

**BOOK REVIEW**  
**A (PARTIAL) VISION OF CHRISTIAN HOLINESS FOR THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY:  
KENT BROWER'S, *HOLINESS IN THE GOSPELS*<sup>1</sup>**

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This book is a revised and expanded version of the Collins Holiness Lectures given at Canadian Nazarene University in 2000. Brower is Vice-Principal and Senior Lecturer in Biblical Studies at Nazarene Theological College in Manchester, England and throughout the book it is clear that his ecclesial commitments make his endeavor more than a detached, academic exercise. What we have here instead, is academically responsible, theologically sensitive, biblical interpretation carried out in service to the church. It is a superb addition to a number of books and articles that indicate a rekindled interest in the doctrine of holiness.

The book is organized into an introduction and six chapters followed by endnotes and a useful bibliography. In the introduction Brower begins by describing the contemporary state of the ecclesial context (that of the Wesleyan/Holiness movement) in which his reflections on holiness have taken shape. He notes that in that context a renewed passion for holiness is reemerging among the laity and younger scholars, a passion for a new vision of holiness that is “more biblically responsible and theologically coherent than the teaching they heard in the past” (14). Or, more sharply put, “They want to live the holy life in the 21st century not in a 19th-century Holiness theme park” (14). It is precisely that sort of new vision of holiness that Brower is attempting to carve out in this book.

In the rest of the introduction, he lays out several methodological and theological assumptions that undergird the book. Notable among these are his assumptions that the theme of holiness runs throughout the entirety of scripture and that word studies alone are simply too limited to serve as the major exegetical strategy for discerning scripture's witness to its nature and importance. Hence, rather than relying primarily on word studies and verb tenses (the tendency of some holiness interpreters in the past), Brower assumes that biblical narrative itself is a major vehicle of doctrinal truth. More particularly, in terms of his focus in this book, he assumes (and demonstrates) that the gospels, as theological documents in their own right, contribute to a coherent understanding of Christian holiness by means of the way their narratives unfold.<sup>2</sup> Finally, he notes two

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<sup>1</sup>Kent Brower, *Holiness in the Gospels* (Kansas City, Mo.: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2005). I was privileged to have access to this book prior to its publication. While it is fairly short (160 pages), I have chosen to offer a longer summary of it than I would in a typical book review making what follows something between a book review and a review article. This is because, to my knowledge, it is the first treatment of Christian holiness from someone in the Wesleyan/Holiness tradition who takes seriously the theological contribution the gospels make to our understanding of holiness *precisely as narratives*. By making this more of a review article, I hope to expose busy pastors to: (1) the results of approaching the gospels as theologically charged narratives; (2) some of the recent currents of thought about holiness by theologians in the Wesleyan/Holiness movement that Brower exemplifies.

<sup>2</sup>Even though this is longer than the typical book review, I can only summarize the results of his efforts here. In order to fully appreciate how these narratives unfold theologically, one should buy the book and read it.

explicit theological assumptions that guide his work, namely, that holiness cannot be properly understood without explicitly framing it in both incarnational and Trinitarian terms. His consistency in framing the discussion this way gives his treatment of holiness more overall theological coherence than some older treatments of holiness which frame it more in anthropological and/or hamartiological terms.

Chapter one focuses on the historical context of the Greco-Roman world and second Temple Judaism as providing the framework within which the gospel was received and notions of holiness were developed. He begins by briefly summarizing various religious practices/conceptions across the Eastern Mediterranean that impinge on understandings of holiness and/or purity outside a Jewish context. Here, he rightly calls attention to the fact that religion dominated all aspects of first century life, social as well as political. But concern for holiness, purity, and impurity were primarily ritualistic or cultic issues having little to do with how individuals lived their life outside the context of temple activities such as celebratory meals/sacrifices. Typical Greco-Roman gods were neither models for moral behavior nor interested in ethical purity. In this context, the idea that a god would call a whole people to holiness as an imitation of that god's own holy character was very odd indeed.

In the second part of this chapter, Brower lays out the substructure of beliefs, practices, institutions and hopes that informed an understanding of holiness in second Temple Judaism. For those who have not read widely in contemporary NT studies, this section is very helpful particularly in its lucid discussion of how the political and social realities (Israel's continuing exile in its own land at the hands of the Romans) of the first century undergird a widespread concern for the purity and holiness of Israel. Following much of current NT scholarship (e.g., N. T. Wright, Marcus Borg), he shows in particular how important Temple, Torah, and the land are in this intensifying concern for purity and holiness in second-Temple Judaism. The latter part of this chapter is directed toward discussion of various "holiness movements" in the Judaism of the day: the Pharisees, the Qumran community, and the Jesus movement itself. This discussion helpfully points out similarities and differences between each of these movements and provides a good point of focus immediately prior to moving into his treatment of each of the four gospels.

In chapter two Brower's focus is on the Gospel of Luke where he highlights both the incarnational and incipiently Trinitarian aspects of Luke's portrayal of Jesus. Here he initially focuses on intersections of Jesus and the Spirit in Luke's narrative (e.g., the virginal conception, John's words in 3:16, the baptism and temptation scenes and the Nazareth sermon). In doing so, he shows how Luke depicts Jesus, as both uniquely Son of God (and truly divine) and yet perfectly obedient to his Father *precisely as a human being* full of the Holy Spirit. As the one who both acts in the Spirit's power and is giver of that Spirit, he begins the restoration of humanity and all of creation. By entering fully into our human condition and taking on our fallen flesh, he sanctifies our humanity and models what it means to be both truly human and truly Israel, thereby offering an alternative vision of what it means to be God's *holy* people. For the Lukan Jesus, therefore, the essence of holiness is not separation from impurity and performance of a holiness code (cf. the Pharisees), but rather inclusive, gracious, compassionate power that

actively seeks the marginalized in order to restore them to God's people. Luke's Jesus embodies the very essence of God's own character providing a paradigm for the Christian life of holiness, a life that is to be lived in and through the power of the Spirit.

In chapter three, Brower moves to the Gospel of John but limits his focus to the question: What is the relationship between the sanctification of believers and the language in John 17 of mutual indwelling, i.e., the mutual indwelling of the Father and the Son and the mutual indwelling of believers in God? Before he comes to discuss John 17, Brower gives a helpful overview of contemporary Trinitarian thought in which he embraces a social model of the Trinity and shows how such a model sheds light on Genesis 1-3, i.e., on humanity's creation in the image of God and the marring of that image in the fall. With this overview as background, he then offers an exposition of the language of being one with the Father and the Son and with one another (John 17:11, 21-23) utilizing the theological concepts of *perichoresis* (as modeled in the incarnation) and *theosis*. These concepts are useful in conveying the truth that God's purpose is for his creatures to share intimately in the very life of the Triune God and yet precisely *as created creatures* (i.e., never being absorbed into the being of God). Approaching John 17:17-19 in this light, Brower argues that the language of sanctification in Jesus' prayer is directed toward the disciples being kept safe from the hostility of the world and toward their being in intimate relationship with the holy God *and with each other*. Hence, Christian holiness is "a social, not an individual, phenomenon" (79). The purpose of such sanctification/holiness is that the disciples might continue the mission of that holy God to the world, i.e., the mission of bringing God's holy, outward-looking, reconciling, salvific love to his world. As they enact this mission together, they are reflecting the character of the holy God to the world and thereby being restored into the image of the Triune God. Given that the sanctification language of John 17 is preceded in the narrative by the promised gift of the Spirit (John 14:16-18, 20-21), one can see the obvious resonance between this understanding of the holiness of the disciples and the life of holiness embodied by the Lukan Jesus in and through the power of the Spirit.

Chapter four deals with the Gospel of Mark which, as Brower notes, contains no explicit reference to sanctification and little holiness terminology. Brower begins the chapter by highlighting the significance Mark gives to the descent of the Holy Spirit on Jesus and the narrative's designation of him as the "Holy One of God" arguing that Mark thereby depicts Jesus as the very "locale of God among his people" (88). Unlike other chapters, in this one Brower traces the overall flow of Mark's narrative from beginning to end. As he does so, he highlights the theme of the journey of discipleship. On this journey, the disciples identify themselves with the Holy One of God and are therefore the holy people of God as they accompany him on his saving mission of proclaiming and embodying the Kingdom of God. On this reading, the theme of discipleship in Mark is another way of speaking about Christian holiness. This chapter concludes with a helpful discussion of various aspects of the journey of discipleship/holiness in Mark's gospel, aspects which have clear contemporary significance.

In chapter five, Brower focuses on the Sermon on the Mount. He devotes about a third of the chapter to setting the literary context of the sermon, emphasizing the significance of

Matthew's prior depiction of the identity of Jesus as a crucial factor in interpretation of the sermon. In the remainder of the chapter he focuses on specific parts of Matthew 5: the language of hungering and thirsting for righteousness (v. 6); purity in heart (v. 8); greater righteousness (vv. 17-20); the command for perfection (v. 48). Here, in dialogue with major contemporary interpreters of this gospel, he deftly negotiates the exegetical challenges this section of Matthew presents. He argues that in the sermon Jesus does not effect a new law or some sort of entrance test to the kingdom; rather its demands should be understood as the grace-enabled fruit of a new "in the heart" covenant, fulfilling the promises of Jeremiah 31 and Ezekiel 36. There is clearly human response called for, however, and that response is perfection, to mirror the very character of the Father. Such perfection is not a moral or legal standard, but rather "perfect love, that single-minded devotion to God and love of neighbor that is the summation and fulfillment of God's great commands to us" (125). This cannot, however, be reduced to a matter of "inner intentionality," but can only take place as it is concretized in relationships within the community of faith and even (or especially) in grace-filled relationships with one's enemies. As such, "the greater righteousness of 5:20 turns out to be nothing less than being perfect like our Father" (126).

Brower's concluding chapter summarizes the main characteristics of Christian holiness that have emerged throughout his study. He concludes the chapter with a series of probing questions that are primarily, albeit not exclusively, addressed to those in the Wesleyan/Holiness tradition.

There is much to commend this small book. The prose is clear and engaging and Brower makes potentially difficult theological ideas (e.g., his discussion of the *theosis* and *perichoresis* in chapter two) accessible to students and pastors. In addition, he demonstrates expertise in contemporary NT scholarship and conversance with contemporary developments in systematic theology (particularly those having to do with the Trinity) enabling him to set the doctrine of Christian holiness on stable grounds, both biblically and theologically. Given the resistance to rethinking the doctrine of holiness in certain quarters of the Wesleyan/Holiness movement over the last couple of decades, Brower shows considerable nerve in consistently focusing on the substance of Christian holiness rather than on its particular point of origin (i.e., "the experience"). While maintaining the *intensely personal* nature of the life of holiness, he refuses to characterize it primarily as an "individual" experience. Rather, he underscores its communal nature and never brackets "inner intentionality" off from holy practices within a concrete ecclesial community. Beacon Hill Press is to be commended for publishing the book.

The main complaint I have about the book is not in terms of its content but in terms of its layout. Brower has a large number of content endnotes that deserve to be read, particularly by those for whom this approach is new. These should have been printed as footnotes at the bottom of the page rather than placed in the back of the book where they are inconvenient to access.

Brower is very conscious of the fact that his treatment of the gospels is limited and that any full-blown exegetical treatment of Christian holiness must also pay attention to the

rest of scripture, particularly to the witness of Paul. As such this is indeed a partial vision of Christian holiness and much remains to be done (e.g., showing how this material on holiness is related to Pauline language like justification/rectification, sanctification, new creation). Even so, this small book has gone a long way toward anticipating what a biblically responsible, theologically careful, vision of holiness might look like in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I highly recommend it, not only for use in courses on the Gospels or on the doctrine of holiness, but especially for pastors who are desperate for trustworthy resources that will help them teach and preach in ways that provide a catalyst for God to transform their congregation into his holy people.