

RESPONSE: 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 empowered by the Holy Spirit? This is how Rob Fringer begins his writing, with a question that, to simple eyes, is simple, but that upon meditating on it, without the typical modern urgency, invites you to pause. For those who might quickly accuse him, for speaking of a holy people that is imperfect, he goes ahead to clarify that the apparent contradiction in speaking of a less perfect perfection is not incoherent, but a reality of this holy people of God. And in pure Swedish style, he invites you to stay for a fika coffee. The one that is not taken with haste, but with a leisurely sharing, with the heart ready for the discussion and from there manage to complement what is lacking.

Fringer divides his essay into five concepts and seeks to answer the following question: Why is it necessary for God's holy people to accept a less perfect perfection? To do this, he begins by showing an eclectic stance on the concept of holiness, warning that they must be received, all of them, as insufficient individually and, therefore, incites that they must be seen interdependently. He cleverly reveals that even the manner of making holiness known has been imperfect or incomplete.¹

Then, as a sort of diagnosis, Rob Fringer recognizes the tendency to develop a theology of holiness from individuality and almost completely ignoring the community element. Similarly (Snyder, 2005) he states that, "Protestantism in general has put the individual above the community (p. 128)."² It is becoming more and more common to forget that Jesus is where two or three gather in His name.³ Fringer imperatively recognizes that, "Community is not the means, but the goal." Rob does not dismiss with the individual, but he does fight against the individualistic confirmation bias, therefore, he concludes that, "there is no such thing as an individual holiness and that only as the body of Christ as a whole can we get closer to perfection". Complementarily, Dr. Bhebhe (2022) in his writings, warns us that it has been a mistake to speak of sin as something that is merely individual and affirms that we should call this "the domestication of sin" (p. 6) and that this has produced an individualistic spirituality.⁴

Here's the question, how does Rob use the concept of imperfection? He recognizes that talking about imperfection must be done relationally. He explains that this relationship that broke because of the fall, that profoundly affected the central identity of the human being by separating himself from God, and that profound feeling that existence is incomplete; because of that inability of the human being to feel 'complete' or 'whole', is why he alienates himself from

¹ Tom Noble (2013), *Holy Trinity: Holy People: The Theology of Christian Perfecting* (Didsbury Lecture Series) Cascade Books. Thomas Noble points out that John Wesley was limited in expressing his theology because he was a man of his own time, with intellectual limitations as a man prior to all the discovery that has been made recently in the areas of the humanities and that today help the field of theology. He also acknowledges that Wesleyan doctrine has been very poorly understood.

² Howard A Snyder (2005), *The King's Community* (Victoria Bonino de Altare, Trad.Second). Ediciones Kairós.

³ Matt. 18:20

⁴ Bhebhe, S. M. (2022). God's Eternal Plan: Gathering, Shaping, and Molding a Holy People for God's Pleasure. *Didache: Faithful Teaching*, 22(1).

others. Schaeffer had already shown the four great ruptures of the human being and how they have profoundly affected God's creation since then.⁵

Likewise, for Fringer, the cause of the imperfection of humanity is the loss of community, since sin tarnished the image of God in humanity and this profoundly affected the ability of the human being to relate to God, to himself, to others and to nature. Since the image of God is essentially communitarian. In other words, Bhebhe points out that “the only thing that God qualifies as not good in the fabric of his creation is the solitude of Adam” (p. 6).⁶ Similarly, Leclerc (2010) notes that Wesley strongly supported the idea that the image of God in the human being signifies the ability to love (p. 158).⁷ Noble also agrees with defining original sin as “a selfish mental attitude, putting the mind in the flesh, or having an egocentric desire”(p. 115).⁸ Therefore, what was lost in original sin was the ability to love and thereby being in community. In the same vein, Fringer concludes on an unmissable note “we lost holiness.”

Consequently, sanctification is understood as the restoration of the capacity to love.⁹ Following Wesley when he expresses that “love... excludes every kind and degree of envy from the heart” (Wesley, 1998).¹⁰ That is why for Fringer salvation is the irruption of God bringing reconciliation and restoration and identifies restoration as sanctification.

As a third point, he develops the theme of the work of the Spirit, pointing out that there is a tendency to individualize the presence of the Spirit so much that one may come to believe that there are many spirits, instead of just one, and expressions that are contrary to Scripture. For Fringer the Holy Spirit also operates within community terms. He points out that in the New Testament the Spirit can be seen as the one who gestates the new community in his holy love and is the one who prepares for edification.¹¹ From this idea of the Spirit in the community, Fringer constructs one of his most significant statements, “Only as the body of Christ can we be holy as God is holy.” At this point it would no longer be scandalous to say that no one is a saint without community.

This can be compared with what Paul teaches about those who let themselves be guided by the Spirit being enabled to produce the fruit of the Spirit, which is love. For Paul the presence

⁵ Francis A. Schaeffer. (1976) *Pollution and the Death of Man. A Christian Approach to Ecology*. (Javier José Marín, Trans.) (Second). El Paso, Texas: Editorial Mundo Hispano. The first rupture with God, has caused a dissatisfaction with oneself (feeling shame for their nakedness), rejection and hostility towards others and the destruction of nature.

⁶ Bhebhe, S. M. (2022). God's Eternal Plan: Gathering, Shaping, and Molding a Holy People for God's Pleasure. *Didache: Faithful Teaching*, 22(1).

⁷ Leclerc. (2010). *Discovering Christian Holiness. The Heart of Wesleyan-Holiness Theology*. Beacon Hill Press.

⁸Noble (2013), *Holy Trinity: Holy People*

⁹Lodahl, M., & Oord, T. J. (2013). *Relational Holiness. Responding to the Call of Love*. (Kindle). Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City. At this point it would be worth recognizing that for Lodahl the heart of holiness is love, rather than considering purity, separation, perfection and so on as the center for their inability to fully embrace the sense of holiness.

¹⁰ John Wesley (1998), *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*. Wesleyan Heritage Publications.

¹¹ Wood, L. (2018). *Pentecost and Sanctification. In the Writings of John Wesley and Charles Wesley with A Proposal for Today* (Kindle). Emeth Press. Wood points out that baptism with the Holy Spirit of Christ means primarily one thing, a baptism of His holy love (p. xii).

of this exclusive fruit has communal consequences, because only where there is love can there be patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control and all of them are lived within a community.¹² Therefore, Wright points out that love is a language that must be learned, a musical instrument that must be practiced, a mountain that must be climbed along difficult paths. Therefore, Wright indicates, “it is part of the life of the Christian, to learn to speak the language of God, which is love, because we are called to learn it until the day when the world of God and ours meet forever” (Wright, 2012, p. 253-261)¹³.

In his fourth analysis, Fringer writes about perfection as imperfect. He points out that the meaning of telos and teleios is much more varied in the biblical text. He notes that because of the influence of Latin, they are frequently interpreted as “without blemish and without defect” and declares that “Christ alone is the only human being who has fulfilled this definition of the word.” Noble also notes that no biblical author and none of the great teachers of Christianity taught “sinless perfection” (2013, p. 22).¹⁴

Therefore, Fringer develops the theme of perfection from the love of God and connects it with the idea that being perfect means: “being fit for the purpose.” For Fringer, we are perfect when we fulfill our purpose to love from the love of God. Therefore, the believer must actively seek to align himself with ways of thinking and acting that are of the Kingdom of God. He promotes having relationships driven by God's love and that love produces maturity. He warns that Christian perfection needs to be incarnated in community. For the holy life is not the absence of imperfections, but the abiding in Christ as head and a manifestation of the presence of the Holy Spirit who compensates for the individual imperfection of every member of the body of Christ. That is why he declares in a liberating fashion, “This is the hope of the world; not us, but Christ in us.”

Finally, he addresses the issue of community. To develop this point he focuses on the sensitive spirituality that the psalmists developed when connecting with God. For Fringer, it is a type of intimacy that can only be had when the human being is vulnerable before God and opens his mind and heart, leaving exposed the scars of the brokenness he has experienced. He indicates that the church of Christ should continue with this kind of sensitivity directed not only toward God, but toward brothers and sisters in Christ. He adds that the church should be able to be transparent and vulnerable in a community context. And although he concludes that the body of Christ is composed of all kinds of imperfection and sin, from that less perfect condition, those elements are part of that holy community and that from its brokenness it can offer the peace of Christ to the world. From another perspective, Bhebhe agrees with Fringer when he speaks of redemptive relationships that are born from the humility of listening to God and seeing others from that place and thus being able to have transparent and vulnerable conversations that show us God in ways previously unknown (p. 8).¹⁵

Personally, I think it is a text that one has to go through slowly, appreciating the notes and savoring those ideas that at first impulse could seem intense. I consider it an unmissable text because of its constant effort to approach our doctrinal heritage from its community dimension.

¹² Galatians 5:22-26 (NIV).

¹³ Wright, N.T. (2010/2012) *After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters*. HarperCollins.

¹⁴ Noble (2013), *Holy Trinity: Holy People: The Theology of Christian Perfecting*. Cascade Books.

¹⁵ Bhebhe, S. M. (2022). God's Eternal Plan: Gathering, Shaping, and Molding a Holy People for God's Pleasure. *Didache: Faithful Teaching*, 22(1).

As one who weaves a cord of love, we see him enduring all theology from the perfect bond, so that our grievous imperfections can be covered from love. Recalling Eugene Lowry on identity (2001, p. 37) he states that, “only when I find myself loved by someone else, can I really discover who I am” (p.64). One could add, “when someone else loves me, even if it is imperfect.”¹⁶ Therefore, one can speak of recovering identity, which Fringer pointed out as lost because of sin.

At the end of the reading it makes me think about what future life will be like where God will dwell among us, in the midst of a kingdom of priests. We will be trees planted by streams of living waters¹⁷ where we will bear fruit and our leaves will be for the healing of the nations, because in that great community of thousands of men and women, living together will be a relief.¹⁸ But as we reach the finish line, let's keep trying, as Fringer says, “because holiness is on the way.”¹⁹

¹⁶ Eugene L. Lowry. (2001). *The Homiletical Plot. The Sermon as Narrative Art Form*. Westminster John Knox Press (1953).

¹⁷ Ps. 1:3

¹⁸ Rev. 22:2

¹⁹ Noble, *Holy Trinity: Holy People: The Theology of Christian Perfecting*. Cascade Books.