

TRANSCENDENCE, HOLINESS, AND THE INTERRUPTION OF THE SPIRIT: A RESPONSE TO BHEBHE AND FRINGER

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Wesleyan theologies of holiness often focus on the immanent, the here and now of how God's love is cultivated in God's people by the Spirit. This focus on the concrete is the result of Wesley's practical and pastoral vision and the centrality that the divine attribute of love takes in a Wesleyan doctrine of holiness. Love, after all, is the divine attribute that highlights God's immanent involvement and care for his creation. Wynkoop has so aptly illuminated how love is the defining feature of a Wesleyan vision and practice of holiness. I am in full support of this vision, foundation, and focus. Yet, I also want to say more, to work out how *sanctifying love* takes us a step beyond the immanent. That said, in this response, I build upon and supplement the two fantastic essays of this session by drawing out the theological assumptions of a theology of sanctification, and, in the end, link these assumptions to the interrupting work of the Spirit.

The claim of Wesleyan theology is that the holy, sanctifying, and perfecting work of the Spirit is a central doctrine of the Christian faith.¹ In the same way that the Fathers' doctrine of *homoousia* and Luther's doctrine of justification became part of the living Christian tradition to such an extent that you cannot fully understand the Christian faith without them, the doctrine of sanctification tells us something definitive about the nature of God and the nature of creation. That is, to say that God is a *sanctifying God*, or a *God who is hallowed and hollows people, places, and things*, is to make a claim about the inherent difference between a holy God and the people who are being made holy. This difference between God and creation is implicit throughout the essays, but it is this very distinction that can be minimized or collapsed in pastoral, practical, relational, and these days, missional theologies of holiness. I'm labelling all of these terms as forms of holiness that are immanent-focused.

A theology of sanctification certainly points to a relational and participatory understanding of the God-world relation, but it also highlights an ever-greater distinction within identity and relationality. A theology of divine holiness assumes a positive and radical distinction between God and humanity. The sanctifying one and the sanctified are distinct. Fringer notes, "Holiness is intrinsically tied to God and any potential holiness we may acquire is always derivative."² God is dynamic love in its simplicity and fullness, and humans become love by participating in God's dynamic life. Because the divine being is the ground of finite reality and the sole possibility of its goodness via creaturely participation, sanctification is first *given* by a holy God of love and *received* by humanity. This given-and-received distinction involved in the nature of sanctifying love permeates all aspects of the divine-human relations. A different way of saying this is that the doctrine of creation and the doctrine sanctification are mutually involved with one another. The very distinction between God and creation that is feature of the Christian doctrine of creation permeates visions of sanctifying love.³

On the one hand, this distinction between divine and creaturely holiness is also highlighted by Fringer and Bhebhe when they speak of the imperfect nature of creaturely perfection, which is a mark of how relationships are distorted by sin and brokenness. On the other hand, the focus here is on the incomplete nature that is inherent to creaturely holiness

¹ Noble, *Holy Trinity: Holy People*, 1.

² Fringer, "Broken-Holy People," 3.

³ Gregory of Nyssa, *The Great Catechism* 27 (NPNF 5); Hart, *You are Gods*, 20.

because its fulfilment, flourishing, and completion is not infinite, and therefore must always stand in receptive relation to God. Creaturely perfection is complex, incomplete and finite, whereas divine perfection is simple and sufficient. Unlike the *broken* nature of creaturely holiness, the *finite* nature of creaturely holiness is an inherent good because it is rooted in the participatory nature of the divine-creature relationship. Human holiness will always be incomplete. In more positive terms, it is dramatic and on-going because its holiness is rooted not only in the doctrine of sin, but in the very nature of how creation relates to the divine being. Creatures become perfect via continual and dramatic participation, where God simply is perfect.

This is not to say that the kind of drama, eventfulness, and openness that make human relationships, living, and love meaningful are not reflected in the divine life. But, in human living, these characteristics make sanctification an inevitably unfinished and progressive work of love, change, and growth. Some Wesleyan-relational theologians say the same can be said of God, but we are suggesting that there is a positive difference between the drama of God's holy love and the drama of human love. Divine holiness that is one with divine love, includes eventfulness, freedom, and openness within divine plenitude, fullness, and, in Bhebe's words, pleasure.⁴ It is in fact this very distinction between God and the world that upholds and supports the relational nature of divine and creaturely being and makes all creative difference, distinction, and variance possible. Since God does not need humanity to complete the divine life or to become holy love, then the sanctifying work of God is pure gift.⁵ Creaturely being is in fact so thoroughly sustained by divine holiness that immanent human expressions of love, relationship, community, and openness and the creaturely differences that make these meaningful are all natural fruit of divine goodness.

The response that I'm building so far points us to the transcendent nature of holiness, a transcendence which can at times be minimized in the way that Wesleyan theologians focus on the immanent. Holiness is certainly about how the Spirit cultivates and expresses love in the people of God and how such love confronts the social and spiritual powers and principialities that oppress humanity. However, this radical claim about the present and immanent nature of sanctification also points beyond itself, for it claims that such holy love is only possible because the Spirit is drawing us into the infinite, perichoretic life of God. One of the mysteries of Christian holiness is that the Spirit enraptures us in such a way that it simultaneously fills us and draws us out of ourselves. Holiness is so immanent to human *being* that it draws human *being* into its proper resting place, its metaphysical home, the glory of God.⁶

By teasing out some of the implicit theological assumptions of a theology of sanctification, we can see that Wesleyan theology is inherently doxological, which can be seen in the way that Charles Wesley's hymns draw their singer's focus to divine transcendence. In the closing lines of "Wrestling Jacob", we see that Jacob, even after encountering the divine being and discovering that God's "nature and name is love", will spend "all eternity to prove" this holy love.⁷ In "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling," humans are "changed from glory into glory" and are "lost in wonder, love, and praise."⁸ In "Let Earth and Heaven Agree," Wesley sings,

⁴ See the works of Hans Urs von Balthasar and Rowan Williams for a further development of this idea.

⁵ Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 63-78.

⁶ Fringer, "Broken-Holy People," 8.

⁷ Hymn 136 in *A Collection of Hymns (BE)* 7:250-252.

⁸ Hymn 374 in *A Collection of Hymns (BE)* 7:545-547.

Made perfect first in love,
 And sanctified by grace,
 We shall from earth remove,
 And see His glorious face:
 His love shall then be fully showed,
 And man shall all be lost in God.⁹

Bhebhe closes his paper with a question, “How do we as Nazarenes live and model this holy community not in seismic episodes but in perpetual witness to a holy God in defiance to the powers and principalities of this world and in radical obedience to the Holy Spirit promptings as envisioned in (I Peter 2: 9-10)”?¹⁰ I am suggesting that holiness theologies ultimately do not have their end in a realized-perfected person or community. As Noble states, “The salvation of the world through the *missio Dei* is therefore the *penultimate* purpose of the church, but the *ultimate* purpose of the church is *the glory of God*.”¹¹ When the Spirit falls upon human bodies and communities, the Spirit fills them with love of God and neighbour. But, the Spirit also interrupts them, drawing them to speechlessness, to wonder, to lost-ness, to further pursuit of the divine. Such an interruption does not distract from the immanent, but the focus on and form of the immanent is interrupted and reshaped in view of the transcendent. We cannot say precisely what human holiness will look like because the holiness of God transforms our very conception of holiness. To say it differently, as the holiness of God descends toward and imparts itself to humanity, it also draws humanity out of itself toward God. The immanent ultimately finds its fulfilment in the transcendence of a glorious God. Paradoxically, it is in such a movement out-of-ourselves that we come truly to be, to rest, to presence, to a profound form of immanent holiness, to a more radical form of holy love for our neighbour.

⁹ Quoted by Noble, *Holy Trinity: Holy People*, 172.

¹⁰ Bhebhe, “God’s Eternal Project,” 8.

¹¹ Noble, “The Mission,” 83.