

THE HOLINESS TO WHICH WE ARE CALLED

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The vocabulary of holiness conveys the basic idea of being different, unique, or set apart for a special use or purpose. The precise reality to which these terms point can be determined only by the context in which they are used. For example, in the ancient world, pagan religions described temple prostitutes (male and female) as "holy" or "sanctified" --set apart for special sexual rites the pagans believed would bond worshipers to their deities. In other words, **the meaning of "holiness" can be understood only in relation to the character of the deity.**

The Character Of God

In the Bible the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ defines the nature of holiness. Clearly, God is unique, unlike all other persons and things. His holiness produces awe and fear, as with Moses at the burning bush (Ex. 3:1-6) and Isaiah in the Temple (Isa. 6:1-5). An encounter with God often frightened the people and always challenged them to be a different kind of people (see e.g., Ex. 19, followed by the giving of the law; cf. Heb. 12:14-29). God, in his holiness, is above and beyond us and our world.

Yet God's holiness also leads him to establish a loving, covenant relationship with his people. He calls a people into existence and claims them as his own (Ex. 19:6; Deut. 7:6-11). Beginning with Abram and culminating with the followers of Jesus, God draws people into loving partnership. He gives them his Word of promise that he may accomplish his plans through them for the good of the world. God, in his holiness, is present and acts graciously to embrace the world with redemptive love.

And the God who is holy calls his people to be holy. That is, to relate to him in ways that correspond to **his** unique, holy character. Accordingly, God wants his people to revere and honor him, and to live in dependence upon him. God also wants his people to delight in knowing and loving him intimately, and to reflect his love to others. **Thus, most generally, holiness means living in deep trust and utter dependence upon God and with unrivaled, passionate love for God and others.**

Jesus: The Gift Of Holiness

At last, when the time was right (Gal. 4:4) God sent his Son, Jesus, to fulfill his holy plans. In fact, Jesus is "the gift of holiness." **He** shows us holiness in human flesh.

Accordingly, the Lord Jesus revered and honored his Father-God, living a life of humble submission and devotion to the Father's will (Phil. 2:6-8). His food and his delight, his passion, was to be his Father's Son and to do His Father's will. In his ministry he reflected the very character of God. He revealed God's heart for the lost--those broken by disease, adversity, and sin, calling them to a new life of love and trust in God. He also revealed God's condemnation on human pride and arrogance, whether among the religious or profane. To one and all Jesus issued the call to repent--to turn away from self and sin and turn toward God. In this call to repent, he invited people to enter the Kingdom of God, to become members of a new society wholly devoted to the plans and purposes of God who is King.

Whatever the cost, Jesus' love for the Father led him to obey and trust God. And the cost was great--death on the cross! In **these** ways, and more, Jesus modeled the holiness to

which God calls us.

But Jesus not only models the gift of holiness, he also offers this gift to us. By his death, resurrection, and promise of the Spirit, God keeps his word to make a new covenant with, and a new day for, his people. Through the cross and resurrection of Jesus the sin that enslaves us and separates us from God is conquered and cleansed. And through the gift of the Holy Spirit God restores us to himself, repairs the damage caused by sin, equips us to be his people, and empowers us to do his will.

For this very purpose Jesus called people to follow him during his ministry. He invited them to be with him, to share his life, to reflect his likeness, and to do as he did in the world. In the same way, Jesus is calling to us: "love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 22:37-38). He urges us to be people of blessing--poor in spirit, grieved at our sin and failure, gentle, hungering and thirsting for righteousness, merciful, pure in heart, peacemakers, suffering for what is right (Matt. 5:3-10). He calls us to "be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt. 5:48) and to "seek first his kingdom and his righteousness" (Matt. 6:33).

Earnest Christians long to live according to Jesus' vision for life in the Kingdom of God and they thus trust God to make them like Jesus. God's Spirit works within them producing fruits of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal. 5:22-23). They seek to be ordinary people who live in extraordinary ways, through whom God embraces the world in love.

The Community and Witness of A Holy People

God's call to holiness of life addresses people both individually **and** corporately. The Spirit and Word of God seek to bring every person into holy and loving union with the living God. But in God's good pleasure individual persons rarely accept the grace of God apart from the community of God's people. And they scarcely ever experience the fullness of grace without participating in the community.

The Scriptures reveal God's intention to call, shape, and use a *people* to reflect his holy character and to do his holy will. In fact, the Old Testament describes the people of God in communal terms almost exclusively. It is primarily to the *community* that God manifests his holy presence, dispenses his holy will, and carries out his plans in the world. To be sure, individuals compose the community, and each person must respond to the call of God. But in God's design the individual's response is stimulated and encouraged most effectively with support and accountability from others in the community.

Thus, Jesus formed a community of followers and made them the nucleus of a movement in the first century world. Each disciple heard the call to follow Jesus and each accepted the call. But following Jesus always brought them into fellowship with other followers. And the most powerful and transforming encounters they had with Jesus occurred when they were together.

On the day of Pentecost, in obedience to Jesus the disciples were together and in their *community* they first received the promised Holy Spirit. Immediately, then, the Acts reports, these Spirit-filled believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teachings and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer . . ." (Acts 2:42). Throughout the Book of Acts and the entire New Testament, the community plays a critical role in shaping men and women who turn the world upside down. In the community of brothers and sisters in Christ

they learn what it means to be like Christ and God's grace forms Christ within them.

Classic Christianity has traditionally recognized the critical role of community in calling people to a holy life and then assisting them on the way of holiness. We must therefore recognize our need for one another and responsibility to encourage one another to love and good works (Heb. 10:24-25).

Indeed, the church not only provides the context, or the soil, in which holy living develops, it also provides the primary opportunity to demonstrate holiness. If the essence of holiness is love for God and neighbor, then in our worship life and in our loving care and support for one another the light of holiness should shine brightly in a dark and unholy world.

Earnest believers will seek to counter the radical individualism of Western culture. Such individualism caters to human self-centeredness, fosters self-reliance, and thus encourages independence from God and isolation from one another. In contrast, God calls us to be a people, a family, whose love for Him **unites** us in passionate pursuit of Christ-likeness. We celebrate the grace of God that makes us the Body of Christ in the world--mutually dependent on Christ our head and one another as gifted fellow-members. We reject individualism as contrary to the will of God. Together we delight in worshiping and serving God, and in assisting one another as we grow up until we all "become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" (Eph. 4:13). Holy living is best experienced not as an individual but as a group dynamic under the power of the Holy Spirit.

Finally, as the Family of God and the Body of Christ, called and empowered to be holy, we have a mission in the world. If the essence of holiness is pure love for God and others, then we must do something, for love always does something. And divine love always does what God does. Indeed, the way of holiness is none other than the way of Jesus. To walk on that way leads us to do what Jesus did.

Thus, a holy people will live a Spirit anointed life and "preach good news to the poor . . . to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Lk. 4:18-19). A holy people will be light in a dark world so that others will see their good deeds and praise the Father in heaven (see Matt. 5:16; 1 Pet. 2:12). A holy people will keep themselves undefiled from the corrupt world around them while embracing that world with redemptive love (see 1 Pet. 2:11-12; Ja. 1:27). A holy people will deny self, both in terms of individual ego *and* group or ethnic ego, and take up Jesus' cross of radical obedience and redemptive suffering for the sake of all people every where. A holy people will accomplish Jesus' great commission to make disciples of all nations because they obey Jesus' great command to love.