people’s minds. Millions of attractive goods are appealing to people on a daily basis. The attractiveness of the goods drives us to work harder and spend more to possess them and use them for our satisfaction. As a result, our minds become materialistic to the core.

In this context of neo-liberalistic capitalism, sanctification is a far irrelevant issue. For the people in the endless economic race and search of material goods, sanctification is far too abstract a topic to even think about.

4. The 4th Industrial Revolution

The enormous advancement of information technology brings to humanity another revolutionary change of life called the Fourth Industrial Revolution. It can be defined as the revolutionary influence of the material-digital-biological technologies on human lives.

We are expected to face mass unemployment as most jobs will be replaced by robotic machines operated by artificial intelligence systems. Researchers like Karl Frey predict that more than 60% of the current jobs will be replaced by AI robots.

In the wake of the fourth industrial revolution, our perception of reality will be greatly expanded and thereby confused due to the technologies such as virtual reality and augmented reality and humanized AI robots. What defines humanity today will be similarly challenged and altered in a near future.

In this context, sanctification is again irrelevant, for the secular, ubiquitous, computerized artificial intelligence can be as omnipresent, omniscient, transcendent and real as God. Biologically and digitally enhanced super-humans will have little need for God's assistance or guidance for survival or prosperity. They will be all achieved in scientific and material ways, not at all religious ways. There seems to be no need to be holy before God.

III. A proposal: a theology of fellowship

How, then, can we effectively re-introduce the gospel of holiness and revive sanctification in the 21st century that is dominated by modern atheism, post-modern individualism, sweeping capitalistic drive and the omnipotence of the 4th industrial revolution?

I would like to suggest a new strategy, the way of fellowship, for sanctification. The following discussion is to show why it is a viable idea and effective way in today's world to revive sanctification in the lives of the church and the society.

1. Biblical emphases on fellowship

In the Bible the word "fellowship" is often used for denoting various associations in general. In this case fellowship does not have particular theological importance. For example, fellowship is a neutral word that it can mean an evil relationship as much as a good relationship: 1 Corinthians 5:2 writes, "And you are proud! Shouldn't you rather have been filled with grief and have put out of your fellowship the man who did this?" 2 Corinthians 6:14 commands, "Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness?" In both verses fellowship denotes association with evil.

However, there are certain instances that fellowship has special, theological meanings, especially in Pauline writings. In this case fellowship has special association with God, Jesus Christ or the Holy Spirit. For example: 1 Corinthians 1:9 says, "God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful." Here Apostle Paul points out the fact that God has called believers into the fellowship with the Lord Jesus.

Further, biblical fellowship is truly pneumatological, and as a result, fully trinitarian in

Paul's letter. 2 Cor. 13:14 mentions "the fellowship of the Holy Spirit," and Phil. 2:1 mentions "the fellowship with the Spirit"

Christian fellowship also means deep sharing with the fellowship partners even in the suffering as it is in Philippians 3:10: "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death."

Johannine writings in the New Testament also show the essential nature of fellowship for our faith and church life, even though they do not use fellowship-terminologies. For example, Jesus' priestly prayer for the disciples shows a strong emphasis on the fellowship dimension. In John 17:20-24 Jesus prayed, "My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, 21 that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. 22 I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: 23 I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. 24 Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world." Here Jesus prays for the unity of the disciples, mutual indwelling among Jesus himself and the disciples and for continued fellowship with them in the Kingdom of God.

1 John 1:3 writes, "We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ." This verse teaches us that the purpose and outcome of Gospel-proclamation is to have fellowship with one another. It also reveals that true Christian fellowship is also with the Father God and Jesus Christ.

1 John 1:6-7 writes, "If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. 7 But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin." These verses teach us that true Christian fellowship demands moral maturity. If we live and walk "in the darkness," our fellowship with God is forfeited; if we live and walk "in the light," Jesus Christ will purify us from all sin.

The early Jerusalem church was also devoted to fellowship among other religious practices. Acts 2:42 records, "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and

to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.”

This verse shows that fellowship was an important function of the early church.

2. Theological emphases on fellowship

Several theologians find that fellowship is the essential nature of God, church and humans. Jurgen Moltmann has developed a trinitarian theology called “social trinitarianism.” The central idea of this theory is that the trinity is an eternal fellowship of the three divine persons. Here fellowship is understood as the essential nature of God. From this perspective salvation is understood as invitation to the divine fellowship.

South American theologian Leonardo Boff also developed a similar theology of the trinitarian fellowship as well. He saw the trinity as a divine community.

Orthodox theologian John Zizioulas similarly claims that “person” is a revolutionary metaphysical concept. Christianity’s introducing of the category of person was a breakthrough in the metaphysical history that had been dominated by naturalistic and impersonal concepts. Here he introduces a philosophical appropriation on the importance of personal fellowship.

It was Emil Brunner that formulated a theology of the church from the perspective of fellowship. Brunner claims that the very nature of church is fellowship. He defines the church as a fellowship of Christians with the Lord Jesus Christ. Church has fellowship as its goal.

3. Historical precedence: Wesley’s fellowship movements

As Wesley scholars like David Watson and Kevin Watson point out, the fellowship of the believers Wesley organized was an essential key to the success of Wesley’s sanctification movement. It was through the fellowship in the societies and band meetings that believers found transformation of life.

4. Contemporary Relevance of fellowship

If fellowship is a central biblical teaching, a major theological direction today and has strong historical precedence, the next question for us is to see if fellowship is truly relevant to today’s mind-set. The following is our argument that it is so: in the age of science, postmodernism, capitalism and the 4th Industrial Revolution, fellowship is most desired.

First, modernistic atheism based on the scientific materialism is now fundamentally irrelevant as contemporary science breaks the mold of materialism. For example, Alfred Whitehead and John Polkinghorne successfully criticize scientific materialism philosophically and scientifically.

Second, postmodernism has ruled out fellowship, but is in desperate need for fellowship. For all its positive appreciation of "otherness," postmodernism ironically makes meaningful and essential interactions among people impossible by its over-emphasis on individuality, otherness and pluralism. That is because, mutual transformation, self-sacrifice for others and dialogical persuasion, ontological association – signs of true fellowship - are all irrelevant to postmodernism. Without those qualities, however, all postmodern relationships are superficial, thereby making each person an island to one another. Thus, postmodern persons seriously lack true personal relationships. They yearn for essential and internal relationships, but there is no philosophical and cultural ground to justify the deep relationships. Here Christian fellowship has something to offer.

People who live in Neo-liberal capitalism also suffer from the lack of personal fellowships. They need a rationale that would dictate them to slow down and turn from their perpetual competitions and obsession with material goods. Christianity provides a different value system that awakens the people from their materialistic and commercialized worldview. Fellowship offers an alternative way of life and relationship to materialistic life and commercial relationships.

Fellowship is also a key word even for the age of the 4th industrial revolution. People impacted by these changes will greatly suffer as they will be deprived of face-to-face fellowship. In a world where everything is digitally connected, reality will be virtually expanded. Technology and convenience will dictate people to retreat from inconvenient personal relationships, and most of all personal fellowships. However, paradoxically, humans' innate desire for personal fellowship will be stronger than ever. Fellowship will be rare but precious thing to pursue in the coming age of the 4th industrial revolution. And Christian churches may well be the only place that people pursue this face-to-face fellowship.

IV. Key features of the fellowship-driven theology of sanctification

The following points explain some major characteristics of the theology of sanctification that focuses on fellowship.

1. Trinitarian Fellowship is the foundation of all Christian Fellowships

As we discussed theologically above, Christian fellowship is an image of the divine fellowship in the Trinity. Thus, the trinitarian fellowship is always the archetype and model for all Christian fellowships. This principle keeps Christian fellowship from all the cultural biases and corrects them.

For example, fellowship is so easily misunderstood as mere socialization or contractual interaction for a mutual gain in the Western cultures. It can be also so easily degenerate into legalistic, perfectionistic or totalitarian program without appealing to the trinitarian fellowship where individuality and communality are in perfect harmony.

2. Fellowship is the ultimate purpose in itself

In the past, fellowship was often understood as peripheral. It was viewed as secondary to other, more important issues and goals such as missions, salvation, good works and etc. It is my suspicion that even Wesley himself failed to view fellowship in such an essential way. Fellowship was rather a means of grace for him to achieve the goal of mutual sanctification.

However, this new theological perspective suggests that fellowship is in itself a proper, essential goal of Christian faith. The church is a fellowship more than anything. From this perspective all other functions and ministries can be properly understood and assessed. For example, evangelism is an invitation to the Christian fellowship with the Lord. Mission is expansion and planting of Christian fellowship in different cultures and lands.

3. Sanctification is understood relationally and communally

In the theology of fellowship sanctification is understood as transformation as both natural outcome of intimate sharing and intentional pursuit of family resemblance as God's children and fellowship partners.

This clearly shows that sanctification always needs good fellowships. It is through a Christian fellowship that a Christian is born and grows up. Thus, building a community of fellowship becomes an essential way of cultivating sanctification. That demands

transforming existing church meetings and small groups into genuinely personal, intimate fellowships.

In summary, theology of fellowship provides churches with a foundation for promoting sanctification. This fellowship-driven theology of sanctification rooted in personal and intimate fellowship is a viable means of sanctification as it is biblically founded, theologically elaborated, contextual and effective to satisfy the longings of the 21st century. Thank you.