

IN SEARCH OF HOLINESS:
A RESPONSE TO YEE THAM WAN'S
"BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN
PENTECOSTAL HOLINESS AND MORALITY"

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In "Bridging the Gap between Pentecostal Holiness and Morality," the author, Yee Tham Wan, bluntly and boldly deals with a subject that has been forgotten or ignored at least by Pentecostal and Charismatic scholars for many years. This subject is simply the Christian doctrine of *holiness*. As Yee has pointed out, the subject has been ignored so much that it has become a burning issue in the circle of Pentecostal and Charismatic believers in recent years. Indeed, almost all Pentecostal and Charismatic believers have been devastated by the news of moral failures of some well-known tele-evangelists. In Asian eyes, moral failures of religious leaders are naturally unacceptable. The religious leaders are expected to live what they believe and preach. There is no dichotomy between being and doing. Nobody wants to eat even the best and most expensive food served on a filthy plate. When a leader has committed a moral sin, this means the loss of his reputation and the end of his present ministry although he may be forgiven. Therefore, the *being* of a religious leader is part of his religious message.

Yee is also correct in saying that the failures of these tele-evangelists were the *public* failures—a tip of the iceberg. Many local churches and Christians around the world have been suffering from the moral failures of their pastors, leaders, or fellow believers. In fact, all Christians are struggling, more or less with the problem of moral failure. By moral failure, I refer not only to sexual immorality but also to other moral failures like alcoholism, drug abuse, love of money, etc. For example, many priests and pastors are alcoholic around us. In the Myanmar Christian context, many so-called Christians are not able to set an example of what they believe to non-Christians. In this respect, their lives are hardly distinguishable from the lives of non-Christians. Ideally

and strictly speaking, all Christians are supposed to strive toward a holy life that glorifies the Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, it is not an exaggeration to say that the problem of moral failure is not only the problem of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christians but also the problem of Christians as a whole. According to the Bible, we, the Christians, are supposed to conform to the likeness of Christ. We are required to live a holy life after we are saved by grace through faith. In other words, we are supposed to strive towards Christian character development. If we do not pay attention sufficiently to living a holy life, we can morally fail any time like these tele-evangelists.

Consequently, Yee's concern regarding the lack of emphasis on Christian holiness is legitimate and worthy of attention. As an Asian Classical Pentecostal, I am also concerned very much with this issue. Since Christians are in the minority in our Asian countries it is important for us to prove through our right living—i.e., living a holy life—that our religion is true. The readers can guess, therefore, that my response to Yee's article will be a positive one. As I have mentioned above, according to my observation, Pentecostal scholars have paid little attention to the subject of Christian holiness. Perhaps they have been preoccupied with defending the distinctive Pentecostal doctrines of baptism in the Holy Spirit and initial evidence. Probably, they are defending the doctrine of subsequence (the doctrine of baptism in the Holy Spirit as subsequent to conversion) at the expense of the doctrine of Christian holiness, as we will see later. Anyway, we can clearly see that in this beginning of the twenty-first century, there is a need to revive John Wesley's personal quest for Christian holiness. Pentecostals should not forget the fact that the twentieth century Pentecostal revival (modern Pentecostalism) was conceived in the context of nineteenth century Holiness movements that can trace their roots directly or indirectly to John Wesley's teaching on sanctification.

Then why has Pentecostal emphasis on Christian holiness diminished? It seems to me that Pentecostal and Charismatic Christians have paid more attention to the Pentecostal power than to holiness. They have given more weight to the manifestation of charismata than to right conduct. This tendency can easily lead to the moral failure of both ministers and believers. Yee gives a number of reasons for this unbalanced emphasis. Put differently, these reasons are the factors or the challenges that hinder moral development of believers. They all have potential for hindering a believer's spiritual journey to holiness equally. Although Yee gives eight of them, they can be summarized into four—Pentecostal separation between morality and spirituality, Pentecostal

Evangelicalism, Pentecostal bifurcation of power and purity, and Pentecostal skepticism about formal rules of Christian conduct.

First, Yee rightly argues that the separation between morality and spirituality by Pentecostals is one of the causes of their lack of attention to Christian character development. On the one hand, if morality is relegated to a sort of secular enterprise, the separation between morality and spirituality is probably the problem of the West. Indeed, we notice that the subject of moral development is one of the areas of study in psychology or behavioral science. As Yee correctly points out, since Pentecostals usually distinguish between the sacred and the secular, as long as moral development is considered to belong to a branch of secular study, Pentecostals will pay less attention to it. On the other hand, if morality is equated with Christian character, then we cannot separate morality from spirituality especially in the Asian context. Generally for Asians, morality and spirituality are closely interwoven. In Myanmar, when we say someone is spiritual we mean he is moral as well as religious (or godly). Someone who is spiritual should behave morally as well as think spiritually. Again, we do expect those who exercise charismata to demonstrate Christian character as well. It is inconceivable for an Asian that an immoral person can exercise Spiritual gifts. However, as Yee has correctly pointed out, this inseparability does not mean that spirituality automatically produces morality or Christian character. Although the two are inseparable in the life of a Christian, they have to be developed separately. But we should also maintain balance between the two. We have to admit that the ways spirituality and morality are related to one another is still a mystery. To this day, Christian theology is not capable of explaining the exact relationship between the two. Nevertheless, the truth is that we dare not separate spirituality and morality from one another. It is illogical to think that spirituality can stand without morality in a Christian life and vice versa.

The second reason is Pentecostal Evangelicalism. Yee is absolutely correct in complaining that the Evangelical doctrine of salvation by grace through faith often results in seeing a set of commandments as works. Specifically, the Calvinist doctrine of salvation, which claims that once a person is saved he is eternally secured, frequently leads to an inappropriate teaching that no matter how much one sins his salvation will not be lost. Those who hold such views have a tendency to ignore biblical commandments that need to be observed in order that one may live a holy life, which is required of every Christian. This is the problem that Christianity in Myanmar is currently facing. Actually, although Pentecostals hold the Evangelical doctrine of salvation by grace through

faith, the majority of them are also Arminians who believe that a Christian can lose his salvation. The negative consequence of the Calvinist doctrine of “once saved always saved,” therefore, is supposed to be the problem of non-Pentecostal and Calvinistic Evangelicals alone. In practice, however, advocates of the doctrine are penetrating Pentecostal churches in various forms of organizations and movements. Generally, these teachers do not emphasize the need of living a holy life. As a result, many Pentecostal believers are left with confusion and doubts. In some places, the teaching causes disunity within local churches or even church-splits. If we do not maintain balance between the doctrine of salvation by grace through faith and that of Christian holiness, our Christianity will continue to suffer the lack of Christian character and consequently we cannot be salt and light.

Third, Yee is right when he argues that Pentecostal bifurcation of power and purity can cause the lack of emphasis on holiness. Pentecostals strongly distinguish the soteriological and missiological dimensions of the work of the Holy Spirit. While the indwelling presence of the Spirit is for regeneration, the baptism in the Holy Spirit is exclusively enduement of power for service. This power for service is closely associated with charismata by many Pentecostal and Charismatic preachers. For these preachers, ministering through the power of the Spirit and manifestation of charismata are more important than teaching Christians to live a holy life. As a result, the teaching on Christian holiness has been given very little emphasis. Perhaps, some of these preachers might have forgotten to care for their own Christian life to develop their Christian character. In my opinion, the separation between the soteriological and missiological aspects of the function of the Holy Spirit is not necessarily wrong. Indeed, Pentecostals maintain that the baptism in the Holy Spirit is *not* a requirement for salvation, but the enduement of power to become a witness for Christ. Some Pentecostal scholars have argued that this power is intended for the “act of witnessing” (i.e., doing) alone, not for “being a witness.” I would argue that the Pentecostal power, according to Acts 1:8, is not only for the act of witnessing but also for being a witness—i.e., witnessing through being. But Pentecostal scholars are reluctant to include “being” in the purpose of Pentecostal power. Perhaps, this reluctance is due to the fear that including “being” in the purpose of Pentecostal power might have to be done at the expense of the doctrine of subsequence. This fear is quite natural and understandable. But we can note that this fear is rooted in placing moral development in the complex of conversion. What we have to reexamine is whether it is legitimate to place the development of

Christian character in the complex of conversion. In other words, is Christian character development an essential requirement for a person to be saved? If the answer is “yes” then we might be guilty of teaching salvation not only by grace but also by work. Actually, Christians try to live a holy life not because they want to be saved, but because they have already been saved. In this respect, Yee’s quotation of Wesley C. Baker (pp. 166-7) is quite relevant and instructive. It is not the purpose of this essay to give a comprehensive argument to answer the question. Nevertheless, if the answer is “no”—i.e., if we can theologically separate Christian character development from the complex of conversion—then we can safely include “being” in the purpose of Pentecostal power. Although the baptism in the Holy Spirit is not a mark of spirituality or morality, I think, it has a potential for helping Christians in their journey to Christian character development. Consequently, this will help us to keep a balance between power and purity in our Christian lives.

The fourth reason is Pentecostal skepticism about formal rules of Christian conduct. This is my summary of three of Yee’s reasons – Pentecostal spontaneity, Pentecostal individualism, and Pentecostal loss of restorationist identity. Probably, this skepticism is intensified especially in the later days of modern Pentecostalism. As modern Pentecostalism was conceived in the context of the nineteenth century holiness movement, initially, many Pentecostal denominations and groups adopted a list of things or behaviors that needed to be avoided by their own constituents as an expression of holiness. These were seen to be sinful at first. Of course, Yee is right when he argues that many Pentecostals were reluctant to adopt the rules of conduct as they saw them as an indication of ecclesiasticism, sectarianism or legalism. This situation seems to me as a sort of paradox or dilemma in the early years of modern Pentecostalism. Nevertheless, generally speaking, observing a set of rules of conduct or codes of holiness was important for the majority of Pentecostals during these times. In later days, however, these codes of holiness were labeled *taboos* that need not necessarily be observed. Many of the prohibited behaviors and conduct have been tolerated. Some Pentecostals, like some other Christians, have become more concerned with the rights of individuals and with cultural matters than the commandments of Jesus Christ. They argue, for instance, that drinking and smoking are not necessarily sinful, but culturally correct. They would say, “This is okay in the west and that is alright in the east.” Therefore, we are exalting our culture above the Holy Bible. We consciously or unconsciously allow our culture to influence our theology. In this respect, Pentecostals may not be very different from the liberals.

Also, it seems like Christians are no longer able to distinguish between right and wrong. Of course, some of the behavioral issues were not problems in the time of New Testament writers. Smoking, for instance, is not discussed in the Bible because there was no custom of smoking during those times. Similarly, watching x-rated movies is not discussed in the Bible because there were no movies during the time of Paul. We have to address these issues ourselves not according to our culture, but according to biblical principles. If we really want to be true to biblical principles, we cannot tolerate smoking or social drinking. However, for some reason we are not very decisive or enthusiastic in dealing with these kinds of behavioral issues. As a result, many sermons become general and abstract rather than specific. It is quite common to hear, "Do not sin," and it is quite easy to say, "Live a holy life." But very few preachers bother themselves to teach what specific behaviors are sinful and what other specific behaviors are holy. What eventually results is our weakness and failure in developing Christian character. Consequently, as Yee complains, Pentecostalism, in some quarters, has lost its restorationist identity. Moreover, Yee is right when he asserts that Pentecostals are skeptical about behavioral sciences. For them, the sacred cannot be mingled with the secular. Their skepticism about formal rules of conduct strengthens their aversion to behavioral science. As a result, many Pentecostals become weak in their journey towards Christian holiness.

Yee also proposes a model for a Pentecostal approach to moral development. Although his approach is partially informed by the Bible, it is primarily based on behavioral science. I am not competent in psychology or social science. Nevertheless, I think, Yee's model of the process of moral development—cognitive-affective-behavioral—is correct. First, one must know what is right and what is wrong (cognitive dimension). Then he must develop a desire to do the right things (affective dimension). Finally, he must practically do these right things (behavioral dimension). If any dimension is skipped or omitted, a genuine moral development will not take place. Omitting the cognitive dimension will produce imperfect moral development. Omitting the affective dimension will result in a fake morality or a morality that will not last. But if the behavioral dimension is omitted there will be no moral development at all.

Again, in my opinion, the challenges or hindrances to moral development discussed above are not necessarily the primary cause of the moral failure of Pentecostals or Christians in general. Indeed, they are the fertile soil on which moral failure is bred. What really causes moral

failure is, I think, the incongruence between one's desire to do good and what he actually does. This incongruence is the gap between the cognitive-affective stage and the behavioral stage. In other words, moral failure is caused by one's inability or failure to bridge the cognitive-affective aspect with the behavioral aspect. The problem that we normally face in our journey to moral development is not that we do not know what are right and what are wrong. Also it is not that we do not want to do the right things. But the real problem is that quite often, we cannot do the right things. This is what Paul means in Romans 7:14-25. Indeed, this problem is caused by our human nature that always has a tendency to do wrong conducts that we do not want to do.

In this respect, Yee is generally correct when he asserts that in the process of Christian moral development, while the Bible must inform cognitive dimension, moving from the affective dimension to the behavioral dimension must be empowered by the Holy Spirit. Indeed, the Bible is full of the teachings on what is right and what is wrong. Biblical norms of right conduct are the foundation for our Christian character development. Of course, Yee is also correct in saying that the cognitive dimension should also be informed by contextual factors (cultural, psychological, religious, and intellectual). But these contextual factors should not transcend the biblical norms. The reason is that, for example, culture is not always perfect because what people perceive as right is not necessarily consistent with the biblical truth.

Again, Yee is absolutely right when he claims that Christians have the Holy Spirit to be able to do what is right. Furthermore, Pentecostals have the advantage in their Christian character development because of their Pentecostal experience. By this, he probably means that Pentecostal power (the Spirit-baptism) is available also for doing the right things. He says, "Pentecostals should be keenly aware that the Holy Spirit power is the power to *"be"* (Acts 1:8)" (p. 172). The concept is plausible and possible. But as I have discussed above, it needs further theological argument to convince others that the Pentecostal power is also for *"being"*—the power needed behave normally that will lead us to Christian character development. Moreover, I think, Yee may need to expand the applicability of the work of the Holy Spirit back to the cognitive and affective dimensions of moral development. The Holy Spirit is the one who reveals and explains the word of God to us and convinces us of our sin. He helps us to distinguish between what is right and what is wrong. In addition, He is the one who helps us to desire to do the will of God. The Holy Spirit, therefore, is active not only in the behavioral dimension but also in the cognitive and affective dimensions.

Above all, the model as a whole will be very helpful to us in our journey to Christian character development. Together with the power of the Holy Spirit, the model can help us to overcome our human nature and do the right things that we want to do. However, as the model is solely based on behavioral science, it lacks a strong theological and biblical argument. Undoubtedly, Yee or someone else will have to develop a practical theology for Christian character development. I believe that this is the burning issue not only in Pentecostal and Charismatic circles but also in the larger church as a whole. Yee has raised the issue just in time. Perhaps, Pentecostal and Charismatic Christians need a renewal movement like the Holiness movement of the nineteenth century. If Christians—scholars and lay Christians alike—do not have a hunger for Christian holiness in their lives, and if they do not continue to deal with this issue, our Christianity will become a dead religion (James 2:14-18). I am really looking forward to the development of a practical theology of holiness. May the Lord, through the Holy Spirit, help us with our journey toward Christian character development!