

Dean G. Blevins and Marie Gregg
A Plain Account of Christian Purity: Berlin Walls

Abstract:

While theological definitions of holiness incorporate purity terminology among several metaphors, the challenges resident in using this language may well impede opportunities of engaging difference and reconciliation. Wesleyans need a “Plain Account” of Christian purity to guide both ecclesial discussions that stress not only strengths, but also limits, in purity thinking. Using an example involving the Church of the Nazarene and Pentecostalism, the writing reveals how purity thinking risks creating “Berlin walls” when engaging differences. The analysis argues that a moral fear of degradation, rather than an acknowledgment of difference, often pushes purity thinkers to oppose certain issues.

Keywords: baptism, degradation, Holy Spirit, moral, Nazarene, Pentecostal, purity, tongues, virtue, Wesleyan

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Introduction

Ministers who embrace the language, and ideology, of purity find themselves faced with a radical rethinking due to recent events. Contemporary writings challenge a shame-based, sometimes hypocritical, or violent, culture surrounding evangelical expressions of purity thinking, even as the movement appears to be making a comeback (Abraham 2022, French 2019, French and French 2022). Often, within Wesleyan circles, the language of purity remains tethered to the larger vision of holiness of heart and life. While the Wesleyan Holiness movement continues to embrace the language of purity, particularly considering its biblical framework, not all academics agree to its veracity in contemporary culture.

To highlight danger, the article draws from a Wesleyan tradition, a case study of the Church of the Nazarene during a key juncture of its history. The writing begins by noting the challenges to purity advocacy today, and Wesley's desire for a "Plain Account" that includes both advocacy but also caution and correction. The writing documents the Church of the Nazarene's vigorous resistance to Pentecostalism, often juridically located in a what outsiders might consider a minor official position. The writing closes exploring the underlying causes and invites continued research and reflection on the theme of a "plain account" of Christian purity.

Purity Thinking Under Siege as an Object of Ecclesial Curiosity

Various purity movements seek to be faithful to biblical definitions of purity (Brower Latz and Ermakov 2014). However, contemporary research reveals that the overall vision of purity, as a social-psychological stance in the United States, remains fraught with specific cultural baggage, affecting politics and exposing painful expressions of abuse both in contemporary times and within US history (Beck 2011, Dreyfus 2019, Haidt 2012, Klein 2019, Wang et al. 2023, Wilkerson 2020). Each exploration provides ample resources to explore the limitations of purity language from a socio-cultural mindset. Still, do these treatises provide enough information to guide ecclesial reflection within the Wesleyan tradition?

Wesleyans often appeal to purity around their key doctrines, such as the Church of the Nazarene with its *Manual, Church of the Nazarene* (2017) Article of Faith X on Entire Sanctification (para. 10). However, the theme also emerges in those awkward moments when a seeming tangential statement in the "Appendix" of the polity's *Manual* (2017, para 925), one not even considered part of the operative doctrine of the denomination,

suddenly appears as a “principle” (sic) statement upon which the denomination’s very identity stands.

This principled view, named by two of the denomination’s General Superintendents, occurred over a resolution to change paragraph 925 in the *Manual* Appendix. The statement addressed the “Baptism of the Holy Spirit” and the possibility of *glossolalia*, or speaking in tongues. Outside observers would be surprised by the rollercoaster of events during the second business session of the denomination’s primary rule making body, the General Assembly, on June 15, 2023, (Church of the Nazarene, Youtube, 2nd Event). Initially the Assembly adopted an amended resolution from delegates from the Global South, offering a more moderate view, stating: “While we do not believe that speaking in tongues is the evidence of being filled with the Holy Spirit, we affirm all the gifts of the Spirit.” However, members of the Global North at the Assembly, recognizing the view might include tongues as a gift, engineered a remarkable legislative reversal through an “amendment to the amendment,” endorsed by leadership. The final resolution unequivocally stated: “We do not believe that speaking in unknown tongues is evidence of being filled with the Holy Spirit.” The sudden change in posture provided an interesting example of how purity, when perhaps misunderstood, links what many name as a timeless Article of Faith to a more tangential denominational statement barely fifty years in the making.

This writing invites readers into a practical theology, or “Plain Account,” of purity that cautions holiness renewal movements who might use purity language in a way that truncates Christian belief and practice (Brower Latz and Ermakov 2014:250-271). Unfortunately, a misuse of purity language may also impede any sustained dialog between members of the body of Christ, when opponents employ language in a manner that creates irrevocable differences based upon a sense of degradation. John Wesley’s struggle to clarify Christian perfection offers an example to explore this need for a different Plain Account.

John Wesley’s Plain Account

John Wesley’s tract “A Plain Account of Christian Perfection” attempted to clarify the limits of Christian perfection as well as elaborate on the doctrine’s strengths. Traditional editions, such as those by Thomas Jackson or Edward H. Sugden, reflect a uniform treatment of Wesley’s words to the point that the treatise appears as a straightforward reflection of his

contemporary thought published in 1777 (*A Plain Account* 1966). However, the critical edition of Wesley's publication, located in Volume 13 of the Bicentennial edition of *Wesley's Works*, reveals a different typographical configuration (Wesley 2013). The critical edition includes varying font styles, revealing clearly how much Wesley drew extracts from previous work, including selective editing to correct for previous overstatements, but also offering new material to bridge the previous work.

While Wesley remains fairly consistent in his belief of the power of Christian perfection, the treatise also contains careful engagement with excessive claims that seemed to appear later in the Methodist movement, particularly following the Methodist revival of 1758-1763 (Chilcote and Collins 2013: 179; Stark 2011). Wesley's description in the *Plain Account* gestures to two earlier documents titled "Cautions and Directions Given to the Professors of the Methodist Societies," and "Farther Thoughts on Christian Perfection," both works which precede the "Plain Account" in Volume 13 of the Bicentennial edition. As Paul Chilcote and Ken Collins note in their introductions, this "revival" called forth extreme views around the efficacy of Christian Perfection perpetuated by Methodist preachers such as Anglican Priest Thomas Maxwell and follower George Bell. The alternative views offer overstatements that allow both for enthusiasm and antinomianism in some circumstances; tempting people to pride by believing that they were saved from all sin, could never die, could never be tempted, that they could feel no more pain, while also professing a gift of prophecy and absolute discernment of the spirits (93-94). Wesley concludes (before a final exhortation) with a series of observations on what Christian Perfection both is *and* is not.

Wesley's treatise, indeed, all of his writings later in life on Christian Perfection, continued to reaffirm his belief, and place the term in service to holiness of heart in life. Yet, it seems clear that Wesley remained pressed also to nuance and amend his view. Also, Wesley obviously needed to correct the errors of perfectionistic thinking, starting as early as 1760, to help Methodists understand that Christian perfection still allowed for ignorance and mistakes, and required the ongoing need for the blood of Jesus' atoning work.

For the sake of this article, the authors concede that any "Plain Account of Christian Purity" should continue to nuance the benefits of this endeavor of seeking purity, perhaps as a goal. However, the authors also stress the need to point out the limitations of purity language, particularly as

it shapes ongoing efforts at renewal. What do Wesleyans risk by undertaking this language? They risk creating “Berlin walls” through a preoccupation with a personal moral code that results in separation within the larger body of Christ.

Case Study: Pentecostalism and the Church of the Nazarene

Perhaps the long-standing strained relationship between Wesleyan Holiness and Pentecostal traditions affords a place to begin examining such a wall as it manifested itself in the summer of 2023. Admittedly the journey between these two traditions (often championed by “the librarians” of Asbury Theology Seminary) remains fraught, even to this day (Bundy, Hammond, and Sang-Ehil Han, 2002, 1-24). With the Church of the Nazarene, the tension begins with the start of both the denomination and the Pentecostal movement in Los Angeles, not far from the William Seymour’s Azusa Street revival. The relationship remains so tense, that explanation often requires more space to explain the denomination’s stance than with other Christian and non-Christian movements (Ingersol 1999: 188-211). As evidenced in the *Herald of Holiness*, as well as subsequent statements in the *Manual, Church of the Nazarene* (1972, 1985, 2017-2021), the barriers erected indeed feel like the construction of a “Berlin wall” to keep the movements thoroughly separated.

Introduction and Methodology

As noted, the denomination’s struggle with Pentecostalism surfaced recently during the 30th General Assembly of the Church of the Nazarene, particularly during its business session held June 15th, 2023. The thirty-minute exchange revealed the depths of the denomination’s view of this “gift” of the Holy Spirit as divisive and challenging to the core identity of the denomination by its highest leadership. Outsiders might note it would seem odd that a statement that appears outside the denomination’s constitution, Articles of Faith, Covenants of Christian Character and Conduct, and ongoing policies and procedures, might prove so essential. While the appendix of the *Manual* holds several important social and moral statements, and indexes and procedural guides, each social statement remains subject to renewal every twelve years. Outside readers might puzzle over a statement bearing such weight in defining a denomination, particularly over against other Christian traditions, with a closing (new) statement added that explicitly reminds its membership of its opposition

to tongues. A documentary exploration using the denomination's primary publication, the *Herald of Holiness* (now titled *Holiness Today*), alongside other interpretations during this key juncture anchored in the 1970s, provides a clue to the creation of an ongoing debate over *Manual* 925.

Though for a short time, leaders in the Church of the Nazarene identified with and saw themselves as part of this movement, enough distinction between Holiness and Pentecostal theology and practice arose by 1919 that the General Assembly voted to drop "Pentecostal" from the name of the denomination (*Manual*, 2017: 19). From this point, the differences only grew. By the mid-1950s articles began to appear in the *Herald of Holiness* that seek to articulate an understanding of the baptism of the Holy Spirit as distinct from the spiritual gift of tongues. In fact, writers argued that tongues have no meaningful place within the Church of the Nazarene. Writers did occasionally mention other supernatural manifestations, yet persistently distinguished between the Wesleyan-Holiness theology of the Church of the Nazarene and the theology and practices of the Pentecostal movement (Clergy Development Church of the Nazarene, 2004: 308).

The years 1954-1984 serve as a timeframe to search the archives of the *Herald of Holiness*, published by the Nazarene Publishing House, Kansas City, and available on the Olivet Digital Commons (<https://digitalcommons.olivet.edu/>). The Church of the Nazarene *Manual* statement regarding baptism with the Holy Spirit did not occur until 1980 (see below), yet changes leading to the update appear commensurate with changes following World War II. This timeframe allows opportunity to discern the processes and denominational impact of such a change. Additionally, broader historical situations such as second-wave feminism, the increasing impact of mass media, and the ever-shifting nature of national politics inform the reading as nothing occurs in a vacuum. Utilizing the search function available for the PDF scans of the older magazine issues, the authors conducted a search of the following words in the reading: tongues, charismatic, Pentecostal, gifts, miracles, baptism of the Holy Spirit.

Documentary Findings

By 1954 the denomination would prioritize its definition of the baptism of the Holy Spirit in a way distinct from the continually developing Pentecostal movement. Lauriston Du Bois, in the January 20, 1954, issue writes, "Personal witness was a vital outgrowth of the Early Church as the followers of Jesus moved out of the Upper Room filled with the Holy Ghost.

Personal witness must characterize the life of the Spirit-filled Christian today" (Dubois 1954: 3). Personal witness, the reader understands, means talking with others about Christ and Christ's work. There is, of course, nothing wrong with this stance, and such conversation is a central part of Christian life. However, the author of this article argues the conversation itself proves crucial and *not* the supernatural empowerment of the believers on Pentecost to speak in languages they would not otherwise know.

A few weeks later, H. Orton Wiley (1954: 10) writes that "it is interesting to note that the Greek words *heterais glossais*, or 'other tongues,' occur only in connection with Pentecost. Tongues provided an inaugural sign, in which the Holy Spirit elevated the powers of the disciples to speak in other languages the wonderful works of God." Wiley thus explicitly makes the connection to known languages; what the earliest believers were empowered by the Holy Spirit to do on Pentecost served to further the spread of the Gospel message. Wiley implicitly understood that such empowerment would not have been necessary if everyone within earshot easily understood a common tongue.

By 1960, the *Herald* articles move beyond making the connection to known languages and step into a space of rejecting the sensational (and perhaps, stereotyped) elements of Pentecostalism. Such articles insist that the empowerment of the Holy Spirit "is not predictive, sensational, prophetic, spectacular, pseudo-healing power, but dynamic witnessing power" (Wordsworth 1960: 10). Again, the presence of the Holy Spirit leads to an ability and drive to share the Gospel with others, but not in ways that extend beyond a normal conversation over a cup of coffee. In July 1960, editor W. T. Purkiser (1960a: 17) bluntly responds to a question with the following answer: "We certainly [do] believe in the baptism with the Holy Spirit, *and* we do not believe in speaking with other tongues as a necessary sign that one has received the baptism with the Holy Spirit... We have never sanctioned speaking in tongues." Purkiser goes on to restate this position in December 1960. "The Church of the Nazarene totally and completely rejects the idea of any kind of tongues as evidence of the baptism with the Holy Spirit" (Purkiser 1960b: 16). For Purkiser, this position remains clearly a settled issue.

However, in 1967, Purkiser finds himself still responding to questions, utilizing greater detail, to answer the baptism of the Holy Spirit:

I believe it is incisively clear from Acts 15:8-9 that the baptism with the Holy Spirit is the means whereby the effectiveness of the cleansing blood of Christ is made real. There is no evidence at all to connect speaking in “unknown tongues” with the baptism with the Holy Spirit. The languages spoken at Pentecost were understood without interpretation by those who came from the various lingual areas represented. There is no reason to believe that the two other times languages are mentioned in the Acts were any different. There was some kind of tongue speaking going on in Corinth, and views as to its nature differ. If it is said that this represents the same phenomenon which is reported in Acts, then it must have been understandable languages. If it is said that the Corinthian tongues were different from those of Acts 2, then there is nothing in I Corinthians 14 to connect the manifestation in any way with the baptism with the Holy Spirit (cf. I Corinthians 3:1-3; 5:1-6; 6:1-8; 11:17-34). (Purkiser 1967: 19)

In 1976 the *Herald of Holiness* published the General Superintendents’ public address to the General Assembly under the title (and official banner) “The Position of the Church of the Nazarene on Speaking in Tongues.” The article begins with the explicit statement:

It is our considered judgement and ruling that any practice and/or propagation of speaking in tongues either as the evidence of the baptism of the Holy Spirit or as a neo-pentecostal ecstatic prayer language shall be interpreted as inveighing against the doctrines and usages of the Church of the Nazarene (Par 25, Section 3 [Referencing the General Constitution admonishing “inveighing”]). (Board of General Superintendents 1976: 4-5)

The General Superintendents statement included several key considerations: 1) Baptism of, or with, the Holy Spirit indicates the presence of heart cleansing or entire sanctification; 2) language in Acts 2 described actual languages of the day, 3) Paul’s direction in Corinthians was to clear up abuses, 4) Nazarenes seeking to encourage tongues are encouraged to seek membership elsewhere, 5) Christian difference may occur broadly in the church; 6) Nazarenes should adopt the stewardship of clearly biblical doctrines and practices.

What seems a settled position among denominational leaders appears far less determined for the average churchgoer. As late as September

1980, new *Herald* editor W.E. McCumber fields questions regarding the nature and function of the “tongues” discussed in 1 Corinthians 14:13-18. He writes, “To Paul, the use of languages in a worship service that could not convey a clearly understood message to the worshipers was self-centered and childish. He passionately believed in communication that edified ‘the other,’ not in demonstration that exalted one’s self (sic)” (McCumber 1980: 31). If a *Herald* reader missed the line in the sand up to this point, McCumber makes it clear. The Church of the Nazarene does not practice speaking in tongues. Those who choose to do so, for McCumber, engage in self-centered, childish behavior.

In June 1981, the *Herald of Holiness* article entitled “The True Blessing of Pentecost: What is It?” makes the point with gentler language. “Since these inaugural ‘signs’ [tongues] are not the permanent manifestations of Pentecost, what, then, is the result of being filled with the Spirit?... the great moral consequence of Pentecost: ‘...cleansing their hearts by faith’ (v. 9)” (McGonigle 1981: 10-11). In the same issue, McCumber gives space in his editorial column to declare that the real lesson of Pentecost is found in the fact of the first believer’s being “cleansed from sin and self-centeredness. [T]hey were prepared to speak and work as the Lord’s witnesses, not for a day but for a lifetime. We can do without the inaugural signs. *We cannot get along without the abiding spiritual effects of power and purity*” (McCumber 1981: 31). In the Church of the Nazarene, power and purity of heart and life, rather than power in the form of supernatural manifestations, remain forever connected.

The *Herald of Holiness* review reveals both the tension underlying the engagement with the Pentecostal tradition, and a clue concerning the impasse, a reliance on purity as the motivating difference. The documentary review also invites an understanding of the underlying context for the divide.

Underlying Conflict

Sociologist and church historian Charles Perabeau offers several important insights into the conflict between the Church of the Nazarene and the emerging Neo-Pentecostal/Charismatic or Jesus People (Koester 2002: 274-278, Perabeau 2011: 19-63). Perabeau notes that Nazarene founder Phineas Bresee tended to downplay the movement at its beginnings and even raised questions concerning its African American roots in Los Angeles. Perabeau continues that the later controversy motivated the denomination

to drop the term “Pentecostal” from its own title (Perabeau 2011: 94-98). While documenting earlier conflicts, Perabeau uses Nazarene archival information to expose a much later conflict following a period when the church seemed amenable to accepting previous Pentecostal churches from England into the Nazarene fold (Perabeau 2011: 39-45).

The apparent “precipitating event,” one that raised barriers to a new level, occurred during the 1972 General Assembly in Miami and culminated in a revised statement that worked its way into the denomination’s polity as a *Manual* statement. Prior to 1972 a group best known as “The Committee of Charismatic Nazarenes” advocated for a re-engagement with Pentecostalism, fueled by the resurgent Charismatic Movement under the aegis of the Full Gospel Businessmen’s Fellowship International, and supported by traditional Pentecostal denominations. A recent crisis in Brazil over *glossolalia* preceded the gathering. However, the most telling moment came during, of all things, a lunch break within the gathering of the General Assembly of the Church of the Nazarene. Delegates returned to discover printed material supporting *glossolalia* as evidence of baptism with/of the Holy Spirit (discussed below) at their delegate seats. The idea of a competing perspective arriving unannounced into the very sanctum of the deliberative body of the denomination probably fueled the differences (Perabeau 2011: 48-55). This view continued to irritate Nazarene deliberation through publications that explicitly advocated for adoption of the alternative view concerning tongues (Full Gospel Businessmen 1973). By 1976 the denomination published a specific statement rejecting tongues speaking (mentioned above) that reflected a clear break with Pentecostalism and removed the possibility of congregations seeking to join “the Association of Pentecostal Churches of America” an opportunity to retain their property (*Manual* 1972, para 27, 40).

The denomination moderated the language, but incorporated a *Manual* statement in 1985, ensuring the position remained part of the polity: “to affirm that even a special or any alleged physical evidence, or ‘prayer language,’ is evidence of the baptism with the Spirit is contrary to the biblical and historic position of the church” (Perabeau 2011: 59, 1985 *Manual*: 284). Perabeau notes that the final iteration of the statement appeared muted from the original resolution, due in part to a theological disagreement over the Board of General Superintendents’ right to function as a form of ecclesial “magisterium” through their ruling; rather than rely on formal polity action through General Assembly resolution to the *Manual*,

Church of the Nazarene (Perabeau 2011: 54-55). Regardless, by the time the final *Manual* statement appeared in the “Appendix” (alongside earlier statements on racism and women’s rights, as well as folk dancing and swimming at that time) this singular statement bore incredible weight for either becoming an ordained Elder, or remaining a member of the Church of the Nazarene.

One should note that Perabeau argues the rift between Nazarenes and Pentecostalism, or the Charismatic movement reflected the Nazarene denomination’s gradual movement toward social respectability (from sect to Church denomination). This “social drift” contributed to the marginalization of Pentecostalism (Perabeau 2011: 18). Pragmatically, just how marginalized the drift might reflect remains open to debate. While the Church of the Nazarene grew 60% between 1972 and 2010, to a membership of approximately 650,000; the Assemblies of God grew 181% to approximately three million and the Church of God (Cleveland, Tennessee) grew over 260% from a little less than 300,000 to over a million by 2010. The growth among ethnic communities within Pentecostal traditions alone might warrant a renewed conversation by this time (ARDA, online <https://www.thearda.com/us-religion/group-profiles/>).

The underlying theological difference rested with the American Holiness tradition’s belief that “baptism with the Holy Spirit” resulted in entire sanctification, while Pentecostalism associated speaking in tongues or *glossolalia* as evidence of baptism of/with the Holy Spirit. These entrenched theological perspectives, often signature to both traditions, probably drove the underlying division, regardless of the evidence of healing, reconciliation, or other manifestations of God’s work within certain Charismatic gatherings. Public events such as the “Conference on Charismatic Renewal in the Christian Churches,” held in Kansas City with 40,000 registrants, highlighted the tension, particularly when magazines like *Christianity Today* (1977) reported that ex-Nazarene clergyman Warren Black and approximately fifty Wesleyan Holiness participants attended as well.

The debate with Pentecostalism deepened the Nazarene denomination’s commitment to a particular theological stance concerning the baptism of/with the Holy Spirit. While agreeing to earlier holiness interpretations of entire sanctification, the embroiled battle may have included emotional and intellectual spillover in attempting to keep the spirit baptism theology “pure” in the denomination, avoiding any hint

of degradation through any alternative view. Researchers might well acknowledge that the denomination did provide nuanced treatments of both the Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements, such as those by Dr. Stan Ingersol (1999). However, the underlying social “pressure” to keep Nazarenes aligned ecclesiastically may well have spilled over into a theological (or ideological) justification to defend the holiness view of baptism of/with the Holy Spirit through a particular reading of scripture. This defensive posture may have led some Nazarenes to “chafe” with interpretations that made Pentecostalism a partner within the Wesleyan Holiness tradition, and “bristle” when its own adherents questioned baptism of/with the Holy Spirit (Dayton 2007: 91). The underlying tension explains some of the “trial by fire” experienced by Nazarene Theological Seminary professor Dr. Rob Staples (2007). Staples faced possible dismissal due to his 1979 writing, “The Current Wesleyan Debate on the Baptism of the Holy Spirit,” which reflected both his opinion, but also that of General Superintendent William Greathouse at the time. Ultimately individual churches attempted some level of reconciliation between the two traditions, yet the rift provides an ongoing tension in both ecclesial and academic settings (Dart 1995).

Observations based on the Case Study

Any denomination does possess the right to declare its doctrinal positions, not only in the quest for theological accuracy but for the sake of informed consent for the members (or potential members) of the denomination. Clear statements allow persons to choose whether they can reasonably be involved with this expression of the Church. There is no problem with the Church of the Nazarene spending time working out its position regarding the nature and use of tongues. The problem occurs when the level of effort expended in this theological wrestling match reifies into a framework that excludes ongoing difference of thought within the tradition and prevents possible fellowship with other parts of Christ’s body, fifty years later in an Assembly action, when even thirty-three percent of the denomination votes otherwise.

Wesleyan Puritanism, A Plain Account Caution

For the sake of this writing, the Church of the Nazarene’s tensions regarding *glossolalia* merely serve as case study to a greater project in determining what a plain account of Christian purity might entail. To be

honest, several Wesleyan traditions might chart similar struggles, as does the Wesley Theological Society's continued "on again, off again" relationship with the Society of Pentecostal Studies, a relationship that ended in 2020 by vote of the WTS membership (Bundy, Hammon, and Han 2022: 9-11, Wesleyan Theological Society 2019 Minutes). At the heart of the issue may be whether certain positions around the doctrine of purity invoke a kind of Wesleyan "Puritanism" either by those more aligned within the American Holiness camp, or even among those who ascribe themselves as classically "Wesleyan."

Puritanism as a Greedy Ideology

Some challenges to purity thinking merely help Wesleyans name the weakness and establish a questioning posture considering contemporary social issues. However, other challenges to purity "thinking" may prove more resilient and require a deeper understanding of the underlying concerns, particularly when differences occur over social issues. This concern opens the door to a different definition of purity often located under the banner of Puritanism, which presupposes the need for a purity of ideology or practice, particularly over the evil seduction of degradation. In an earlier survey of Puritan movements (Christian and non-Christian), anthropologist and educator Walter E. A. van Beek (1988) notes that the quest for purity provides a "greedy ideology." Van Beek writes that this quest:

(W)hether voluntarily accepted or enforced, demands total commitment. It affects all spheres of life, leaving no field of action untouched. Lacking easily fulfilled goals, "the quest" continues to pursue adepts. After removing one corrupt institution, or removing one particular source of defilement, other evils seldom fail to manifest themselves swiftly... Puritans view the world as a battlefield, where the forces of Good – always in short supply – battle against omnipresent Sin, Corruption and Evil. Among the ideologies of puritan movements, all of which offer an explicit definition of sin, several different approaches to Evil can be discerned. The main distinction is that between personal and collective evil, between evil residing chiefly in the individual, or evil located in the body social. The Christian movements offer examples of the first category. (van Beek 1988: 4-5)

The book van Beek edits includes chapters addressing Geneva Calvinism, English Puritanism, Dutch Evangelicalism, and Chinese Christian

fundamentalism alongside Islamic traditions and even communism. The breadth of the presentations demonstrates that a process, or “posture,” surfaces once purity becomes part of the conversation around social, or even ecclesial engagement. This approach mirrors other historical surveys of American Protestantism that associate purity imagery with the rise of American Fundamentalism (Ferm 1991: 55-72). When does “difference” become so painful that purity invokes a need to overcome, expel, and barricade others in order to avoid the degradation of the group’s beliefs and practices? This question surfaces less with a concern of John Wesley’s own Puritan influence, whether Wesley saw himself among non-conforming Puritan ministers or as an Anglican priest. That ground remains open to interpretation (Hammond 2009: 174-207; Monk 1966). However, Wesley, often portrayed as a Methodist pietist, opens the door to this hybrid vision today (*Christianity Today*, 10/26/2022).

Like Wesley’s Methodism, Puritanism received its name from the detractors of a group of Reformed English Protestants intent upon creating “godly Genevas” in England and America, yet deeply interwoven with Anglican roots (Coffey and Lim 2008: 1-9; Collison 2008). Within this movement one would find both moderate and radical efforts to redraw the boundaries of permitted behavior. The efforts primarily occurred during periods of uncertainty, and in the midst of diverse and uncertain subcultures that fractured the customary expectation of religious “manners.” Unfortunately, the efforts often did more to create dissension among the faithful as it did to address differences in social classes (Walsham 2008: 280).

A Right Heart?

Wesleyans might argue that John Wesley’s sermon “The Catholic Spirit” offers a buffer to intense expectations, and rejections, of alternative stances within Christian tradition. True, Wesley did reject certain assumed heretical stances in the sermon, speculative and practical latitudinarianism, as well as a disregard for congregational practice (III:1-3). Yet on matters of difference from worship to “opinions” Wesley invites: “Is thine heart right, as my heart is with thy heart?” Secondly, an offer made on Jehonadab’s answering, “It is:” “If it be, give me thine hand” (Wesley, 1750/1985: 82).

However, the question of discerning a “right heart” may well be the place where a Plain Account of Christian Purity requires considerable judgment on the part of both parties. With the advent of research in moral

psychology, perhaps the “heart,” or emotional disposition, raises the key concern by all parties. When one fears that one’s purity might be threatened with degradation, a dangerous tendency occurs to either ignore, attack, or just barricade the suspected culprit. Jonathan Haidt (2012) identifies five socio-moral postures that shape US discourse: care/harm, fairness/cheating, loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion, and sanctity/degradation (Haidt 2012: 146). The moral intuitions remind WEIRD participants (Western, Educated, Industrial, Rich... by global standards... and Democratic) that reason alone does not drive decision making (Haidt 2012: 103-120). Both research into Wesley’s own moral psychology and resulting contemporary work in fields such as medicine and counseling psychology support this holistic view (Leffle 2021, Maddox 1998, 2001). Haidt also uses the term “sanctity” to describe a once biological necessity (to avoid pathogens) turned toward the sacred or religious. Since purity in the Wesleyan tradition carries an explicit religious perspective (opposed to the purity of chemicals), the same moral intuition applies (Haidt 2012: 170-177).

Berlin Walls: Barriers to Difference through Purity Regulation

While Haidt in no way reflects a Wesleyan theological bent toward purity, any view of purity easily conflates with the moral intuition of sanctity, and particularly the correlative fear of degradation. This particular concern opens the door to protect ourselves, and perhaps even God. Richard Beck (2011) writes, “Feeling this degradation, we seek to protect God from need, to create quarantines around God. God, thus, is self-contained, perfect, and holy. But inherent in this impulse is a flight from our own need, a refusal to exist in a state of need” (Beck 2011: 170). When written on a larger theological horizon (associated with the very holiness of God) the term may easily incorporate other moral intuitions such as loyalty and authority by ascribing ultimate allegiance to the Puritan ideal (Van Velzen and van Beek 1988: 7-29). Impurity, in this sense, reflects a loss both of true reverence, perhaps a betrayal of a loyalty, and a sense of subversion. Degradation, particularly in a Puritan vision, includes the necessity, inevitability, of sin rather than merely acknowledging difference. Degradation threatens one’s identity through association. Naming sin, calling for repentance, and ultimately (perhaps) both expecting and extending forgiveness provide the operative response to engaging difference within a Puritan piety (Watkins 1972: 8-16). To degrade, rather than remain pure, challenges a range of moral intuitions, and invokes a conversionist response, making the

possibility of rational discourse around differences harder to accomplish. In the face of sinful behavior, the Berlin wall rises from the horizon.

Degradation may take several forms including, remarkably, a seeming intellectual tendency to protect a proper historical Wesleyanism that risks dismissing alternative theological variation around John Wesley's own message and life (Abraham 2005, Noble 2011). This type of protective theological perspective reflects Andrew Brower Latz's (and he might say Kathryn Tanner's) concern with a kind of assumed theological purity, associated with Postliberal theology and Radical Orthodoxy, a purity that belies even the original ecumenism in Wesley's thought (Brower Latz 2014: 258-261). When it comes to a Plain Account, perhaps creating a larger tent, rather than circumscribing the conversation against some theological traditions, warrants consideration (Morrill 2008: 83). Erecting Berlin walls against some theological positions really may not serve to deepen the Wesleyan tradition, particularly if one hopes to remain in new "ecumenical" settings absent the blind spots of current theological concerns.

Beginning the Plain Account

As noted at the beginning of this writing, Wesley's "A Plain Account of Christian Perfection" acknowledged the positive as well as cautioned toward harmful excesses. This writing focused on raising a caution toward adopting excessive focus on purity by erecting institutional barriers that hamper, even punish, those perceived "outside" the ideological or practical walls of sanctity. One indicator adopted by economist and leadership theorist Albert C. Brooks (2019) occurs when leaders, on either side of an issue, adopt a posture of "contempt" for the opposing viewpoint. Brooks, adopting social psychologist and relationship researcher John Gottman, asserts contempt reveals the primary motivation for the dissolution of marriages, when we reduce even those people closest to us to a "worthless" status (Brooks 2019: 23). Brooks does offer antidotes reflective of a national discourse that includes powerful leadership on both sides of an issue. In the current ecclesial context, this aligns perhaps with the tendency to remain in "bubbles" of mutual support, so often aligned with the protection of one's "identity" in light of a broader stance (Brooks 2019: 205-206).

However, there may be some "gestures" of positive interaction worthy of mention for future exploration. The first possible clue emerges from the study of scripture and Jesus own approach to the "impure," often considered worthless. Previous writers like Richard Beck argue that Jesus'

love overcomes the barriers to impurity (or at least to revulsion) to embrace the other. This ability, for Beck, would be available for Christians through the practice of the Eucharist for the sake of mission. Beck writes:

(O)ne cannot help but wonder how the association of the Lord's Supper with Jesus' ministry of table fellowship might be shaping the missional imagination of that church. How, even if the adults were a lost cause, the image of Jesus eating with sinners might be affecting the minds of the children within that faith community. Or how the conscience of one individual might be pricked by the images of the Eucharist one Sunday morning, prompting her to reject the hurtful practices of the church. (Beck 2011: 198)

Beck's vision is helpful for overcoming the inhospitality of the church in the face of difference. While purity may require more, including a broad vision of wholeness and attention to overcoming evil, a vision of hospitality may at least mitigate difference from within a body.

We close this article as we opened, with an invitation to other Wesleyans to consider what a "Plain Account of Christian Purity" might accomplish for this day. In a world marked by deep polarization, like other times in history, the tendency to erect barriers in the face of honest difference (Berlin walls) is only one potential concern. Other challenges may occur, but always with the potential of a Plain Account discovering a deeper, richer, doctrine...and loving posture toward others...if we look closely.

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