

A RESPONSE TO A HOLY PEOPLE
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In this short paper, Dr Rob A. Fringer argues that *a Holy People is found in an embrace of our shared brokenness, which through the outworking of the Holy Spirit is brought to a less perfect perfection in the midst of community*. Fringer begins this article by tracing the Church of the Nazarene's understanding of the holy people and the various options we have used to describe this experience of holiness. Having outlined the various ways we have used to describe the experience of holiness, he concedes that not one term is able to do justice to the work that God does in our lives. Fringer, however, notes that the Church of the Nazarene has "tended to emphasize individual over communal holiness". Through an analysis of our manual statement, Fringer is able to argue his case. For Fringer even when we tend to focus on community we do so for the sake of the individual as opposed to "the goal being the holiness of a community". He cites Wesley's often-quoted phrase "The Gospel of Christ knows of no religion, but social; no holiness but social holiness". Fringer is to be commended for interpreting this phrase in the manner in which Wesley used it. Historically there has been a tendency to see this phrase as suggesting that the people of God need to engage in social programs (as important as that is). Wesley's concern was that individuals cannot be holy without the community. This definitely resonates with the African perspective and its emphasis on community.

The communal worldview is most encapsulated by Mbiti when he said "I am because we are and because we are therefore I am."¹ There is no overemphasis on one entity but both are important. Sometimes because the pendulum has swung more on the individual side (especially in the West) the temptation is usually overturning it on the side of the community. However, we have to ask: Can a community be holy without the holiness of individuals? Can individuals be holy without the holiness of the community? Maybe the answer is not to be found in either community or individual but both. An individual needs a holy community for their holiness and a community needs holy individuals for its holiness.² Given that the West struggles to "imagine sharing our holiness with another" the African emphasis on community is an antidote. Since in Africa, we can also be tempted to forget the individual, our brothers and sisters from the West can help us to see our blind spots. This indeed is the beauty of being of an international church.

Fringer then speaks about embracing our shared brokenness. He acknowledges that we often do not speak about our brokenness. He sees its roots in humanity's fall into sin and the idea of the *imago dei* which Fringer notes has been distorted. He sees the idea of community as grounded in the image of God concluding that "*we were created in community and for community*". In our salvation/holiness God reconciles us and restores us and these Fringer contends "were not offered to an individual but to a people". It is interesting that when missionaries came to Africa, they often struggled with the idea of a whole village accepting the message of the gospel and wanting to be baptised en masse. Certainly, the corporate aspect of our salvation has been lost as a result of the Enlightenment's emphasis on individuals rather than on community. Fringer acknowledges that even though Wesley's understanding of holiness was

¹ John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, Repr. (Nairobi: East African Educational Publ, 2015), 105.

² Kent Brower, *Living as God's Holy People: Holiness and Community in Paul* (Paternoster, 2014), 39.

communal, in many ways he was “still a man of his time”. It would have been important to highlight some of the examples in which this is true in Wesley’s thought.

Fringer further states that “even in the church, we hide our brokenness”. I, however, wonder whether Fringer’s concern is the brokenness of individuals or corporate brokenness. A few lines down he states that “holiness has been defined more individualistically rather than communally”. The question that follows is if indeed Fringer’s concern is community holiness given that he says “We each struggle with our own human inadequacies. We are ashamed of who we know ourselves to be and believe that if others saw our ‘true’ selves, then they would no longer desire relationship with us”. In the African context, there can be a tendency to speak more about our communal holiness as a way of downplaying our lack of holiness at an individual level. Clearly, there cannot be communal holiness without individual holiness. The two are intricately connected.

Fringer transitions to a discussion of the outworking of the Holy Spirit noting that “while we may be broken, the Holy Spirit is not”. Even here Fringer sees the idea of communal holiness coming through the unifying work of the Spirit. He demonstrates the communal nature of our faith by appealing to scripture where often the pronouns are plural rather than singular e.g. I Corinthians 3:16-17. He writes “Throughout the New Testament we see that the Spirit unites Christians into a single new entity ...enabling us to faithfully embody and display the holiness of God”. From this, he concludes that “holiness is always communal and only made possible in relationship with God and another”. The agent of this work is the Holy Spirit who “unites us into one holy people” says Fringer. The reversal of Babylon in Acts of the Apostles chapter 2 on the day of Pentecost adds support to Fringer’s interpretation. When the people were filled with the Spirit, they spoke with one voice, and they were unified as one people—the church of Jesus Christ. Yet this did not insulate them from some of the problems that are part of fledgling communities.

Fringer then moves on to talk about a less perfect perfection noting that only Christ was able to attain God’s call to perfection. He then contends that in the New Testament, the idea of perfection is tied to the idea of God’s love. This love entails that of our enemies. Fringer sees the missional aspect of our call to perfection noting that “we are called to live in a new creation reality” in which we “become the righteousness of God” together. For Fringer “Perfection is not found in completing particular actions in a particular way or even in the completion itself. Perfection is found in the journey of lived relationships that are compelled by God’s love”. He further contends that regardless of “personal brokenness” and “the deficiencies of the entire group” we are still holy since “our holiness is not our own”. One wonders through whether Fringer is advocating the idea of the imputation of holiness as opposed to the impartation. To what extent can we be said to be holy yet we are not holy? Even with the idea of love one wonders whether we can fail to love or fall short of the demands of love. If that happens are we still perfect or holy?

In the last section the author notes that Israel was not chosen because of how good they were but that they were able “to engage God authentically”. It is this authenticity according to Fringer which brings about genuine intimacy. He, however, admits that even in a homogenous community there can “be times of frustration and disagreement”. One wonders if we should consider congregations where people don’t “look and think like us”. Are not these the kind communities we should be trying to create if we are truly the holy people of God. The fact that we create separate services for people who do not “look or think like us” is a failure to become

the alternative community we should be.³ Worship in a holy community should not be about personal taste or style of music. It should be about what brings honour and glory to God. Fringer returns to brokenness when he says that “there is something profoundly beautiful about our brokenness when seen through the lens of a loving community”. Where brokenness is accepted “God’s power, holiness, and especially God’s love shines through” says Fringer. He concludes by calling the church to abandon its preoccupation with personal piety while embracing communal holiness which he claims might be “less perfect than we might like”. It is not clear whether Fringer is referring to our lives before the gospel or our current experience as the people of God. Yes, we must take the tension “between the already and the not yet” seriously; yet as Wesleyans we do affirm the optimism of grace.⁴ Should there not be a difference between the former life and the current life? Peter Oakes is right to note that Paul’s holiness language which he uses to speak of Christians in Rome “represents a sharply defined boundary: all Christians are holy, non-Christians are not”.⁵ We have to be careful that we do not glorify what Christ Jesus died to address. The words of H.V Miller are pertinent, “The sin question is the pivotal question. Anything taught or preached which obscures the cruciality of sin becomes an enemy of the cross of Christ”.⁶

³ Brower, *Living as God’s Holy People*, 5.

⁴ Brower, *Living as God’s Holy People*, 21.

⁵ Peter Oakes, “Made Holy by the Holy Spirit: Holiness and Ecclesiology in Romans,” in *Holiness and Ecclesiology in the New Testament*, ed. Kent Brower and Andy Johnson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 178.

⁶ Howard Vassar Miller, *The Sin Problem*, Revised and slightly enl. ed edition. (Beacon Hill Press, 1947, 28).