Culture and the Beauty of Holiness  
Reflections from the South Pacific  

Neville Bartle

Declare his glory among the nations,  
his marvelous deeds among all peoples.  
For great is the LORD and most worthy of praise;  
he is to be feared above all gods.  
Ascribe to the LORD, O families of nations,  
ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.  
Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name;  
bring an offering and come into his courts.  
Worship the LORD in the splendor of his holiness;  
tremble before him, all the earth.  
(Psalms 96:3-4, 7-9)

These words of the Psalmist are very relevant to this conference because they combine the themes of worship, mission to other nations, and the splendor and beauty of holiness. I want us to think about the phrase “beauty of holiness” rather than “message of holiness.” The phrase “message of holiness” implies that something is given and merely needs to be translated with the least possible change. “Beauty” brings a sense of wonder, awe, appreciation, and even worship, but it is harder to define, for the concept of beauty is influenced to some extent by one’s culture. How does the holiness of God reveal itself in human cultures? Just as white light is split into many colors when passed through a prism, so the white love of God is revealed in many different colors when transmitted through various cultures.

I would especially like to thank Brent Hulett and the others who had the vision to call this conference around the theme of “The Challenge of Culture: Articulating and Proclaiming the Wesleyan Holiness Message in the Asia Pacific Region.” Too often the church has largely ignored the close relationship between theology and culture. Theology has been seen to be absolutely true rather than being a human and, therefore, cultural understanding of the truth. Too often missionaries and theological educators saw their task as finding ways to transmit their theology into new cultures with as little change as possible (Hiebert 1987:105). If we fail to relate theology to the cultural concerns of our listeners, then much of what we say will be perceived as irrelevant. If theology does not meet the heart-felt needs of people, it is perceived as powerless and/or irrelevant. If theology does not relate to the local culture, it is perceived as foreign, and on the basis of its perceived foreignness, Christianity is often rejected. One African scholar writes, “The observed lack of commitment of the average African Christian to Christ is due to a lack of ‘fit’ between Christian theology and African life” (Imasogie 1983:12). The same could be said of many other areas of the world. Charles Kraft writes, “Even the best of Western theological thinking has been found by non-Westerners to be answering questions they are simply not asking, while completely ignoring questions which they are deeply concerned about” (1983: 8-9). In addressing the subject of culture and the concept of holiness, we
need to think of those features in the culture that help us in presenting the message of holiness, as well as those factors that can cause misunderstanding. One thing is certain: if we proclaim the “message of holiness” without carefully and prayerfully addressing cultural issues, distortion and confusion is guaranteed and holiness loses its beauty.

**The Concept of Holy in the South Pacific**

The concept of holy is deeply ingrained in the cultures of the South Pacific. The Hebrew word *qadhash*, which refers to things, people, and places being set apart for sacred use, is paralleled by the Polynesian words *taboo, tabu, tapu, tambu.*

In the Old Testament people such as priests and Levites were holy for they were set apart for service in the temple. The temple, altar, and all the things used in worship in the temple were holy for they were set apart for sacred use. The Sabbath was set apart from other ordinary days and thus was a holy day. And above all the name of God was holy. Strange though it may seem, there were prostitutes who served in heathen temples who were also classified as *qadhash*, for they had been set apart for temple service. The word had a formal ritualistic meaning rather than an ethical/moral meaning.

In the South Pacific, similar concepts have applied. Places, people (priests) and things that were dedicated to the spirits and tribal gods were “taboo.” There were certain restrictions of what they could eat, where they could go, where they could sleep, and with whom they could associate. To break these taboos would incur the wrath of the spirits. On the other hand, right relationships were maintained by observing the taboos. There were sacred names and rituals that only certain people could perform. For all other people, they were “taboo.” Forbidden was the flip side of holy.

The Polynesian *tabu* and the Hebrew *qadhash* both mean “set apart for sacred use.” This is in contrast to that which was common and accessible to all people and for common everyday use.

Scripture shows the concept of holy undergoing an ongoing development, as the concept moved from a formal ritualistic expression, to one that has a moral and ethical meaning. As the moral and ethical quality of God’s character was emphasized, so the moral and ethical dimension of human holiness became more and more pronounced.

The concept of *taboo* gives us a starting point in helping people understand the holy life, but there is a danger if we stay with that level of meaning. It very easily degenerates into legalism. Holiness becomes a list of “taboos”—forbidden things. Holiness people do not smoke, drink alcoholic beverages, chew betel nut, or go to nightclubs. Some groups in PNG add that holiness people always wear shirts with long sleeves and shave off their beards. Some see the Seventh Day Adventist followers as being even more holy in that they do not eat pork, eels, possums and various other animals or fish. This quickly leads to holiness being perceived as a list of do’s and don’ts. It becomes a human achievement, and like the Pharisees in Jesus’ day, people become proud of their holiness. Such holiness is a false holiness, has no beauty, and was rejected by Jesus.

**Holiness as Allegiance**

Holiness can be expressed as giving total allegiance to God. This is expressed in the first commandment and also in the words of Deut 6:5. Jesus emphasized this point when he said, “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment” (Matt 22:37-38). Primary allegiance is the issue at stake. In the Western world the issue is often putting God before self or financial security, material possessions, status and
position in society. The same applies to other cultures as they succumb to the pressures of Westernization. In tribal cultures the issue is, “Who comes first—God or clan?” People have been brought up in a society that says “A good person supports his clan members at all times. Support of clan members takes priority over all other obligations, at all times and under all circumstances.” This has a positive side to it. Clan members care for each other—be they young or old, sick or healthy, rich or poor. It is actually much superior to the Western self-centered approach to life. What happens, however, when one must choose between allegiance to God and allegiance to the clan? This is the big issue that must be addressed in tribal societies. How does one stay a loyal supportive member of the clan and meet one’s clan’s responsibilities and at the same time have Jesus as supreme Lord of one’s life? Because of the intense individualism of Western society, holiness has often been thought of as internal, personal, and to a large extent, private. The concept of separation from the world has also encouraged isolated personal holiness. In tribal societies, as in the Old Testament, the social implications of living a holy life cannot be ignored. Instead of thinking about the implications of being a “child of God,” we need to think more about the social implications of being the “people of God” in a more collective sense. Perhaps tribal people may help us Westerners to recapture an aspect of holiness that we have too often neglected. If Jesus is not Lord of all, then the essential foundation of holiness is missing.

Holiness and the Spirit World

A people’s theology of the spirit world is another very important issue that affects the practical outworking of holiness in people’s lives. The most basic understanding of holiness is that of being a people separated unto God. The first of the 10 Commandments expresses this: “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before/besides me” (Exodus 20:3). This was the big theological issue of the Old Testament. Elijah challenged the people, “How long will you waver between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal is god, follow him” (1 Kings 18:21). The issue at stake was who would provide for fertility of crops, flocks, and the well being of their families. Today people still wrestle with questions of fertility of family, flocks and gardens, success in business, and healing in time of sickness. Often Western theology has spoken of a savior from sin and eternal salvation, and has left these other issues to agriculture, economics and medicine, but in many areas of the world these are seen as being essentially spiritual issues.

Closely related to the concept of health and fertility is the fear of dark forces, spirits, witches, sorcery, spells and curses. Does the Gospel have good news for these people? Often our Western ignorance of the spirit world and our reluctance to talk about it has given the impression that the Bible too is silent and God is powerless to deal with this area. We have not emphasized Christ’s triumph over principalities and powers and so people feel the need to hold onto elements from their traditional religion to deal with these dark and fearful forces.

One missionary writes, “Our religious tradition, our humanistic education and scientific mind set have blinded us to the reality of the spirit world that Paul describes in Ephesians” (Butler: 1993:386). An African scholar says, “Many African Christians have perceived the ‘God’ of Christianity to be a ‘stranger God,’ the God of the white man who is unfamiliar with the local spiritual problems. To these Africans, Christianity was of no practical use in times of existential crisis” (Imasogie 1983:69). People from other cultures also share these same feelings.

Finally, “Any theology that does not portray Jesus Christ as an all powerful savior who here and now can free people from all fear, especially the fear of witchcraft and superstition is inadequate” (Healey and Sybertz 1996:22).
Western theology has sometimes led people to see Christ as an inadequate savior who may be able to provide eternal salvation but who knows little about the problems of day-to-day living. Consequently, they feel compelled to hold onto rituals, amulets, ancestral tablets and other things for protection against unseen evil forces. We preach a message of total commitment to Jesus Christ; but if Jesus is perceived as being an inadequate savior, they will not let go of their present rituals and objects of worship. Our message falls on deaf ears because there are worldview issues that have not been addressed.

Another worldview issue is that of ancestors. It is right and proper to honor and respect our ancestors. Indeed, we can thank God for them but not rely upon them as our guardians, protectors and providers. “Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living” (Romans 14:9). What are the implications of this statement in regard to the ancestors? The doctrine of holiness cannot be divorced from issues such as these. We may preach holiness as a second work of grace, but if we have not dealt with these basic issues of allegiance, the fine details of our theological definitions are largely irrelevant to our listeners.

A Cross-Cultural Definition of Holy

How do we define holy? How should a holy person live? Do the accepted Western standards of holy living apply equally in other cultures?

Missionary X is known as a good holiness preacher. He is a hard working person who likes to get things accomplished and does not want to waste time. He has little time for idle chatter as he wants to get on with God’s work. He considers wasting time to be a sin. To spend time talking, when a person should be working, is the same as stealing. His national colleagues see things differently, for in their culture relationships are extremely important. Relationships must always come before work. They see the missionary as impatient and rude. Because he puts work before relationships, they see him as uncaring, unloving, therefore far from holy.

Missionary C grew up in a culture that emphasizes thrift, being very careful with money, and saving for the future. She becomes a missionary in a Pacific Island that emphasizes generosity. People will spend their entire savings to put on a big feast for a wedding or a funeral. For them, this is the right and proper thing to do, and the correct way to show love and concern for family and friends. The missionary sees this as a sinful waste of money. The nationals, however, see the missionary as being stingy and selfish. A pure heart is a gift from God, but holiness of life will be reflected in different ways in different communities.

Is there a cross-cultural definition of holy, or a holy life style, that applies to all people in all cultures? What does a holy life look like in day-to-day life? Will this vary a little, or much, from culture to culture? A starting point would be to ask ourselves, “How was an ‘ideal’ person viewed in the traditional beliefs of this culture?” In the traditional myths and legends of each culture there are stories that demonstrate the qualities of an ideal person. Holiness should at least enable a person to live up to the standards of the traditional beliefs and even exceed them. Paul insisted that church leaders should be “above reproach” and have a “good reputation with outsiders” (1 Timothy 2:7). Sometimes a foreign definition or standard of holiness has led to the “holiness people” being considered as weird rather than “above reproach.” If we are to be above reproach, our standards should be higher than those of the society in which we live.

Perhaps this was what Jesus was meaning when he said, “For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter
the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 5:20). Could we paraphrase this to read, “Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Confucius scholars/ Buddhist monks/ Hindu priests/ Muslim imams/tribal chiefs/priests you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven”? If we were to take time to reflect on questions like this, it may cause us to see some cultural values in Scripture that had been overlooked and to understand holiness in a new and richer way. Spirit-filled holiness people should not only meet the ideals set forth in traditional beliefs, but also actually exceed them. If we do not, then where is the beauty of holiness, and where is the power of the Holy Spirit? Our message of holiness will have no beauty, no power, and no appeal.

For example, I understand that meekness is a very important virtue in Thailand. Western evangelists often come across as being aggressive, which is not a positive virtue. The dynamic presentation of the Western evangelist, which makes him effective in America, may be the very quality that prevents Asians from seeing the meekness and beauty of Jesus. Perhaps meekness is an aspect of holiness that has been greatly overlooked by Westerners, and we need an Asian perspective to give us a richer appreciation of the beauty of meekness as an important dimension of a holy life.

Proclaiming the Message

We have looked at some of the cultural issues that affect people’s understanding of holiness. We now go on to look at issues related to proclaiming the message of holiness.

In understanding how to proclaim holiness to tribal peoples of the South Pacific, it is very instructive to reflect on how God communicated the message to tribal people—the Israelites—in the Old Testament. Where do we find theology in the Old Testament? There is nothing in the Old Testament that compares with the Pauline epistles. Old Testament theology is not found in precise definitions and carefully worded theological arguments. Instead, it is found in the narratives of God’s dealings with his people. It is imbedded in the songs, the processions, feasts, sacrifices, in the architecture of the tabernacle, and in the design of the high priests robes. The phrase, “Holiness to the Lord,” comes from the gold plate that decorated the high priest’s turban! Theology is not rooted in philosophical arguments but is woven into the narratives and in visual symbols and moving ceremonies.

To communicate the message of holiness to people in tribal communities, we need to look at narrative theology and at ways of expressing God’s truth in stories, legends, parables, through drama and by using pictures.

If we contextualize our subject matter but do not contextualize our methods of communication, we do only part of the job. We must become more creative in our theologizing and get away from the false idea that stories and pictures are for children only.

One story I have found very helpful in communicating the holiness of God and his desire to make us holy, is the story of Isaiah’s vision in the temple. This dramatic narrative is powerful. It contains a heavenly vision, the holy temple, an awesome mysterious angelic choir, altar fires, buildings shaking, and God’s audible voice, and a broken man’s heart wrenching admission of his desperate spiritual need. Tribal people love this rich vivid symbolism and drama. This story conveys powerfully the fact that God is holy and humans are sinful, but God is willing and able to cleanse us and make us holy.

The stories of the disciples before and after Pentecost demonstrate the dramatic changes the Holy Spirit made in the lives of the disciples. The story of Stephen illustrates many of the qualities of the Spirit-filled life. Ezekiel’s vision of the valley of dry bones shows the energizing, life-giving power of the Holy Spirit. Symbols of oil, water, and fire communicate vividly to people who think in symbols and word pictures.
I found that forcing myself to express the doctrine of holiness through visual symbols made me rethink my theology and sent me to my knees as I tried to move from theological formulas to visual symbols. This next chart lesson contrasts the difference between three types of people: the non-Christian, the Christian who although born again is experiencing an ongoing conflict between the Holy Spirit and the sinful nature, and finally the Spirit-filled Christian. The human self is not removed from the life of the Spirit-filled believer. Self still exists, but not as a self-seeking entity opposed to God, for “self” is now kneeling, humble, obedient and yielded to the lordship of the Holy Spirit. There is a harmonious relationship between my spirit and the Spirit of God. This is the heart of the sanctified life.

Again and again I have been amazed and humbled as I have seen how God has used such simple things as visual symbols drawn on a sheet of paper with a felt tip marker to make his Word come alive and impress it upon the hearts and minds of people.

Lord, help us to be more creative and more effective as we proclaim the beauty of holiness. May many people surrender themselves to the lordship of Jesus Christ, and may the infilling Holy Spirit enable the wonderful love of God to shine through their lives and their culture so as to reveal the multi-colored beauty of true holiness. Lord Jesus, help us to express the beauty of Jesus and the beauty of holiness in a multitude of cultures and languages. For your glory we ask this. Amen.
1. Isaiah was a young prophet who lived 800 years before Christ was born. He worked in Jerusalem and preached God's Word to the king and the leaders in Jerusalem.

2. King Uzziah had died. He had been king of Judea for many years and the country had prospered under his rule. Now he had died, and Isaiah was deeply concerned and wondered who the next king would be. He wondered what changes this would bring to his country. Isaiah went to the temple to pray.

3. Isaiah 6:1-5. While Isaiah was praying, God showed him a vision. He saw God high and exalted and seated upon the throne of the universe. He was surrounded with brilliant angels, who were calling out to each other, “Holy, Holy, Holy! The Lord Almighty is holy! His glory fills the world” (Isaiah 6:3). God was so holy and powerful that the seraphims (angels) covered their faces because they could not look on the face of God. The temple shook and was filled with smoke. Isaiah realized in a new way the greatness, majesty and holiness of God.

4. Isaiah saw the majesty and holiness of God and felt totally unworthy in the presence of God. Even though he was a prophet who spoke for God, he felt his mouth was unclean. He saw that the whole of society also had unclean lips. Isaiah felt doomed, because of his sinful mouth and also because he had seen God with his own eyes. Years before God had said to Moses, “I will not let you see my face, because no one can see me and stay alive” (Exodus 33:20).

5. Isaiah said, “I live among a people whose words are sinful” (Isaiah 6:5). Some people are easily led into wrong habits of obscene or vulgar language as they listen to people using bad language. Christians must stand strong, remembering that we are new people in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17). We must follow Jesus example, and the words that we speak should glorify God, and be acceptable to him.

Isaiah the young prophet had been preaching God’s Word, but he now realized that his life was sinful and not pleasing to God. He felt so ashamed and cried out to God (Isaiah 6:5). A seraphim (angel) came flying towards Isaiah with a burning coal in tongs. He touched Isaiah’s lips with the coal, then said, “...your guilt is gone and your sins are forgiven” (Isaiah 6:7).

6. Then Isaiah heard the Lord say, “Who shall I send? Who will be our messenger?” Isaiah had now been forgiven and cleansed, and so he gladly responded, “I will go! Send me!” (Isaiah 6:8).

7. God calls us to live holy lives in all that we do and say. The Bible says we must be holy, because God is holy (1 Peter 1:15-16). Isaiah did not steal, or get drunk, or live an immoral life etc. He was a good man following God, and preaching His Word. However, when he realized the holiness of God, he knew that his life was not free from sin, and so he sincerely repented. What about our lives? Have we thought deeply about the holiness of the Almighty God? Are we living lives that are pleasing to God? Or do we have some sins in our life, such as lying, gossiping, jealousy, or envy and anger in our hearts towards someone else? If any of these things exist we must come to God and sincerely repent, and ask for God’s forgiveness and cleansing.

8. The seraphim touched Isaiah’s lips with the hot coal, and he was forgiven and cleansed. God also wants to cleanse our lives from sin by the blood of Christ and fill us with his Holy Spirit (Acts 2:3-4). John the Baptist said in Luke 3:16, “...He [Jesus] will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.” God gives the Holy Spirit to those who ask him (Luke 11:13). The Holy Spirit cleans our hearts and makes them pure (Acts 15:8-9).

9. When the fire of God cleansed Isaiah, he was immediately ready to go and work for God. In Acts 1:8 Jesus said, “But when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, you will be filled with power and you will
be my witnesses.” When God cleanses and fills us with his Holy Spirit, he wants us to work for him in whatever way he calls. This may be witnessing, preaching, discipling others or loving and caring for others. We can serve God in many ways. God does not want us to be lazy, selfish and waste our lives. Are we ready, like Isaiah, to answer God’s call, and serve him in whatever way he chooses (Romans 12:1-2)?

Appendix 1B
Appendix 2A

THE SINFUL NATURE—THE HIDDEN ENEMY

1. This person is not a Christian. He is self-centered: he lives to please himself, and satisfy his sinful desires. God loves him and wants to transform his life and make him truly a child of God. The Holy Spirit uses the Word of God to convict him of his sins. The Holy Spirit works in his life until he repents and desires to be rid of his sins (2 Timothy 3:16 and John 16:7-8).

2. The Holy Spirit has been working in this person's life. He wants to be free from sin and the habits that are ruining his life and his family. He confesses his sins to God. “If we confess our sins to God, he will keep his promise . . . He will forgive us our sins and purify us from all our wrongdoing” (1 John 1:9). We cannot change our own life in our own strength. Jesus died on the cross to take the punishment for our sins so that we may be forgiven. Salvation is a gift from God (Ephesians 2:8). It is because Jesus died on the cross that we can be forgiven (Ephesians 1:6-7). We must believe that Jesus died to take away our sin and to make us clean on the inside. “The blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from every sin” (1 John 1:7). When people confess their sins to God, he forgives their sins and cleanses their hearts. They become like new people with a new way of living. They do not want to do the things they used to do. Now they want to please God in all that they do. The Holy Spirit lives within them, teaches them, and strengthens them in their Christian life (Romans 8:16 and 2 Corinthians 5:17).

3. Here we see a Christian who has a struggle in his Christian life. The Holy Spirit is present in his life and wants to lead him in following God’s way. But the old self-centered way of thinking is there as well. We call this the sinful nature. The sinful nature wants to be in control of his life and so there is great conflict going on. The Holy Spirit and sinful nature (or self-centeredness) are fighting against each other. “For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want” (Galatians 5:17).

4. 1 Corinthians 3:1-3. We want to live a holy life and do what is pleasing to God. However, the sinful nature keeps pulling us away from what the Holy Spirit wants and we end up doing things we do not like. (1) Some people get angry quickly, shouting at people and quarreling. (2) Some people are jealous of others and desire to get the things or positions that other people have. (3) Some have no real joy in giving their money or time to God or serving him. (4) Other people have a problem with pride and want other people to notice them or praise them. (5) Some people do not say anything bad about other people, but they are envious in their hearts or maybe bitter towards other people. If these things exist in our lives we cannot grow and become strong Christians.

5. How do we get rid of the sinful nature? “Do not give into bodily passions, which are always at war against the soul” (1 Peter 2:11b). “Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires” (Galatians 5:24). “Get rid of all bitterness passion and anger. No more shouting or insults, no more hateful feelings of any sort” (Ephesians 4:31). “Be holy in all you do, just as God who has called you is holy” (1 Peter 1:16). We need to be completely rid of the sinful nature.

The man in this picture is very ashamed of the sins in his life, such as jealousy, anger, and being afraid to stand up for Jesus. He has neglected Bible study and prayer and has an unforgiving spirit. We must confess all of our sins, and be really sorry for the way we have lived. We must ask God to clean our hearts and fill us with his Holy Spirit. We must believe God can do this and we must be obedient to his words in the Bible.

6. Matthew 5:6. We must desire with all of our heart to be filled with the Holy Spirit. God wants to
fill us, but he is waiting for us to ask. Luke 11:13 says, “How much more, then, will the Father in
heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?”

7. Acts 5:32 says the Holy Spirit “is God’s gift to those who obey him.” In this picture the Holy Spirit
is on the throne in this person’s life. The person is kneeling, humble and obedient, ready to do
whatever God wants him or her to do. We must allow the Holy Spirit to control our lives and we
must obey God’s Word. We can no longer be self-centered and think only of pleasing ourselves.
Christ and his desires for us must have first place (John 14:21). When we are completely yielded to
Christ in every area of our lives, the Holy Spirit fills us. The sinful nature and all its desires have no
place in us. What about your life? Who controls your life and actions; the sinful nature or the Holy
Spirit?
Appendix 2B

**THE SINFUL NATURE - THE HIDDEN ENEMY**

1. John 16.7-8
   2 Tim 3.16
   [Heart illustration]

2. Eph 1.6-7
   Rom 8.16
   1 John 1.7
   2 Cor 5.17
   [Heart illustration]

3. Gal 5.17

4. 1 John 1.9
   [Heart illustration]
   1 Cor 3.1-3
   [House and palm tree illustration]

5. 1 Pet 2.11b
   Gal 5.24
   Eph 4.31, 1 Pet 1.16
   [Person holding a torch]

6. Mt 5.6
   Lk 11.13
   [Person holding a torch]

7. Acts 5.32
   John 14.21
   [Heart illustration]
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