

## STUDY PAPER SIX

### Holiness in an unholy world by The Rev Professor Frances Young

Holiness was originally to do with being set apart from everyday life. The Holy of Holies in the Temple was the awesome place, dedicated to God, which even the High Priest entered only once a year.

On a trip to Egypt I suddenly realised the full significance of what had happened in early Christianity. Ancient temples were like palaces. The crowds of “subjects” were kept outside -- maybe the god would appear on special occasions, a bit like the Queen appearing on the balcony at Buckingham Palace. Only the priests were allowed into the royal divine presence. But inside an ancient Egyptian Temple we found the walls, once covered in images, defaced as high as someone could reach, and deep inside the scratched sign of the cross. Christians had invaded and challenged the old religious order.

The Bible insists that living human beings are made in the image of God. Paul spoke of the body being the Temple of the Holy Spirit. Somehow the holiness of God had to break out of its separateness into ordinary life. Christians gathered in houses to worship. They spoke of living sacrifices as they dedicated themselves to God. When they eventually built places of worship, they were not Temple-palaces but basilicas – public halls where people gathered to listen to God’s word and share in God’s community.

Maybe John Wesley was unaware of what archaeology has revealed, but he did “democratise” early monastic texts which read the scriptures as a call to total dedication, so that God’s holiness and perfection were embodied in the believer. He saw everyone as chosen and called to be conformed to the image of God’s Son, so as to become Temples of God’s Holy Spirit. Wesley interpreted this ‘scriptural holiness’ as perfect love. For, “be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt. 5.48) reflects “I am the Lord your God; sanctify yourselves therefore and be holy, for I am holy” (Lev. 11.44).

[Hint: you could use a concordance to assist with the first two questions]

1. Can you trace the connection between Israel’s election and holiness?
2. Can you identify the allusions to Paul’s Epistles in the third and fourth paragraphs above? Consider them in context, and expand this sketch of Paul’s theology.
3. Discuss (a) the extent to which John Wesley’s call to spread scriptural holiness throughout the land was an appropriate re-reading of Paul’s theology and (b) what it might mean in today’s world.
4. Does it matter that the Methodist church no longer seems to emphasise scriptural holiness?