The Bible Doctrine of Sanctification

By **Wayne Jackson**

The Greek terms that are rendered into English by "sanctification," "holy," and "saints" convey important biblical truths. Unfortunately, in the world of "Christendom" many erroneous ideas have grown up around these expressions. Some interpret "sanctified" as the equivalent of "saved." Practically speaking, the saved and the sanctified represent the same class of people, but the terms have different points of emphasis.

Others allege that sanctification refers to the process by which the original "carnal nature with which every human is born" is purged (Earle 2000, 324). This is not true, for human beings are **not born** with a "carnal" nature (Jackson 2009, 67-68). Some believe "sanctification" is a state of absolute, sustained perfection which some Christians attain in this life. This theory is similarly void of truth; not even Paul had achieved perfection (Phil. 3:12; cf. Rom. 7:18ff; see Cottrell 1996, 442ff).

Catholicism contends that the "saints" are an exclusive group of deceased holy people who now abide in heaven, who have passed through a "canonization" process (with papal validation). Supposedly these "saints" make intercession for the people of God on earth. This dogma is wholly foreign to the New Testament. In the Bible, "saints" are holy people who live on earth (cf. Acts 9:13, 32, 41; 1 Cor. 1:2; Phil. 1:1, etc.). The term is never used in the New Testament of heavenly beings.

The Word Family

In the New Testament words frequently appear in families. By this we mean that from an original root or stem various grammatical forms have developed. And though there is a common linguistic ancestry, different meanings in varying contexts are apparent. The careful student must note the grammatical differences along with their contexts, and thereby attempt to derive the correct meanings in diverse passages.

In this study we will examine the family of words that reflect the ideas of sanctification, holiness, and saints. This New Testament family of cognate forms is found in several grammatical modes more than 275 times. Consider the following breakdown which indicates renditions as found in the **King James Version**. Variations will be reflected in other English translations.

1. *Hagiazo* (a verb; found twenty-eight times) is rendered by such terms as "sanctify" (Eph. 5:26), "hallow" (Mt. 6:9), or "be holy" (Rev. 22:11).

2. *Hagiasmos* (noun; ten times) may be "holiness" (Rom. 6:19) or "sanctification" (Heb. 12:14, ASV).

3. *Hagios* (adjective; 233-234 times) may be rendered "holy" (Acts 2:38), "saints" (Phil. 1:1), "holy one" (Mk. 1:24), or "holy thing" (Lk. 1:35).

4. *Hagiotes* (noun; two times) is "holiness" (Heb. 12:10).

5. *Hagiosyne* (noun; three times) is found as "holiness" (Rom. 1:4).

In its historical development the basic word form passed through several stages. Initially *hagios* referred to that which elicited a sense of reverence or awe. Later it came to signify something cleansed of contamination. Eventually, the term connoted those who, as a result of their cleansing, have been set aside, as dedicated to the service of God. An appreciation of this latter connotation would drastically change the lives of some church members. Let us consider some basic Bible facts regarding sanctification.

Sanctification

Since the Bible teaches that no accountable person can enter heaven without sanctification (Heb. 12:14), it is paramount that those desiring eternal life understand and appreciate the importance of this theme. Consider the following dimensions of this exalted topic.

Divine Source

There is an **ultimate** sense in which only God sanctifies a person. On behalf of his disciples, Christ addressed his Father: "Sanctify them" (Jn. 17:17a). The verb is an imperative form, suggesting a strong petition. The sanctification of this text is not salvation; the disciples were saved already. This request was that they be set apart and fortified for the rigorous work that would be required of them after their Master's departure.

The same in **principle**, however, is true of Christian sanctification. The process must originate with God (Rom. 1:7). Sanctification cannot be achieved apart from salvation, and forgiveness cannot occur by means of any plan or mode of operation that results from **human** genius. Redemption is not "of" (*ek*—"out of") **ourselves** (Eph. 2:8b), nor by any "plan or course of action" involving a "good deed or noble action" **initiated** by men (Thayer 1958, 248, 526).

Basis of Sanctification

Apart from the death of Jesus, there could be no sanctification. By means of the new covenant, "we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all" (Heb. 10:10). Those who seek pardon for their sins apart from the gospel of Christ search in vain. There is no other way (Jn. 14:6; Acts 4:12).

Mode of Sanctification

The mode of sanctification is divine truth, embodied in God's written word (Jn. 17:17b). This sacred consecration is not some esoteric influence sent directly from heaven independent of an initial verbal revelation (now embodied in the Scriptures). Nor is sanctification (holiness) a unique bestowal upon the "elect," who supposedly were chosen by God before creation, as Calvin contended (1975, xxii.2). Instead, sanctification is a **choice** that human beings make. It is never forced upon them by some irresistible influence.

Human Responsibility

The process of sanctification begins with an **attitude.** Peter forcefully charged: "[S]anctify in your hearts Christ as Lord" (1 Pet. 3:15a). The verb "sanctify" is an aorist, imperative form—a sacred **command** suggesting urgent attention. The command format demonstrates that man is not wholly passive in his sanctification. Though the apostle was addressing Christians, the principle applies to the lost as well. The sense of Christian sanctification is a "setting apart" resolve, i.e., mentally submitting to Christ as the Master of one's life. The "heart" is a person's decision-making center. Jesus is to be the driving force in the exercise of a Christian's volition. The phrase is somewhat analogous to that of the model prayer. "Hallowed *hagiazo* (imperative mood)] be your name" (Mt. 6:9). The obligation is to reverence God and "to glorify him by obedience to his commands" (Brown 1976, 229).

Accessing Sanctification

In a text that explicitly has to do with salvation, Paul declares that Christ gave himself up for the church that he might "sanctify" it, "having cleansed it by the washing of water with the word" (Eph. 5:25-26). Several vital truths are here contained:

- Christ's death was necessary for both the cleansing and sanctification processes.

- Cleansing is preparatory to sanctification.

- The cleansing is accomplished by the "washing of water with *en* (i.e., accompanied by; cf. Moule 1953, 78)] the word."

The terms "word," "water," and "cleansing" are the doctrinal equivalents of "Spirit," "water," and "kingdom" (Jn. 3:5), complemented elsewhere with "Spirit," "washing of regeneration," and "saved" (Tit. 3:5; cf. 1 Cor. 6:11). The references to "water" and the "washing of regeneration" are virtually conceded to be references to water baptism. No one who has neglected to obey the gospel of Christ can be sanctified (2 Thes. 1:8-9).

Sustaining Sanctification

"Follow [eagerly seek; a present imperative] after peace with all, and the sanctification, without which no one shall see the Lord" (Heb. 12:14). Here sanctification is the consecrated life of holiness. Sanctification is not an irrevocable done deal; it's an abiding obligation (cf. Rom. 6:19, 22; 1 Thes. 4:7; 1 Tim. 2:15).

Forfeiting Sanctification

Is it possible to forfeit one's sanctification and be lost? Calvinists contend it is not; inspiration argues otherwise. Scripture warns if the Christian regresses into a life of willful, unrestrained sin (Heb. 10:26), he can expect a fierce judgment of fire that devours God's adversaries. It will be a punishment worse than any merciless death, because he "has trodden under foot the Son of God, and has counted the blood of the covenant by which he was **sanctified** as an unholy thing" (v. 29). The apostate will fall into the hands of a judging God who will render well-deserved vengeance (vv. 30-31).

Conclusion

Sanctification (holiness) is a crucial Bible theme. Unfortunately it often has been neglected—both in study and application. One must constantly remind himself of the ancient, inspired admonition. "I am Jehovah your God: sanctify yourselves therefore, and be holy; for I am holy" (Lev. 11:44; cf. 1 Pet. 1:16).

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Philippians 3:12; Romans 7:18; Acts 9:13, 32, 41; 1 Corinthians 1:2; Philippians 1:1; Ephesians 5:26; Matthew 6:9; Revelation 22:11; Romans 6:19; Hebrews 12:14; Acts 2:38; Mark 1:24; Luke 1:35; Hebrews 12:10; Romans 1:4; John 17:17; Romans 1:7; Ephesians 2:8; Hebrews 10:10; John 14:6; Acts 4:12; 1 Peter 3:15; Ephesians 5:25-26; John 3:5; Titus 3:5; 2 Thessalonians 1:8-9; Romans 6:19, 22; 1 Thessalonians 4:7; 1 Timothy 2:15; Hebrews 10:26; Leviticus 11:44

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