

RACE, EMBRACING BROKENNESS, AND GOD'S ETERNAL PROJECT:
A RESPONSE TO FRINGER AND BHEBHE
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Fringer and Bhebhe rightly steer us toward a more corporate understanding of being a holy people in contrast to the individualistic doctrine of holiness that has characterized us and often created “a façade of holiness, a pious purity clothed in morality and having little to do with genuine community” (Fringer, 5). In my context—the overwhelmingly white Church of the Nazarene in the United States (WCNUS)—nowhere has this been more evident than in most of our churches’ continued silence about the created conditions of structural racism against people of color, especially African Americans. This is the case despite strong language in sections 915, 917, and 920 in the Manual’s appendix calling Nazarenes to actively name and work against structural prejudice and injustice.

Over the last few years, the continuing effects of racial biases embedded in US society and in many of us who participate in it have been on display in the faces of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and numerous others. Rather than lamenting another black image bearer’s death, we white US Nazarenes have often simply looked away, rushed to uncover something in the victims’ backgrounds that could have justified what we saw or heard, or insisted that each situation be interpreted as an isolated incident rather than first considering that it might be another example of a continuing unjust, racialized pattern.

When combined with our relative lack of concern for the continuing racial disparities in incarceration, income, education, health outcomes and household wealth in the US, should the minute percentage (estimated < 1%) of African Americans in the Church of the Nazarene in the US surprise us? Has the WCNUS worked at cross purposes—intentionally or unintentionally—with God’s eternal project of breaking down barriers between diverse people groups and making them one in Christ’s body (Bhebhe, 3)? If so, we aren’t unique. Much of the white American church, especially evangelicalism, shares this form of brokenness that Wille Jennings calls the “diseased social imagination” of western Christianity.¹ Briefly stated, in the western Church’s colonizing expansion, Christianity’s original trajectory that created a desire for intimacy with diverse others often took a painful form, “one in which the joining often meant oppression, violence, and death, if not of bodies then most certainly of ways of life, forms of language, and visions of the world.”² This history created “Christian sensibilities, identities, and habits of mind which continue to channel patterns of colonialist dominance...”³ manifest in an ongoing pattern of racial biases and structural injustice that inhibit what we white Christians say we desire, i.e., racial reconciliation and intimacy with the racial other. As many at this conference can no doubt testify, this diseased social imagination’s harmful effects have been felt beyond the US context. Hence, while this response focuses on the racial brokenness of the WCNUS, a similar phenomenon produces racial biases and structural injustice in other parts of our church.

Unfortunately, most white US Nazarenes don’t acknowledge this form of shared brokenness. We refuse to recognize how Sin functions as a power to sculpt shared notions of “commonsense” and

¹Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 6.

²Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 9.

³Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 8-9.

social structures like laws and institutions—including churches—in racialized ways. Understanding sin primarily as *intentional* individual actions, essentially what Bhebhe refers to as “this domestication of sin in the soul” (5), blinds us to the way that our own minds may be permeated with unconscious racialized “commonsense” assumptions subtly working against our desire for “racial reconciliation.” So, we continue repeating our history of silently complying with—or even actively supporting—the existing created conditions of racial injustice. Intentional or not, allowing ourselves to be used as “weapons of injustice” in Sin’s hands (Rom 6:13a) in this way cannot be mitigated by applying Wesley’s distinction between individual sins and infirmities to the situation to “save” our holiness.

Fringer rightly argues that we need a doctrine of holiness that embraces our shared brokenness that the Spirit brings to a less perfect perfection in the midst of community (Fringer, 1). But what would constitute *embracing* our “shared brokenness” regarding the racial issues I’ve raised? Are the racial biases of the diseased social imagination of many of us white US Nazarenes part of the shared brokenness we should *embrace*? Are we, in Fringer’s words, “holy despite our personal brokenness and despite the deficiencies of the entire group” (8)? It is true that any holiness that might characterize us is Christ’s, not ours, and that “it is only ours as we abide in Christ” (Fringer, 8). But as long as we white US Nazarenes continue exhibiting a diseased social imagination with little concern for the material conditions of our African American siblings, can we claim to be collectively “abiding in Christ” and therefore, sharing in Christ’s holiness? Or does the relative lack of African American bodies among us betray any such claim to holiness? Indeed, if “the journey of lived relationships that [we say] are compelled by God’s love” (Fringer, 8) includes no sustained intimate ecclesial relations with African Americans, is our journey moving toward *Christian* perfection or toward something else?

Perhaps Bhebhe moves us in the right direction when he argues that “living confessionally in redemptive relationships is...fundamentally about the humility that frees us to hear God and see Him through the other as we engage in transparent and vulnerable conversations that reveal God to us and us to each other in unfamiliar and unexpected ways” (8). Regarding the WCNU, this would mean first having transparent and vulnerable conversations where we listen carefully to our (very few) African American Nazarenes that might help us see and confess our racialized assumptions and silence as the effect of Sin’s power over our individual bodies, ecclesial bodies, and larger society. But such conversations would have to be followed by attempting to repair the damage caused, requiring us to present ourselves to God as “weapons of justice” (Rom 6:13). In other words, it would mean becoming a people who—as called for in section 915 of the Manual’s Appendix—“identify and seek to remove acts and structures of prejudice, facilitate occasions for seeking forgiveness and reconciliation, and take action toward empowering those who have been marginalized.” In the Manual, identifying and seeking to remove acts and structures of prejudice *precedes* seeking forgiveness and reconciliation.

Only when we are open to becoming this kind of people can the Spirit start to heal—or better, *sanctify*—our diseased social imagination and equip us to become “the living witness to Christ in [US] society” that Bhebhe argues God calls his holy people to be (8-9). This would be costly in our politically charged society, and we, as well as our Nazarene African American siblings, might have scars to show for it as the one Spirit unites us together as Christ’s holy body. But such scars, inflicted because of our work for interracial intimacy, would simply mark us out as one part of the *scarred*, corporate body of risen Lord. These are not scars from the general

brokenness shared by all humanity (would Fringer agree?), but specific scars that *directly result from participating in God's redemptive, reconciling, and restoring mission.*

If the WCNUS is to experience the revival that requires living “in companionship with each other in redemptive relationships” (Bhebhe, 9), it will require us, with the Spirit’s enabling, to present our individual bodies as weapons of God’s saving justice as a part of the *singular/corporate* “living sacrifice” that is “holy and acceptable to God” (Rom 12:1). “What is needed in this moment, as ever,” writes Timothy Gombis, a white American NT scholar, in a recent blog post, “is white bodies joined together with black and brown bodies *as a body*—bodies and body committed to God’s public justice.”⁴ Might this whole Spirit-enabled process be one “visible and tangible witness of our brokenness *and* our transformation into holiness” (Fringer, 10)? It would certainly be an embodied public witness to God’s saving justice which, as I have argued elsewhere,⁵ thereby publicly displays God’s own character/holiness. It would be a powerful public demonstration of God’s reconciling power accomplishing God’s eternal project of creating a holy people.

Since all our attempts to corporately embody God’s saving justice, and thereby God’s holiness, will remain imperfect and partial, we must always own and confess that “less perfect perfection.” It is the unifying Spirit who invites us white US Nazarenes to begin the journey of intimacy with our African American siblings by coming to terms with the racialized way Sin has sculpted our church, our social structures and laws, and given us a diseased social imagination. That same Spirit invites us to come to terms with the impact our diseased social imagination has had on other Nazarenes of color in the US and internationally. Should we cooperate with the Spirit in this, embracing the “less perfect perfection” for which Fringer argues might move us closer to participating in God’s eternal project about which Bhebhe speaks so passionately.

⁴Timothy Gombis, “The Anemic Individualism.” Emphasis original.

⁵Andy Johnson, *Holiness and the Missio Dei* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2016), passim.