

HOLINESS AND PURITY IN A POST-CHRISTIAN AGE

Kent Brower

This article is a revised version of the Frederick Coutts Memorial Lecture delivered at Booth College, Sydney, NSW in August 2015 under the title ‘Living as God’s Holy People in a Post-Christian Age’. It argues that in the post-Christian context of Western liberal democracies there is a need for a fresh articulation of the concepts of holiness and purity. The scriptures provide the foundation for this revision with their call for radical inclusion of ‘the Other.’ The story of God deconstructs the human story of division, domination and violence so that holiness is expressed in a cruciform love that seeks justice for all.

How shall we live as God’s holy people in a post-Christian age? Should we even talk about holiness when such talk, especially when linked to purity, sounds like a worrisome form of extremism? These are serious questions. It could be argued, however, that the cultural context of western liberal democracies (WLDs) needs a revised view of holiness that is embodied in the public sphere.

I. The Loss of the Grand Narrative

Although there are vast differences between WLDs, they have as their common heritage the interweaving of the Judaeo-Christian religious traditions, and the Graeco-Roman civil and judicial patterns. All of this has been mediated through the Enlightenment project to modern secularism. Since the Enlightenment and the rise of modernity, huge advances in the sciences, commerce and technology have contributed to the exponential growth of wealth as well as its concentration in the hands of a few.

If there were a mantra amongst WLD elites that has emerged since the end of the Second World War, it is ‘human rights’. Although the importance of human rights in pre-secular society may be traced back 800 years at least to the Magna Carta in 15 June 1215, the full flowering of this emphasis began to emerge in the nineteenth century. Almost all WLDs have a constitutional Bill of Human Rights or a Human Rights Act or, as in Australia, a system in which human rights are protected by common law and precedent. However

expressed, through them the power of the crown or state (as well as of other persons or entities) to encroach upon the freedom of the individual, has been limited. While their roots may well include significant connection to the Judaeo-Christian tradition, they are part of the post-Enlightenment process of secularisation and 'disenchantment'.¹

The gains have been significant. Laws usually protect the powerless and the vulnerable. At the heart of any human rights convention is *justice*.² Racial discrimination, for instance, is prohibited. Most, but not all, of the brutalising and degrading consequences of its manifestation have been ameliorated by laws that protect the powerless and the vulnerable. But attitude – humankind in its inner dysfunctionality – and practice lag behind. The trend in many WLDs is away from human rights to the introduction of laws and regulations that limit the rights of non-citizens. 'Securing our borders' is the new mantra. International terrorism and the exponential rise in the number of refugees desperate to escape their places of birth for the possibility of peace and safety affect the WLDs. Fuelled by a paranoid press, xenophobia is rising at an alarming pace. The irony of WLDs blocking entrance to refugees, asylum seekers and other migrants is often lost on many in the wealthy WLD.³

Globalisation through commerce and technology is another feature of the postmodern era. The power of corporations – many of

¹ See Christopher H Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West*. Vol 1 (London: Continuum, 2005), 8-16 for a brief survey of the disenchantment in the West. Partridge looks carefully at the influence of Weber and Troeltsch in describing this process.

² Development aid has had some effect in alleviating poverty, enhancing education and improving mortality rates. Admittedly, this aid is often motivated by enlightened self-interest, rather than any altruistic notion of justice and human rights. NGOs proliferate, offering help to alleviate hunger and disease and to enable the first steps towards improved health. These secular versions of Christian medical and educational mission so prominent amongst evangelicals in the last two centuries have come to dominate the charitable giving in WLDs.

³ David Cameron, the British Prime Minister, on 30 July 2015, described the migrants congregated in Calais as 'swarms of migrants' vowing that Britain would not be a 'safe haven' for them. [<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-33713268>; <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-33716501> [accessed 30 July 2015]. The irony of Christians clamouring for stripping migrants of rights is largely lost. What would happen if these words from the Holiness Code in Leviticus were taken as seriously by Christians as some others? 'When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.' (Lev 19:33-34)

them larger and wealthier than all but the largest of nation-states, who can move money across borders, locating their corporate headquarters in tax-havens – is notorious. Conversely, the plundering of the poor continues apace, as does the plunder of the environment. The technological advances in the last decades have gone hand in hand with other aspects of globalisation. A list of the benefits would be long, not least in person-to-person communication. But there are dangers. Drone warfare somehow places much of the human cost of war on the less fully-armed combatant. In fact, Stephen Hawking opines that the development of artificial intelligence in robots could mark the end of humankind. He has joined over a thousand prominent scientists and others in calling for a ban on weaponised AI.⁴

The gains in human rights, globalisation, the advance of technology and the triumph of free market economics coincide with a cultural shift in WLDs. The optimism of the recent past is now considered naïve. The capacity of ‘science’ and technology to fix things is questioned. The explanatory power of the grand narrative of human progress has all but collapsed. In its place has come a resistance to *any* grand narrative. Religions of all kinds are viewed as sociological phenomena of human construction through which power is exercised for social control – and religion, many assert, is responsible for violence, environmental degradation, western imperialism, and ISIS, spawning all sorts of odious fundamentalisms, including Christian fundamentalism. Indeed, Sacks argues that radicalised and politicised religion ‘is the face of altruistic evil in our time.’⁵

The end of a grand narrative is, however, a loss. People fear social change and search for identity, meaning and security. Heretofore dominant societies are under threat as power is eroded through the impact of globalisation and migration. Socially constructed assumptions about shared history and shared experience no longer convince. In these circumstances, boundaries become more prominent and social cohesion is diminished. Visible minorities in particular are ‘othered’. They then choose an identity that isolates

⁴www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-30290540;
www.theguardian.com/technology/2015/jul/27/musk-wozniak-hawking-ban-ai-autonomous-weapons (accessed 29 July 2015). See also the interviews by FT columnist Ravi Mattu, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qdmi4LQDWjk>, and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R-zWUBCDkNc> (accessed 06 August 2015).

⁵ Jonathan Sacks, *Not in God’s Name: Confronting Religious Violence* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2015), Kindle edition, Chapter one.

them even further. People search for justice and peace, but see only the projection of power. They hear the cries of the hungry, powerless and abused, but cover their ears and spend vast sums on building gated communities and securing borders.

Into this vacuum religious answers are re-emerging in unimaginable ways.⁶ As Sacks notes, ‘the re-emergence of religion as a global force caught the West unprotected and unprepared because it was in the grip of a narrative that told quite a different story.’⁷ Can the grand narrative of the gospel still speak in this context? And does God still call a holy people to be on God’s mission, in God’s world? To suggest that a retelling of the story itself can make the difference is naïve. But the eschatological thrust of the story in which God calls his people to live now in the light of the future to which God is calling the whole of creation in Christ can and will make a difference at the local level, while naming and opposing systemic evil can act as a restraining influence on evil and a well-spring of good in the WLDs even now. So I believe the answer is ‘Yes’. But we have some work to do. Perhaps the place to start is to re-visit scripture and from that basis, ask how we should live.

II. Holiness in Scripture’s Story

‘Holiness’ runs throughout scripture even when the term itself is not present.⁸ It establishes the calling and identity of Israel, defines its mission, and governs its practice. It determines the physical shape of the wilderness community and the furnishing of the tabernacle.⁹ It dominates the construction of the Temple and the function and practice of the priesthood. It inspires the sectaries in Qumran and the Pharisees. John the Baptist, a holy and righteous man, and Jesus, the Holy One in the midst of his people, lead holiness movements.¹⁰ After Jesus’ death, resurrection, and ascension, and the outpouring of the Spirit, the Jesus movement continues on the

⁶ See Partridge, *Re-Enchantment*, *passim* which shows the huge rise in alternative spiritualities. To this is combined the growth in migrants with strong religious commitments from the non-western world into western Europe.

⁷ Sacks, *Not in God’s Name*, Chapter 1.

⁸ This section develops ideas in Kent Brower, *Holiness in the Gospels* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 2007).

⁹ See Philip Jenson, *Graded Holiness: A Key to the Priestly Conception of the World*. (JSOTSS 106; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992).

¹⁰ Arseny Ermakov, ‘The Holy One of God’ in *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 36 (2014): 159-184.

mission of the Messiah. Scripture ends with the holy God in the centre of the holy people in the holy place.¹¹

Scripture is clear, then: those who are the followers of Jesus Messiah are called to be God's holy people on his redemptive mission in his world. According to 1 Peter 2:9–10, these followers of the Jewish Messiah are called to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, having been transformed from 'not a people' into 'the holy people of God'. The language mirrors the shaping of Israel in Exodus 19:1–6, in a highly significant intertextual expansion of Israel's story. Paul, too, sees the followers of Jesus to be participants in the work of God through the Jewish Messiah (see Rom 8:17; Eph 2:10). Those who are 'in Christ', 'in the Messiah', are called to be saints/the holy ones wherever they are found. God's called people, brought into intimate relationship with him – made righteous – are the holy ones, even partakers of the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4), mutually indwelt by the Father and the Son through the Spirit in the hospitable love of the triune God.

Undergirding this story and giving it meaning is the identity of God: God is the holy, creator God.¹² God's holiness cannot be defined simply as the *mysterium tremendum*,¹³ or the transcendence, otherness and uniqueness of God,¹⁴ or even purity and abhorrence of sin. God alone is holy in essence so human holiness is always derived. Humans, places or objects are only holy insofar as they are related to the source of holiness.¹⁵

1 Creation and Holiness

In order to understand how the holiness of God and God's people are connected, we need to begin at the beginning. The story begins in the creation narratives where God's creation culminates in making humankind in the divine image. The language of Gen 1:27 is very suggestive. Humankind is created in the image of God: 'Let us make

¹¹ Gordon J Thomas, 'A Holy God among a Holy People in a Holy Place: The Enduring Eschatological Hope,' in K E Brower & M W Elliott, eds, '*The Reader Must Understand: Eschatology in Bible and Theology*' (Leicester: IVP, 1997), 53–69. (Published in North America as *Eschatology in Bible and Theology: Evangelical Essays at the Dawn of the New Millennium* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1999).

¹² John E Hartley, *Leviticus*. WBC 4 (Dallas: Word, 1995), lvi, following Milgrom and other OT scholars, posits holiness as the 'quintessential nature of Yahweh as God.'

¹³ See Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (Oxford: OUP, 1925).

¹⁴ See David Peterson, *Possessed by God: A New Testament Theology of Sanctification and Holiness* (Leicester: IVP- Apollos, 1995).

¹⁵ See Hartley, *Leviticus*, lvii.

humankind in our image. So God created humanity in his own image, in the image of God he created humankind, male and female he created them.¹⁶ Created in the image of the Triune God, humans are hard-wired for relationship with God, each other and the rest of creation. This is relational, people-of-God language, a notion that defines the essential character of God's people: 'You shall be holy for I am holy' (Lev 19:2).

Clearly, this is not about gender. The reality is far more profound and far-reaching. Briefly, if God is thought of as a social being, a triune Being-in-Community, existing in the dynamic of 'an unceasing movement of mutual love,'¹⁷ then loving communion is the basis of God's relationship with the created order.¹⁸ As Gunton observes, '[for humans] to be in the image of God is to be called to a relatedness-in-otherness that echoes the eternal relatedness-in-otherness of Father, Son and Spirit.'¹⁹ If we are to think of God as a relationality, then it must follow that those created in his image would likewise exist in relationality.

This is precisely what we find confirmed in the second creation narrative. Here, God sees that it is not good for 'Adam', the man, to be alone, a singularity. So from this solitary being, God forms two beings.²⁰ The implications are far-reaching. Scripture gives *value* to every human being. Humans are not created as the minions of the gods but to be in a loving relationship with their creator.²¹ Full attention to the creation narrative leads inexorably to affirming the image of God in all people including those with disabilities.²² It enables people to celebrate the diversity within humankind, while affirming the unity of all in and through participation in God's redemption. It is why faithful covenantal relationships are expected and affirmed, why work may be transformed from drudgery to

¹⁶ All biblical quotations are from the New Revised Standard Bible.

¹⁷ Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way* (London: Mowbray, 1979), 33.

¹⁸ See Brower, *Holiness in the Gospels*, 69–73. The next section is a re-working of that more extensive treatment.

¹⁹ Colin E Gunton, *Christ and Creation*. The 1992 Didsbury Lectures (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1992), 101.

²⁰ See David S Cunningham, *These Three are One: The Practice of Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998).

²¹ See Gordon J Wenham, *Rethinking Genesis 1–11. The 2013 Didsbury Lectures* (Cascade; Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2015).

²² See Amos Yong, *The Bible, Disability and the Church: Towards a New Vision of the People of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011). Generally speaking, we have reached consensus on the image of God in people regardless of race, culture or gender, but attention to disability is a more recent phenomenon.

participation in God's creative work. All these take their cue from the Creation and Garden stories of Genesis 1-3.

The God-designed destiny of humans is also to be in relationship with the rest of the created order. The man comes from the same soil as do the beasts, yet he alone is a 'living soul'. The man and the woman are to exercise dominion over the created order as its representative. The imagery in Genesis 2 describes what dominion looks like. Taken from the same dust and existing in the image of God, dominion was to be expressed in a symbiotic relationship with the rest of creation and by representing God to the creation and the creation to God.²³ In this, humankind was also to represent God, to reflect God's image, a loving relational being in god-like harmony with all others within the created order. They are involved in fostering the ongoing relationship of the created order to the Creator, epitomised by the lovely image of Yahweh walking in the Garden in the cool of the day (Gen 3:8).

But this story goes badly wrong. Love, the freely given gift from God to the image-bearer, is turned inward by humankind. Humanity seeks to evade its Creator and exercises this gift of love in a self-centred way. Into the Garden comes chaos. Every relationship is distorted. No longer is the relationship with God unclouded; and the relationship between men and women, the primary model of God's relationality, is fraught with pain, sorrow and mistrust. Creation itself fears humanity. Instead of holding its symbiotic place in creation, humanity becomes parasitic and exploitative. No longer is being holy the normal state of humanity. Instead, the unnaturalness of the marred relationship with the Creator and the entire created order becomes the norm of the human condition. Distant from the source of holiness, humankind can only reflect a distorted image of the holy and loving God. Humanity's plight is hopeless and helpless: only the creator God could rescue, redeem and heal. Scripture tells that story.

2 A Kingdom of Priests and a Holy Nation

Israel believes that they are God's chosen covenant people. In the defining act shaping Israel's self-identity, Yahweh rescues the beaten-down slave family from oppression and makes them into a people with meaning and identity, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, in a special relationship with him. Yahweh would be their

²³ Gunton, *Christ and Creation*, 102.

God, the holy one living in their midst. Obedience to the commandments and ordinances set out in Exodus through Deuteronomy would enable the people to dwell with their God. The people were to develop characteristics like God that would affect every dimension of life.²⁴ As a people Israel is God's chosen people to bring justice, wisdom and peace to the whole created order. Like the humans in the Garden, they were called to be priests – representing God to the created order, and the created order to God. They are called to reflect the image of God – to be holy as Yahweh is holy.

The call to be a holy people required *separation* from the profane because they were dedicated to the holy God. The people were called out from the other nations to be God's own people. In short, they were to see themselves as the embodiment of God's rescue mission for the entire created order. Separation was never an end in itself—it was simply the concomitant of being God's holy people. But as soon as Israel began to see its separateness as an end in itself, it became a barrier rather than a means to God's mission.²⁵ Israel neither reflected the holiness of God nor mirrored God's image to the surrounding nations. Defeat, enslavement, and deportation into exile followed as first the northern kingdom of Israel succumbed to Assyria (721 BCE) and then Judah fell to the Babylonians (586 BCE). Had God's rescue plan failed?

Even while the people were scattered in exile, God remained faithful. The prophets promised that if the people returned to God, God would dwell in their midst again in the holy land. Included in God's promises was the hope of a new in-the-heart covenant enabling them to be a holy people in a new way.²⁶ God would also cleanse and renew the holy place. Then the holy God could again dwell in their midst, and the nations would come to worship God in Jerusalem, the centre of the holy land.²⁷ At the heart of this hope was the consciousness of the need to be made pure, both the people and the land. And that again pointed to separation. So what happened?

A remnant did indeed return, but the restoration was neither as glorious nor as complete as the pictures painted by the prophets suggested it would be. Circumstances were decidedly different – no land, no temple, no gathered people – all aspects of lost social

²⁴ See Hartley, *Leviticus*, lxiii. Thomas, 'A Holy God,' 58, argues that 'faithfulness, love, justice, honesty, kindness and purity emerge as aspects of divine holiness that are to be replicated by the people of God.'

²⁵ See Thomas, 'A Holy God,' 59.

²⁶ See especially Ezekiel 36:25–27 and Jer 31:31–34.

²⁷ See Isa 66:8–23; Mal 3 & 4.

identity. In this new context, the renewal of social identity as God's holy people focused on ethnic purity (see Ezra 6:20-21; Neh 10; 13). Ezra, the priest and scribe, and Nehemiah, the governor of the Babylonian client state, were both intent on separating the ethnically pure people who returned from exile – usually the elite who had been deported – from those who remained and had intermarried with their neighbours. This is almost certainly the picture behind the Ezra/Nehemiah genealogies, on the one hand, and divorcing of foreign wives, on the other: purity of identity and purity of women were somehow linked. The Samaritan story seems to begin here. In Josephus' view, according to Wardle, the Samaritans were 'descendants of uncircumcised immigrants who worshipped foreign gods'.²⁸ Thus, the history of the division between Samaritans and the Judaeans can be traced back at least to the period of Sanballat and Nehemiah, but as Wardle shows, the hostility was crystallised with the destruction of the Samaritan temple on Mount Gerizim by John Hyrcanus in 128 BCE.²⁹

Hence, although they again lived in the land, the covenant people of God were, in many ways, still awaiting God's promised deliverance, the promised return from exile.³⁰ The longed-for age to come had not arrived. If the holy God were to dwell with his people again, they would need to be pure. But what did this mean? From the reforms of Ezra and Nehemiah to the late second temple period, a key aspect revolved around ethnic purity: Who was a Jew? This led to highlighting various aspects of praxis including food rules,

²⁸ Timothy Wardle, *The Jewish Temple and Early Christian Identity* (WUNT 2; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010) and Richard A Horsley, *Galilee: History, Politics and People* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1995), 119.

²⁹ See Wardle, *The Jewish Temple*, 120. Outside of the Jerusalem elite, the high priesthood was no longer considered wholly legitimate by many. It was controlled by the governing authorities. In the pre-Hasmonean period, the priesthood even became available for purchase from the ruling political authorities. The notion of hereditary priesthood was 'completely abandoned', according to Babota, and 'the priestly prescriptions of the Torah played an increasingly secondary role.' See Vasile Babota, *The Institution of the Hasmonean High Priesthood* (Suppl JSJ; Leiden: Brill, 2014), 52-57, 65, 67. See also Wardle, *The Jewish Temple*, 58, who points out that priestly exogamy and sexual relations by the priests with their wives during menstruation rendered the priests impure.

³⁰ This is one of the major and more controversial points proposed by N T Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*. Vol 2 of *Christian Origins and the Question of God* (London: SPCK, 1993), *passim*. See now the further support offered by Craig A Evans, 'Jesus and the Continuing Exile of Israel' in Carey C Newman, ed. *Jesus and the Restoration of Israel* (Carlisle/Downers Grove: Paternoster/IVP, 1999), 77-100. The argument is first set out in detail in N T Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (London: SPCK, 1992).

Sabbath observance and circumcision as key identity markers both within Palestinian and Diaspora Judaism. These became boundary markers between God's covenant people and the Gentiles.

Clearly, purity and holiness are far from peripheral issues: they are somehow connected. When they are treated as synonymous, a hard, cold, exclusive, performance-driven pseudo-holiness may be the result. Holiness people are always at risk from performance-driven indications of purity that are confused with holiness. This notion of purity is antithetical to the loving mission of the holy God and an impediment to living out holiness in WLDs.

III. Problematic Purity

In a recent publication entitled *Purity: Essays in Bible and Theology*, Andrew Brower Latz argues that the notion of purity is so problematic that it should no longer be used in public discourse.³¹ The problem, says Brower Latz, is that purity carries negative connotations in almost all its usages within political or social spheres. Because it implies a simplistic binary divide between purity and impurity, purity as a category is incapable of dealing with the ambiguities of human existence.³² But it also fuels sinister ideologies and horrible atrocities.³³ On the twentieth anniversary of the massacre of the Muslims of Srebrenica by Bosnian Serbs, we reflected again on the horror of ethnic cleansing, the killing of people to establish a homogenous population in which Muslims were excluded from ethnically pure Serbs. This atrocity dredged up horrible reminders of the Nazi policy of cultural and racial purity in order to preserve the pure Aryan race. Twenty years on from the Srebrenica massacre, the rise and rhetoric of right wing political parties in the European Union especially in its references to cultural identity sends a chill across the continent.³⁴ This example is merely

³¹ Andrew Brower Latz, 'Purity in Future Theology' in Andrew Brower Latz and Arseny Ermakov (eds), *Purity: Essays in Bible and Theology* (Eugene: Pickwick/Wipf and Stock, 2015), 250–271.

³² Brower Latz, 'Purity', 252. The 'dirty hands' problem in politics in which an agent sometimes must do wrong in order to do the right is given as an example.

³³ The most notorious example of a previous generation was the rise of Nazism and the consequent Holocaust. As Jonathan Sacks observes, 'Nazism presented itself as a profoundly moral movement, designed to purify the nation from alien elements poisoning its bloodstream...and to rescue the Volk from degeneracy.' Sacks, *Not in God's Name*, kindle edition, Chapter 3.

³⁴ The decimation of the Christian population of the Middle East leads Sacks to comment that 'what is happening is the religious equivalent of ethnic cleansing. It is

one of what Jonathan Sacks calls ‘altruistic evil: evil committed in a sacred cause, in the name of high ideals.’³⁵

In fact, the whole idea of purity so troubles some thinkers that they would rather we abandon the notion. Brower Latz is particularly concerned about defining purity in sufficiently narrow terms to make it achievable.³⁶ This leads to a moralism that ‘involves denying the broken middle, refusing to dialogue, closing down links with the wider political culture putting confessional interest before the wider interests of the common good and solidarity with others.’³⁷ Such moralism is self-authenticated by denying the ambiguity of human existence in favour of affirming conformity to one’s own particular moral code.³⁸

The notion of purity within any fundamentalist tradition is the exclusion of that which does not conform, and then classifying the difference as impurity. This process of ‘othering’, pointing to differences and identifying these as the characteristics of outsiders, is a major point of discussion amongst human geographers, sociologists and ethicists. All of us recognise ‘othering’ in official policy, in our time most blatantly seen in the pernicious and bizarre racial policy of Apartheid South Africa. But purity also has a long and ambiguous history within the Judaeo-Christian tradition. The very commandments and ordinances given by God intended to protect and enhance communal wholeness were also those that contributed to the process of ‘othering’ (see the reference to Ezra/Nehemiah above) – crystallised in the Jew/Gentile divide of the second temple period. In doing so, too often the heart of the matter was missed in practice through the increasingly strict regulations to guarantee purity.

Does this mean that purity no longer matters? Whatever might be best in social and public discourse, in my view, the notion of purity must continue to be addressed within the holy people of God. But it is equally clear that the notion has to be shorn of its oppressive and destructive overtones, and its capacity to ‘other’ people who do not conform to my codes, or, more importantly and dangerously, to my

one of the crimes against humanity of our time.’ Sacks, *Not in God’s Name*, Kindle edition, Chapter 1.

³⁵ Sacks, *Not in God’s Name*, Kindle edition, Chapter 1.

³⁶ This is akin to the misuse of Wesley’s definition of ‘sin properly so-called’, versus ‘sin improperly so-called’ that has had the unfortunate consequence of fueling ‘sinless perfectionism’.

³⁷ Brower Latz, ‘Purity’, 256.

³⁸ See Brower Latz, ‘Purity’, 256.

interpretation of God-given commandments and ordinances. What is needed is a radical return to *theology*, properly so-called, reflection on the character of God. The call to be holy as God is holy needs to take its cue for holiness from the being and identity of the triune God of grace,³⁹ rather than constructing holiness on the basis of a checklist of purity performance targets.

IV. Purifying Purity

If Brower Latz is right that purity is a toxic term that fails in the social and political realm, is there any way that it can be revisioned within Christian circles to remove its odious connections to racism, sexism, anti-migration, ethnic cleansing, and the like? This is indeed a challenge. Purity is prominent in Scripture, is often connected to ‘law-keeping’ and ‘obedience’ by conscientious believers, and undergirds some of the interpretations of what the holy people of God look like, and how individuals and communities should live their lives. So, purity will have to remain an essential part of the narrative.

In late Second Temple Judaism, the boundary between those who are the people of God and those who are not, centred on circumcision, food rules, and Sabbath. These are live issues. Mark has a telling commentary on Jesus’ approach to the food rules: Jesus declared all foods clean (7:19).⁴⁰ Debate over whether Jesus’ words and deeds could be summarized in such a succinct statement actually misses the point: Jesus ‘is redefining holiness in his teaching and ministry.’⁴¹ But Jesus, the holy one of God, is re-defining God’s holy people away from conventional boundary markers. Adherence to food rules cannot be the criterion.

Neither can tightly defined Sabbath observance. In Mark 2:23–3:6, two stories together focus on Jesus’ Sabbath activity. When Jesus’ disciples are accused of breaking the Sabbath by shelling corn, Jesus, the representative of God and of God’s people, is the Lord of the Sabbath. He has authority to determine the meaning and significance of the Sabbath. His concern is not to ensure the sanctity of the Sabbath but to focus on God’s gift of the Sabbath as care for the created order. In the healing episode, the focus is not on the

³⁹ Borrowed from the title of James B Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace*. The 1994 Didsbury Lectures (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1996).

⁴⁰ The following section is based on K E Brower, *Mark: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*. NBBC (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 2012).

⁴¹ Brower, *Mark*, 197.

man's withered hand – ‘it is scarcely an emergency that could not wait until the end of Sabbath. But [tellingly,] it was a condition that would exclude the person from priestly service (see Lev 21:16-20).’⁴² The restoration of the broken, bleeding, and excluded individuals to the people of God is not a matter that should be postponed nor forbidden for the sake of Sabbath or any other purity rules.⁴³ A few lines later, after Jesus has chosen the twelve apostles, Jesus’ identity is again challenged, first by his family (3:19b-21), and then by scribes from Jerusalem (3:22). But Mark’s readers already know Jesus’ identity (1:1, 24; 3:11). The scribes miss it. And so too do those who are closest to him - his blood relations. Jesus’ identity, in turn, is the determining factor in the identity of his followers. The identity question comes to a head when Jesus’ biological family comes to take him away from those gathered around him. But in a shocking response, Jesus asks, ‘Who are my mother and my brothers?... Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother’ (Mark 3:31-35 NRSV). Those around the Holy One represent the restored people of God, called to proclaim God’s good news.

This restored people of God are a new social reality. They do the will of God because they are entrusted with the mission and message of Jesus, and, most importantly, are with Jesus. Jesus transforms them into the holy community – the restored kingdom of priests and the holy nation. This relationship transcends the closest of kinship ties. Their core characteristic and identity is profoundly simple: holy people are those who do God’s will. They follow him in his mission of bringing the lost and bleeding into security and health rather than acting as gatekeepers to protect the holiness of God.

If this is Jesus’ agenda, how does this play out in the early church? Acts starts with the ascension and the outpouring of the Spirit on all flesh. The turn of the ages, promised by the prophets, has come. This good news is to be proclaimed to the ends of the earth. All this is clear in principle from Pentecost onwards. But Acts shows that understanding the implications of who is now part of the (re)newed people of God does not come easily. Peter knows that this new age has dawned, but he does not quite grasp that the Spirit poured out on all flesh includes Gentile flesh.

Two episodes are particularly interesting. Acts 8:5-17 has Philip, Peter, and John incorporating believing Samaritans into the people of God through baptism. Then Philip is sent by the Spirit to meet an

⁴² Brower, *Mark*, 96.

⁴³ Brower, *Mark*, 100.

Ethiopian eunuch. Luke tells us very little about this man, but what he does is significant. And it is complicated. The eunuch came to Jerusalem to worship. He is well-placed, possibly a Gentile god-fearer, but, most importantly, a eunuch. This man came to Jerusalem to worship. But here he would have experienced first-hand the issue of boundaries. According to Deut. 23:1, a eunuch is excluded from the assembly of God's people. Now he is on his way home, perhaps somewhat bemused and certainly perplexed. So he starts reading Isaiah. So much of what Isaiah says is breath-taking in its vision of hope. But his personal reality also strikes him: he is on the fringes of the people of God. A Gentile could be circumcised and convert to Judaism. But for a eunuch, full membership in the people of God and participation in worship are out of the question. It is to this person that the Spirit directs Philip.

We are not told all that the eunuch has read from the Isaiah scroll. He may have read, 'thus says the Lord...[S]oon my salvation will come, and my deliverance be revealed...[D]o not let the eunuch say, 'I am just a dry tree.' For thus says the Lord: To the eunuchs...I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off.' (Isa 56:1, 3-5) But so far as he can tell, this great day has not arrived. He has just been in Jerusalem and the boundaries are still firmly in place.

Then Philip, starting with Isaiah 53 tells him the good news: the day has arrived! Perhaps the Spirit also directs Philip to explain Isaiah 56:3-8. This seems possible because the eunuch asks: 'What is to prevent me from being baptized?' The question may be loaded with the delicate issue of his sexual impurity lying just below the surface. 'Can someone like me,' he asks, 'excluded according to scripture, really be part of the renewed holy people of God?' If so, Philip's answer is clear because 'he commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him.' (Acts 8:35-38 NRSV) Welcome to the holy people of God! Some commentators think this story explains the expansion of the gospel to Africa. So the emphasis is upon the *Ethiopian eunuch*. But could the emphasis be on the *Ethiopian eunuch*? Isn't it at least interesting to think of the advance of the gospel to Ethiopia through the ministry of a Spirit-filled eunuch?

The second episode (Acts 10:1 – 11:18) is agenda-setting and requires an even bolder re-reading of scripture. The episode is the decisive evidence in the crucial Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:7-12). The story starts with the devout Gentile, Cornelius, receiving an

angel from the Lord telling him to summon Peter from Joppa. Cornelius obeys, sending messengers. Meanwhile, Peter is in prayer, gets hungry and asks for something to eat. He falls into a trance and sees a feast, including unclean animals, set out before him. He hears a voice that orders him to kill and eat creatures some of which he knows to be forbidden to God's people (see Lev 10:10; 11). The same sequence is repeated twice more and then the vision disappeared.

This is no ordinary messenger. The voice is immediately understood by Peter as the voice from heaven. Peter has heard this voice before (Luke 9:35), so this is another extraordinary revelation to Peter. Now he responds by addressing the voice as Lord. The voice authenticates the source of the vision, just as the voice in the transfiguration had identified Jesus and demanded that the disciples listen to him, despite the extraordinary nature of Jesus' teaching. But Peter is resistant with good reason. He is not being asked to set aside a tradition of the elders; he is being asked to violate the commandment of Scripture. Leviticus 10:10 demands that God's people are to 'distinguish between the holy and the common, and between the unclean and the clean,' followed by extensive descriptions of these categories in Leviticus 11. Now, Peter, the observant Jewish follower of the Jewish Messiah, is challenged by the voice to act in a way that is contrary to the explicit command of scripture. The voice does not demand that Peter change his views on what is clean or unclean, although that does seem to be the direction of travel in the New Testament (see Mark 7:19). Rather the voice says to him three times 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.' (Acts 10:15)

By the time he arrives at Cornelius' house, Peter knows what the vision is about: 'God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean.' (Acts 10:28) After he tells the story of Messiah Jesus to the assembled Gentiles and the Spirit comes upon them, Peter's decision is telling: "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.' (Acts 10:47-48)

Unsurprisingly, this welcome of Gentiles into the holy people of God solely on the basis of the Spirit's work in their lives causes consternation. When Peter is called to explain himself, he points to the work of God: it was God who gave the Spirit to the Gentiles, so, most significantly, Peter asks, 'who was I that I could hinder God?' (Acts 11:17) Later, at the Jerusalem Council, when opposition was rising from an increasingly conservative early church, Peter's

response shows even greater understanding. First, God through the Spirit creates the people of God by purifying their hearts; this is the work of the Spirit without reference to any of the usual criteria. Second, any imposition of the usual boundary markers upon these Gentile followers of the Messiah would be ‘putting God to the test and placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear. On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.’ (Acts 15:7-12) Even the established criteria in Scripture when used as boundary markers applied by us can be a hindrance to the work of God.

The inclusion of the Gentiles in the holy people of God is not settled with the Cornelius story nor the Jerusalem Council. It continues to be an issue Paul has to confront on numerous occasions. And on this point, Paul and Peter are as one: God shows no partiality. One of Paul’s most important theological statements on this issue occurs in Ephesians.⁴⁴ The heart of Paul’s theology – his picture of God – is revealed in that pregnant phrase – ‘in the Messiah.’ God’s good purposes are to gather up ‘all things in heaven and earth together under one head, even the Messiah.’ (Eph 1:10) Paul sees everything – past, present and future, mediated through the person and work of Christ.

First, Paul sets out the past and present situation of the Gentiles. ‘You [Gentiles] were at that time without Christ,’ he says, ‘being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.’ From Paul’s perspective as a Jew, they were clearly ‘the Other’. ‘But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ...in his flesh he has made both groups [Jew and Gentile] into one.’ (Eph. 2:11-14) But welcoming Gentiles without circumcision continued to divide believers. For Paul, this was not just a social problem; it was a theological problem. Circumcision was an identity marker – it was the sign of ‘an everlasting covenant.’ According to Genesis 17:14 any uncircumcised male...shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.’ So when Paul addresses the issue of circumcision, he moves into dangerous territory. But the Messiah, says Paul the Jew, has ‘abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances.’ (Eph. 2:15) Clearly, this must include the boundary markers including

⁴⁴ Scholars are divided on the Pauline authorship of Ephesians but if he did not write it, it still contains the heart of Paul’s thought.

circumcision. In a breath-taking move, Paul states that this means of determining participation in God's holy people, this command laid down in Scripture, has been abolished through the Messiah's death. In Paul's view the direction and purpose of the law are accomplished in the Messiah – so that he can write later that 'Christ is the goal of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.' (Rom 10:4)

This stunning conclusion by Paul needs to be fully appreciated. Even the purity laws have been taken up in Christ's purifying death. Thus, all who are *in the Messiah* are part of God's holy people since 'in the Messiah the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord, a dwelling place for God.' (Eph. 2:21-22) And for Paul, this is a present reality, not something that will happen in the future when death obliterates all divisions of race, gender, status. In Christ these divisions are ended already. Differences remain but in the people of God there is no place for any division. Christ has broken down the barriers – put an end to the hostility by absorbing it all in his death.

V. Lived Holiness in the Twenty-first Century

What, then, does lived-out holiness look like in a post-Christian context? At its heart, the answer is simple yet profound. God's people are called to embrace God's story and, filled with the Holy Spirit, to live out their place in God's mission in word and in deed. A few suggestions of ways to move forward may be appropriate.

First, we need to re-read our scriptures with our Jesus glasses on. Reading strategies can be atomistic and disconnected as if our view of the Bible were the same as a fundamentalist reading of the Qur'an. In the astute words of Jonathan Sacks, 'fundamentalism reads texts as if God were as simple as us.'⁴⁵ But scripture has more to say to us than we imagine. It is the story of the triune creator, holy God of love and grace, who calls, redeems, transforms, empowers and sends people into God's much-loved creation, on the one hand, and of the response of people to this love of God, on the other. The story of God deconstructs the human story of division, domination and violence. Only a re-reading of the narrative, understood in the light of the life-death-resurrection-ascension of the Messiah, will enable us to offer meaning, significance and hope for those who have lost all of that in the shattering of secular grand narratives.

⁴⁵ Sacks, *Not in God's Name*, Kindle edition, chapter 12.

Second, we need to embrace the Other. When we see others as persons created in the image of God, people for whom Christ died, we reflect the call of God to be holy people. The Other is no longer a category of outsider, but is named and loved because God names and loves. ‘God does not prove his love for some by hating others. Neither, if we follow him, may we.’⁴⁶ Instead, the heart of the good shepherd in scripture is that ‘none may be missing.’ (Jer. 23:4; Isa. 40:26). God’s presence is experienced in our communities when God’s healing and reconciling love is at work in broken lives and dysfunctional families. But, more importantly, it is seen when we love the Other. Holiness then looks like compassion, with cruciform love that seeks justice for all, even those who hate us.

Third, we need to re-configure purity. There is an irony that this statement follows the imperative of embracing the Other. Purity has been the means by which boundaries excluding the Other have been erected. Purity matters but the notion of purity that emerges from our re-reading of scripture is not other-creating but, paradoxically, boundary-destroying. The pure in heart love as God loves the world. Thus, those who look the least likely – Gentiles, eunuchs, the ritually impure – are welcomed into the renewed people of God because they are purified through faith by participation in the Messiah and, therefore, in his mission. The purity that matters is this pure-in-heart, motivational centre of people, transformed and being transformed through the power of the Spirit, who together are aligned with the will of God. Its primary external expression is loving God with all the heart and our neighbours – especially the Other – as we love ourselves. This kind of purity is not exclusive but transformative in our communities of faith. It also embraces those who have not yet been brought into God’s holy people, as we long for the transforming power of God to be effective in their lives. It is God-reflecting – faithful, generous, compassionate, welcoming, redemptive, transformative, holy love.

Fourth, we need to celebrate the presence of grace in God’s world. We do this through worship in word, sacrament and mission. But we also look for and celebrate the evidence of God’s prevenient grace already at work in this broken world. When the powers act in ways that are in step with God’s purposes, grace affirms. When they do not, grace bears prophetic witness to the possibility of a different future. Thus, this kind of holiness is living that recognises and, indeed, enters into the suffering at the nexus of broken relationships

⁴⁶ Sacks, *Not in God’s Name*, Kindle edition, chapter 9.

at personal, interpersonal, societal and national levels. But living this generous, cruciform life of transforming love even in the midst of that brokenness, is a sign of God's future direction in and for his created order.

Thus holiness is life lived simultaneously in the power of the resurrection and the eager longing with groans along with all of creation for the consummation of all things in Christ. In sum, the call to be God's holy people in the twenty-first century is no different from the call in all of scripture: it is to love God with all your heart and your neighbour as yourself. On these hang all the law and the prophets.⁴⁷

Kent Brower is Vice Principal, Senior Research Fellow and Senior Lecturer in Biblical Studies at Nazarene Theological College, Manchester. He is a member of the Tyndale Fellowship and has served as Secretary to the New Testament Study Group. A member of the Church of the Nazarene's International Board of Education, he has taught in ten countries outside the UK. He is the author of *Mark: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 2012), *Living as God's Holy People: Holiness and Community in Paul* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2010) and is Joint editor of the Global Dictionary of Wesleyan Theology (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, Kansas City, 2013).

⁴⁷With thanks to Andrew Brower Latz for his private correspondence at crucial points.