

Why are We Surprised By Sin?
Holy People and Unfitting Behavior in the Bible

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Introduction

Except for the most cynical, most people have been surprised by sin at some point. Our Sunday School “reality” is jarred when we find Jacob baldly lying to his father to gain his blessing. We are shocked to find even David, the ideal king, the “man after God’s own heart,” in bed with Bathsheba, plotting Uriah’s death in cold blood, and later cowardly overlooking his children’s sins. When we get to the New Testament, our hope is renewed that the Holy Spirit will set things aright, but then we find the Corinthian Christians visiting prostitutes. Even with this long, marred history, we expect the contemporary church to be different. Then the newspaper headlines of pastoral scandal, our personal experiences of vindictive church politics, and the seemingly endless variety of interpersonal strife puzzle us anew. Finally, when we are brave enough to look into our own hearts, expecting them to be in conformity with God’s ways, we instead find darkness, willful rebellion and lust for power.

Why are the holy people of God so unholy? Why do we continue to expect things to be better than they are? What does God think of all of this? How should we live amongst such a “people of God”? These are the questions that motivate this paper.

In order to discern references to holiness in the Bible, I begin by defining it and noting the biblical words used for it. Unfortunately, English uses derivatives from both Old English (*halig*, holy) and Latin (*sanctus*, sanctify) to translate the biblical ideas of holiness.¹ The English terms “holy,” “holiness,” “saints” (holy ones), “sanctify,” “consecrate” (make holy) and “sanctification” all translate words derived from the Hebrew root *qadash* (“to sanctify”) or the corresponding Greek root *hagiazō*. The root concept in both cases is one of separation.² In its religious context, it refers to something being separated from the realm of the “common” (or

¹ Peter Toon, *Justification and Sanctification* (Westchester, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1983), 36.

² Louis Berkhof, *Manual of Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1933), 265.

“profane”) to being reserved for religious purposes. Thus, Bockmuehl defines sanctification as “the act or process by which people or things are cleansed and dedicated to God, ritually and morally.”³ Toon defines it as “the transition from the realm of the profane to that of direct association with God.”⁴ Though holiness can be used in regard to the spatial, personal, ritual and time dimensions,⁵ this paper focuses on the personal: the holy people of God. It is important to note that the concept of separation for God’s purposes is not always explicitly tied to holiness language in the Bible so I draw from this larger theme rather than the narrower linguistic range.

In this paper, I trace through the Bible the theme of God’s holy people and their resulting ambivalence that both embraces and rejects their sanctification. For each of the major periods in salvation history, I address the following issues (though not necessarily every one in every period): God’s holiness, God’s sanctification of his people, their ambivalent stance, and God’s response to them. I separate God’s response into three categories: his internal response, his words to his people, and his accommodation of the creation and its administration. In the end, I summarize both the continuity and development of this story.

Creation and Eden

The biblical story of holiness begins with God. Being creatures, we see and live in the creation, but we do not see the Creator directly. However, when we see the creation we become aware of his power (Rom 1:20) because we know that nothing within the creation could have created the creation. Therefore the truth is generally proclaimed: there is a Holy One who is separate from the creation. Through the revealed creation story of Gen 1, we see that the Creator is intentional and uncontested. God himself is the starting point of holiness and he is seen to be

³ K. Bockmuehl, “Sanctification,” *New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Sinclair B. Ferguson and David F. Wright (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity P, 1988), 613.

⁴ Toon, 37.

uniquely separate, powerful, intentional and uncontested.

Creation also marks the beginning of God’s sanctifying work. The entire creation is holy. God made it for his own purposes and, in that sense, it is ‘dedicated’ to him. When he declares it “very good” (Gen 1:31), he affirms that the result is in keeping with his design and therefore fulfills his purpose.⁶ But within the holy creation are gradations of holiness.⁷ Specifically, humanity is separated from the rest of creation by being made in God’s image and by being commissioned to rule over creation. By divine fiat, the first humans are specially dedicated to God’s special purposes as his image-bearers and his subordinate sovereigns. The narrative of Gen 2 displays this “holy order” functioning properly. God’s unique holiness is demonstrated as he creates (Gen 2:7-9, 22), motivates human activity (Gen 2:15, 19), is the ethical judge of good and bad (Gen 2:18) and informs human ethics (Gen 2:16-17). Humankind (in Adam) rules subordinately over God’s creation by the sovereign act of naming (Gen 2:20). Without reference to holiness language, the first creation account establishes God, humanity, and creation as being holy, though in different ways.⁸

God’s holy creation reveals its ambivalence immediately. In Gen 3, the serpent, explicitly stated to be one of God’s creatures, questions God to the woman. The creation is no longer wholly holy, no longer completely dedicated to God. When the humans rebel against God’s ethical authority, they also yield their holiness by distancing themselves from God’s purpose. They use their God-given creative power to create coverings for their ashamed bodies. They hide

⁵ Philip Peter Jenson, *Graded Holiness: A Key to the Priestly Conception of the World* (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1992), 35-8.

⁶ William J. Dumbrell, *The Search for Order: Biblical Eschatology in Focus* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1994), 22.

⁷ This theme is developed in depth for the Priestly Pentateuchal tradition in Philip Peter Jenson, *Graded Holiness: A Key to the Priestly Conception of the World* (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1992).

⁸ The first overt use of holiness language is Gn 2:3, where God sanctifies the seventh day. Though important, this reference to holy *time* is not central to the current topic.

from each other and from him. The key to the rebellion is the serpent's lure that Eve would become "like God, knowing good and evil" (Gn 3:5). The human choice was consciously to upset the holy order, to move from a stance of being *with* God to being co-equal with (and therefore *against*) God. Being holy is counter to human pride. Toon suggests that the common symbol of fire for God's holiness is an apt one because "a great fire attracts by its powerful light and repels by its heat."⁹ Though the biblical story has not yet used the fire symbolism, it is already clear that humanity is deeply ambivalent about holiness – it is both desired and despised. It harmonizes with our *imago Dei* yet simultaneously threatens our lust for autonomy.

The narrator does not betray God's internal reaction to the situation yet, though the reader is tempted to fill in the gap. But God does respond with words. He asks revelatory questions (Gen 3:9, 11, 13) and then explains his next actions (Gen 3:14-19). Beyond his words, God modifies his original design for creation. He establishes curses that reshape the created order, kills some of his own created animal life to make proper garments, and then banishes humanity from the garden. It is important to note the responses that God does *not* choose. He does not destroy creation and begin again, nor does he not simply accept the rejection of his holy order and allow things to continue on their own course. His response is *accommodation*, the restructuring of creation in light of the changed situation.

From Abel to Babel

Despite God's accommodation, humankind continues to refuse to be set apart for God. Cain's murder of Abel is a rejection of Abel's holiness as well as his own. This rejection of holiness reaches its peak in the days of Noah when "the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil

⁹ Toon, 37.

continually” (Gen 6:5, *NASB*¹⁰). Later, the Tower of Babel is humankind’s attempt to build its own cosmic mountain (Gen 11:4), asserting autonomy so far as to be Creator.

In light of these troubles, God again chooses to sanctify. He selects Noah, “a righteous man, blameless in his time” (Gen 6:9), for a new special purpose: to be the new start for humanity. This is one of many times where God chooses particular people to be set apart for his special purposes.

Noah continues humanity’s ambivalent response to holiness. He obediently carries out God’s plan by building the ark, gathering the animals, and offering sacrifices to consecrate the new creation. He also exercises his God-given rule over creation by planting a vineyard (Gen 9:20). But Noah does not continue to live according to his holy calling; he immediately debases himself by becoming drunk and uncovering himself (Gen 9:21).

During this period, the narrator painfully describes God’s internal response to his people’s behavior: he is sorry and grieved (Gen 6:6). God also continues to communicate with his people. He asks redemptive questions of Cain as he did with Adam (Gen 4:9-10). He describes his new plan and reasoning to Noah. But then God communicates in a new way: he explicitly makes a covenant with creation and with Noah: he will never again destroy all flesh through flood. God remarkably condescends to make a promise that restricts his future behavior. God also continues to re-shape creation. Most dramatically, he re-creates the world through the flood, bringing the dry land forth from the waters again and starting with a new human family. But God further reshapes his plan by explicitly prescribing capital punishment and meat-eating (Gen 9:2-6), adjusting his rule for humanity in light of the new situation.

¹⁰ All biblical citations are from the *New American Standard Bible*, 1977 unless otherwise indicated.

Abraham

Humanity's continued ambivalence about being holy causes God to now institute a gradation of holiness among humanity. He sets Abraham and his descendants apart for a special purpose, thereby sanctifying his descendants beyond other nations. God will bless Abraham with a nation and a land, and Abraham will bless the rest of humanity.

Abraham responds with familiar ambivalence. He faithfully obeys God's call by leaving his family and trusting that God can do the impossible by raising Isaac from the dead. But even Abraham succumbs to fear before Pharaoh (Gen 12:11-13) and agrees to Sarai's plan to accomplish God's purposes by circumventing her God-given barrenness (Gen 16:2).

God extends his covenantal promises, further constraining how he will act in the future by committing himself to Abraham (Gen 12:1-3; 15:5; 17:1-8). He then communicates in two new ways: (1) He associates his name specifically with Abraham, staking his reputation on Abraham's success; and (2) he adds a self-maledictory oath that assures Abraham of the seriousness of his promise (Gen 15:8-21). God stakes his very existence on having a people dedicated to him. During this time of the patriarchs, God also newly reveals how he administrates history behind the scenes. Joseph enigmatically informs his hateful brothers that "you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good" (Gen 50:20). A single event is now seen to have both human and divine initiative behind it. God is revealed to *reverse* the results of rebellious actions, making them constructive. God also provides a new sign of holiness: circumcision marks the people of God as his holy people.

Exodus and Sinai

In the exodus account, God's holiness receives focus again. As he brings Israel out of Egypt, God asserts himself above local deities and imperial armies. Israel then sings, "Who is

like Thee among the gods, O LORD? Who is like Thee, majestic in holiness...?" (Ex 15:11). God reveals his unique holiness not just to Israel but to the nations. He also reveals his holiness in a special way to Israel. In his theophany at Sinai, he shows himself as both threatening and merciful. He powerfully saves his people from slavery, but his presence in the midst of the people is a dangerous blessing.

In the exodus, God continues his sanctification of Abraham's nation by calling Israel out of Egypt and setting them apart for his purposes. He thus describes them as his "own possession among all the peoples," "a kingdom of priests," and "a holy nation" (Ex 19:5-6). Though the entire earth belongs to God, Israel is set apart as a holy nation for the purpose of reconciling all of creation back to God.

How then does Israel respond to her holiness? She continues the drone of ambivalence. The people rejoice in praise of God after crossing the sea (Ex 15:1-21) but soon turn to an idol of their making and ascribe their deliverance to it (Ex 32). They obediently build the tabernacle and meticulously perform the prescribed cultic practice (Ex 40:16; Nu 8:20), assembling as God's holy people in grand formation around his presence at the ark (Nu 10:33-36). But then they immediately reject their holiness and long to return to Egypt (Nu 11:4-6). Once again, the holy people resent being holy. They do not want to be God's special possession. It is too much for them. On the brink of entering the promised land, they balk and long to be "common" again, to return to un-holiness (Nu 14:1-4).

God's inner response to this continued rebellion moves from sorrow to anger (Ex 4:14; 32:9-10; Nu 11:1). This anger nearly erupts into destroying the people, but Moses manages to mediate between God and his rebellious people to save them. God's communication to his

people greatly expands at this point as he makes clear that their “definitive sanctification”¹¹ carries ethical¹² obligations: “You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy” (Lev 11:44-45; 19:2; 20:7). Levitical law ensures that for the holy nation every aspect of life has its center in God: food, birth, marriage, death, bodily functions, wage-earning, riches, and poverty, to name a few. He also provides new warnings of curses if they disobey. Note that the curses do not threaten to revoke their holiness, for the threat is not that God will return Israel to being ordinary. The threat is that disobedience will cause God to make Israel *worse off* than the other nations (Deut 28) so that they will remember and return to their vocation as God’s holy people (Deut 30). God also accommodates his people by giving them the sacrificial system, which is an additional divine accommodation. Israel *will* become profane by both intentionally and unintentionally rejecting her holiness. God provides a means for the profaned to be restored.

At the end of the Pentateuch, the nation is poised to enter Canaan but the tension remains between God’s choice of a holy people and their reluctance to accept their holiness.

Monarchy

God asserts that Israel is his unique, holy people by giving them Canaan. But eventually they demand that Samuel “appoint a king for [them] like all the nations” (1 Sam 8:5). This request is not simply for a new government, but is a rejection of their holiness and a desire for commonness. God’s summary is that “they have rejected Me from being king over them” and laments that this is in accord with their rejection of their holy calling ever since they left Egypt (1 Sam 8:7-8).

Even with Israel’s rejection of their calling, God accommodates. In an intricate series of

¹¹ David Peterson, *Possessed by God: A New Testament Theology of Sanctification and Holiness* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1995), 13.

¹² I use the term “ethical” broadly to mean that behavior is subsequently governed by God’s view of right and wrong.

stories and speeches, God gives Israel a king while warning them that this king is both punishment and salvation.¹³ The people seek a monarch to substitute for God. But God remains their king and in full control of the anointing of Saul. God does not allow Israel to be “like all the nations,” for he remains committed to them being holy. However, Saul’s refusal to be devoted to serving God results in him being rejected as king (1 Sam 13, 15). Saul is replaced by David, who lives out his holy vocation by faithfully acting as God’s agent, whether in defeating Goliath (1 Sam 17:26), refusing to kill Saul (1 Sam 24:6), or worshipping before the ark (2 Sam 6:12-19). God responds to David’s faithfulness by promising to eternally bless Israel with kings from the line of David (2 Sam 7:12-16). In the gradations of holiness, the holy people of God will be ruled by an additionally-holy king, set apart as the ruler of the people under God.

But even David loses sight of his holy vocation and begins to indulge himself by avoiding war (2 Sam 11:1), taking another man’s wife (2 Sam 11:3-4), and murdering her husband (2 Sam 11:15). Though set apart for God’s purposes, David follows his own. David’s pattern is repeated by his son Solomon, who faithfully brings Israel to her height (1 Kgs 10) and then faithlessly leads her into idolatry (1 Kgs 11:1-8). This pattern of mixed faith and faithlessness becomes the hallmark of centuries of monarchy, yet the trajectory spirals decidedly downward and ends with the northern kingdom destroyed and the southern kingdom in exile. As they are dispersed amongst common people, the holy people seem to have lost their holiness.

Through this period, God chooses a new communicative response by sanctifying prophets to carry his dramatic messages. The prophets’ holiness is made clear in Isaiah’s call where he bemoans, “I am a man of unclean lips, And I live among a people of unclean lips.” (Isa 6:5). But God purifies him with a hot coal and sends him as a holy man to an unholy people. The prophets

reveal much about God's inner life. He is likened to a spurned, jealous lover. Sometimes appearing as wrathful, he affirms that he is only seeking to bring them back to living as the holy people that they are (Ezk 33:10-16). God laments Israel's treachery towards him as her husband (Jer 3:19-20); she acts like a harlot (Ezk 16:15-29). His response is both fury and grace (Ezk 16:42-63). This complex array of reactions displays God's jealous love for his special treasure.

God also communicates through the prophets that his people's ambivalence will not last forever. He will act decisively to remedy the continuing problem. He will confront evil with severe punishment, but it will result in his people becoming firmly established (*e.g.*, Isa 40:1-11). The prophets see that Israel's failure is because of the mismatch between her holy calling and her impure heart. Thus God will establish a new covenant that results in them having pure hearts (Jer 31:31-4; Ezk 36:25-27) so they will truly be devoted to God.

God also continues to accommodate. He promises David that he will work eternally through a holy king from his descendants. God also makes clear that he is setting apart a holy remnant from within the nation of Israel. When Elijah despairs over Israel's idolatry, he thinks that he is the only one who accepts his holy calling: "I alone am left" (1 Kgs 19:14). God's response is to say that Elijah is wrong and that God "will leave 7,000 in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal" (1 Kgs 19:18). The number of God's holy ones had seemed to be continually expanding from Abraham to a great nation. But now it is contracting down to a small minority of those who accept their vocation. Even more drastic are Isaiah's prophecies that point to the remnant being reduced to a single individual, the Servant (Isa 42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12).

Through the monarchical centuries, two truths remain in deadlocked tension: God's holy

¹³ Five kingship passages (1 Sam 8:4-22; 9:1-10:16; 10:17-27; 11:1-13; 11:14-12:25) alternate in presenting

people refuse holiness, and God refuses to let their refusal stand.

Jesus

I began this paper by noting that we are often surprised by the fact that God's consecrated people continue to sin. Ezra poignantly expresses this surprise in his prayer of confession when he discovers the sins of the returned exiles. He cannot believe that now, when "for a brief moment grace has been shown from the LORD our God, to leave us an escaped remnant...And now, our God, what shall we say after this? For we have forsaken Thy commandments" (Ezra 9:8,10). Ezra's surprise at the people's sin is understandable, but after surveying the Old Testament, we see that holy people never live appropriately. We are no longer surprised by sin because we agree with Paul's analysis that "all are under sin" (Rom 3:9). No matter what gradation of holiness a person has, rebellion is part of the response. After being conditioned to expect no one to walk wholeheartedly with God, we are shocked to find someone who does. Jesus, the holy one of God, lives a life of perfect obedience. But as if this shock were not enough, the one true holy man is rejected by God and punished as the worst offender. The world is turned upside down.

Jesus radicalizes the idea of God's holiness by *defying* the very categories of God's unique holiness: he denies his own nature of deity, empties himself and becomes a man (Phil 2:6-7). The unique Creator becomes (seemingly) a common creature (John 1:10). Then as a man, he is set apart from other men by the Spirit descending upon him, his transfiguration and by the voice from heaven commanding obedience (Mark 1:10-11; 9:2). Peter comes to know Jesus as "the Holy One of God" (John 6:69). Jesus is most clearly separated from all humankind by his bodily resurrection, revealing for the first time a new mode of human existence. In the scheme of

graded holiness, Jesus is the most holy man, blurring the distinction between God's unique holiness and human holiness. As a human, Jesus sanctifies himself (John 17:19) and is fully obedient (Rom 5:19).

God had responded to humanity's rebellion in many ways. Jesus remarkably embodies *each* of these responses. First, Jesus' inner responses include the same sorrow, anger and jealous love towards his wayward people. They are revealed in his weeping, overturning tables, and his delight in those who receive him. Like God, Jesus expresses marriage-love to his people.

Second, like the Father, Jesus communicates with his people. He speaks as a prophet. His speech is full of wrath, comfort, laws for holy life, and redemptive questions and parables that wake people up from their confused rejection of holiness. Jesus pronounces blessings and curses upon his holy people depending on how they respond to their holiness. Jesus makes promises to his people about sending the Holy Spirit and about his own return.. As Yahweh set his name on Israel, Jesus stakes his reputation on his disciples. Jesus responds to his wayward people by speaking in the same way as God.

Third, Jesus acts like his father when he responds to sin by sanctifying. As God chose Abraham to be his holy agent, Jesus sanctifies disciples for the same purpose (John 17:17-19). Fourth, He responds by re-creating and re-administering creation. He brings new life by opening eyes and ears, and breathing new life into his people (John 20:22). He re-administers his world by replacing the sign of circumcision to mark Israel's holiness with baptism by water and the Holy Spirit to mark the church's holiness.

Finally, Jesus fulfills in himself many of God's accommodations to his people's rejection. God gave priests and sacrifices to the nation to restore their holiness when it was blemished, and Jesus becomes the high priest who sacrifices himself. Jesus becomes the everlasting king from

the seed of David. God's self-maledictory oath placed his sanctification of Abraham as more important than his own life and Jesus sacrifices his life in order to sanctify his followers. Joseph observed that God turned his brothers' evil into good, but Jesus' death as a criminal becomes the ultimate transformation of humanity's evil intent into good.

Some say that Jesus never claims to be God, but he clearly acts like God. His purpose matches Yahweh's: to produce a holy people. "And for their sakes I sanctify Myself; that they themselves also may be sanctified in truth" (John 17:19). These sanctified ones are once again moved from the realm of the common to that of the holy, set apart for God's purpose.

Church

The sanctification of the church is expressed in a different way than Old Testament sanctification. The root idea is the same, but its essence is altered. The church is not set *apart* from the common, but is set *in* Christ. The church's saints are those "who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus" (1 Cor 1:2). This new existence *in* Christ is permanent and cannot be tarnished. Thus it can be said that the church has been "sanctified...once for all" because Jesus' "one offering...has perfected for all time those who are sanctified" (Heb 10:10, 14).¹⁴ This new holiness is also highlighted when the church is said to be "sanctified by the Holy Spirit" (Rom 15:16; cf. 2 Thess 2:13; 1 Pet 1:2). Both individually (1 Cor 6:19) and corporately (Eph 2:21-2), the church experiences a more personal presence of God in the Spirit than had been described previously. In terms of graded sanctification, Christians have become the Holy of Holies. The apostles proclaim that the time of God's promised new covenant has arrived, when God's law is written on hearts and the people will no longer reject their dedication to God (Jer 31:31-4; Ezek 36:27; 2 Cor 3:3). The effects of this new relationship with God are so transformational, that

¹⁴ Peterson, 34-6.

Jesus refers to it as being “born again” (John 3:7) and Paul refers to a saint as “a new creature” (2 Cor 5:17). Continuity with Israel as the people set apart by God is emphasized by Peter: “you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession” (1 Pet 2:9). But sanctification has clearly deepened in its way of working.¹⁵

The combination of seeing Jesus’ perfect life and these new descriptions of the sanctification of the church leads one to suspect that sin will never appear in the church. Indeed, theologies of perfection¹⁶ and “entire sanctification”¹⁷ have been developed along these lines. The early church undoubtedly exhibits a transformed life that reflects its sanctification. The vignette of unity and generosity in Acts 2:43-7 displays this beautifully. Churches are filled with members who are now free from terrible former lifestyles (1 Cor 6:11; Eph 5:8). Most convincing is the life of Paul, who testifies that God “set me apart, even from my mother’s womb” (Gal 1:15). This consecrated Paul exemplifies the indefatigable Christian life as he devotes himself wholeheartedly to the work for which God sanctified him (Acts 9:15-6). It is the example of Paul that lures many to think that Christians can indeed live sinless lives. But if we look closer we find that even Paul cannot accomplish the unity that he preaches as he separates from John Mark and Barnabus (Acts 15:36-41). Most famously, Paul reveals his tortured struggle with living in accord with his holy vocation: “For the good I wish, I do not do; but I practice the very evil that I do not wish” (Rom 7:19).¹⁸

¹⁵ There is disagreement about whether this apparently new degree of sanctification was present in the Old Testament. For an argument for the presence and work of the Holy Spirit in Old Testament saints, see Leon J. Wood, *The Holy Spirit in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1976).

¹⁶ D. D. Sceats, “Perfection, Perfectionism,” *New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Sinclair B. Ferguson and David F. Wright (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity P, 1988), 505-6.

¹⁷ Melvin E. Dieter, Anthony A. Hoekema, Stanley M. Horton, J. Robertson McQuilkin and John F. Walvoord, *Five Views on Sanctification* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Academie Books, 1987), 9-57.

¹⁸ Fee argues that Paul here is referring to his pre-Christian life and not to a current struggle with sin. Even if that is the case in this instance, the story of the early church reveals a constant struggle with living in accord with holiness. Gordon D. Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 508-15, 820-2.

Indeed, when we look at the early church we find more resemblance to the Old Testament rejection of holiness than any sort of perfection. Here I offer a brief survey of some of the troubles in the early church. In a scene reminiscent of Achan's theft in Josh 7, Ananias and Sapphira are deceitful concerning their gift to the church and are killed (Acts 5:1-11). Even amidst generosity, widows are being treated unfairly (Acts 6:1). Though the Holy Spirit was promised to teach all things (John 14:26), Christian sanctification does not eliminate theological argument: the issue of circumcising Gentile converts must be strenuously argued (Acts 15:1-31). When we turn to the epistles and recreate the situations into which they were written, we discover that the church is fraught with difficulty in living out her holy vocation. In fact, Paul's response at finding the new converts at Thessalonica living *faithfully* brings him great joy, possibly bordering on surprise (1 Thess 3:5-10)! The ever-present reality of unfaithful living drives Paul to continually exhort Christians: "I...entreat you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called" (Eph 4:1). In his letter to Philemon, Paul uses careful tact to convince Onesimus' owner to treat him in a Christ-like manner, for such behavior could not be assumed. Likewise, both Peter and Paul need to explain how households are to be run in a holy manner (Eph 5:22-6:9; Col 3:18-4:1; 1 Pet 2:18-3:7) and how to view civil government (Rom 13:1-7; 1 Pet 2:13-17). Even the unity that God forms by incorporating believers into "one new man" (Eph 2:15) has to be actively preserved (Eph 4:1-6; Phil 1:27). Finally, the danger of Christians apostatizing completely was a concern to the author of Hebrews (Heb 6:1-12).

It is important to emphasize that these various problems do not bring into question the reality of the people actually being sanctified. When Paul calls the Thessalonians to sexual purity, he specifically points to their sanctification as the reason they need to change their behavior (1 Thess 4:1-8). It is not because they are un sanctified that something needs to change,

but because they *are* sanctified that their behavior must change. When he confronts the unruly idle in the same church, he commands them to work, but specifically tells the leaders to regard them as brothers, even if dissociation is necessary (2 Thess 3:10-15). Inappropriate behavior is most outrageous at Corinth, yet Paul unabashedly refers to the Corinthian church as sanctified (1 Cor 1:2) and calls them “to express that sanctification in lifestyle.”¹⁹ This holy church has members who question Paul’s apostolic authority (I.4:1-5; I.9:1-2; I.14:37), deny the doctrine of bodily resurrection (I.15), visit prostitutes (I.6:12-2), are involved in incestuous relationships (I.5:1-13), carry lawsuits before pagans (I.6:1-11) and abuse the Lord’s table (I.11:17-34).

This exhausting list is not meant to disparage the glorious people of God, but to emphasize that those sanctified in Christ and by the Holy Spirit still struggle with living in accord with their holiness. The pattern of the Old Testament is still present in the New. Robert Alter’s observation concerning Israel remains true for the church: “covenantal privileges by no means automatically confer moral perfection.”²⁰

So how does God react to his holy church’s misbehavior? God’s former inner response of sorrow and anger seems to disappear. It would be better to say that it has been redirected towards Jesus at the cross, who brought the ultimate sorrow to God’s heart and suffered the extremity of God’s anger. The church need no longer fear causing God to be angry or sad. God does react by communication. He directed the writing of epistles in the early church for corrective teaching and he continues to work through Christians inspired with speaking gifts (Eph 4:11; 1 Cor 12:7-11). In this way, God speaks through the mutuality of Christian community, calling us to obey the law of love (Gal 5:16-26). God also responds with actions, principally corrective discipline (Heb 12:5-11; Rev 3:19). He also threatens to remove the privilege of being his witness on earth

¹⁹ Peterson, 41.

if misbehavior continues (Rev 2:5). However, the Bible does not indicate that God will change anything about his basic administration of the world until the end. God leaves the still-ambivalent church in the care of regeneration, Spirit indwelling, community support, and his love. “We love, because He first loved us” (1 John 4:19).

New Creation

A day is coming when God will complete his holiness project. God began with a purposeful creation and he will accomplish his will of having a creation that serves his purpose. The great Day of the LORD has been prophesied for thousands of years. After his patience comes to an end, God will intervene (2 Pet 3:9-10) to purify creation by destroying the parts that refuse his call to exist for their created purpose. The result will be so startlingly different that it is pictured as a new creation (Rev 21-22). The New Jerusalem is called “holy,” is “made ready as a bride adorned for her husband,” (Rev 21:2) and contains “nothing unclean” (Rev 21:27). Holy humanity will then live in harmony with God (Rev 21:3).

Conclusion

By tracing through the Bible the theme of God’s holy people and their struggle with living faithfully to that holy vocation, it becomes clear that this struggle is pervasive. All people in all ages who have been called to join in God’s purpose have been torn between living as holy and returning to being common. In light of this, it is odd that we are so often surprised by sin amongst God’s people, as if it is unusual or as if something has gone terribly wrong. Even with all of the advantages of life within the now-and-not-yet Kingdom of God, being sanctified is not the same as being perfect.

God’s reaction to this rebellion has been manifold and progressive. Most importantly, he

²⁰ R. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1981), 46.

neither rejects the rebels nor acquiesces and condones their behavior. The center of God's response is a combination of maintaining his own holiness and also maintaining his *hesed*, his covenantal, faithful love for his people. These two responses remain in tension. His inner responses include sorrow, anger and jealous love. He communicates his displeasure, makes promises and covenants, provides directions for living, pronounces future blessings and curses, and even places success above his own life. Amazingly, he also accommodates his created order and its administration to provide a pathway to his purposeful goal. God is consistently determined that his recalcitrant creation will achieve his purpose. In a most surprising move, Jesus brings God to humanity, accomplishing a perfect response to being holy. The resulting church is far from perfect, but begins living freely in response to God's love and looks forward to completed holiness in the coming new creation.

Though the downfall of God's holy ones can be surprising and even discouraging, God's unswerving devotion, his *hesed* love, has always accommodated creation in a way that forwards his purpose. Furthermore, his promise to attain his goal of living in peace with a holy humanity is sure.

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