Called to Be Saints: Holiness As Christian Vocation

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It was two simple questions: (1) “What is the New Testament view of holiness—how can we recapture the essential meaning of this concept in 45 minutes?” and (2) “. . . Are you available to make a 45 minute presentation . . . on the New Testament view of Holiness?” These questions showed up on my computer screen on Wednesday, March 18, in an e-mail from Clyde Kratz, Virginia Mennonite Conference Administrator. The second question was easy to answer: “Yes! I will be happy to serve the VMC Assembly by offering [such] a Bible study.” I understand my calling as one to serve the church through opening the scriptures with and for others and searching for their meanings. So the invitation to offer a Bible study had a straightforward, simple answer.

The first question, however (“What is the New Testament view of holiness . . . in 45 minutes?”) was and is not so simple. Did Clyde have any idea what he was asking for? The motif of “holiness” is not merely one small stream that runs through the New Testament along with countless others, but rather a broad river coursing throughout the writings of the earliest Jesus-followers and central to their meaning. There is literally nothing within the New Testament writings that is not in some way touched and transformed by the concept of “holiness.” This is one massive and major motif. And there is literally no way that I can unpack every facet of New Testament “holiness” within the allotted 45 minutes. What I can do, however, is to identify a handful of “big and basic ideas” that are broadly crucial to a 1st-century New Testament understanding of “holiness” and to lay them out briefly for our 21st-century consideration.

So where do we start? Here there can be only one answer: God. Surely the biggest and the most basic of our “big and basic ideas” here this morning is that ***God is holy***. Here is where our study has to start. The earliest followers of Jesus are, just like Jesus, Jewish. These folks live and breathe the Jewish scriptures left to them by their Jewish ancestors. And what they know from these scriptures is that Yahweh, the God of their ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, is a holy God, none other than “the Holy One of Israel.”[[1]](#footnote-1) This is the God who reveals his holiness to Moses at the burning bush: “Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground” (Ex 3:5). This is the God whose “holy” mountain the Israelites at Sinai are strictly forbidden to touch (Ex 19:23; cf. Ex 19:12-13). This is the God who announces his holiness through Moses to “all the congregation of the people of Israel” (Lev 19:2a) in the words, “You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy” (Lev 19:2b). And this is the God of Isaiah’s awe-inspiring vision: “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory” (Isa 6:3). And the response of God’s people to God’s “holiness” is a single, immediate, and powerful response across generations and years. God’s “holiness” causes Moses to “hide his face” because he is “afraid to look at God” (Ex 3: 6b). God’s “holiness” terrifies the people at Sinai with the abject fear that they could “die” on the spot (Ex 20:18-19). God’s “holiness” virtually paralyzes Isaiah with the awareness of his own sinfulness: “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!” (Isa 6:5).

This is the holy God whom the earliest followers of Jesus know from their scriptures. And this is the holy God to whom they point in their own writings. In her Lukan hymn of praise to God Mary proclaims that “the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name” (Lk 1:49). In similar fashion the Johannine Jesus addresses God as “Holy Father” (Jn 17:11); and the Jesus of Matthew and Luke teaches his disciples to pray, *before all other requests*, that God’s name “be hallowed” (Mt. 6:9; Lk 11:2). Peter proclaims to his readers that “he who called you is holy” (1: Pet 1:15) and then recites Leviticus 19:2 (“. . . for I the LORD your God am holy”) to support his claim. And the Writer to the Hebrews holds out to his readers (Heb 12:10) the promise that God’s discipline happens “in order that we may share [God’s] holiness.” But surely the most powerful witness to God’s “holiness” comes in the cosmic hymns of John the Revelator. The four living creatures who surround God’s heavenly throne sing continually, “Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God the Almighty, who was and is and is to come” (Rev. 4:8). And the souls under the heavenly altar, “the souls of those who had been slaughtered for the word of God and for the testimony they had given” (Rev. 6:9), proclaim God’s “holiness” precisely as they cry out for vindication: “Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long will it be before you judge and avenge our blood . . .?” (Rev. 6:10). Before all else, the New Testament writers know and proclaim that ***God is holy*.**

And if the New Testament writers know that God is holy, they know that Jesus, God’s Son, is, by the very same token, holy as well. As the angel of the Lord tells Joseph (Mt 1:20), “the child conceived in [Mary] is from the Holy Spirit.” And as Gabriel tells Mary herself (Lk 1:35), “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy . . . .” As all four of the Gospel Writers recount, the Holy Spirit “descends” on Jesus “like a dove” (Mk 1:10; Mt 3:16; Lk 3:22; Jn 1:32-33) following his baptism in the Jordan. Within their narratives the Gospel Writers and their characters know Jesus as “the Holy One of God” (Mk 1:24//Lk 4:34; cf. 1 Jn 2:20), “the Holy and Righteous One” (Acts 3:14), and God’s “holy servant Jesus” (Acts 4:27, 30). In Luke’s words (Acts 10:38), God has “anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power,” thus enabling Jesus’ remarkable ministry of “doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil . . . .” Luke knows Jesus as “full of the Holy Spirit” and “led by the Spirit” (Lk 4:1). John, for his part, knows (Jn 10:36) that Jesus is “the one whom the Father has sanctified (that is, “made holy”) and sent into the world.” Paul knows that “Jesus Christ our Lord” has been “declared to be Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead” (Rom 1:4) and that “Christ Jesus . . . became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification [that is, “holy-making”] and redemption” (1 Cor 1:30). Peter calls his readers (1 Pet 3:15) to “sanctify Christ as Lord.” And John the Revelator knows Jesus (Rev 3:7) as “the holy one, the true one, who has the key of David.” Clearly Jesus, God’s Son, shares the “holy” character of his Father for the New Testament writers.

And then there is God’s Spirit, the powerful presence of God at work in the world. God’s Spirit is known prominently throughout the New Testament writings as “the Holy Spirit”[[2]](#footnote-2) or, as Paul says on one occasion, “the Spirit of holiness” (Rom 1:4).[[3]](#footnote-3) And, as the New Testament writers make abundantly clear to us on all hands, it is God’s “Holy Spirit,” or, if you will, God’s holiness set loose in the world, which unleashes God’s power and enacts God’s will.

The language to describe this holy activity is rich and varied. God “promises” the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:33; Eph 1:13) and “sends” the Holy Spirit from heaven (1 Pet 1:2; cf. Jn 14:26). God “saves” God’s people “through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit” (Tit 3:5). God “gives” the Holy Spirit as a single “gift” (Lk 11:13; Acts 2:38; 5:32; 8:18, 19; 15:8; Rom 5:5; 1 Cor 6:19; 1 Thess 4:8) or as multiple “gifts” (1 Cor 12:4-11; Heb 2:4), distributed “according to God’s will” (Heb 2:4) or “just as the Spirit chooses” (1 Cor 12:11). God “baptizes” people “with the Holy Spirit” (Mt 3:11; Mk 1:8; Lk 3:16; Jn 1:33; Acts 1:5; 11:16; cf. Mt 28:19),”fills” them with the Holy Spirit (Lk 1:15, 41, 67; Acts 2:4; 4:8, 31; 9:17; 13:9, 52), and “anoints” them “with the Holy Spirit and with power” (Acts 10:38). God, acting through the Risen Jesus (Acts 2:33) in fulfillment of Scripture, “pours out” the Spirit on “all flesh” (Acts 2:17, 18) and “even on Gentiles” (Acts 10:45). God “marks [believers] with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit” (Eph 1:13). The Holy Spirit, for its part, “descends” on people (Lk 3:22; Jn 1:33), “falls” on people (Acts 10:44; 11:15), “comes” on them (Lk 1:35; Acts 1:8; 19:6), “is” on them (Lk 2:25), “remains” on them (Jn 1:33), and “lives” in them (2 Tim 1:14). And people, in turn, “receive” the Holy Spirit (Jn 20:22; Acts 8:15, 17; 10:47; 19:2), are “full of the Holy Spirit (Lk 4:1; Acts 6:3, 5; 7:55; 11:24), and “live in the comfort of” the Holy Spirit (Acts 9:31).

But there is much more here as well. The New Testament writers don’t merely proclaim that God’s Holy Spirit is present and active in the world within the lives of God’s people. They also provide lots of “chapter and verse.” God’s “holy” work and God’s “holy-making” activities, carried out through God’s “Holy Spirit,” reflect a wide-ranging “holiness agenda” with which God engages God’s people.

The Holy Spirit is in the communications business, “speaking” to God’s people. In the past the Spirit spoke through David (Mk 12:36; Acts 1:16), Isaiah (Acts 28:25), and other “men and women moved by the Holy Spirit” (2 Pet 1:21). And these words have long since been written down. The Writer to the Hebrews can simply announce, “The Holy Spirit says/testifies,” and then quote Scripture. But the Holy Spirit also speaks to the people of God in the present moment, giving them words to say in urgent and terrifying moments when they are put on trial for their faith: “ . . . Do not worry about how you are to defend yourselves or what you are to say; for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that very hour what you are to say” (Lk 12:12; cf. Mk 13:11; Mt 10:20). And the Holy Spirit likewise “speaks” into the very specific circumstances of people’s lives, “revealing” to Simeon his personal and visual encounter with “the Lord’s Messiah” (Lk 2:26) and “testifying” to Paul the “imprisonment and persecutions” that await him (Acts 20:23; cf. Acts 21:11).

The Holy Spirit is engaged in educational pursuits. The Lukan Jesus “gives instructions through the Holy Spirit” to his disciples before his ascension (Acts 1:2). The Johannine Jesus tells his disciples, “But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit . . . will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you” (Jn 14:26). Paul acknowledges to the Corinthian believers, ”We speak . . . in words taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual things to those who are spiritual” (1 Cor 2:13). And the Writer to the Hebrews credits the Holy Spirit with “indicating,” that is, explaining, a complex correspondence between the old covenant and the new covenant (Heb 9:8).

The Holy Spirit is clearly into the “calling and sending” business. “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul,” the Spirit says to the believers in Antioch, “for the work to which I have called them” (Acts 13:2), work which is clearly missional in character. And when Barnabas and Saul “go out” in response to this call, they do so as those who are “sent out by the Holy Spirit” (Acts 13:4) and as those whose very itinerary is directed in detail by the Holy Spirit (cf. Acts 16:6-10). And the Holy Spirit is equally involved with the “witness” carried out by those who are “sent.” When they are hauled before the high priest and the Jewish council for teaching in the name of Jesus (Acts 5:27-28), Peter and his cohorts recount the crucial details of the Jesus-event (Acts 5:30-31) and conclude, “And we are witnesses to these things, *and so is the Holy Spirit*” (Acts 5:32; emphasis mine). And in their letters to churches both Peter and Paul credit the Holy Spirit as active in the proclamation of the good news: As Paul says to the Thessalonian Christians, “Our message of the gospel came to you in power *and in the Holy Spirit* and with full conviction” (1 Thess 1:5). To the Corinthian believers he proclaims that “no one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ *except by the Holy Spirit*” (1 Cor 12:3; emphasis mine). And Peter refers to “those who brought you good news *by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven*” (1 Pet 1:12; emphasis mine).

And beyond the “calling and sending” work of the Spirit and the Spirit’s agency in “bringing the good news” lies the slow, patient work of church planting and church leadership. And here the Holy Spirit is active as well. Paul’s last words to the Ephesian believers, before he leaves them enroute to Jerusalem and the sufferings that lie ahead, include this poignant appeal: “Keep watch over yourselves and over all the flock, *of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers,* to shepherd the church of God that he obtained with the blood of his own Son” (Acts 20:28). Here the Holy Spirit assists church leaders in the fundamental faith-nurturing task: “Guard the good treasure [of “sound teaching and faith”] entrusted to you, *with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us*” (2 Tim 1:14; cf. 2 Tim 1:13; emphasis mine).

The Holy Spirit is likewise active as the church engages in acts of strategic and ethical discernment. Such discernment can be passionately engaged and deeply fractious, as is the Jerusalem conference portrayed in Acts 15 over the most volatile of all conceivable issues for the 1st-century followers of Jesus, Jewish and Gentile alike, namely the issue of circumcision (Acts 15:1-35). But through the enabling power of the Holy Spirit even this fraught and fractious debate concludes with the collective declaration, “. . . It has seemed good to us and to the Holy Spirit” (Acts 15:28). In his letter to the Thessalonians Paul warns them that whoever “rejects” his—and God’s—appeal to holy living (1 Thess 4:1-7) “rejects not human authority but God, *who also gives his Holy Spirit to you*” (1 Thess 4:8; emphasis mine). And in his letter to the Corinthians Paul lays out by contrast a vicious vice list which reflects the kind of people who “will not inherit the kingdom of God” and, by the same token, the kind of people “that some of [the Corinthians themselves] used to be” (1 Cor 6:9-11a). Then he turns the picture upside down with the words, “But you were washed, you were sanctified (that is, “made holy’), you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ *and in the Spirit of our God*” (1 Cor 6:11b). Clearly, for the New Testament writers, the gift of the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit’s holy-making are crucial both to ethical discernment and to holy living.

Here, then, is the holy and holy-making God reflected in the writings of the New Testament. And here is our first “big and basic idea” vis-à-vis holiness. The second “big and basic idea” follows directly behind the first and builds directly off of it: ***God who is holy wills holiness from God’s people in return and calls God’s people to be saints, that is, “holy ones.”*** Here it is Peter, writing to “the exiles of the Dispersion” throughout Asia Minor (1 Pet 1:1), who sets the theme for us, building off of Leviticus 19:2 from the “Holiness Code” of Leviticus: “Like obedient children, do not be conformed to the desires you formerly had in ignorance. Instead, as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; for it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy’”(1 Pet 1:14-16).

The concept here is a basic one: God’s own “holiness” sets the “holiness agenda” for God’s people, God’s “obedient children,” as Peter frames his language. The reference to “children” here is scarcely due to chance. Within the Jewish thought world of the Ancient Near East there is a broad recognition that family connections are directly linked to one’s character. To be the “son of” someone or something, spoken in the colloquial language common in a patriarchal society, implies that you reflect the characteristics and/or the moral character of the one to whom you are a “son.” At its most basic level the term “son of man” simply means “human being” or “mortal” (cf. Ps 8:4b; Ezek 2:1, 3, 6, 8, *et al*). And when Jesus gives the name “Boanerges” or “Sons of Thunder” to his disciples James and John (Mk 3:17), he undoubtedly does this for reasons that become immediately obvious in the everyday world where James and John live. So for Peter to address his readers as “obedient children” and to name “the one who called [them]” as “holy,” clearly suggests the “family likeness” motif that Peter then spells out directly in the words of Leviticus 19:2: “You shall be holy, for I am holy.” Just as the “holy” character of God once called forth the “holiness” of God’s people, the Hebrews (cf. Lev 17-26), now the “holiness” of the one who has called these Gentile followers of Jesus in Asia Minor calls forth their own “holy” response.

And it is this fundamental idea of “family likeness” which clearly undergirds the entire New Testament portrayal of “holiness.” Matthew’s Jesus, while he doesn’t use the language of “holiness” at all, clearly builds on the “family likeness” motif in calling his disciples to faithful living (Mt 5:44-45; emphasis mine): “But I say to you, ‘Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, *so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.*’” Paul, while he does not refer to Leviticus 19, frames his discussion of “holiness” in the language of “calling” (1 Thess 4:3, 7; emphasis mine): “For this is the will of God, *your sanctification,* that you abstain from fornication, that each one of you know how to control your own body in holiness and honor . . . . For God did not *call* us to impurity *but in holiness*.” 2 Timothy 1:9 speaks in a similar way of God “who saved us and called us *with a holy calling*, not according to our works but according to his own purpose and grace” (emphasis mine). Elsewhere Paul “shorthands” his understanding of God’s “call to/in holiness” to the simple phrase “called to be saints” (Rom 1:7; 1 Cor 1:2). And throughout the New Testament writings as a whole, the single most prominent term used to describe the followers of Jesus is, in fact, the term “saints.” This usage is huge. It is found at very least in Matthew, Acts, Romans, 1/2 Corinthians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1/2 Thessalonians, 1 Timothy, Philemon, Hebrews, Jude, and Revelation, not to mention “holy women” in 1 Peter and “holy prophets” in Luke and 2 Peter. Check it out in any concordance. You’ll find it.

Regardless the New Testament language, the New Testament meaning is perfectly clear: God’s will for God’s people is “holiness” (or, if you like the bigger word, “sanctification”); and it is in and for “holiness” that God calls God’s people, and calls them to be “holy ones” or “saints.” “Holiness”—bearing the family likeness of our holy God—lies at the very roots of our self-understandings as the people of God. And this is our second “big and basic idea” for the morning.

And if this is true, if “holiness” is indeed our fundamental calling as followers of the Triune Holy One (God, Christ, and Spirit), then the question that started with God finally comes around to us. What does “holiness” look like in the real world and for real people, whether the 1st-century world and the first Jesus followers or our own 21st-century world and us as 21st-century followers of Jesus? ***And what are the “big and basic paradigms” (our third “big and basic idea”) that will guide us toward faithful living?*** The New Testament writers (and Paul, above all) help us out in this regard, with just such a handful of “big and basic paradigms” that lie behind all the detailed specifics of their 1st-century vice and virtue lists and all the apostolic imperatives directed to the 1st-century churches. Let’s try out these 1st-century “holiness” paradigms and see what we can learn from them.

***(1)*** ***Holiness as marriage.*** This paradigm for “holiness,” quite apart from the specific sexual issues that Paul is discussing here and quite apart from sexual ethics altogether, is one that reaches all the way back through the Jewish Scriptures to its point of origin in Genesis 2:24: “Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.” And it is out of this concept of marital unity that the Hebrews begin to use the language of marriage to depict the relationship between God and God’s people. God and God’s people belong to each other as do husband and wife, a marital union that has clear implications for “holiness.” This paradigm, in fact, becomes so deeply rooted within the Jewish community that the Hebrew prophets commonly adopt the language of “whoredom” and “adultery” as metaphors for the faithlessness and the moral degeneracy of God’s people (thus, for example, Isa 1:21; Jer 3:1-5; 23:9-15; Ezek 16:1-63; Hos 1:2; 2:1-23).

Now the New Testament writers, building on this deeply-rooted marital image of God and God’s people, employ this same metaphor as they speak about “holiness.” Only now the “bridegroom” is Jesus himself. And the “bride,” where there is one, is the church. In Matthew’s Gospel we see a hint of this motif. Jesus tells the story of “a king who [gives] a wedding banquet for his son” (Mt 22:1-14). And at the end of the story we learn that a wedding guest (not the “bride,” who is not even mentioned here) is ultimately thrown out of the wedding banquet and into “outer darkness” for “not wearing a wedding robe” (Mt 22:11-12; cf. Mt 11:12), an apparent metaphor for righteous deeds (cf. Rev. 19:8, 14).[[4]](#footnote-4) In Revelation, however, the marital metaphor for God and God’s people appears full-blown and in full glory (Rev. 19:6b-8, emphasis mine). And here the “holiness” implications are unmistakable: “‘Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, *and his bride has made herself ready; to her it has been granted to be clothed with fine linen, bright and pure”—for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints*.” “Holiness” clearly belongs to the marriage imagery here. And this “holiness” is conceived fundamentally as “righteous deeds” to be performed by the “bride of the Lamb.”

Paul’s use of the marriage metaphor in 1 Corinthians 6, in distinction to the image of Revelation, does not reflect a corporate image of the church and its “holy” character. Here the focus is on the individual believer. And it builds directly off of Genesis 2:24. “Do you not know,” Paul says to the Corinthian Jesus followers right in the very midst of a discussion of sexual ethics (1 Cor 5:1-6:20), “Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ?” Shall I therefore take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never! Do you not know that whoever is united to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For it is said, ‘The two shall be one flesh.’” (1 Cor 6:15-16). Here the question is not at all “What righteous deeds should I be doing to prepare for the marriage of the Lamb?” but rather “To whom am I already “married,” as it were? And what does that say about how I use my body and to whom I give my body?” This question will surely assist us as we think about sexual ethics. Here “holiness” is conceived in terms of “body” language, “marital” commitments and “one flesh” images. But these concepts and images, used metaphorically, can extend far beyond the boundaries of sexual ethics to address all aspects of “holiness.”

The household code in the Letter to the Ephesians (Eph 5:21-6:9) takes the marriage metaphor for Christ and the church and turns its “holiness” implications in the opposite direction from the Revelation text. In Revelation there is only the hint of divine agency, that is, the power of God to enable “holiness”: “To her [that is, the bride of the Lamb] it *has been granted*,” presumably *by God*, “to be clothed with fine linen” (Rev. 19:8a; emphasis mine). In Ephesians that divine agency now comes into full view. And now it is not at all the “righteous deeds of the saints” (Rev. 19:8b) that are in focus, but rather the self-giving love of Christ himself who personally transforms his church-bride in order to make her “holy” (Eph 5:25-27, emphasis mine): “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her*, in order to make her holy* by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word, so as to present the church to himself in splendor, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind—yes, *so that she may be holy and without blemish*.” And the text goes on (Eph 5:29-30: “For no one ever hates his own body, but he nourishes and tenderly cares for it, *just as Christ does for the church, because we are members of his body*.” And then comes a direct citation of the “one flesh” text from Genesis 2:24. Being “members of [Christ’s] body” has strong “holiness” implications here. But the “holiness” envisioned here emerges not from “righteous deeds” nor from faithful “marital” commitments, but from the self-giving, transforming, and cleansing work of Christ.

(2) ***Holiness as temple, priesthood, and sacrifice***. The 1st-century followers of Jesus, whether they are Jewish or Gentile, live in a world filled with temples. These temples are, for the most part (that is, 99.99 +%) pagan temples, temples built to honor the Greek and Roman gods of the day. And these temples are ubiquitous and very imposing, adorning the harbor entrances to major cities and crowning the mountaintops near to these cities. But for the Jews and up until the year AD 70 there is one temple alone, the Jewish temple on Mount Zion in Jerusalem, that is dedicated to Yahweh, the God of Israel, and focused on the worship and praise of Yahweh. And it is this temple, the temple personnel, and the worship life of the temple, without question, that the New Testament writers pull into service as a significant paradigm for use in thinking about “holiness.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

A) To begin with there is the “building” motif itself. “Do you not know,” Paul says in 1 Corinthians 6:19, “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God and that you are not your own? . . . Therefore glorify God in your body.” (1 Cor 6:19). Paul, who has just introduced the “marriage” metaphor, now adds a new metaphor to his repertoire of “useful illustrations,” namely the “temple” metaphor. “Holiness” here is no longer simply the matter of decisions concerning “marital fidelity,” whether metaphorical or otherwise. Now “holiness” speaks to the intangible and yet undeniable reality that those who are “in Christ” (a favorite term of Paul’s) are in reality now indwelt by God’s Holy Spirit, *just as the Holy of Holies in the Jerusalem Temple is the place where God’s presence dwells*. Paul has no hesitation about the truthfulness of his claim. And in fact it is the very factuality of this claim that gives Paul the basis for his appeal: “Your physical body is already the temple, that is, the house, of God’s Holy Spirit; and is, *ipso facto* , dedicated to God’s glory. It is not yours to use or abuse as you wish. It has a designated owner and a designated purpose. Live out that purpose through God’s Holy Spirit and with your body.”

1 Corinthians 6:19 is an appeal to individuals. But the “temple” metaphor, just like the “marriage” metaphor, extends beyond the level of individuals and matters of “personal holiness” into the realm of “corporate holiness.” And in 2 Corinthians this “corporate holiness” has to do with separation from what is “unclean” (2 Cor 6:14, 16-18; 7:1): “Do not be mismatched with unbelievers . . . . For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, ‘I will live in them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. *Therefore come out from them, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch nothing unclean*; then I will welcome you, and I will be your father, and you shall be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty.’ Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and of spirit, *making holiness perfect in the fear of God*.”[[6]](#footnote-6) Being “the temple of the living God,” as Paul describes it here, is a vocation that calls the church to distinguish what is “holy” and what is “unclean” and to “separate” itself in clear and decisive ways from that which is not “holy.”

In 1 Corinthians 3:17, however, Paul is speaking not about separation but about church unity, when he drops the following into his discussion: “Do you not know that you [plural and collective] are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you [plural and collective]? If anyone destroys God’s temple [that is, you, plural and collective, as the church], God will destroy that person. For God’s temple is holy and you [plural and collective] are that temple.” It appears that “holiness” has everything to do not only with personal ethics but likewise and equally with our gathered life and our collective character as the church of Jesus Christ. And Ephesians offers us just such a portrait of “holiness” as church unity, as it speaks about “strangers and aliens” who are now “citizens with the saints and members of the household of God” in a “structure” which is “joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God” (Eph 2:19, 21). If “holiness” has everything to do with “separation” from what is “unclean” (2 Cor 6:16-7:1), it likewise has everything to do with church unity within “God’s holy temple” (1 Cor 3:17).

B) Then there is the “priesthood” motif. The New Testament writers not only envision individual believers and the collective church as the “temple” and thus the “dwelling place for God.” They also mix their metaphors without hesitation and envision believers and the church itself as the priests who serve within this temple. In his letter to the house churches of Rome Paul tells them of his calling “to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles *in the priestly service of the gospel of God*, *so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit*” (Rom 15:16; emphasis mine). Here the “holiness agenda” of church leaders, framed in the language of temple and temple worship, is to present their churches to God as “holy offerings” that are “acceptable” to God. Peter is also happy to mix his metaphors in this regard. Only Peter now identifies the entire church itself as a collective “holy priesthood to offer spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God through Jesus Christ (1 Pet 2:5b). Here “holiness” is the act of serving God as priests, both as church leaders offer their churches to God as “sanctified offerings” and as churches themselves create a “holy priesthood” that offers “spiritual sacrifices” of praise to God.

C) But there is still more. Not only do the New Testament writers, in this case Paul in specific, depict both individual Jesus-followers and the church itself as “temple” and as “priest/priesthood.” Here Paul goes one crucial step further and identifies individual followers of Jesus and the collective church as the very “sacrifice” (in this case a “living sacrifice”) offered by the priest in the temple. And this “sacrifice” has everything to do with “holiness” (Rom 12:1-2, emphasis mine): “I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, *holy and acceptable to God*, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, *so that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”[[7]](#footnote-7)* And with this crucial appeal to “body”-based “holiness,” focused ultimately on “discerning the will of God,” Paul launches into a wide-ranging discussion throughout Romans 12-15 of what it means in the real world to be “living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God.” We don’t have the time for the details. But there is nothing here in Paul’s depiction of “holiness” for the faint of heart. But don’t take my word on this. Check it out for yourselves.

(3) ***Holiness as slavery.*** Talk about images that are shocking and far from “politically correct”! Slavery was the curse of the Ancient Near East, just as it has been the curse of countless societies since then, including not so long ago our own. But Paul rips this unsavory metaphor—violent, abusive, oppressive, destructive—right out of the real world that is the Roman Empire and adopts it as one of his “most useful illustrations” to speak about nothing less than “holiness.” Talk about “sleight of hand”!

Remember 1 Corinthians 6, where Paul mixes his metaphors between “marriage” and “temple”? Well, he actually slips a third metaphor in there as well, that of “slavery” (1 Cor 6:19-20; emphasis mine), proprietary ownership, but without naming it in so many words: “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? *For you were bought with a price*. Therefore glorify God in your body.” “Bought with a price”! Who is it in Paul’s world, or anyone’s world, for that matter, our own included, that is “bought with a price”? It is the slave, to be sure. Paul doesn’t elaborate here. But the Corinthian believers surely know that Paul is here invoking the metaphor of “slavery.” No doubt numbers of them are themselves slaves, people who have been “bought with a price” by their own masters. Nobody needs to explain to the Corinthian believers what it means to be “bought with a price.” But now it is God who has “bought” them. This is why they “are not [their] own.” And this clearly implies that their lives and their actions are to be shaped and formed by the will of God and not their own choices. So being the “temple of the Holy Spirit” means, by the same token, being God’s slaves and carrying out God’s will as those who have been “bought with a price.” Here “holiness” is all about proprietary ownership, the believer’s ownership *by God*.

In his letter to the Roman believers, in the midst of a discussion of baptism (Rom 6:1-23) Paul names “slavery” directly as his metaphor for “holiness.” But here the language is not of those who are “bought with a price” (1 Cor 6:19) but rather of those who “present [their] members as slaves” (Rom 6:13a/b/c, 19b/c) to a master. And here the imagery is not that of “ownership” per se, but rather of the “dominion” or absolute control exercised by the master of the slave (Rom 6:12-14, 19): “Therefore, do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. No longer present your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and present your members to God as instruments of righteousness. For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace. . . . But thanks be to God that you, having once been slaves of sin, have become obedient from the heart to the form of teaching to which you were entrusted, and that you, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness . . . . For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to greater and greater iniquity, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness *for sanctification* [that is, “holy-making”].” And Paul concludes (Rom 6:22a), “But now that you have been freed from sin and enslaved to God, the advantage you get is sanctification.”

Here Paul views “sin” not simply as some unfortunate result of wrong or even perverse human choices, but rather as an active and aggressive power which takes its own initiative to “enslave” people and exercise complete control or “dominion” over them. Sin is powerful. Sin is domineering. And sin is ultimately enslaving. But the place where this “domination” and this “slavery” gets broken, definitively, is, for Paul, in the waters of baptism. This is where believers are “baptized into Christ Jesus” both into his death and into his resurrection, with the result that they are now “dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus” and can even now, right in the midst of the real world, “walk in newness of life” (cf. Rom 6:3-11). This is good news, folks, the very best news! “Baptism into Jesus Christ,” as Paul knows it, is not simply a beautiful, peaceful symbol of the fact that “I [or we] have decided to follow Jesus.” It may be that. But it is also much more. Baptism is that epoch-changing event in which the power structures of the universe are realigned, where the power of sin is broken, definitively, through the death and resurrection of Jesus, so that believers are freed, definitively, to be slaves of God and to live holy lives.

And here we have it, friends! Three “Big and Basic Ideas” about “holiness” in the New Testament and three “Big and Basic Paradigms” for “holiness” in the New Testament. This theme is widely variegated. It is complex and perhaps even confusing. It is likewise crucial and profoundly compelling. But for all of you, the confused as well as the compelled, there is one last word I have to offer, a word of benediction, a word from Paul (1 Thess 5:23): “May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this."

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1. Thus Ps 71:22; 78:41; 89:18; Isa 1:4; 5:16; 12:6; 14:27; 17:7; 29:23; 30:12, 15; 31:1; 41:20; 45:11; 55:5. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Mt 1:18, 20; 3:11; 12:32; 28:19; Mk 1:8; 3:29; 12:36; Mk 13:11//Lk 12:12; Lk 1:15, 35, 41, 67; 2;25, 26; 3:16, 22; 4:1; 11:18; 12:10, 12; Jn 1:33; 14:26; 20:22; Acts 1:2, 5, 8, 16; 2:4, 33, 38; 4:8, 31;5:3, 32; 6:3, 5; 7:51, 55; 8:15, 17, 19; 9:17, 31; 10:38, 44, 45, 47; 11:15, 16, 24; 13:2, 4, 9, 52; 15:8, 28; 16:6; 19:2, 6; 20:23, 28; 21:11, 28; 28:25; Rom 5:5; 9:1; 14:17; 15:3, 16; 6:19; 12:3; 2 Cor 13:13; Eph 1:13; 4:30; 1 Thess 1:5, 6 4:8; 2 Tim 1:14; Tit 3:5; Heb 2:4; 3:7; 6:4; 9:8; 10:15; 1 Pet 1:12; 2 Pet 1:21; Jude 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Elsewhere The New Testament writers make reference to “the Spirit” (Mt 4:1; 12:31; Mk 1:10, 12; Lk 2:27; 4:1, 14; Jn 1:32, 33; 3:5, 6, 8, 34; 7:39; Acts 2:4; 8:29; 10:19; 11:12, 28; 19:21; 20:22; 21:4; Rom 8:2, 4, 5, 6, 10, 13, 23, 26, 27; 15:30; 1 Cor 2:4, 10; 12:7, 8; 14:2; 2 Cor 3:6, 8,17; 5:5; Gal 3:2, 3, 5, 17; 4:29; 5:5, 16, 17, 18, 22, 25; 6:8; Eph 2:22; 3:5; 4:3; 5:9, 18; 6:17, 18; Phil 2:1; Col 1:8; 1 Thess 5:19; 2 Thess 2:13; 1 Tim 3:16; 4:1; 1 Pet 1:2; 1 Jn 5:6, 8; Jude 19; Rev 1:10; 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22; 4:2; 14:13; 22:17; cf. Rom 8:16; 1 Cor 12:4, 8, 9, 11, 13; Eph 2:18; 4:4; Jn 4:24); “the Spirit of God” (Mt 3:16; 12:28; Rom 8:9, 11, 14; 15:19; 1 Cor 2:10, 11, 14; 3:16; 7:40; 12:3; Phil 3:3; 1 Pet 4:14; 1 Jn 4:2; cf. Mt 12:18; Acts 2:17, 18; 1 Cor 2:12; 6:11; 2 Cor 1:22; 3:3; Eph 3:16; 1 Jn 3:24; 4:13; Rev 1:4; 3:1; 4:5; 5:6); “the Spirit of the Lord” (Lk 4:18; Acts5:9; 8:39; 2 Cor 3:17, 18); “the Spirit of your Father” (Mt 10:20); “the Spirit of truth” (Jn 14:17; 15:26; 16:13); “the Spirit of grace” (Heb 10:29); “the Spirit of Jesus” (Acts 16:7); “the Spirit of Christ” (Rom 8:9; 1 Pet 1:11); “the Spirit of Jesus Christ” (Phil 1:19); “the Spirit of [God’s] Son” (4:6). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Cf. the parable of Mt 25:1-13, where five “bridesmaids” are shut out of the “wedding banquet,” because they had to go and purchase more oil for their lamps and arrived after the door was “shut.” This parable, however, appears to be focused on preparedness (“Keep awake therefore . . . .” [Mt 25:13]) rather than on righteous deeds. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Cf. Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1997): 57. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Cf. Rev 18:4-5, where “another voice from heaven” responds to the fall of Babylon (18:1-3; emphasis mine) with the words, “Come out of her, my people, *so that you do not take part in her sins*, and so that you do not share in her plagues; for her sins are heaped high as heaven, and God has remembered her iniquities.” [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Cf. 1 Peter 1:2, where the believers are portrayed as “sanctified by the Spirit to be obedient to Jesus Christ and to be sprinkled with his blood.” Here the sacrificial imagery is apparently that of the people of God at Sinai on whom Moses “sprinkles” the “blood of the covenant” (Heb 9:18-22; cf. Ex 24:8). For further discussion, see J. Ramsey Michaels, *1 Peter*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1988):12. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)