



Diversity, Disagreement and Debate: A theology of impure holiness in the early church and modern Methodism

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Abstract: This article explores the concepts of holiness and purity, suggesting that the latter can be understood as culturally shaped ways of living out the former, which in turn is an expression of a relationship with God. It considers debates around purity of belief and practice among first century Christian communities, holding these as a paradigm for the Methodist Church in Britain and elsewhere today; it argues that holiness, rather than one particular means of maintaining purity, should be the guiding principle, creating an atmosphere in which healthy diversity – and accompanying disagreement – can enrich community life for all.

Keywords: *Holiness • Diversity • Debate • New Testament • Purity*

Introduction

The church today, much like the church at almost any point in its history, is a place of debate. There are ongoing debates within certain traditions, regarding the place of women in leadership, and across most global mainstream denominations there are discussions about the nature of marriage and the appropriate inclusion of people who are LGBTQI+. Alongside such questions, less emotive ones – or at least ones which go less to the heart of an individual's identity – continue to arise. Church order, mission and evangelism, different forms of ministry, the administration of the sacraments – the list could be endless.

Outside the church, in the worlds of politics and media, the rules of debate and dispute, at least within Britain and certain of her close allies, feel as though they have been redrawn in recent times. There is a growing sense that leaders and campaigners feel unrestrained by truth or facts, and are able to assert anything, however untrue, with little fear of consequences. This perhaps goes partly to explain a counter trend – the longing for a form of philosophical and political certainty in which debates become polarised around uncompromising absolutes, and standing one's ground becomes more important than listening to and understanding the 'other'. The desire for truth and clarity, in other words, can lead to a form of absolute doctrinal purity, in which debate and compromise are impossible and, ironically, truth is often once again the first casualty. This is, of course, not new, although it may be an increasingly regular phenomenon. It is also a tendency which has long been recognised within the church.

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Zeal for the truth, a worthy aim, too often leads to a very narrow focus, in which the bigger picture – and the bigger truths – are lost.

Another longstanding phenomenon, however, in apparent contrast to both the inevitable debates and disagreements, and the desire for one heartfelt belief to hold sway, is the again laudable desire for unity. We aim for a fundamental agreement and sense of oneness as God's people and, in consequence, often feel uncomfortable with debate. When it arises, therefore, as inevitably it does, we want to see it as an ultimately unifying process. We look for a process through which the truth is refined so that we may find a 'pure truth' for which so many long through testing different, competing versions. And perhaps it is such, but in this paper I will suggest that to see it as only this is to sell short the place that disagreement and debate have within the life of the church. It can help us to reach the truth, and it can simply be an inevitable consequence of diversity in the church. But it can also be an expression of our holiness, helping us to guard against a damaging kind of pursuit of purity, and allowing each individual, group and culture to live out that holiness in meaningful ways - even meaningful acts of purity - which relate to their life, faith and understanding.

To this end, this paper will attempt to shape understandings of 'holiness' and 'purity' which make sense of debates within the early church as it developed and grew into comparative doctrinal maturity, and which might help us today to identify together what is central to our faith, what is appropriate material for debate, and what might appropriately be left to individual conscience. The ways in which these terms are understood inevitably change over time and between cultures, so any definition adopted for the purposes of this paper will necessarily be somewhat anomalous in at least some of its application. With that warning in mind, however, we will aim to explore holiness as an expression of closeness to God, and purity as a process by which a relationship with God is worked out and closeness demonstrated. This may entail rituals which place a person in a state where they believe they can come before God, or practices and doctrines which enable them to perform and demonstrate their faithfulness to God. I will suggest that purity, as a way of demonstrating or enacting holiness, has value, but that its value is contingent and culturally shaped, rarely eternal.

Holiness and Purity

The Jews were called to keep themselves pure and holy (Leviticus 15:31),¹ as befitted a people dedicated to the holy God. Although the two categories overlap, there is a crucial distinction between purity and holiness; the former is a ritual state which allows contact with the latter. Breach of the purity code is not simplistically problematic; some required, inevitable or desirable actions and events, such as the filial duty to bury one's parents (Leviticus 21:1-3; Numbers 19:11), the monthly menstrual cycle (Leviticus 15:19-24) or childbirth (Leviticus 12:2-5) would necessarily involve ritual impurity. This was not sinful, although failure to purify oneself afterwards may have been.² Holiness was related to association with God, and the closer an individual might come to the centre of holiness – the temple, its inner courts, the holy of holies – the greater the degree of purity required.³

Nevertheless, the precise relationship between the two categories is debated. Neusner broadly equated purity with holiness, holiness being an amoral means of enabling the individual priest or worshipper to come into contact with the divine, to whatever degree was permitted.⁴ This emphasis was important in restoring some balance to a

¹ The presentation of holiness is, of course, far from uniform within Hebrew scripture, including some key differences between the Levitical code and the Deuteronomistic tradition, which are beyond the scope of this brief summary.

² See, for example, Numbers 19:13,20; Leviticus 7:20-1; 17:16; 22:3,9; Jonathan Klawans, *Purity, Sacrifice and the Temple* (Oxford: OUP, 2006), 53–54; Hannah K. Harrington, *The Impurity Systems of Qumran and the Rabbis: Biblical Foundations* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993), 32; but cf. Jacob Neusner, *From Politics to Piety: The Emergence of Pharisaic Judaism* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1973). Wright argues that observance of purity regulations was moral, marking participation in the wider ethical concerns of Jewish society, which form the basis of the purity code: D.P. Wright, "The Spectrum of Priestly Impurity," in *Priesthood and Cult in Ancient Israel*, ed. G.A. Anderson and S.M. Olyan (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), 165, 175–80; cf. Carol Meyers, "Household Religion," in *Religious Diversity in Ancient Israel and Judah*, ed. Francesca Stavrakopoulou and John Barton (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 129–30. It is interesting to note that recent discussions of purity have, for the most part, not been concerned with its distinction from holiness.

³ E.g. Exodus 20:25-6; 29:36-7; 30:7-10; Leviticus 16:2-28; 21:6,10ff; 1 Samuel 7:1.

⁴ Neusner, *From Politics to Piety: The Emergence of Pharisaic Judaism*; Jacob Neusner, *Purity in Rabbinic Judaism: A Systematic Account* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994), 58; cf. also Klawans, *Purity, Sacrifice and the Temple*, 171: "Ritual purity remained for ancient Jews, first and fore-

discussion where, it might be argued, there had been too great a trend towards playing up the ethical dimension of holiness and playing down the ritual, in response to Christian and other criticism.⁵ Neusner is right that there was a significant ritual element to holiness; while 'holiness' and 'purity' are not synonymous, there is clearly substantial overlap, not least in that obeying the entire Torah was the most crucial act of holiness on the part of God's people.

Others, however, have seen holiness as the ethical counterpart of ritual purity. Harrington regards the priestly strand of the Pentateuch as an ethical, holiness code, with an emphasis on the holiness of priests and all Israel, and the call to purity as a call to "be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy" (Leviticus 19:2; cf. 11:44-45; 20:7).⁶ Important as Neusner's counterbalance has been, it is surely also right that to be holy is to follow a particular moral code. Firstly, the very fact that Torah obedience, with no distinction between 'ritual' and 'ethical', is the essence of holy living, means that purity itself carries an ethical imperative. Secondly, the instruction to 'be holy as God is holy' implies conformity to the nature of God; that is surely an ethical call, as much as it is a call to ritual cleanliness. Indeed, the command comes twice in the book of Leviticus, once as the conclusion to a section of apparently 'ritual' laws (Leviticus 11:44),⁷ but once to conclude a section of more 'ethical' rules (Leviticus 19:2).⁸ Klawans notes the imperative to imitate God's holiness, observing that purity regulations focus particularly on death and reproduction, two processes which are unnecessary for God – indeed, outside the nature of God. Thus, he suggests that a concern for purity is, in effect, a concern for *imitatio Dei*.⁹

Klawans' central thesis is that ritual acts, such as sacrifice, were understood as inherently metaphorical, enacting what they represented. In countering too sharp a distinction between ritual and meaning it is perhaps not surprising that he does not explore an equivalent schism between purity and holiness. That distinction may nevertheless remain useful, even if we should be cautious of overplaying it. In her study of rabbinic holiness, Harrington argues that both ritual and ethical elements are crucial.¹⁰ For the rabbis, she contends, holiness relates first and foremost to God, and secondarily to the people, practices or institutions dedicated to God – the Torah and Torah obedience, the temple, the land of Israel and the Jewish people, including their ritual and ethical lives.¹¹ As such, she suggests, holiness arose essentially by membership of a particular nation,¹² and is therefore in the birthright of the Jews, not a matter of personal choice; but it is also a matter of corporate responsibility, requiring a commitment to the covenantal relationship with God by obeying the Torah.

Holiness, then, is both an identity and an ethical commitment. It relates to Israel's identity as a land and a people chosen by God; the Temple is holy, because it is where God has chosen to reside and be worshipped; the objects used in worship and the people set apart to maintain the worshipping life of the nation are all holy by virtue of their dedication to this task. But the call to 'be holy' is not simply a recognition of having been chosen, but also a call to live in a way which reflects the identity of God: "Be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy" (Leviticus 19:2). It is a call to justice, to particular conduct, to a particular worshipping life, and to faithfulness to God.

Purity is not morally neutral, in that it is a way of living out that holiness, and it is an act of obedience to God. But neither is it inherently virtuous, divorced from that context of holiness. If Israel is living in a way which dishonours God, even her most conscientious obedience to the ritual purity rules is of little value.¹³ Purity rites and rituals, whether they be the circumcision of all male children, purification following childbirth, acts of sacrifice and repentance, or adherence to strict dietary laws, symbolise something beyond themselves. They declare the individual or nation's commitment to God, or the sincerity of a penitent's longing to return to a state of holiness. They are the outward sign of something which is deeper and more fundamental.

most, the prerequisite for encountering the sacred, whether that meant entering the earthly temple, the heavenly one, or - at Qumran - the earthly, temporary and inadequate substitute for the currently defiled Jerusalem Temple."

⁵ Hannah. K. Harrington, *Holiness: Rabbinic Judaism and the Graeco-Roman World* (London: Routledge, 2001), 3–4.

⁶ Harrington, *The Impurity Systems of Qumran and the Rabbis: Biblical Foundations*, 32–35; Harrington, *Holiness: Rabbinic Judaism and the Graeco-Roman World*, 34–37.

⁷ Cf. 11:2b-44, concerning clean and unclean animals and food.

⁸ Cf. 18:3-30, concerning sexual ethics.

⁹ Klawans, *Purity, Sacrifice and the Temple*, 56–66.

¹⁰ Harrington, *Holiness: Rabbinic Judaism and the Graeco-Roman World*, 164–86.

¹¹ Harrington, 11-12, 45ff.

¹² Cf. Harrington, 30–34.

¹³ Note, for example, Isaiah 1:13; Hosea 6:6.

And, as such, they are profoundly affected by the social context in which they are enacted. The concern of the Pharisees with purity was greater than that of the general population, while for communities such as that at Qumran this concern led to a life set apart from society at large. The centralisation of the cult on Jerusalem will have brought particular ritual requirements, not least in the increased emphasis on a professional priesthood, while the desire to preserve a distinct identity as God's holy people gave purity a particular focus during times of exile or, perhaps, in diaspora communities. And over the history of Judaism and its worship, the nature of purity rituals has changed; sabbath observance and kosher rules may still be followed, and there is still a tradition of lamenting the Temple and longing for its restoration, but modern, Rabbinic Judaism has developed in the absence of the centralised cult, and so has adapted in more localised ways, centred on the local synagogue, the family home, and the geographically defined Jewish community.

New Testament Purity

If, then, purity can, as I have argued, be understood as an outward, socially constructed enactment of holiness, how did it find its expression in the life of the early church?¹⁴ An interesting case study might be the circumcision debate, which emerges at points in the New Testament (Acts 15:1ff; Galatians 2:11ff). The details of this debate, together with the difficulties in reconstructing it and the inevitable areas of contention in any reconstruction (including the potential points of tension between the Pauline epistles and the accounts in Acts), are well rehearsed, and I shall not repeat them here. But whatever the historical details may have been, it seems to boil down, on one level, to a question of purity. Did those who chose to follow this Jewish messianic sect need to concern themselves with their own ritual and 'ethnic' purity.

Circumcision was - and remains - a marker of a Jewish man's membership of the holy people. The nation which God had chosen for a relationship of particular closeness, and which was, then, by definition 'holy', expressed that holiness in the outward (if not usually publicly visible) sign of circumcision. For a proselyte, this act of circumcision was the marker of joining that people. Thus, it was a ritual representation of holiness. In that it marked out those who belonged to the holy nation, or 'ethnos', it was also a marker of 'ethnic' purity, although its availability as a sign of conversion means that it did not necessarily carry the implications of birthright or 'purity of the bloodline' that might often and problematically be associated with a concept of ethnic purity. The concern of the circumcisers, therefore, would seem, at least in part, to be that new converts, if they were to participate in the holiness of those chosen by God, should respect the conventional ways in which that holiness was demonstrated through ritual.

But is there not also another purifying concern at work? The easy response for Paul would be, perhaps, to encourage new followers of Christ to consider circumcision simply as a part of their initiation and acceptance into this community. After all, it would smooth over the difficulties and allow the new church to focus on more critical issues. And few would argue that Paul was a man who shied away from demanding (or giving) radical commitment for his faith! And yet, his response was to dig in his heels and make a crusade of what might seem at first glance to be a peripheral matter. For him, the principle of inclusion of the gentiles, precisely as gentiles, became perhaps a rival demand of purity. Again, it can be seen as a symbolic outworking of a principle of holiness – the chosenness of the gentile Christians by God – and it becomes as absolute a demand as the ritual purity requirements were to the circumcision set. Cephas, in Paul's version of events, is accused of 'not walking in line with the truth of the good news' (Galatians 2:14), through compromising this crucial principle; Paul, on the other hand, has taken pains to show himself to be doctrinally pure throughout,¹⁵ and berates the gentile Galatian Christians for falling short in this regard. To engage in a ritual act, symbolising their participation in God's holy people, would seem a harmless enough gesture, but symbolism has power, and in this case he sees it as a denial of the radical new principle of participation on the basis of faith. If they are going to engage in such symbolic acts, then not all the ritual purity in the world can compensate for their doctrinal impurity.¹⁶

¹⁴ We are not, here, concerned with how early Christians or their religious contemporaries might themselves have defined it, but rather where and how it might be seen at work according to this understanding.

¹⁵ E.g. Galatians 2:11; though cf. an allegedly different approach with regard to Timothy: Acts 16:3.

¹⁶ Galatians 5:2-12; cf. the sharp contrasting of the two in Philippians 3:4-6.

It is arguable that debate, where it is valued and encouraged, is often seen as a purifying act in itself. This is the principle of the British Parliament, with oppositional benches set two sword lengths apart and violence symbolically replaced by the cut and thrust of debate at the dispatch box. It is the basis on which many courts of law operate, and characterises much of the exploration in the academy. A matter of theological, political or ethical dispute is rigorously tested and refined through discussion and debate, in the hope that this will bring the collective mind closer to the 'right' answer. The end goal is unity, and the aim is that a consensus view will emerge from the arguments and counterarguments. But is this what is going on in this situation? Of course, in those debates and arguments, individual participants may have no intention of changing their own minds, and a clear wish for their view to prevail. It is for those with an overview, who chair the debates or attempt to hold together the different factions, to keep sight of a bigger picture of refinement and consensus. We see something of this in the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:6-29), where a compromise position is found. But even there, that word 'compromise' is key. Some purity regulations are to be observed by the gentiles; others are not. And there appear to be times when it is expedient to make greater concessions, in order to ensure the support of the circumcision faction.¹⁷ And nowhere is there any suggestion that this debate concerns Jewish Christians, who presumably continue to circumcise their sons.¹⁸ So we are presented with different practices, representing different, socially constructed, outworkings of a shared holiness. There is agreement that this sense of being close to God, which constitutes holiness, is now to be seen through the lens of Christ's death and resurrection, and different groups mark this in different ways, through their worship and prayer, through their dietary regimes, through their sabbath observance or early morning hymn singing,¹⁹ or through their circumcision.

So maybe the objective is less about unity on any given matter, than about unity regarding the heart of the Christian faith, and a tolerance of diversity on all other matters? This need not be as a matter of fundamental principle in and of itself; it would, after all, be a pragmatic way to deal with differences of opinion – agree to disagree on peripheral issues, so that all factions can worship together, break bread together, and share together in spreading the gospel. But, whether or not this was the intention, might it perhaps be the case that the disputes and diversity were at least a part of the explanation for the church's extraordinary early growth? Linguistic diversity is often seen as a critical part of the Pentecost conversions (Acts 2:5-11), but diversity comes in many forms, and variety of beliefs, practices and expressions of purity may be just as crucial in enabling a wide range of people to feel attracted to this way of faith. Such diversity would also be extremely natural, in a church which contains Jews and gentiles, slaves and free citizens, men and women, and inhabitants of countries from at least across the Roman Empire. It is natural to want to read the statements of unity, in Galatians 3:28 and Colossians 3:11, as removing distinctions and differences, but they are, after all, declarations of parity and equality, not of sameness. The differences of experience, gifts, culture, situation, language, etc. remain, and they remain significant, but they are no longer to affect the value of each individual, as all are of equal worth in God's eyes. There is space in the church for all. In this context, those for whom circumcision is a genuine and meaningful response to participation in God's people, can practise circumcision; those for whom not being circumcised is an important representation of a new kind of inclusion, can refrain from circumcision. And all can participate fully in the Body of Christ.

Removed from the immediate threat to his missional achievements, and with the argument perhaps over, or at least lying dormant, Paul comes across as less dogmatic on the matter of circumcision in subsequent letters. In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul deals with circumcision only briefly (1 Corinthians 7:18-19), but it is telling. As with the later epistle to the Romans, it reemphasises his position, that gentile Christians should not seek to be circumcised, but does so in a somewhat ambivalent way.²⁰ But what is perhaps most interesting is that it affirms a church in which both those who have been circumcised and those who have not should be equally proud of – and valued for – who they are.²¹ This, then, is not a church of doctrinal purity, but one in which a mixture of ways of belonging can coexist.

¹⁷ E.g. Acts 16:3, though cf. Galatians 2:3. Differing accounts, with differing rhetorical purposes, means that it is impossible to be sure whether both are correct, and there was an inconsistency of approach between Timothy and Titus, driven perhaps by different pastoral imperatives and priorities, but this is not improbable.

¹⁸ E.g. Acts 21:20-26, where there is a restatement of the compromise position, to reassure Paul, the champion of the gentile Christians (21:25), alongside a concern to emphasise Paul's own commitment to his Jewish heritage (21:24), and, ultimately, to reassure Jewish Christians that they are not being asked to abandon their Jewish rituals (21:21).

¹⁹ Pliny, *Letters* 10.96.7.

²⁰ Cf. Romans 2:25-3:2.

²¹ Again, cf. Romans 3:30 or, more negatively, 3:9. This might also be seen in Galatians 6:15, but only once Paul has got an enormous amount

Later still in his ministry, Paul writes to the Christian communities in Rome. These are not of his foundation and may represent a mixture of circumcised and uncircumcised believers, perhaps as distinct Jewish or gentile house churches. The key passage here is Romans 2:25 to 3:2, in which Paul contrasts a hypothetical circumcised believer, who is unfaithful to the Torah, unfavourably with uncircumcised believers who are faithful followers. He holds to his position that circumcision is unnecessary for gentiles, but there is none of the anger and absolutism seen in Galatians. He builds on the 1 Corinthians idea that those who are circumcised should be proud of that identity, with his claim that there is real value in being one of the circumcised (3:1ff). But ultimately, circumcision loses all its value if it is not the outward sign of an inner life of holiness. This is, in essence, an orthodox Hebrew understanding of ritual; it is the enacted, socially and culturally appropriate, symbol of a relationship with God. It is one way of marking out an identity as one of God's people, and it is entirely fitting for those who carry the historical, family and ethnic heritage that gives it its meaning. But for those who come from outside that specific community, it symbolises a need to become something that they are not, in order to attain the holiness that is an association with God. In this case, it becomes a distraction from that holiness, or even an obstacle to it. It is to invest value in the ritual acts for their own sake, and not as symbolic of something else. He is saying, in effect, that the relationship of faith, or holiness, is what is important, and how that is represented is a matter of personal significance.

The Weakness of Vegetarians

In both Corinth and Rome, however, another question of the general applicability of Jewish Law had arisen, and one which must actually have been particularly sharply defined for gentile believers. They had come to believe that the gods whose cult had previously shaped their lives and culture were in fact not gods, but simply lumps of wood and metal, with neither life nor power. But they had also come to understand the worship of these inanimate creations as idolatrous and destructive. The earliest gentile believers were asked by the Jerusalem Council to adhere to a simplified version of the dietary laws, including a prohibition on the eating of meat previously sacrificed to idols (Acts 15:20). Since then, the presence of non-Jews in what was originally a Jewish sect had become normal, and it seems that their identity precisely as gentiles was no longer under significant threat. But they had renounced their previous Graeco-Roman religious beliefs and practices, and there was potentially a particular need for them to distance themselves from the world of which they had been a part.

What, then, to do about the meat which they might buy in the market? This was, after all, just meat. The fact that it may have been offered to the gods before being sold is neither here nor there, because those gods are not gods, and the gesture is meaningless (1 Corinthians 8:4-6), unless, of course, the act of idolatrous worship itself might taint the meat, meaning that by implication the gentile Christian eating it was endorsing – or even associating him or herself with – such sinful acts (1 Corinthians 8:7). Paul's attitude is in keeping with his increasingly relaxed view of circumcision; eat or not, he suggests – it matters not a jot (1 Corinthians 8:8). What matters is the holiness which is represented; if a believer's life of faith and commitment to God is lived out in the rejection of all association with idol worship, then that act of dietary purity should be respected by those who might adhere to more of an ideological purity. This second group, who are committed to the principle of the non-existence of other gods, should nevertheless be wary of undermining the act of faith and devotion of their vegetarian brothers and sisters (1 Corinthians 8:9-13). Living out their God-given freedom is, in a sense, a ritual act of purity, in that it is the lived expression of holy faith, but it should be compromised, if necessary, for the sake of another's holiness.²² They are asked, in effect, to give up the right to be 'right', so that others may do what is right for them.²³

The same approach is seen in his letter to the Roman churches (Romans 14:13-23). He elevates the principle of care and compassion for one another, and for one another's consciences, above the principles at stake. Those who hold to a doctrine of freedom in Christ should live this out, through a heartfelt enjoyment of God's good gifts. But they should not impose their practice of this on those who are concerned about the dangers of idol worship.

of anger out of his system (5:12)!

²² Another reason for declining to eat meat might be as an act of witness, Paul suggests: 1 Corinthians 10:24-33.

²³ There is, of course, also a question of whether Paul's characterisation of one group as 'weaker' might somewhat hinder unity, or whether he is here striking a note of sarcasm, parodying some believers' sense of themselves as 'stronger' in faith than others. In either case, the challenge to the 'stronger' – self-perceived or otherwise – is to accept that greater strength brings greater responsibility towards others.

Conversely, this second group should not condemn as evil the things enjoyed by the first group, because this would be to put at risk their deeply held belief in freedom. Each should be willing to subordinate their enactment of their faith to the greater principle of shared life in Christ, or shared holiness.

Given this relaxed attitude to vegetarianism, we might also suspect that, if a Roman gentile Christian were to announce that he had been circumcised as an act of devotion, Paul would shrug and wish him well. The difference between this situation and the earlier context of Galatia is perhaps that of imposition. To be circumcised or not is a matter of personal conscience, and not of external pressure. By the time of the writing of Romans, the greater need was to recognise the shared journey of faith, and the shared participation in the life of Christ, while acknowledging that this could be lived out in any number of ways.²⁴ Circumcision can be an act of devotion, or an empty gesture; so, for that matter, can abstaining from meat, or indeed, claiming freedom in Christ.²⁵ This reading reflects the emphasis on reconciliation throughout much of the epistle to the Romans (e.g. Romans 15:1ff), and the fact that this seems to flow from a theology of reconciliation with, and closeness to, God – that is, a theology of holiness. It also makes sense of the concern with factionalism in 1 Corinthians (1 Corinthians 1:10-16), and of the theme of unity within diversity (1 Corinthians 1:10).²⁶

This emphasis is surely partly pragmatic; the church had, by the time this epistle was written, become a huge and diverse body, and had to learn to accommodate a wide spread of those who, previously, had no need to agree on very much at all, but who must now recognise a shared mission. The history of the church is riddled with occasions where these differences have become too much to bear, or where the concern of one group with proper practice, and of another with the purity of their faith, have led to schism and even war. But the very earliest history, while it contains its fair share of disagreement, may also perhaps (in theory, at least) offer a model for disagreement done well – one in which the place of debate, difference and disagreement is about more than ensuring the eventual triumph either of proper ritual practice or of correct articles of faith. In short, perhaps the ‘mixed economy’ of the rapidly growing early church could offer us food for thought today?

The Methodist Church in search of purity

The Wesleyan churches have a strong and enduring tradition of conferring; in British Methodism, which is the context I know best, this is epitomised through the Conference, held annually, as well as through more local (and more frequent) District Synods, Circuit Meetings, Church Councils and General Church (congregational) Meetings, and equivalent models characterise Methodism globally.²⁷ At their best and most effective, these allow for matters to be commended for consultation and discussion throughout the Connexion, and for matters of local concern to be referred ‘upwards’, for discussion at the national level. But what do we consider the value of this conferring to be? What do we expect it to achieve?

The rhetoric around debate and free speech in the UK, as in much of the global north, centres around its refining, purifying quality. Within the UK, there has been debate over the last decade or two around the role of universities and the Higher Education sector in protecting and promoting free speech. This has centred around two areas – the excluding of certain speakers in the name of preventing violent extremism, and the ‘no-platforming’ by students’ unions of speakers deemed sexist, racist, homophobic, etc. Much of the argument for free speech has centred around the need to allow even unpalatable opinions to be aired, so that they can be debated and discussed, and the truth reached. This is unsurprising in the context of a university, where competing ideas, pitted against each other, have often been the driver for scientific advancement or philosophical developments. But it is interesting that it is used also in the Church, where one might expect there to be greater emphasis on policing the boundaries of ‘correct’ theological and ethical thought. This phenomenon is, of course, not entirely absent! But where conferring

²⁴ Cf. Ephesians 2:11.

²⁵ Cf. perhaps 1 Corinthians 5:1ff; 7:2ff.

²⁶ Cf. the ‘body’ imagery in ch. 12, contrasted with the emphasis on communion in ch. 11 and the great hymn to love in ch. 13.

²⁷ For Wesley, ‘conferring’ was significantly broader than the Conference, covering all conversations between Christians: David N Field, *Bid Our Jarring Conflicts Cease: A Wesleyan Theology and Praxis of Church Unity* (Nashville: GBHEM, UMC, 2017), p. 153; Richard p Heitzenrater, ‘The Exercise of the Presence of God: Holy Conferencing as a Means of Grace’, in *Perfecting Perfection: Essays in Honor of Henry D. Rack*, ed. by Robert Webster (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2015), pp. 61–80. See further below.

does occur, and not just within Wesleyan or protestant traditions, there is often a concern to ensure that opposing voices are heard. The major Catholic Councils, for instance, are carefully structured in this way, and controversial Catholic theologians, although they may need to tread a careful line and often face calls from traditionalists for their excommunication or censorship, are generally tolerated and even consulted by the hierarchy.²⁸ And often, the language used is that of a need for all perspectives to be heard, in order that the truth might be reached. Debate and consultation refine ideas. They are necessary in the search for doctrinal purity.

But another rhetoric can often be discerned alongside this purifying aim. It is perhaps loudest when the 'right idea' is not ultimately knowable. Within a Higher Education context, scientists (usually) see themselves as working together, testing competing theories and solutions, with the shared goal of finding the best, or correct, way. Sometimes, of course, commercial interests interfere, but at its truest, this is its purpose. But faculties of philosophy, history, literature or theology do not have this luxury. Although written and archaeological evidence can shed light, if two historians disagree about the correct interpretation of an event – the relative significance of its causes, its consequences, the motivations which underpinned it – neither can generally be empirically proved right.²⁹ One theory may enjoy consensus for a while, but it will eventually be replaced by another, more persuasive, and it will always have its entirely credible detractors.

Within the academy, the world at large and, in particular, the church, nowhere is this more evident than in the field of ethics, and particularly sexual ethics. Passionately held views become deeply entrenched, until they become almost the central tenet of a faith. Those who are opposed to same-sex relationships, for instance, believing them to be unbiblical, sometimes seem to accord this a lynchpin status; if you interpret those scriptural passages differently, then you are no true Christian. And on the other side of the debate, similarly elevated is the belief that God welcomes all as we are, and that while some aspects of our broken humanity are open for transformation, sexual orientation and gender identity are self-evidently not among them. And while most of us find ourselves on one side or other of this debate, and would wish to see that side's position accepted and adopted by all, that seems unlikely, to say the least, to happen imminently. In time, each burning issue of the day ceases to be quite the area of central concern that it has been; most British Methodists, at least, are not expending significant energy debating circumcision, food sacrificed to idols, preaching in the open air, the remarriage of those who have been divorced, or the ministry of women.³⁰ But these matters do not disappear overnight, and debate will inevitably continue.

So maybe we need a different paradigm, rather than considering debate to be purifying. Issues of doctrinal purity, like any other kind of purity, are socially shaped. What seems axiomatic now, has not always been, and will not always be so. For generations (though not as eternally as some would like to think), there was an accepted consensus around the acceptability – or rather, unacceptability – of same-sex relationships. Of course, this was not universal, but it was normative and it was doctrinally 'pure'. Social history would suggest that the West, at least, is moving towards a new norm, and the next iteration of doctrinal purity will be to see discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation as unacceptable. But there is a period of transition which is painful but inevitable, and holds Western libertarian values in sometimes difficult tension with the value of decolonialism, which may invite Western thought to pay due attention to the voices of the majority world, even where these may seem less 'liberal'. Debate and disagreement may be part of what shifts the definition of 'pure' in this context, but to see this as its primary purpose risks polarising elements of the church over something which is, in the end, not doctrinally central, and it does so while the world often looks on in bewilderment at the energy which it absorbs. Critically, I would suggest, what such a focus on the purifying nature of debate does, is to elevate the observance of forms of purity above the holiness that they are meant to reflect.

This is not, however, to propose a relativist vision of church life, in which anything goes. Some forms of doctrinal purity are, rightly or wrongly, universally accepted, although which ones these are may change over time, or be culturally defined. It would be hard to find a Christian who would now seek to defend slavery, even if views on such matters as reparations, or levels of active concern over modern forms of slavery, may vary. What, then, is the

²⁸ E.g. Eamon Duffy, "Reformation and the End of Christendom: Two Visions," *Holiness* 3 (2017): 170, <https://sciencio.com/article/10.2478/holiness-2017-0003>.

²⁹ I am leaving aside here ideologically driven historical revisionism, which ignores established and accepted facts.

³⁰ Although, with some of these, there are still elements of debate.

guiding principle, which draws the boundaries of doctrinal acceptability? If purity is the socially defined outworking of holiness, then surely it is holiness which should define the principles of purity, and not the other way about?

Holiness, I have suggested, is concerned with our closeness to God. That which is holy is precisely what God has chosen to be holy, and our holiness is defined in relationship to God. But, as in the Hebrew Bible, holiness also has an ethical dimension. We live in a holy way, by living in a godly way – a way which reflects the nature of God. In the transition period from one socially accepted norm to another, there remain certain unchanging principles. The early church debate around the circumcision of gentile Christians centred on the extent to which inclusion required commitment to certain practices; but as it settled down, the principle which emerged triumphant was that of love. It was not one's own purity – ritual or doctrinal – which mattered most, but compassion for those at a different point in the transition from one understanding of purity to another. There was space, Paul argued, for those for whom circumcision was meaningful and important, as well as those for whom it was not. There was space for those whose devotion led them to abstain from meat, as well as for those who cheerfully exercise their God-given freedom to partake of a steak.

Matters which concern the modern church can surely be approached in the same way; there is space for those who wish to have their infants baptised, and those who prefer to wait for their children to make their own decision. There is space for those who wish to abstain from alcohol, and for those who drink responsibly. There is now, in the British Methodist Church, space for those who wish to conduct the marriages of couples of the same sex, and for those who feel in conscience that they cannot. But this requires a willingness to compromise, and to allow that the other believer's conscience is a matter between them and God. It means, in essence, a willingness to relinquish the right to win the argument – the right to be 'right', in an absolute sense.³¹ And Paul seems to encourage the Roman Christians, alongside a concern for their brothers' and sisters' consciences, to stand by their own conscience and defend their right to live by it (Romans 14:16). He does not encourage a careful avoidance of the topics on which they disagree, but rather an acceptance that disagreement need not be a winner-takes-all situation, and can instead be a context in which positions are robustly defended and practice allowed to vary, to reflect those honestly held positions. A biblical approach to debate within the church sees debate and disagreement as an acceptable part of the life of the church, not just because it may act as a refining process, but because it is inevitable. Where there is agreement about the fundamental principles of holiness, and a genuine desire to live in a way which reflects and honours the nature of God, there will still be disagreement as to what that means in detail, and there will be commitment to different acts of 'purity', or the ritual and doctrinal outworking of that central principle of holiness.

But there is perhaps one more point to be made, which centres on the nature of God. In that nature, I would argue, there is a wrestling and a commitment to debate. We see it in God's debating with Job (Job 13:13ff), and in the willingness to be challenged by Moses (e.g. Exodus 32:11-14). We see it also in the person of Jesus, as he wrestles with the necessity of the suffering ahead (Luke 22:41-42) and when he allows his understanding to be challenged by the Syrophenician woman (Mark 7:25-30). Indeed, this understanding of God as one who invites debate has always characterised parts of Jewish tradition, and in the first Century we see it in particular in the pharisaic and scribal debates around the *Torah* – debates in which Jesus participates.³² Debate and disagreement is good, not just because it is part of a shared search for the truth, nor just because it is inevitable and must therefore be accommodated. Rather, it is part of being a diverse and varied community. If Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female are to have equal standing, then their different perspectives and social norms must also have a place to be aired. At times, there will need to be direct challenge, as with Paul when the Galatians were being required to fit a particular understanding of purity. At times, there will need to be challenge where we perceive a perspective to be lacking in love and compassion. But the price of diversity and breadth is disagreement and debate, and this is to be not only tolerated, but actively welcomed as an enrichment of the life, mission and ministry of the church. Conference and consultation are at the heart of Wesleyan ecclesiology because diversity of thought and of practice are not only inevitable, but good. In our conferring, we can seek to come to a common mind on what really matters – the nature of God and of holiness; and being agreed on this, we should be enabled to bring our matters of dispute for sharing and discussion, in mutual love and in a mutual understanding of what is central, and

³¹ This might resonate with Wesley's understanding of bigotry, summarised by David Field: "a too high regard for opinions is the opposite of genuine holiness." Field, *Bid Our Jarring Conflicts Cease: A Wesleyan Theology and Praxis of Church Unity*, 87.

³² E.g. Mark 2:16-17, 24-27; 10:2-9; 12:13-17; Luke 5:21-24; 6:9; 7:36-47; 11:37ff; 14:1ff; 17:20-21; John 3:1-21; 8:12-20.

what is peripheral, allowing one another the space to live according to our conscience and to exercise our own acts of purity in ways which are fundamentally devotional and loving.

Conclusion

A desire for purity of thought and deed is an understandable ambition in a church committed to the service of the holy God. We are called to be God's holy people; if holiness is about relationship with God, and about reflecting the very nature of God, this is a high calling indeed. If our purity rituals and the purity of our lives, including our creeds and doctrines, are an outworking of our commitment to holiness, then it seems logical that nothing but the best will do. This is perhaps a glorious ambition which has motivated Pharisees, ascetics, fundamentalists and other devotees throughout history, leading some to sainthood and others to heresy. But is this really what God requires of us? If we aim for perfection, does there not come a point where our concern with purity threatens to become an end in its own right, and therefore potentially idolatrous? This is, after all, the God whose prophets remind us that it is better to fall short on the sacrificial programme than in our commitment to holiness and justice: "For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings" (Hosea 6:6, New Revised Standard Version).

This willingness to compromise on purity in order to achieve holiness might find precedent in some surprising places. Paul, the apostle to the gentiles, does not seem instinctively to be a man of compromise; whether as a zealous Pharisee (Philippians 3:3-5) or as a crusader in the battle against enforced circumcision of the gentiles, he seems committed to the purity of his life, actions and beliefs. And yet he would rather compromise on his passionate dedication to the idea of freedom in Christ than lead a fellow believer to eat meat against their conscience – provided that he also is allowed use of his conscience in enjoying meat, and his gentile congregations are permitted to leave their bodies uncircumcised. John Wesley, likewise, was a man committed to the purity of his offering to God, through daily devotion, works of charity, study of Scripture; it is hard to criticise any of these activities. But famously, he felt that this lacked any real value without the quality of relationship with his God that he saw in others, including his Moravian fellow-travellers. Purity without holiness, in other words, was an empty experience.³³ And he was also a pragmatist, who would adjust his principles to match the reality of what actually worked, adapting his understanding of episcopacy when he felt it useful to ordain missionaries, and consenting to 'become more vile' when open air preaching became his most effective option.

For us today, still driven apart by competing visions of purity of faith and practice, perhaps there is a need to be ever more passionate in our pursuit of holiness, but more impure in its practice. That is, we must be as one in our search to understand the nature of God, and to reflect God in our life together; but we should place love for one another and regard for one another's conscience and devotional practices ahead of the purity of our own deeds and creeds. In all this, a re-emphasising of the ideas of conference and consultation, not as means to a purer end, but rather as a key part of the purpose of Church life, might help us to embrace diversity of thought, culture and identity. As Field puts it,

"The invitation to sanctified and sanctifying conferencing is not an easy way out of conflicts. It is not a broad way or a middle way. It is a call to costly self-denial, humility, love, and vulnerability in the service of a greater goal – a church that embodies the love of God."³⁴

In turn, this might help to energise and revive us, ensuring that the church is genuinely open to all who desire to know God, and not merely to a clique of the 'super-holy', who know the right things to believe, to say and to do. In effect, true social holiness might come when we are not afraid to be more impure, discovering what it means today to 'consent to be more vile'.

³³ It is at least arguable that his high standard of personal experience is just another unrealistic purity requirement, but that question is far beyond the scope of this paper.

³⁴ Field, *Bid Our Jarring Conflicts Cease: A Wesleyan Theology and Praxis of Church Unity*, 165.

*All praise to our redeeming Lord,
who joins us by his grace,
and bids us, each to each restored,
together seek his face.
He bids us build each other up;
and gathered into one,
to our high calling's glorious hope
we hand in hand go on.*

*The gift which he on one bestows,
we all delight to prove;
the grace through every vessel flows,
in purest streams of love.*

*E'en now we think and speak the same,
and cordially agree;
concentred all, through Jesu's name,
in perfect harmony.*

*We all partake the joy of one,
the common peace we feel,
a peace to sensual minds unknown,
a joy unspeakable.*

*And if our fellowship below
in Jesus be so sweet,
what heights of rapture shall we know
when round his throne we meet! (Charles Wesley)*

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