

RESPONSE TO ROB A. FRINGER AND STANLEY MAKHOSI BHEBHE  
Eudo Prado, Professor of Decentralized Theological Education  
Church of the Nazarene South America Region

The presentations I will discuss below are those of Dr. Rob A. Fringer, “A Broken Holy People: A Biblical Plea for God's Holy People to Embrace a Less Perfect Perfection,” and that of Dr. Stanley Makhosi Bhebhe, titled “God's Eternal Project: Gathering, Shaping, and Molding a Holy People for God's Pleasure.” The two works focus on the Church as the holy people of God, taking on significant aspects related to this theme in their respective investigations, through which they touch on our theology of practical holiness with great propriety and reflective depth. Next, I will strive to adequately present those problematic axes where they coincide and the questions that are presented in light of the conclusions obtained by both researchers, mainly in terms of their implications for the current moment that theological reflection experiences in our denomination.

At the time I write this reaction, from my point of view, in our denomination a heated debate has been unleashed on the orthodoxy and validity of some of our doctrinal conventions, and which, moreover, are considered definitive in the light of our Manual, in the face of the changes that have been presenting themselves for some time at the global cultural level, as is the case of the issue of sexual identity and LGBTQ affirmation in the core of the Christian community. Although the works which I have been given the very high honor of responding to do not mention the controversy referred to above, I consider that many of their reflections would help to manage this problem and others of an equally sensitive nature for the life of our current church, which is in accordance with the will of God both in the academic and ecclesial fields.

Given these simple introductory considerations, I will move on without further ado to discuss the essence of the two works. Both converge on the idea of the community of a holy people as the constitutive character of the church, according to God's creative and redemptive purpose. Bhebhe points out that God created the human being for a relational purpose, to his own delight, as an expression of the communal nature of Deity. God finds great pleasure being in communion with the community of those whom he has redeemed. God's ultimate end, then, is as expressed in salvific history, “to gather, to shape, and to mold a holy people.” Thus, he affirms that “the permanent and essential characteristic of the church is that, by design, purpose and identity, it is a community.” With this coincides Fringer's approach to remember that a significant aspect of the image of God in us is the community. “We were created in community and with the goal to live in community.” In this sense, he explains the corporate sense of the presence of the Holy Spirit to unite us in union with others in one body, the body of Christ.

Now, the biblical theological analysis of the central idea of the church as God's holy people, leads to important conclusions in the treatment of both expositors, which, moreover, lead to very practical implications that help to understand more profoundly some traditional doctrinal convictions and allow for the sincere evaluation of our ecclesiological and missiological practices in the face of the present global culture.

According to Fringer, the approach to the Spirit as an individual gift is wrong and has focused our attention on individual holiness. This traditional perspective has an aggravating factor and it has triggered the mistaken personal desire to achieve a certain type of perfection with legalistic parameters. I fully agree with his approach, because morality or moral effort does not in any sense represent the biblical definition of the experience and life of holiness. Morality

individualizes and separates us, being more occupied simply in maintaining an image before others, than in developing relationships truly grounded in Christian love. It can be said that this misconception has led us to the various current pharisaical ways of “straining out the gnat and swallowing the camel.”<sup>1</sup>

This is where I want to highlight the importance of being clear about the biblical concept of perfection. One of the things that most clouds our view of the character of the church as God's holy people is the traditional concept of sin as an individual problem, which at the same time prevents the complete accomplishment of the mission. Sin is fundamentally about altered relationships. Bhebhe expresses it with much propriety in the following way, "It is in the contextual view of sin as evil corruption of the order of creation and the perfect and wonderful bonds of God where we must appreciate how essential community is for the holy people to be an effective witness to the world."

Being that, as Fringer points out, a significant aspect of the image of God in us is community, and we were created in community in order to live in community. According to his appropriate explanation of the corporate sense of the Spirit's presence to unite us in union with others in a Holy People, I one hundred percent endorse his statement that “it is only as the body of Christ that we can be holy as God is holy.” Here comes into effect the title of his paper: A Broken Holy People. What kind of perfection do we promote or aspire to in our ecclesial communities? Fringer recalls that perfection in the New Testament is fundamentally related to the love of God. He points out that “this way of being and living is perfect when it is motivated by love and carried out in community...Our ability does not determine our perfection. Neither does individual sin or morality. If we are one body, filled with the Spirit, with Christ as our head, then we are holy, even though we are on the way to holiness.” Based on this I want to summarize his analysis by stating that, the purpose of the perfection of love is to associate ourselves with God in his relational mission.

In my opinion, when we link together the important reflections of Fringer and Bhebhe in the light of the thematic axis of this session, “In the Power of the Spirit: Holy People”, important reflective questions arise. Are we really allowing the Holy Spirit to shape the community of love He desires, when we otherwise reject the imperfection we share? Is it that many times, on the basis of an evidently accentuated legalism, we rather close the doors of the kingdom of God to people?<sup>2</sup>

I also consider it important to remember that the community of love does not basically refer to life in common externally, nor to find ourselves physically close to others, because we can be “close”, but without others. Rather, it refers to the “unity of love,” which is to be together building a holy people, despite individual imperfections. It is basically what Acts 4:32 teaches us about the lives of the first Christians, “And the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and soul; and none claimed to be their own any of what they possessed, but they had all things in common.” St. Augustine explained this community of love, this unity of the Spirit in the following way: “Your soul is not your own, but of all your brothers; and their souls are yours or, rather, their souls and yours are not souls, but the only soul of Christ.”<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Matthew 23:24

<sup>2</sup>Matthew 23:13

<sup>3</sup>Augustine, “Letter 243, 4” in Works of St. Augustine, v. XIb, 2 ed., (Madrid: BAC, 1958) 420.

As I expressed in the introductory part of this response, and according to the analyses of both speakers that I have tried to interpret as faithfully as possible through the reflective processing of some of their most essential ideas, their contributions are very pertinent and enriching, and can serve as a basis, to motivate and guide theological dialogue on those topics related to the life of practical holiness that have been mentioned here. Likewise, the way in which these themes have been presented by Fringer and Bhebhe, where a loving motivation and concern is evident towards the affirmation of our communion as God's holy people despite the innumerable differences we may have between us, in particular calls me to be proactive in considering their exhortations.

A. W. Tozer once said, “Be part of the nature of love that cannot remain calm. He is active, creative and benevolent. ‘God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.’ “God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son.” So it must be where there is love; love must always give to its own, whatever the price.”<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup>A. W. Tozer: *The knowledge of the Holy God*. (Florida: Editorial Vida, 1996) 110.