

BROKEN-HOLY PEOPLE: A BIBLICAL PLEA FOR GOD'S HOLY PEOPLE
TO EMBRACE A LESS PERFECT PERFECTION

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What does it mean to be a Holy People who are empowered by the Holy Spirit? The seemingly contradictory title of this paper gives clues to my answer. Stated plainly, I will argue 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*. This statement will be broken down and explained below and then brought back together in my final section. In this way, the very outline of my paper exemplifies the move from brokenness to wholeness, while still being admittedly less perfect than my readers would prefer. Nevertheless, in its imperfection, I hope to leave room for the Holy Spirit to move into the cracks of my argument and into our own brokenness and in so doing to draw us closer to God and one another.

A Holy People

Nazarenes are Holiness People, but are we a Holy People? It is one thing to purport holiness as a distinguishing doctrine or denominational identity, quite another thing to *be* a holy people.

Definitions of what it means to be holy abound. Options have included¹:

- Full consecration to God
- Being sanctified holy
- Being filled with the Spirit
- A second definite work of grace
- Being set apart for the purposes of God
- Being made perfect in love
- Being fully restored in the image of God
- Purity of heart and life
- Loving God and loving neighbors
- Wholeness in Christ
- Christlikeness

¹ This list is adapted from: Rob Benefiel, "Forward I," in *Relational Holiness: Responding to the Call of Love*, by Thomas Jay Oord and Michael Lodahl (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 2005), 11.

It is likely not one or the other, but a combination. Nevertheless, in our short history as a denomination, we have tended to emphasize individual holiness over communal holiness.

Manual Article X, on *Christian Holiness and Entire Sanctification*, is mostly stated in the plural, which gives the appearance of being communally focused. Yet, when read carefully, subtle shifts to the singular in multiple places betray its more individualized focus.

It (entire sanctification) is wrought by the baptism with or infilling of the Holy Spirit, and comprehends in one experience **the cleansing of the heart from sin** and the abiding, indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit, **empowering the believer for life and service**. . . . We believe that the grace of entire sanctification includes the divine impulse to grow in grace as **a Christlike disciple**.²

While the last paragraph of this Article³ acknowledges Christian community as the most fertile soil for holiness, it still envisages an individual partaking in community for the sake of personal holiness. Therefore, such community is ultimately a means to an end for the individual, rather than the goal being the holiness of a community.

One may ask, “am I my brother’s (or sister’s) keeper?”⁴ What does another person’s holiness have to do with mine? John Wesley addressed this point on multiple occasions, none more poignant than in these words:

[I]t is only when we are knit together that we “have nourishment from [God], and increase with the increase of God. . . . “Holy solitaires” is a phrase no more consistent with the gospel than holy adulterers. The gospel of Christ knows of no religion, but social; no holiness but social holiness.⁵

² Church of the Nazarene, *Manual 2017-2021* (Kansas City: Nazarene Publishing House, 2017), 31-32, emphasis is mine seeking to highlight the more individualistic focus.

³ “Participating in the means of grace, especially the fellowship, disciplines, and sacraments of the Church, believers grow in grace and in wholehearted love to God and neighbor.”

⁴ Genesis 4:9. Unless otherwise stated, all Scripture quotations are from the NRSV.

⁵ John Wesley, *Works* (Jackson), 14:320-21. By these words, Wesley was referring to community holiness and not to social justice. For a better understanding of this, see Andrew C.

In Western (and Westernized) culture, it is hard to imagine sharing our holiness with another. And yet, this is exactly what God does for us. Holiness is intrinsically tied to God and any potential holiness we may acquire is always derivative.⁶ Therefore, holiness can never be individualized. It is the corporeal body of Christ that comes closest to perfection.⁷ But what do we do when the body of Christ, the Church, looks more broken than holy?

An Embrace of Our Shared Brokenness

“Broken” is not a word we often associate with ourselves or others. Yet, we recognize a significant degree of brokenness in our world. This brokenness,⁸ which is primarily relational, can be traced back to Genesis, which gives an account of humanity’s “fall” and the subsequent downward spiral into every-increasing chaos. Humanity went from naked and unashamed to naked and afraid;⁹ we hid from God and blamed God and one another for our shared sin. We have been doing the same ever since.

Humanity’s brokenness is essentially tied to a loss of our core identity. Something of the image of God, in which we were created, was marred in our separation from God and one another. This is because a significant aspect of this image is community. Just as the Godhead exists in community (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), so too, *we were created in community*¹⁰ and

Thompson, “From Societies to Society: The Shift from Holiness to Justice in the Wesleyan Tradition,” *Methodist Review* 3 (2011): 141-72.

⁶ Kent Brower, *Holiness in the Gospels* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 2005), 24.

⁷ Cf. Ephesians 4; Romans 12; and 1 Corinthians 12.

⁸ For Wesley, there was a significant difference between sins and infirmities and his definition of Christian perfection only involved being free from the former. See John Wesley, “On Perfection” in *Works* (BE), 3.70-87. See also, Mark Olson, “John Wesley's Doctrine of Sin Revisited,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 47.2 (2012): 53-71.

⁹ Genesis 2:25 & 3:10.

¹⁰ Genesis 1:26-27.

for community.¹¹ In the fall, we lost more than our personal freedoms. We lost our truest selves, which were only found in our connectedness to God and one another. Humanity's break with community left us less than whole¹² and less than holy!¹³

It took a loving act of God to step into the brokenness with the hope and promise of reconciliation and restoration. These two concepts are key to our understanding of salvation (equals reconciliation) and sanctification (equals restoration).¹⁴ It is because "God is love"¹⁵ and because "God so loved the world,"¹⁶ that reconciliation has been offered since the fall. God extended relationship in the form of persistent presence and constant covenant. These realities were not offered to an individual¹⁷ but to a people. Those entering covenant with God were simultaneously entering into covenant with one other. God was making Israel into a people, and God's people were (and still are) called to be a "light to the nations, that [God's] salvation may reach to the end of the earth."¹⁸

¹¹ Genesis 2:18. See also, Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), esp. 127-282.

¹² Wholeness is an idea often associated with holiness. Here, I include community (with God and with others) as an integral part of being whole, even of being human. This could be compared to the idea of *ubuntu* in many African culture. See Luke Lungile Pato, "Being Fully Human: From the Perspective of African Culture and Spirituality," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 97 (1997): 53-61.

¹³ Likewise, Wesley viewed holiness as a restoration of the image of God in humanity. While Wesley's holiness theology was strongly tied to community, he was, nevertheless, still a man of his time. He was influenced by the western individualism that was birthed out of the enlightenment.

¹⁴ The words reconciliation and restoration are preferred because they carry significant relational connotation, whereas salvation and sanctification have often been used transactionally.

¹⁵ 1 John 4:8, 16.

¹⁶ John 3:16.

¹⁷ This is even the case with people like Abraham, Moses, and David.

¹⁸ Isaiah 49:6.

Nevertheless, our shared brokenness and the ensuing shame it produced has made it difficult to be open and honest before God, much less before one another. Even in the Church, we hide our brokenness, preferring self-imposed distancing and isolation over genuine community. After centuries of living this way, we have convinced ourselves that this is normal and have built theologies to support our actions. One such theology pertains to our doctrine of holiness, whereby holiness has come to be defined more individualistically than communally. Furthermore, our fear of rejection has often resulted in the creation of a façade of holiness, a pious purity clothed in morality and having little to do with genuine community.

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. Within Wesleyan-Holiness circles, this issue is often compounded by our understanding of and desire for a certain kind of perfection (legalism).

The Outworking of the Holy Spirit

While we may be broken, the Holy Spirit is not! Nevertheless, most Christians treat the Spirit as an individual gift, a personal guide to aid in one’s daily living. As holiness people, we would extend the work of the Spirit to include making the individual holy. In practice, it appears that we do not have one Holy Spirit but millions of “holy spirits” that guide individuals into numerous contradictory interpretations and applications of Scripture. And the work of these “spirits” over the history of the Church universal has been more divisive than unifying.

Scripture presents the Holy Spirit very differently. There is *one* Spirit who unites us together as *one*.¹⁹ Furthermore, the work of the Spirit in the believer is always cooperative, intended for the “building up of the body of Christ”²⁰ and for the extending of God’s witness “to the ends of the earth.”²¹ Numerous times, the singular Holy Spirit is spoken about in terms of its dwelling within the community of believers who are presented as a collective singular entity. This is easily missed in English translations where the second person plural “you” is ambiguous and easily misconstrued as singular. Furthermore, English translations regularly pluralize singular nouns and verbs, which betray the interpreters’ individualistic biases. Because of space, a single example must suffice to show the significance of a more accurate translation.²²

Do you (all) not know that you (all) are God’s (one) temple and that God’s (one) Spirit dwells in you (all)? If anyone destroys God’s (one) temple, God will destroy that person. For God’s (one) temple is holy, and you (all) are that (one) temple.²³

Throughout the New Testament we see that the Spirit unites Christians into a single new entity (e.g., God’s temple, God’s body, God’s image), enabling us to faithfully embody and display the holiness of God. In other words, the Holy Spirit within each believer joins them into the singular body of Christ, and it is ultimately only as the body of Christ that we can be holy as God is holy.²⁴ This means that the unity (*not* uniformity²⁵) of Christians is a vital aspect of holiness.

¹⁹ “For in the *one* Spirit we were all baptized into *one* body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of the *one* Spirit” (1 Corinthians 12:13; cf. Ephesians 4:4).

²⁰ Ephesians 4:12.

²¹ Acts 1:8.

²² Compare also Romans 12:1-2 and 2 Corinthians 3:17-18 in the Greek.

²³ 1 Corinthians 3:16-17.

²⁴ Leviticus 19:2.

²⁵ Like the Trinity, unity is best understood in terms of oneness in the midst of diversity.

Holiness is *always* communal and only made possible in relationship with God and one another through the Holy Spirit who, despite our individual brokenness, unites us into one holy people.

A Less Perfect Perfection

The words *telos* and *teleios* are part of a Greek word group that has a range of meanings. For example, they refer to: end, completion, cessation, maturity, wholeness, fulfilment, and goal. The modern understanding²⁶ of the words “perfect” and “perfection,” meaning “without defect or blemish,”²⁷ can be found in this word group, but they are *not* limited to it. Christ is arguably²⁸ the only human to have fulfilled this definition of the word.²⁹ Even as we consider the animal sacrifices found in the Old Testament,³⁰ we can readily recognize that these animals were not perfect in the modern sense of the word. Instead, we could say they were “fit for purpose”—they were well suited for the role they needed to fulfill. When the New Testament speaks of perfection in relation to believers, it is strongly connected to God’s love. We are told that God is love and that as we “love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.”³¹ Jesus even connects perfection with love for our enemies.³² God’s love working in us and through us moves us toward maturity, putting an end to childish ways³³ and toward “the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.”³⁴

²⁶ Which is ultimately influenced by the Latin.

²⁷ 1 Peter 1:19.

²⁸ Since Christ took on human flesh, it is likely that he would have had some physical defects or blemishes. Therefore, we cannot take this statement of absolute perfection too far.

²⁹ See Hebrews 2:10; 5:9.

³⁰ E.g., Exodus 12:5; Leviticus 22:21.

³¹ 1 John 4:12.

³² Matthew 5:43-48.

³³ 1 Corinthians 13:11.

³⁴ Ephesians 4:13.

We, the Church, are called to a kind of perfection that aligns our thinking and doing with that of the Kingdom. We are given purpose in our perfection, and this purpose is to partner with God in God's relational mission.³⁵

Stressing this aspect of perfection, we can recognize our need for community in order to embody it. As the body of Christ, we are called to live in a new creation reality where our lives are given over to this “ministry of reconciliation,” and in so doing, we “become the righteousness of God” together.³⁶ This type of being and living is perfect when it is motivated by love and lived out in community. Therefore, “success” is not the mandate. Perfection is not found in completing particular actions in a particular way or even in the completion itself. Perfection is found in the journey³⁷ of lived relationships that are compelled by God's love. Our ability does not determine our perfection. Nor does individual sin or morality. *If* we are the body, filled with the Spirit, with Christ as our head, then we are holy even as we are becoming holy. And we are holy despite our personal brokenness and despite the deficiencies of the entire group. Our holiness is not our own. It is Christ's! And it is only ours as we abide in Christ!³⁸

This understanding of perfection has its advantages as it frees us to be genuine before God and one another. It is, however, a double-edged sword. Most of us fear openness and would rather hide behind that which we believe we can control, namely our outward appearances and actions. We regularly give up the freedoms provided by the cross to embrace the shackles of

³⁵ John 4:34; 1 John 2:5-6; Colossians 3:14-17. The majority of this paragraph is taken from my forthcoming book with David B. McEwan, *Embracing a Doctrine of Holiness* (Lenexa, KS: Global Nazarene Publications, forthcoming).

³⁶ 2 Corinthians 5:11-21.

³⁷ Similarly see, T. A. Nobel, *Holy Trinity: Holy People: The Historic Doctrine of Christian Perfecting* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2013),

³⁸ John 15.

social acceptance (including the approval of our church communities). In so doing, we present each other and the world with a pretense of wholeness and likely cause more harm than good. When others see a people “without defect or blemish” they either know we are hypocrites, lying to ourselves and them, or they feel excluded believing they cannot sustain this standard. Worse still, we hide Christ under the veil of our own self-sufficiency. The apostle Paul warned against such actions and emphasized the importance of what I am calling a “less perfect perfection” or being a “broken-holy people.” He wrote: “But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.”³⁹

God’s power, glory, and holiness are meant to shine through our brokenness. Christ gives us an example of this less perfect perfection. It is seen in the reality that Christ’s scars remained after he is resurrected.⁴⁰ Some may argue this was simply a way of proving to witnesses that he was indeed the same Jesus who was crucified. But even if this is correct, it remains true that the scars of Christ’s brokenness, inflicted by the world, remained as a witness of God’s power in the face of horrific circumstances. These scars foreshadow our reconciliation and restoration, for “by his bruises we are healed.”⁴¹ Christ’s brokenness draws us together making us whole again, despite our continued brokenness. That is why, even in our newfound wholeness, we are “always carrying in the (one) body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in

³⁹ 2 Corinthians 4:7.

⁴⁰ The church, while maintaining the full divinity and full humanity of Christ, has tended to emphasize the former to the detriment of the later. As a result, we define holiness, and restoration into the image of God, in terms of returning to a type of pre-fall divine-like state. This seems to be more appealing than continuing to embrace our humanness. As the body of Christ, like our Head, we are both divine and human. In the later, there must be a place for our continued infirmities.

⁴¹ Isaiah 53:5.

(the one) body.”⁴² This is the illogical and unfathomable beauty of holiness—Christ crucified living in and through his body. In this way we evidence that God’s “grace is sufficient for (us, and the world), for (God’s) power is made perfect in (our) weakness.”⁴³

This is the hope of the world; not us, but Christ in us. Our attempts to present a finished product are more about our “unholy” desires to have other people see us in a positive light. If God is to be glorified through us, the world needs a visible and tangible witness of our brokenness *and* our transformation into holiness, especially as a community.

In the Midst of Community

The name “Israel” means “to strive with God and humans.”⁴⁴ This is an important point often overlooked in the biblical narrative. God didn’t choose Israel because they were perfect. In fact, as we read their story, we see that in many cases they were as bad as those surrounding them. What separated Israel from the other nations was their willingness to engage God authentically. The psalms of lament are a great example of this. Therein, the people wrestled with God, crying out in their pain, frustration, doubt, and anger. Many modern Christians cringe at such raw emotion, especially aimed towards God. Nevertheless, this level of engagement and vulnerability opens a space for genuine intimacy. God invites us to such intimacy, a kind of intimacy that can only be had as we stand naked before God bearing our hearts and minds, and yes, the scars of our brokenness.

⁴² 2 Corinthians 4:10.

⁴³ 2 Corinthians 12:9. See also Diane Leclerc, *Discovering Christian Holiness: The Heart of Wesleyan-Holiness Theology* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 2010), who articulates the significance of weakness for a deeper understanding of holiness (244-52).

⁴⁴ Genesis 32:28.

But the invitation doesn't stop there. God also invites us to a similar level of intimacy with our brothers and sisters in Christ.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, the impact of sin has caused such intense community to feel foreign to us. Even when worshiping among a loving and accepting community of believers who look like and think like us, still there are times of frustration and disagreement. This is multiplied one-hundredfold when we expand to include the full body of Christ, which most definitely includes "the least of these."

The full body of Christ is comprised of all kinds of brokenness⁴⁶ and sin. These things will most definitely make us uncomfortable and even scare many away. Yet, when we stop and think about it, there is something profoundly beautiful about our brokenness when seen through the lens of a loving community. This is a picture of holiness, as imperfect as it may look. When every person is welcome at God's table despite their continued brokenness, then we have a picture of the Kingdom come. It is in this type of community that God's power, holiness, and especially God's love shines through.⁴⁷

Conclusion: Bringing the Parts Back Together

In this short paper, I have tried to argue 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.* This understanding requires a redefining of many of the

⁴⁵ Wesley's Bands served this function.

⁴⁶ In the limited space of this paper, there was not time to address the important issue of disability. Our theology of holiness must include an understanding of personhood that includes *all* people, and our ministry must intentionally find ways of building lasting relationship *all* people. See esp., David B. McEwan and Jim Good, *Sustaining Hope: Friendships and Intellectual Impairment* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2021).

⁴⁷ Compare Mildred Bangs Wynkoop, *A Theology of Love: The Dynamic of Wesleyanism*, 2nd edition (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 2015), 165.

concepts we have learned within the church over many years. It also requires us to embrace our own and other's brokenness in ways that will undoubtedly be uncomfortable and confronting. The good news is that we no longer need to do this on our own. For too long we have been preoccupied and distracted by personal piety. It is time for us to embrace a more communal holiness that will be less "perfect" than we might like. Nevertheless, it may be exactly what we need. And it may be exactly what our world needs too.

We are Christ's body, and we still bear his scars, likewise we must not be ashamed to bare these scars to a watching world. Like Jesus before an unbelieving Thomas, we must say to our unbelieving neighbors, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe."⁴⁸ In our brokenness, we offer Christ's peace to the world. In God's healing reconciliation and restoration, we show the world that in their brokenness there is still the hope of holiness as they join with Christ and with this less than perfect Church.

⁴⁸ John 20:27. Maybe we need to consider our brokenness as part of our evangelism.