

“RESPONSE TO DR ROB FRINGER AND DR STANLEY BHEBHE”

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Response

With a pleasure, I read these two complimentary papers, which provide great insights into the heart of one of the most complex and divisive areas of Christian doctrine, the doctrine of the church. Although there is considerable diversity in the way, in which Fringer and Bhebhe use different approaches and methods, both of them address the same important questions related to the existence of the church in their own context. There is a manifest unity of themes presented by both authors: relational aspect of our existence as the members of the body of Christ; the Church as the image of the Holy Trinity; covenant with God as a people; holiness of the community, and God’s relational mission for His holy people.

The authors’ primary concern in both papers is the communal approach to the understanding of holiness. Trying to describe their experience of the church influenced by Western individualistic thinking both Fringer and Bhebhe develop strong arguments for the life in the community as the way of human existence, which was designed by God from the beginning.

In his paper, Fringer provides an opening statement, which defines what follows next and serves as a frame for his paper. He wants us to explore in what sense the church struggles to be faithful to its calling (to be a holy community) despite a reality of living in the present world of sin. I think this leads us to a very dynamic view of the church, which author calls “the move from brokenness to wholeness”. Using several definitions of what it means to be a holy people Fringer brings us to an idea that as a denomination we paid more attention to individual holiness over communal holiness. He argues that careful reading of our Manual Article X reveals that such Christian community still serves as “a means to an end to individual than the goal being the holiness of a community.” As Nazarenes, we are familiar with Wesley’s quote of “social holiness” but, according to Fringer, in Western culture it is hard to imagine sharing our holiness with other people. I agree with him that in this context, our holiness is individualized and the body of Christ looks “more broken than holy”.

Although Bhebhe approaches this issue from a different angle, and starts from a discussion of sin as a problem of individual conversion, he comes to the same understanding of importance of community, which should be “at the heart of the life, identity, and witness of ‘holy people’”. He implies that believer’s life and spiritual growth is “designed to be realized in the context of community”. Bhebhe believes that in African context a very individualistic approach to conversion often meant “the creation something other than African”. He is concerned that sometimes this individualistic approach in shaping the Christian spirituality “robbed believers” of an essential ingredient, namely, community.

In looking at each paper, we can observe that both authors attempt to show the relational character of our holiness. Fringer continues to disclose the concept of “brokenness”, which he believes is “primary relational”, and comes to the idea that we were created “*in community and for community*”.¹ He introduces us to the theological meaning of the story from Genesis underlying the concern for proper understanding of what happened. I absolutely agree with

¹ The idea is from Miroslav Wolf, *After our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

Fringer, when he states that during this “fall” event humanity lost its “core identity”, something from the image of God, in which we were created in the first place. He appeals to the idea that significant aspect of God’s image is the image of Trinitarian community, in which God exists. Therefore, Fringer concludes, what happened left us as humanity “less than whole and less than holy”. Interestingly enough, he mentions in the footnote the concept of *ubuntu* from African context, which is related to the existence of an individual human being as an integral part of a community or as “we are”. I believe, in Christian theology this “we” includes not only others but God the Trinity as well.

Bhebhe in his paper completely supports this idea and he states, “The solemn call and mandate to participate in the Koinonia and the Ecclesia, emanates from the heart of the God who is in Community with Himself.” Using a quote from Fee, Bhebhe develops this understanding of “a holy people” as a people with whom God is able to live together helping them reproduce His life and character. He reminds us a well-known truth: God created humans to be in relation with Him and with each other. They are relational beings who are supposed to live in communion with others, which is pleasing to God. The purpose of their existence is unique and it originates from “the Community of Godhead”, which serves as the image for their creation. It was very interesting to see how building up his argument Bhebhe comes to a discussion of another leading theme in both papers: the covenantal relationship between God and His holy people. He argues that God made this covenant with a people and not an individual. Bhebhe attempts to show that belonging of an individual to a covenanted community allows them to participate in God’s redeeming mission in this world. On the contrary, disobedience to God and separation from community leads to broken relationships and alienation.

It seems to me that Fringer picks up this idea and perfectly formulates how human race came to this state of alienation and brokenness: we went “from naked and unashamed to naked and afraid”. In his thinking, this is related to a loving act of God that promises reconciliation and restoration to the broken and fallen humanity. In agreement with Bhebhe, he connects this act of God with the constant covenant and persistent presence of God among His people. Fringer comes to exactly the same conclusion: “these realities were not offered to an individual but to a people”. He actually clarifies in the footnote that it is true even with people like Abraham, Moses, and David. Accordingly, this covenant with God serves as a basis for entering simultaneously into covenant with other people.

Analyzing further the arguments from these papers, we can notice that both authors perceive the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of community as the mandatory condition for its holiness. I really appreciate a very helpful example of translation of significant biblical verses from 1 Corinthians 3:16-17. Fringer argues that properly translated these verses show that the Holy Spirit is spoken about in terms of working in “a collective singular entity”, rather than in a separated individual. We can find similar statement in Bhebhe that the community of a holy people is the product of the Holy Spirit. The ideas from these papers related to the mission of this community, which Fringer actually calls “God’s relational mission”, inform our understanding of a holy people and at the same time leave space for the future discussions.²

At some point, both authors use a common analogy of “journey” or pilgrimage with God, when our holiness or perfection should be lived out in the community filled with the Holy Spirit.

² Authors did not provide much information of what the mission of this community is all about. They also do not discuss an eschatological future of a holy people and their corporate life of worship.

As Fringer nicely put it, “*If* we are the body, filled with the Spirit, with Christ as our head, then we are holy even as we are becoming holy.” Using the image of “Christ’s scars” after the resurrection, he expresses the idea that “Christ crucified” lives “in and through his body”. Probably, what Fringer is trying to say is that Christ *resurrected* lives with His people despite the fact that He was crucified and He bears the scars as an evidence that He experienced our “brokenness”, which will be transformed by His power of resurrection. We could not agree more with Fringer that the hope of the world is in Christ, Who through His Spirit is able to transform our broken lives and the life of a ‘less perfect’ community into a loving community that glorifies God.

Conclusion

As Nazarenes, we believe that our calling, both personally and corporately as a church, is to become holy. Both papers add to this understanding emphasizing the importance of a journey with God and other people. Led by the Holy Spirit we have to experience together a process of transformation from the ashamed and afraid toward the loved and accepted. This happens through the “confessional” and redemptive life style when a holy people embraces their “shared brokenness” and move together toward their healing and restoration.

We know that our ecclesiology or our understanding of community is always informed and expressed through the practice. As we think of practical application of what was discussed in these papers, we can turn to the questions that were raised by the authors. If we use the language from Fringer then we should ask: What shall we do as the church to let God’s power, glory and holiness to shine through our brokenness? In other words, we can paraphrase a question from Bhebhe: How do we as Nazarenes live and model the holy community in our context? Probably, we should continue to discuss these questions in our local communities while we journey together as a global community of a holy people.