

## RESPONSE TO ROB FRINGER AND STANLEY BHEBHE, “HOLY PEOPLE”

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We have received substantial gifts in Dr. Rob Fringer’s paper, “Broken-Holy People” and Dr. Stanley Bhebhe’s paper, “God’s Eternal Project.” I offer this response as a means of amplification and clarification. Through four brief movements, I seek to read the theme of brokenness (Fringer) through “the essential ingredient of spiritual dynamism” (Bhebhe, 6) by: 1) issuing a resounding affirmation for a holiness theology moving beyond perfectionism, 2) supporting an exploration of ‘brokenness’ as a theological category, 3) calling for additional clarity around the term ‘broken,’ and, 4) issuing a constructive suggestion for such clarity through a pneumatological reading of John 20, giving particular attention to a “new community being forged by the Holy Spirit” (Bhebhe, 3).

To begin, we turn our attention to holiness theology beyond perfectionism. Philosophically resonate with classical Greek thought, perfectionism signals the absence of any flaw or lack. As numerous theologians have established, perfectionism is not what Wesley had in mind when using the term ‘Christian perfection.’<sup>1</sup> Nor is flawlessness the central connotation of the New Testament term *teleios*, employed by Matthew and often translated as ‘perfect.’<sup>2</sup> Jesus was not quoting Plato in his Sermon on the Mount.

For this reason, my second point is one of affirmation: brokenness is a category worthy of exploration in holiness theology. Affirming this point calls for an initial distinction: brokenness need not be equated with sinfulness. Brokenness, rather, denotes the one whose life is not defined by perfectionism. Consider the person who has been victimized, the one whose hopes for bodily flourishing are insistently deferred by unrelenting oppressive forces, the one who bears the wounds inflicted by addiction, poverty, and the like. Put historically, the ‘broken’ are those whom the Church of the Nazarene was born to serve. A holiness theology that traffics in perfectionism holds little hope for those who bear scars and differences or carry around wounds in their flesh. A theology of holiness, conceived in the pattern of the broken-holy one, however, proclaims a resounding message of hope: the wounds of brokenness are no barrier to holiness.

Advancing this claim, however, calls for our third point: we need more clarity around the term ‘brokenness.’ By this phrase, do we mean fallenness, sinfulness, relational fragmentation, ecclesial shortcoming, impediment to flourishing, victimization, or something else? Each approach to the term gives it a different theological function, which carries the possibility of creating confusion or diminishing the beautiful potential this exploration opens. While this unfortunate dynamic is unfolding in various publication and discussion venues, I’ll offer two examples from one paper under consideration. Simultaneously, “it remains true that the scars of Christ’s brokenness, inflicted by the world, remained as a witness of God’s power...” (Fringer, 9) and, “While we may be broken, the Holy Spirit is not!” (Fringer, 5). I am confident that Dr. Fringer is not arguing that the Son is deficient or defective while the Spirit is not. Rather, I

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<sup>1</sup> Examples include Mildred Bangs Wynkoop, *A Theology of Love* (Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2015), 273-303, and T.A. Noble’s account of Wesley’s theology of perfecting in *Holy Trinity: Holy People* (Cascade, 2013), 97-116. Wynkoop’s analysis reminds us that “perfection is not, principally, the absence of all that is less than perfect, but the presence of love with all the dynamic meaning of love” (301). Noble’s account of Wesley’s theology of Christian perfection gives us a vision of ‘imperfect perfection,’ which “simply means *undivided love*” (91).

<sup>2</sup> See Kent Brower, *Holiness in the Gospels* (Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2005), 125-126.

suspect this highlights the tricky semantic place that the term ‘brokenness’ holds in holiness theology, leaving us to ask, “Is brokenness consistent with a life of holiness?” The answer, of course, likely depends on what we mean when we use the term.

As I’m advocating, we use the term in a way that affirms the Christological reality of Jesus being simultaneously broken and holy. By virtue of his complete communion with the Father in the life of the Spirit, the holiness of the Son is not thwarted by his social displacement, religious nonconformity, or the open wounds he carried to his death and into his resurrection. From all outward appearances, Jesus was broken; he was one more passing spectacle in Rome’s parade of the vanquished. The Christian faith, though, bolstered with affirmations dating back to Niacea, finds no threat to Jesus’s holiness in whatever Rome did to break him. Being broken by Rome did not involve Jesus sinning against the Father. Christ’s brokenness is no impediment to his flourishing in the love of the Three-One God.

Jesus’s brokenness is taken up in his resurrection, purposed anew, and opens a pathway to those who have been broken at the hands of others. Through Christ’s work, their victimization is no barrier to holiness because the Son of God opens his own brokenness as an invitation to participate in the life of the divine.

We are now able to locate ‘brokenness’ in relationship to ‘sin.’ Brokenness may not be an impediment to the flourishing of love, but impeding the flourishing of love is the very nature of sin. As Dr Bhebhe reminds us, sin is fundamentally “about altered relationships and alienation” (Bhebhe, 6). If sin is understood as a breach in relationship with God, brokenness need not be viewed as a barrier to holiness. While Christ’s own body was broken open at the hands of his torturers, his devotion in love to the Father remained. In his prayerful, “Nevertheless...” he overcomes the possibility of alienation to the Father even as he gives his body to be broken (Luke 22:42). For those who are broken, victimized, and oppressed, the gospel speaks: your brokenness is no barrier to relationship with God. Brokenness is not the same thing as sin.

Turning away from devotion to the Father, denying the Spirit’s power to draw us into the divine life through the Son’s invitation, however, is the sinful malformation that prevents us from living a full expression of human life. The denigration of dynamic relationship with God – the distortion of the divine image – has the capacity to infiltrate the lives of those who, from all external appearances, are integrated, whole, and unbroken. Measuring human flourishing according to visions of social fittingness, physical flawlessness, or raw religious conformity, however, did not account for the flourishing of Jesus’s life, and neither will they define a holiness people. We are the people following the broken-resurrected Christ whose flesh was flawed because of his complete devotion to the Father in the power of the Spirit.

Such a claim prepares us for a fourth and final movement, at least for the purposes of this response. By way of constructive suggestion, I draw our attention to John’s account of Jesus’s resurrection appearance to the disciples (John 20:19-28). Here, we see his broken body is held open as a site of invitation. “Reach out your hand and put it into my side,” Jesus says (John 20:27). The place where his body was broken now stands open as a place of invitation, and even if Thomas does not take Jesus up on his offer in a physical sense, it is this very invitation in which Thomas finds new life: “My Lord and my God!”

As Fringer has refreshingly reminded us, “it is ultimately only as the body of Christ that we can be holy as God as holy.” With this reminder, let us also not forget: the body of Christ is

resurrected bearing the wounds of crucifixion. It is glorified as broken! His brokenness is not an impediment to the flourishing of love! Neither are the wounds in Christ's body sutured. Rather, they remain open in invitation. Christ's 'imperfections' invite broken persons into the fullness of Christian perfection, to participate joyfully in the flourishing of love.

This affirmation, then, puts us in a position to consider a promising pneumatological point, close to the heart of both papers we're considering. Standing in the presence of the disciples who had fearfully locked themselves away, the broken-resurrected Christ "breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit'" (John 20). Here we see a Johannine account of the Spirit's enlivening of the holy community. While different from Luke's account of Pentecost, a shared theological dynamic remains: the Spirit, who is breathed by the broken-resurrected Son is the life of the ecclesial community. The church, in essence, breathes in the pneumatological 'air' exhaled from crucified – broken! – lungs, and we spring to life as the body of Christ, vigorously animated to live God's mission in the world. Reverberating in tune with Genesis 2, John's account reveals that the intimately donated divine breath breathes life into the gathered community of disciples, uniting it to live and move. 'Receiving the Holy Spirit' via the exhaling of Christ's broken body is the church's vitality, the gift of life it receives from the Holy One.

As the "living portrait of Jesus" (Bhebe, 10), the church's brokenness is no barrier to its holiness. However, impeding the flourishing of love is just such a barrier. The language we have at our disposal to describe this "pervasive corruption of...relationships" (Bhebe, 7) is 'sin.' A flawless bodily integrity, an 'unbrokenness,' is not a requirement for the life of holiness, just as they were not for Jesus. In his likeness and power, the marks of our wounds, the rhythms of our oddity, and the movements of our resurrected life toward the broken – God's "eternal project" (Bhebe, 1) – are precisely the marks of the holy life.